

Square Grouper

A Troy Adam / Mangrove Bayou mystery
by Stephen Morrill
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Chapter 1

Monday, May 1

It was a cool morning with a mild wind ruffling the Gulf of Mexico along Florida's southwest mangrove coast. A watcher high above — a brown pelican riding an updraft and surveying for schools of fish, perhaps — would have seen the Ten Thousand Islands as a miles-wide forest of mangrove-covered islands and scattered oyster bars, interspersed with small and shallow bays and channels, a living green-and-blue map of the world's second-largest mangrove forest. This map is devoid of any sign of human existence but for one small boat speeding northwest in the Gulf a few hundred yards offshore.

Lester Groud eased back on the throttle and let his flats boat drop off of plane. The stern wave caught up and went under the boat, back to front, corkscrewing the stern around. Lester, standing in the center behind a steering console, adjusted to the rocking motion without noticing. He was staring at the shore of a nearby island, only a few red mangroves with their sprawling roots, long fingers seeming to clutch a small oyster bar beneath them. The tide was low and a dozen seagulls were squabbling over something on the oyster bar.

Lester Groud spent half his life out on this water and in these islands. Anything odd aroused his curiosity. He reached for his binoculars in their holder on the side of the center console and looked again. He saw nothing but a squabbling crowd of seagulls. Whatever they were making such a fuss over was hidden from his sight.

Groud was a fishing guide when he wasn't being mayor and one of the three councilmen for the southwestern Florida coastal town of Mangrove Bayou, but on this day he was alone. He had just bought a new eighteen-foot Maverick flats boat to replace his older and now decrepit skiff that had served him well for many years. Today he had been running the boat at various throttle settings to break in the outboard, just idly paralleling the coast on up to Cape Romano and around to Marco Island and then back south to Indian Key and the channel entrance into Everglades City.

Groud put back the binoculars and adjusted the trim tabs for shallow water and slow speed, tilted the 115-HP motor up to protect the prop, and eased into a narrow channel that led past the small island, and farther on into the maze. He crept closer, the upturned prop cavitating and blowing water up in a small arc behind the boat, inefficient but safer for the propeller.

Just a dead fish, likely, Lester thought. Still, he was in the fishing business and Groud's philosophy was that the more he knew the better he was at it. And he had nothing better to do today than examine dead fish to see what had killed them.

As he approached the oyster bar, Groud put the throttle into neutral to stop the prop, and walked forward to get the anchor and put that overside on a short line. He knew he would soon have oyster scratches in the gel coat all down the length of the boat — that was inevitable in these waters — but it was like buying a new car; you hated to get that first ding. He climbed out of the boat into water two feet deep and waded across to the oyster bar.

The water was still chilly — at least by Florida standards — and Groud was wearing only cargo shorts and Topsiders boat shoes and one of his usual back-vented multi-pocket fishing shirts with the distinctive Velcroed rod-tip holder above the left breast pocket.

As he approached, the small flock of gulls reluctantly took flight, hanging around just above his head and screeching angrily at him. Groud squatted to look at the dead fish. The dead fish had four fingers and a thumb and appeared to have come off of a human arm, having been amputated at the wrist. It seemed relatively fresh and the seagulls had pecked some at it but not destroyed it.

"Jesus," Groud said. He stood and started for the boat, intending to bring back the bag he had brought his lunch in. The gulls promptly descended once more. Groud went back and picked up the hand and took it with him to the boat. The gulls followed, screaming at him. He climbed into the boat, picked up a plastic bag, and dumped out a Cuban sandwich he'd bought that morning at Publix. He put the hand inside the bag, beat off two gulls that made a try for the sandwich, and then leaned over the side to wash off his own hands. He pulled up the anchor, backed away from the oyster bar, and turned for home.

"Wait 'til Troy gets a load of this," Groud muttered. He punched the boat up onto a plane and skipped across the calm Gulf waters toward the buoy that marked the entrance to the Collier River, eating his Cuban as he drove. The gulls tried to follow but soon gave up and went about other gull-business.

"And what do you have to say for yourself," he asked the hand. The hand didn't seem to have an opinion.

Chapter 2

Monday, May 1

Troy Adam was drinking his fourth cup of coffee, sitting sideways behind his desk so he could put his feet up on a pulled-out desk drawer, contemplating Sunset Bay and the boat ramp visible beyond his western office window and considering where to go for lunch. Spots, the twenty-pound Savannah cat that slept on a dog bed in Troy's office corner, woke up, stood, stretched and yawned, and then let out a yell.

"I know," Troy said. "I'll get you some lunch." He went into the break room, automatically dodging Spots who, as always, raced past his ankles to get to the refrigerator first. The cat never seemed to learn that it didn't matter when *it* got to the refrigerator, that what was important was when the *human* got to the refrigerator. Troy got out the current defrosted pound-sausage of horsemeat and spooned some of that off and into a bowl. He bought the horsemeat, twenty pounds at a time, from a rendering plant in Fort Myers and alternated that with standard cat food cans. Savannahs were hybrids and had odd dietary requirements.

Troy refilled his coffee cup and went back to his office, past the never-closed door with *Director of Public Safety* painted on the glass upper half. The door had been like that since he had been hired and Troy refused to fix the sign until someone confessed to scraping off the *L*. No one ever did.

Out his west-facing office window and across Sunset Bay, Troy could see Mrs. Mackenzie, in one of her many yellow outfits, sweeping the parking lot of the Sea Grape Inn where Troy lived. A new-looking flats boat came into Sunset Bay much too fast and backed down abruptly, sending a wash up the boat ramp ahead of it. Troy frowned. He was the police chief, not the Good Boating Manners enforcer, but still

He sat up when he saw Lester Groud tie up the boat and step onto a pier. Groud took out a small sack and walked swiftly away and out of Troy's sight. Troy leaned back and resumed his consideration of lunch places. One thing Mangrove Bayou had was a lot of choices, mostly intended to appeal to the tourist trade. Troy, whose cooking skills ran to small cardboard boxes of frozen dinners and pushing the popcorn setting on his microwave because he couldn't understand the thing's instructions, usually ate breakfast and lunch and, sometimes, dinner in one or another restaurant, and he liked to rotate the honors, to show the police-chief flag.

Lester Groud walked into Troy's office. Troy sat up and turned to face front. Groud glanced at the door as he passed and then sat in a visitor chair.

"Nobody's confessed yet?" he asked.

Troy shook his head. "Tough crowd. Hardened criminals."

Groud grinned. "No name on the door or name plate for your desk either. You act like you were still here on probation."

"Name's Troy Adam," Troy said.

"I know that. I hired you, for Christ's sake. It was you or that wall-eye, one-tooth guy. Not a lot of choice."

"Still, always good to have bench strength," Troy said. "And that's a dollar, Les." Troy had, upon his arrival, created the Bad Words Jar to help curb the cursing around the station. At the end of each month the crew had a beer and pizza party with the proceeds.

Spots came back and demanded that Groud scratch Spots' ears. Groud did so automatically. Spots sniffed at the plastic bag Groud held and the mayor pushed the big cat's head away.

"I'll catch the jar on my way out, when I go past June's desk," Groud said.

"Jar will be under her counter." June Dundee, the dispatcher out front, did not work on Mondays, their slowest day.

"Know where it is," Groud said. "So. Slow day, Chief?"

"Thinking about lunch." Troy picked up a paper off his desk and slid that across. "Weekly report." Each Monday Troy did up a report on the previous week's medical, fire and police activities. That was emailed to several people but one thing Lester Groud was not was an email person.

"Anything interesting?" Groud asked. He didn't pick up the report.

"No. Unless you count tourist sunburns. Lot of pink skin, white bra-strap shadows and painful muffin-tops. Couple fistfights. One fender-bender, nobody hurt other than their feelings. Some idiot parked in a handicapped space at The Village Shoppes Square and Domino Reiss had the car towed and then wrote him up."

"That's like a three-hundred-dollar ticket," Groud said.

"Two-fifty, in fact. Domino is tough on crime. And anything else gets in her way. Then we had college kids down here on break who tried to cook hot dogs over some burning oleander branches ..."

"Ouch," Groud said.

"Doc Volmer says they'll be all right. They didn't inhale too much. Painful eyeballs, mostly. That your new boat?"

Groud turned in his chair to look out the window. "Yeah. She's a beauty. Take her out tomorrow, first charter with her."

"Why do we call boats 'her'," Troy asked.

"Easy. They cost a lot of money to get in the first place, and a young fortune to keep, they're high-maintenance, and they'll break your heart. Yet you can't imagine living without one. You have a boat."

"Well, sailboat, yes. Solo canoe too. Both together cost less than that motor you've hung on that thing out there."

"I can afford it. You can't. We try to give you a raise and you divert the money to promote Juan Valdez instead."

"He deserved it."

"Well, can't say you don't put your money where your mouth is," Groud said.

"You also give away half your pay to people hard up for one or another reason. I think you're a good police chief — not like the one in Tampa who fired you — but you need to think more about yourself."

"She was a good police chief."

"Who?"

"The one in Tampa who fired me."

"Firing you makes her good?"

"No. But she was still the best police chief I ever knew. Retired now. Taught me not to be an overbearing jerk like you see all too often with cops. Treat people with kindness and understanding and they don't fight back so much."

"Humm. Right. I've seen you be downright savage at times. Other times I suspect you were worse but I can't prove it. Just as well, likely."

"This my annual job review?" Troy said. "Or did you have some point to the crash-landing on the dock out there and hustling in here with a sack that Spots is interested in?"

Groud grinned and looked back at Troy. "Nothing gets by you. You needing more staff to do your job?"

Troy looked puzzled. "Could always use more help. But I thought the town council was too cheap to hire another officer."

"We are. But maybe I can help you today."

"How?"

Groud put his sack on the desk and slid it across to Troy.

"Let me give you a hand," he said.

Chapter 3

Friday, May 12

All that Troy had been able to tell was that the hand had come from a Caucasian male with manicured nails and no rings, and had been lopped cleanly off, probably no more than two days before the seagulls, and then Lester Groud, had found it. Troy had sent out Juan Valdez and Bubba Johns in the town police boat to look for more body parts. They found nothing. Troy had sent the hand to Alicia Sydney, the medical examiner in Naples. She had managed to get some prints off the fingers and some DNA if they could find the rest of a body to match that to. She had told Troy that she was sending the hand and the prints on up to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to see if they could get more information out of those.

"FDLE on line one," June Dundee said on the intercom.

Troy picked up the phone. "Yeah. Talk to me," he said.

"You Chief Troy?" a man asked.

"Close enough. Troy Adam. At your service."

"Oh. Thought the Adam was your first name. Like the guy in the Bible."

"Well," Troy said, "I suppose for him it was his only name. Hard to have a family name when you're the first person ever."

"Could have called himself Adam God."

"Never thought of that. Did you call me up to debate theology?" Troy said.

"Name's Bob Dawson. I actually do have a family name and still got all my ribs too. About the only things my first wife left me with. Called about those prints off that hand. Tracked down the ... er ... owner."

"That was almost two weeks ago. Bet the hand is a little ripe by now."

"We got a tight budget," Dawson said, "But we do own a refrigerator. Use it to store lunch. And hands."

"That's good, Bob," Troy said. "And our lucky winner is?"

"Guy named Victor Betancourt. Cuban. Marielito."

"Must be an old Cuban by now, he came over in the Mariel boatlift."

"Not that old. Mid-fifties. If he's still alive. Leaving a hand out in the Gulf of Mexico is not a good sign. Downright careless."

"Suppose so," Troy said. "What can you tell me about Mr. Betancourt?"

"Took care of his nails ..."

"I knew that."

"... didn't wear rings. And had recently eaten a Cuban sandwich. Traces of ham, mustard and bread."

"I think that's from the bag the hand was in," Troy said.

"What, you saying you use Cuban sandwich bags to store evidence in?"

"We're a small department here," Troy said. "We make do. Is there a next of kin? Any contacts? Any idea why his hand was out there?"

"I'd say that's your job, Chief. But he's in the system. Drug distributor. Medium big. Weed and coke both. He was already a drug dealer at the age of 17, when the Cubans generously yanked him out of prison there, loaded him onto a boat, and sent him to us

prepaid. Now he's older and wiser and bigger in the business. He has just come out of Miami — we think he was sort of pushed out — and only recently popped up on our radar in your neighborhood."

"I don't think he's what the chamber of commerce meant when they asked for 'green' businesses to come here," Troy said.

"Suppose not. I think he's horning in on west coast Florida action. Nibbles around the edges. Has good connections down south in Colombia and goes down there to get his own stuff. Tampa guys would know more. Talk to them. You know anybody in Tampa P.D.?"

"A few. I'll make the call. Can I get your report? I'll add it to my file. Be nice to have more than one sheet of paper in it."

"You use paper?"

"Old fashioned." Angel Watson, the department's electronics guru, sometimes called Troy a Neanderthal.

"Well, I'll email this down to you. Then you can print it so you'll have paper. Good luck with it."

Ramon Bustello Prado worked in the Major Crimes section at the Tampa Police department. Troy called him next.

"Oh Christ!" Prado said into the phone. "I was having a nice day until now. What the hell do *you* want?"

"Afternoon, 'Bust," Troy said. "Always nice to catch up with my old boss."

"Your old boss. Before you got fired."

"Well, at least you didn't fire me."

"No. The chief fired you. Half the department wanted that honor but she outranked us. As I only dimly recall, because I'm trying to forget you ever existed, you blew away a teenager armed with a water pistol."

"Looked real to me. And he *had* just committed armed robbery with it."

"So why are you infesting my ear on this otherwise fine day."

"Need information." Troy related what he knew about the hand and Victor Betancourt. "I didn't know the name. Thought you might."

"I do. He's new. Came over from Miami to grace our presence. He's ... brash. Things were pretty much settled around here, Tampa Bay area on down to Naples. Everyone in their niche and getting along. New guy — Betancourt — bumps shoulders, next guy bumps the next guy down the pecking order. Soon, whole place is full of bumping. Got so you couldn't sleep at nights in the projects for all the gunfire. But Betancourt disappeared a month ago. Word is he went on down south to buy some product ..."

"We're already down south."

"Farther south. Where they only speak Spanish."

"Oh. Miami. I'm with you now."

"Shut up. He went to Cartagena. That's in South America for you who are geographically challenged."

"Named for the city in Spain," Troy said. "Which, in turn, was named after Carthage in North Africa."

"Screw you and your ancient history books. Anyway, he didn't come back here. We sort of assumed he'd gone back to Miami from Colombia. But your hand thing

implies he might not be coming back at all. Whatever it is, it's good news here. Things are settling back down to normal."

"Good to know you're all over those drug dealers," Troy said. "Harassing them. Jailing them. Convicting them. Cleaning up the mean streets."

"Shit. You know how it is. It's Whack-a-Mole. We pop one occasionally, when we get lucky, when one of them steps on his own dick. But someone else, slightly less stupid, fills the void within weeks. All we're doing is improving the gene pool."

"So where has this Betancourt been for a month?" Troy asked.

"I don't know. Somewhere in Colombia, probably. Garden spot of the coke industry. You didn't find the rest of him?"

"No. But I could 'disappear' a small army out in these mangrove islands. Between sharks, crabs, and gulls, fresh food vanishes quickly. It's a minor miracle we found his hand and even that was an accident."

"Well, I'll have the drug guys snoop around. See what rumors we turn up."

"Appreciate that, 'Bust."

"Shit." And the phone line went dead.

Chapter 4

Saturday, May 13

As always, Jason Snyder's alarm clock woke him at exactly 6:47 a.m. He got up and made his single bed, hospital corners and sheet tight enough to bounce a quarter on it, and then stared at it. Maybe he needed a new bedspread. The John Deere tractor had looked cool when he was twelve. But at nineteen, he thought, he needed something more grown up. *Old enough to have sex with women. If any of them would have me. Bitches.*

Jason showered for precisely five minutes, spent the next five minutes shaving his face, more for practice than because it needed it, and his head because that would annoy his mother, and then opened the antique Army footlocker his dad had given him when Jason was eight. He took out one pair of white jockey underwear, rolled up with others in the top drawer of the footlocker, and one pair of black rolled-up socks. He put those on and took some fresh starched and pressed black trousers out of his closet, along with one fresh starched and pressed white long-sleeve shirt. All his trousers were black and all his shirts were white and he insisted that all his trousers and shirts be pressed. It was his uniform. *Just like Troy*, Jason thought as he "broke starch" by pointing the toes of one foot down and pushing it through one leg of the pants. *Up tight. Out of sight. All right.* His mother paid the cleaners and he borrowed her car to make the laundry run each Monday.

He put on some black dress loafers that he polished each night before he went to sleep, sat at his desk, and opened his laptop and checked his online game first, to see if he had sold anything in the auction house in World of Warcraft. He checked in with several social media sites where his profiles said he was a successful young entrepreneur, son of wealthy parents and graduate of an ivy league school. No new messages.

It was 7:29 and Jason took one last look around the bedroom and nodded to himself. *A place for everything and everything in its place. Wish Dad was here to see this.*

He went downstairs at 7:30, as always. Precision in all things, large and small. His mother, Mariko, had fixed his breakfast and now she laid it out on the small table in the kitchen. He sat and sneered at it. "We had eggs and pancakes yesterday," he said.

As he talked, Jason carefully separated the eggs from the pancakes. He always ate food one item at a time, then the next item, always carefully separated on the plate. Discipline in all things, large and small. His mother always dumped things together so that the pancakes might actually touch the edge of the fried eggs. He hated that but she never learned. *Stupid bitch*, Jason thought.

Mariko Fujimori Snyder turned from the sink to look at her only son. Jason was five-eight and barely one hundred pounds and pale from rarely going outside. He had her brown eyes, a slight slant to the eyelids, and would have had her straight black hair but he shaved his head, something that annoyed her. She was a temporary single mom; Jason's father, who had married her in Tokyo twenty-three years ago, was in the Army and had been overseas for the past year. He was not due home for another six months.

"And we might have that tomorrow too," Mariko said. "You don't like the food, find another restaurant."

"Got no money."

"I give you an allowance. What did you do with it?"

"Spent it at the mall." This was not entirely true. Jason had set aside most of his weekly allowance for months until he had enough cash saved to buy a cheap used Brazilian handgun, five extra magazines, and ammunition at a gun shop and shooting range in Naples. He had borrowed his mother's car, told her he would be shopping at the mall, and run up to Naples to buy those.

The helpful people at the range had taught him how to shoot and let him practice until he understood how to load and fire a 9-mm semiautomatic pistol. They had not blinked an eye or asked why someone who clearly had never fired a gun before suddenly needed one with extra magazines. They had told him to wait three days for the required 'cooling off' period and a background check. And that was that; he had spent more time and effort getting a driver license.

"Had you considered not playing computer games and, instead, working at a job?" Mariko Snyder said. "That's what most nineteen-year-olds do."

"Don't know how to do anything." Jason finished the eggs and started on the pancakes. He never added the syrup until the eggs were gone because he didn't want syrupy eggs. That would have been undisciplined. The one thing his father had impressed upon Jason was the need for constant, unremitting discipline in all things, big and small. *All right. Up tight*, Jason thought.

"Jason, nobody at your age knows how to do anything," Mariko Snyder said. "You have to learn. Find some small job and earn some money. It will make you feel better about yourself. You don't go to school now. You never applied to any colleges. You can't just sit up there in your bedroom and play computer games all day, every day. Don't you get bored by that?"

Jason ignored that. It was an old argument between them and she was, after all, just a woman. "I feel just fine." *Not my fault women all hate me*, he thought. *Bitches. Teach them all something. Something real soon.*

He sat and ate silently, scowling at his mother's back as she washed her own breakfast dishes. He went back to his bedroom and turned on his computer and started typing an email to the only person in the world who seemed to understand him.

Chapter 5

Saturday, May 13

Troy tried to keep to some sort of schedule, hard as that often was, of seven-to-seven Mondays through Fridays and then he checked in at the police station at least once on the weekends. The tourist season was winding down and Troy's officers had not arrested anyone Friday night and so there was no need for anyone to be in the station. Troy insisted that someone had to stay there if they had a prisoner. Given the small staff, that often meant that he had to sleep on his long leather sofa in his office.

On Saturday afternoon Troy walked over from the Sea Grape Inn, cleaned up the break room's pizza boxes, left a stern note on the table there that nobody would read, fed Spots, and sat at his desk to read his email. June Dundee, the dispatcher, was at the front desk because she worked Tuesdays through Saturdays, but the two of them were alone in the station.

Troy sighed when he saw his email list. One was from the Osprey Yacht Club, a notice of an upcoming Hail and Farewell event. Troy, as director of public safety, was an honorary member even though the club management didn't care for his skin tone and had once tried to throw him out.

One email was from Martha Sizemore, stating that "some people from *Garden and Gun* magazine" would be at her home next Wednesday and would he please arrange some traffic control so the photographer could do his job. Troy smiled at the notion that Martha and her award-winning yard and plantings would draw such a crowd that she would need traffic control. Still, he made a note to add to the patrol log for that day, for officers to drive by and check on things. Sometimes, being police chief was a bit political and he didn't need to get on Martha Sizemore's bad side.

One email was a note from a salesman wanting to discuss with the city council his ideas for improving the police department. Troy always appreciated advice from out-of-town strangers on how to do his job better. And one email was from Jason Snyder.

My mom is on my back again today, Snyder wrote. She hates me. Always has. She wants to kick me out. Told me to get a job and eat someplace else. Bitch. Wait until my dad hears about this. I mean, she's not even American, not a real one, and he's sworn to fight all foreigners.

Troy looked up from his screen and out across Sunset Bay. That always had a calming effect. Maybe later he could take his sailboat or canoe out for some late afternoon exercise. He looked at the screen again.

I don't know why girls hate me so. Even back in school, all the way back to grade school, girls hated me. They didn't say so. They're sneaky. But I could sense it. I'm smart. I could get into Mensa if you would only nominate me.

Troy sighed. Jason *was* smart, Troy knew. And he had tried before to explain to Jason that Mensa didn't care who else a member recommended. There didn't exist any such system; it wasn't friends inviting friends. All Jason needed to do was take the standardized IQ test that the local group's testing coordinator supervised. But that would require actively bestirring himself and Jason, Troy knew, was extremely passive.

The kid had latched onto Troy because Troy was multi-ethnic, being part black, part Caucasian, and part Asian. It hadn't seemed to Troy to be much of a reason for a friendship but he knew that Jason was a strange one and that what Jason thought important was often something no one around him could fathom.

Troy answered the other emails and then spent many minutes typing a reply to Jason. He always found this hard because he had to be extremely careful. A conversation — talking in person or via email — with Jason was a bit like defusing a bomb. You wanted to be careful what you did and to consider all possible consequences before making any sudden movement.

He was still working on that when June came in and stood in his open office doorway, her way of quietly interrupting. He looked up. "Yes?" he said. "Something?"

"Maybe. We got something odd," She said.

"Hard to imagine, around here." Troy leaned back and put a foot up on an open desk drawer.

"Got a call from a woman over on Snake Key," June said. "She said she had seen a child peeking out a window from the house next door. Thing is, there's three adults who live in that house. She says they're real slobs and they keep all the windows shut and curtains closed but she has never, in the several years those people have lived there, seen any children."

"What does she want us to do about it?"

"She didn't know. She thought she should report it. The people are so weird, two men and one woman. And the house so closed-up looking all this time. Usually you can tell if someone has young kids. They got toys out in the yard. The kids go to school. Other kids come around to play."

Troy thought about it. Out on Sunset Bay a boat was slowly chugging towards the ramp, four men on board, a collection of fishing rods in holders attached to the hardtop above the center console. *Tide must have turned*, he thought. *One reason to quit fishing in the middle of the day.*

"Do we have an address for this house of mystery?" he asked.

"Yes," June said. "Snake Key. Place on Totch Road."

"Good," Troy said. "First thing Monday I'll have someone call the elementary and high schools. See if they have any students from that address. Call that Montessori-kindergarten school too. We got any other schools in town?"

"Not that I know of. Not since we closed that military academy thing."

Troy nodded and looked out the window. The fishermen were tying the boat to the pier next to the ramp. "Okay," he said. "We'll see what the schools have to say."

Chapter 6

Sunday, May 14

The dream was evolving over time. A part of Troy's consciousness knew that, even when immersed in the dream itself. Now he had Billy Poteet using a knife to try to cut the throat of some woman. In reality, Billy had put a gun to Wanda Frister's head and Troy had blown Billy's head half off. That had happened in the midst of a hurricane, yet in this dream there was no rain or wind.

"I'm not going back to prison," the man said. Troy wondered what had become of Billy Poteet. The man bent to look around the woman's head, aiming his knife at the jugular vein.

"Don't do it," Troy shouted. "We can get you some help. You don't want to kill her. You love her."

The teenager with the water pistol straightened up and dropped the gun on the ground. "You're right," he said. "I give up." And Troy's gun went off and killed him.

Troy jerked awake, half-sitting up. He was in Lee Bell's bedroom at her house on Airport Key. He threw aside the covers and ran to her bathroom. He made it in time, bent over the toilet, and vomited. He waited there, on his knees with his arms on the toilet seat. He heard Lee coming into the bathroom behind him. He vomited a second time. There was often a second time; he never knew why.

Lee had her hands on his naked back. Other than on his office couch, Troy slept in the nude. Lee liked to wear a tee-shirt that came down to her knees. "It's all right," she was saying. "I'm here. Let it out." Sometimes Troy also wept after these dreams. He didn't know why he did that, either.

He stood and washed his mouth out in the sink. "I'm all right," he said. "Thanks. Sorry to spoil our day and our lunch in Miami."

"Write it down," Lee said firmly. Troy kept a journal at Lee's house and another at his own condo, to write down the dreams. Randy 'Panda' Groves, Troy's therapist, had insisted.

"Yes dear." Troy sat on the toilet lid and pulled the journal and a cheap pen off a magazine rack Lee kept there. He had never asked her why she had a magazine rack in the bathroom but knew that many people did. Troy's opinion was that bathrooms were places to shit, shower, and shave and that didn't leave much leisure time for reading. He had never seen a magazine rack in an Army latrine.

"And don't worry about Miami," Lee said. "We'll make lunch on time even if we have to fly."

Troy managed a smile. "Well, you have that option." Lee Bell operated a one-plane flying service around south Florida. "Fly at two hundred MPH, or drive that Corvette at half that." The first time that Troy had seen Lee he had wanted to give her a speeding ticket but hadn't had a ticket book with him.

Lee grinned. Troy liked her grin even more than her smile. The smile was incandescent but the grin promised more.

"Cessna's top speed's about 160," she said. "But I'll drive us," Lee said. "Car needs the exercise."

"Why is it that I'm not reassured," Troy said. "Kyle Rivers stops you when you blow past the sheriff's station at the Everglades City turnoff at 80 MPH, I don't know you."

"Kyle Rivers is a sweetie-pie."

"Kyle is a hard-assed deputy who will ticket you for speeding and me for letting you."

"Come back to bed," Lee said. "It's only three a.m. You won't be doing your run until six. I'll come with you. Today is all about you. Take care of my man. Might even be a present later."

Troy shook his head. He walked back into the bedroom, Lee following, and picked up his underwear. "Can't go back to sleep after these dreams. You know that. I'll sit out in the living room and read. You go back to bed. I'll wake you at six."

Chapter 7

Monday, May 15

"You got a nice little police department here," Matthew Landreau said brightly. "Impressive for such a small town."

Landreau was a self-styled traveling police expert. Councilman Maxwell Reed had insisted that the town council and Troy listen to Landreau's advice. Mortimer Potem, the town's manager, had come upstairs too. The six of them were sitting on cheap yellow plastic stacking chairs around a vinyl-covered table with folding legs, one of many in the meeting room above the town hall. The meeting room was sometimes used as a refuge during hurricanes, but mostly it was where they held bingo games, occasional plays, the monthly town meeting, and conferences with passing experts eager to set Mangrove Bayou on the road to progress.

"We manage, somehow," Lester Groud said.

"You sure do," Landreau said. He was an imposing man, taller than Troy and fatter than councilman Norris Compton and he overflowed his chair seat. *Probably flies first-class, in the big-ass seats*, Troy thought. Troy had never flown anywhere first class and he devoted a moment to that thought while Landreau opened a briefcase to get out some papers. Maybe flying in the right-hand seat in Lee Bell's Cessna counted. Troy didn't know. The seat was not that big and Lee wouldn't let him eat peanuts because the shells ended up everywhere.

Landreau wore a blue suit with lighter blue stripes, a red tie for power, and beautifully-polished loafers with tassels. Troy wore his tan long-sleeve uniform with the long pants, and some black New Balance running shoes. The three councilmen wore whatever casual clothes happened to be nearest to their closet doors that morning. Mortimer Potem, as always, wore a good suit, gray and double-breasted, and — today — a tie with Donald Duck emblazoned on it. Potem collected cartoon ties, the only thing amusing about him. Troy had never seen Potem smile and Troy suspected that Mortimer Potem slept in his suit, rigidly straight so as not to wrinkle.

"But, if I may be forward," Landreau said. "Your chief here, and your police department, are still living in the twentieth century. You can do better. And you can do better for free or very cheaply."

"We do need to upgrade some things," Max Reed said.

"What are we doing wrong now?" Lester Groud asked.

"Not wrong," Landreau said. He stared a moment at Potem's tie. "Just old-fashioned. I'm here to help. Let me tell you about the Federal government's 1033 program."

"Tanks," Troy said.

"What?" Norris Compton said.

"He wants us to have tanks."

"Is that true?" Groud said.

Landreau shook his head. "Not at all. The 1033 program is intended to distribute to responsible police agencies across America certain equipment the U.S. military has no

further use for and which has been written off their books. Why throw away or scrap used equipment when it's still far better than most police forces have or can afford."

"I thought the feds did away with that nonsense," Troy said. "Too many Officer Friendlys turning into Robo-Cops."

Landreau smiled. "They did away with talking about it so much. But I can still get certain items from them. For you."

"We can't afford much," Potem said.

"You don't have to afford anything," Landreau said. "I can set it up so it's free."

"And what do you get from this," Groud asked.

"More important, what sort of free stuff can we get," Reed said.

"I receive a modest commission for my help in placing the excess equipment. More than eight thousand police departments have taken advantage of the program, and even a few school districts."

"Nothing like a good tank to keep those senior proms from spinning out of control," Troy said.

Landreau ignored that. "As for what you get, you can pick and choose. I can supply you with weapons, from M-16s on up to .50 caliber heavy machine guns ..."

"Ma Deuce," Troy said. He looked around at puzzled expressions. "The M2 machine gun. Been around since the 1930s. Excellent weapon for heavy combat. I could level this building with a ten-second burst. Set one up in the high school with grazing fire down the corridors and those kids would learn pretty quick to get a hall pass to go to the toilet."

"Well, sure," Landreau said. "But we also have uniforms, camouflage options, sidearms, helmets, protective vests, vehicles like Humvees and MRAPs. ..."

"What's an MRAP? Compton asked.

"Basically, a heavy truck," Landreau said. "Useful for riots or SWAT team applications ..."

"It's a mine-resistant ambush-protected truck," Troy interrupted. "Weighs fifteen tons and most of that is armor protecting the bottom from land mines. Perfect for us to use when some college kids get rowdy and start drinking on the beach. I bet a beer can would bounce right off. Guys like Landreau have sold about fifty of those trucks to Florida police departments ..."

"We don't sell them," Landreau said. "Only expedite delivery."

"Not one department has any real use for them," Troy continued. "They sit behind police buildings collecting dust and bird nests. Florida's national guard — part of the actual, real, Army — doesn't own any." He looked at Landreau. "Were you going to get to the armored personnel carriers next?"

"Well, we can supply APCs, true. M-113s if you want them."

"No Bradleys?" Troy asked. "Maybe an Abrams tank? Do a neutral steer with one of those in the middle of one of our brick streets and our maintenance guys would have heart attacks."

Landreau shook his head. "Not yet, anyway. Maybe in a few years."

"Aren't there some things more ... well ... useful to us in a small town," Reed said.

"Well, we can supply all the filing cabinets you want," Landreau said. "If you need bayonets, we have twelve thousand of those we're trying to move."

"Bayonets," Groud said. "How twenty-first century. You got any swords?"

"No swords. Did you need swords? I can go outside the program for special orders."

"Don't be ridiculous," Groud said. He looked around the table. "Troy, Mortimer. What say you?"

"We don't need filing cabinets," Mortimer Potem said. "We have surplus ourselves, what with going digital. We already have good vehicles. In fact, not long back we bought a third police truck for the chief, here."

"Already have vests and uniforms," Troy said. "Even have two AR-15s in a locker downstairs, and shotguns in the three vehicles. We don't have a SWAT team. I suppose I'm it. I don't want a helmet and I don't need camouflage gear. Around here camouflage would be dressing to look like a frou-frou beach bar. He looked across at Groud. "Are we done here? Can I go do some police work. Busy day."

"Yes. Perhaps we can think this over and get back to you," Groud said to Landreau.

"I can leave you some sales material. Brochures," Landreau said. He seemed annoyed.

"Do that. Talk to Mortimer Potem here. He's our professional manager. Now I have to run too. Fishing party to take out."

Troy went downstairs to his office. He sat and looked out the window at the boat ramp and started re-reading the file on one Victor Betancourt, Cuban drug importer, who appeared to be mostly missing in action. The Tampa cops had emailed down what they knew about Victor. It took Troy two minutes to read the file. Then he sat and stared at the boat ramp, thinking.

Lester Groud walked in and sat in a visitor chair. He looked at Troy, who was still staring out the window. "This your idea of doing police work?" he asked.

Troy held up the Betancourt file. "We never rest," he said. "Thought you had a fishing party."

"I lied."

"Lot of that going around. What's with Max Reed? Why is he all enthused about arming my troops to the teeth in case of invasion? Next thing, someone will want us to buy an anti-aircraft gun."

"My guess," Groud said. "Landreau will flip Max a 'taste' of his fee."

"Ah. Lester, you have a suspicious mind."

"Good song. Am I right?"

"I don't know. Don't much care. We have no earthly use for any of that gear. What Landreau failed to mention is that it comes with strings attached. We have to arrange delivery and pay for that. Costs more to ship a filing cabinet than it's worth. An MRAP has to be brought here on a wide-load flatbed trailer from some place far off. We have to maintain it — and some of that will be expensive. We have to file regular reports back to the Disposition Services of the Defense Logistics Agency ..."

"You already knew about this," Groud said.

"Oh yeah. Knew about it back when I was in the Army. We used to laugh about it. The 1033 program is for junk we can't even give away to our defense partners around the world. We civilians get what Costa Rica doesn't want."

"Must be some use for it. Somewhere. I mean, if eight thousand police departments like it, can't be all bad."

"Maybe not, though I can't think, offhand, of anything good," Troy said. "They like the program because some cops like to play dress-up in fearful combat uniforms and big guns and go out and terrify the paying citizens. It's Halloween for immature cops."

"Well, we don't have immature cops here," Groud said.

Troy grinned. "Used to. Back before Milo Binder sharpened up."

"My nephew, yes. He was a jerk and he did come out all right. I think you did that."

"Milo did that. I just let him know what was expected of him."

Groud looked at the file in Troy's hand. "You find out anything more about Mr. Hand?"

"Not much." Troy handed the file across and let Groud read it. "As is so often the case," Troy said, staring out the window, "we're sitting here twiddling our thumbs, waiting for anything useful to bob up."

Groud smiled and leaned forward to put the file back on Troy's desk. "Better off than Mr. Betancourt, at least."

"How's that?"

"He can't twiddle his thumbs any more."

Chapter 8

Tuesday, May 16

It's a damned disgrace," Maxwell Reed said. "Ought to be shut down." It was eight a.m. and Troy and the three town councilmen were meeting in his office, drinking coffee and disposing of a box of Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

"Why?" Troy said.

Reed stared at Troy. He had to swallow before he could speak. "Why? Because it's sinful, of course."

"I'm in the enforcing the law business," Troy said. "Not the enforcing the Bible business." Troy reached for the last maple-covered doughnut before Lester Groud could get it.

"Well, operating a house of prostitution is against the law," Reed said.

"Yes, it is," Troy said, "last time I looked."

"I was gonna eat that," Groud complained.

"You snooze, you lose," Troy said to Groud. He looked at Reed. "Florida statutes say that, 'It is unlawful to own, establish, maintain, or operate any place, structure, building, or conveyance for the purpose of lewdness, assignation, or prostitution', I suppose that makes every hotel and motel in Florida guilty, not to mention half the automobiles owned by parents of teenagers."

"Oh, surely not," Reed said. "They aren't places for prostitution. Not all of them, anyway."

"I like a cheerful naiveté," Troy said. "I'm sure that no one has, ever, rented a hotel room just to have sex in. Or had sex in it with someone not a spouse. As for teenagers, why would Detroit even make back seats in big sedans if not for sex?"

"You're just jealous because you drive a shrimpy SUV with a back seat too small for even a hand-job," Groud said.

Troy grinned. "Back seat folds down. Front seats fold back. You would be astonished at what one can do inside a Subaru."

"Spare us the details."

"There are no details," Troy said. "My spine is too old for that nonsense. Anyway, the only exception in the statute is for spouses. Les, and Max, you two are in the clear, being married."

"Well," Groud said. "Not to each other."

Troy ignored that. "Norris, you and Marjorie Liston need to cut out all that nasty stuff."

"We're pretty straight-laced," Compton said. "Missionary position and all that."

"Christ, Norris," Groud said around a sugar-dusted doughnut. He swallowed.

"Too much information."

"I think that was on the *Bayou Breeze* town news web site last week," Troy said.

"Very funny," Compton said. "What about you and Lee Bell? You have sex. I bet it's lewd."

"You don't know that," Troy said. "Actually Lee and I spend nights reading Marcel Proust. She's especially fond of *Remembrance of Things Past*; sometimes she even bakes madeleine cakes."

"What's a madeleine cake," Groud said.

"Sort of a French hush puppy," Troy said.

"Oh."

"Then the statute has a lot of blather about getting prostitutes and even johns into drug treatment programs," Troy continued. "I always thought that odd, the assumption that if you wanted sex, or wanted to earn money by selling sex, you must be on drugs because no good Christian Floridian would want sex otherwise."

"Purpose of sex is to have children," Reed said firmly.

"Heard that rumor," Groud said. "Doesn't mean it's true."

"And anyway, don't most prostitutes have drug habits," Reed asked. "And V.D.?"

"In my limited experience, busting them up in Tampa, yes," Troy said. "Lot of them are teenage runaways, trying to get by. But we don't jail people for having sexually-transmitted diseases, do we? Sadly, in my opinion, we often do jail them for being addicts. But that's another issue."

"Then, at the end of the statute," Troy continued, "the fines go to support DCF, the Department of Children and Families. So, in essence, whores and their johns are performing a vast and unrecognized public service."

"I think you're yanking on our legs here," Compton said. "Max has a point. Jenine Foster is probably a madam running a whorehouse. Right here in River City."

"Shocked," Troy said. "I'm shocked and appalled."

"Of course you are," Compton said. "I'm curious. You must have known this. You're a bright fellow. Why haven't you shut her down already?"

Troy looked around the table at his three bosses. "Lester, did you already know or suspect her?" Troy asked Groud.

"Sure. But, then, I know Jenine. She supports any and all charities here in town. When someone falls on hard times, Jenine is there with that first donation. I can count on her. Far as I'm concerned, she's doing no harm and helps the town a lot more than the tightfisted, tight-assed Bible-thumpers."

"You, Norris? You been to Jenine's ... er ... abode?"

"No. I'd been told there was one in town. Didn't know who," Compton said.

"Who told you?"

"Guy said he went there when his wife was out of town. Apparently she likes to go home to mother sometimes — and he likes for her to go home to mother. Get some strange on the side. Says the place is actually called Pauline's. I don't know why."

"And this gentleman's name is ... ?"

"Rather not say," Compton said.

"Ah hah," Troy said. "And you, Max. How did you learn of this nest of snakes befouling our little Garden of Eden here?"

"Someone told me about it."

"Who?"

"Someone. Just someone."

"So, to summarize here," Troy said. "Max and Norris have only secondhand suspicions, lent them by men they refuse to name because those men, if all this is correct,

are breaking the law too. Lester seems to know the woman but thinks highly of her. Max now wants me to act upon what is not sufficient evidence, and jail the females participating in various sexual unions while we ignore the males whose money pays for all of it. How am I doing so far?"

"Pretty good, I'd say," Groud said.

"It's not right," Reed said. "She's committing a crime. Why don't you go *get* some evidence, if that's all that's holding you back."

Troy smiled. "Need for evidence is always a major stumbling block for us police chiefs."

"Don't be difficult," Reed said. "Go do your job."

"I'll stop in at Jenine's. Or Pauline's or whatever. Talk to her. Snoop around." Troy glanced at his office door with its defaced sign that he refused to fix until someone confessed. "I am, after all, Director of Public Safety."

Chapter 9

Tuesday, May 16

By Monday afternoon no school had claimed any students from the address on Totch road. Troy sent Dominique Reiss over there Tuesday morning to see what was what. Dominique reported back that there was nobody home and no vehicles in the driveway. Troy decided to look into it himself after lunch. He drove over to Snake Key and stopped first at 527 Totch Road, the address of the woman who had phoned in about the child next door. She was home and invited him in. They sat in her kitchen at a small table and drank Coca-Cola. Troy didn't much care for soft drinks but he had swallowed a lot worse in the process of putting people at ease.

"How sure are you that you saw a child?" he asked. "Couldn't have been some adult maybe peeking out while on his or her knees for some reason?"

"I know a child when I see one. They keep all the windows shut and shades down. All the time. But I definitely saw a kid pull a shade aside and look out. She was looking out like she had never seen the world before. It was odd how she looked around at everything. Then she was suddenly gone and the shade was back in place."

"How do you know it was a girl? Got an age estimate?"

"Well, I guess I don't know if it was a girl. She, the child, had long hair, all in front of her face. Its face. How old? Maybe four, five. Small anyway."

"You say the child suddenly disappeared from view. Like it just decided to go do something else, or like someone yanked it away from the window?"

"It was sudden all right. That's all I know."

"All right. Thanks for the Coke. You think of anything else, call my office."

Outside, Troy walked next door to 529 Totch Road. The Snake Key boatyard was one block south and the Guide Club two blocks north. There were now two pickup trucks, one in the driveway, one parked in the yard and both old enough to qualify for antique plates if anyone bothered. It wasn't really a yard, just the sand between the house and the street. Someone had long ago left a stripped engine block, a straight-six, in the center of the yard and someone had later planted some flowers in the open cylinders. The flowers were flopped over and long-dead. The house was concrete block, painted white but half the paint had peeled off. There was a flat roof and no porch whatever to shield the front door. All the windows that Troy could see were blocked off by shades that were pulled down. Troy knocked on the door. The door was a hollow-core interior door and the weather had ruined it, the lauan-mahogany veneer peeling off in long strips.

A young, short, fat man opened the door. The man stared up at Troy as if thought came slow to him. A cloud of cigarette smoke wafted out, and some other smell with it, something worse. In the dimness of the living room Troy could see, over the man's shoulder and through a fog-like haze of smoke in the room, a fat woman and another young, short fat man standing in a doorway to another room. A big white pit bull in the living room started barking hysterically. Troy put a hand on his gun.

He also realized two things: What he could see of the living room was an unholy mess, with rugs, furniture and boxes of something scattered around and sheets tossed over some furniture. And the stench of urine, feces and mold wafted out of the house and

over and around the fat man in the door to reach Troy's nose. The man puffed away on his cigarette and continued to look at Troy blankly. He was wearing some trousers with various stains and a torn sleeveless undershirt that was filthy.

"Grab that damn dog!" the woman shouted and the second fat man, standing beside her, reached down to seize the dog's collar. Troy realized the two men were identical twins and identically obese. The dog didn't stop barking. Troy didn't take his hand off his gun. The woman came to the door and shoved the fat man there out of the way. She was short too, and wore a smock of some sort that had once been white with a blue flower pattern. Now it was gray and it was hard to see the flowers. She was a fat 'pouter-pigeon' body shape, big breasts that hung down loosely in front, a huge rear end that stuck out behind like a caboose, her spine somehow managing to balance in the middle the opposing see-saw forces. She looked up at Troy. She had a half-smoked cigarette stuck to her lower lip. "Who you?" she asked.

"Troy Adam, I'm the police chief here." Troy was fascinated to see her lips move and the cigarette bob up and down too but not fall off. "Had a report that you had a child living here. I'd like to see the child."

"We ain't got no kid here," The woman said.

"Mind if I come in and look around for myself?"

"Damn right I mind," she said. She reached for the cigarette and waved that at Troy. "There's no kid, and people around here need to mind their own business."

"Ah. Well. okay. Had to ask. You understand. I'll make a note that the report was wrong. Sorry to bother you. Nice dog. What's his name?" One thing Troy didn't want was for this clan to up and move before he could round up some reinforcements.

"His name's Spawn. You come back here and I'll set him on you," the woman said. She slammed the door in Troy's face.

Back at the station, Troy ran the two license tags from the trucks parked at the house. Both belonged to Harriet Daniels. Troy could find no criminal record for Harriet. Apparently it was not unlawful to smell bad.

Chapter 10

Wednesday, May 17

Olive Piotrowski, the investigator from the Florida Department of Children and Families, showed up around three p.m. the next day, parking her car on the dead-end street beside the door to the police station lobby. She was a no-nonsense, abrupt woman, about forty-five, five-six and stout. Her graying hair was pulled back in a severe bun and she wore a severe look on her face. Troy guessed it was a face that had seen too much in twenty years with Florida's DCF. Troy suspected she ate roofing nails for breakfast. June had also called Manuel Gonzalez, the veterinarian, who doubled as dog-catcher at times, and he was there with his truck. Troy rounded up Milo Binder to drive them out to Snake Key.

When she saw their patrol truck, Piotrowski objected. They had no child seats in the Suburban. "How are you going to bring back a child if you do find one?" She demanded.

"Beats me. Hadn't thought of that. Milo, do we have any child seats, maybe back in the storeroom?"

"Never seen any, Chief."

"Humm. That's a bit of an oversight. We'll have to get some, keep one each in the trucks."

"Well, you certainly should," Piotrowski said. "We'll take my car."

"Milo, take the Suburban and meet us there. Manny, you follow Milo." Troy and Piotrowski walked back through the station and out the front door. Her car had three child seats in back, in different sizes. "Ever ready for anything," Troy said, looking at them.

"Humpff," she said and put the car in gear. Troy gave her directions as she drove too fast. The speed limit in all of Mangrove Bayou was thirty but Troy was afraid to say anything.

On Snake Key they caught up to Milo and Manny on Perimeter Road. Without slowing, Piotrowski swerved around both and took the lead. Troy told her to turn left onto Totch Road. In a minute he pointed out the house. Both pickup trucks were there. Piotrowski pulled into the yard and blocked in one truck. Milo blocked the driveway end, with Manny's pickup behind.

This time Harriett Daniels opened the door. She was still wearing the same dress — at least Troy didn't see how anyone could have more than one and keep them all at the same level of grunginess. She was once more smoking a cigarette that was half-gone. She looked at Troy, at Piotrowski, and at the police truck parked in front with its lights flashing. A look of fear slowly came into her eyes. If she saw Manny Gonzalez standing by with his catch-pole in hand, she gave no sign.

"Are you Harriet Daniels?" Troy asked. The woman slowly looked up at him and nodded.

Piotrowski pushed Troy aside and stepped forward. "Mrs. Daniels, I'm Olive Piotrowski, and I'm an investigator with the Florida Department of Children and Families," she said in her most severe voice. "I have legal authorization to enter this

property and look for an unreported child." She handed Daniels a bench warrant. "You will not interfere. These officers will stand by to assist me."

"There's no kid. Just my boys," Harriett Daniels indicated the young men who had come to stand behind her. They didn't look hostile to Troy, only mildly curious. Both were in their early twenties. None of the three could have come through the doorway without having to squeeze. One man had a cane and walked with a slight limp, the other wore a baseball cap even in the house. The one with the baseball cap had a good grip on Spawn's collar again. Spawn was uttering a continuous deep growl. Like most cops, Troy was sick of people with pit bulls. Big four-legged penises for people with no self-esteem, in his opinion.

Troy pointed, "Manny, do your thing." Gonzalez stepped forward and slipped the strap loop on the end of the pole over the dog's head and tightened it. "Okay," he said over his shoulder to Troy.

"Excuse me," Troy said. "Ma'am, back up." He gently pushed Harriett Daniels away from the door and stepped into the living room. Inside, he flipped the light switch by the door and realized why it was so dark in there. There was no electric power. The only light was dim daylight filtering through the stained window shades.

"You two, sit on the sofa. Mrs. Daniels, you join them." The men both stared at him. "Sit," he said louder and pointed. The men sat. Harriett Daniels sat between them. Troy was amazed the sofa didn't collapse under their combined three-quarter-ton of weight.

When the one man let go of the dog it tried to leap at Troy and its weight actually forced Manny Gonzalez back a few steps. Troy hopped to one side as Gonzalez dragged the dog out at the end of a four-foot pole, and into the yard. "Give me the cane," Troy said, stepping forward again. The man with the cane held it out and Troy took it and leaned it against the wall in an opposite corner. "Milo, Mrs. Piotrowski, come on in. Milo, you stay here and watch these three." He looked at the two men. "Who are you guys?"

They just stared. Harriet Daniels was holding up the warrant so the light from a shaded window behind her could dimly illuminate it. As she was holding the warrant upside down, Troy wondered about her reading skills. Finally Harriet Daniels looked up and spoke. "My sons. They're brothers. They're a little slow. That one is George," indicating the one with the hat, "and that's Richard."

"Fine. Richard, Harriet, George. Stay where you are." All three sat and stared up at Troy, three cigarettes smoking together.

Only then did he take a look around. He wished he hadn't. Troy had been in rooms where rotting corpses had lain for weeks and those didn't smell as bad as this house. Urine and dog feces was smeared on the walls, mashed into the rugs, dripping off the furniture. The rugs were wet with urine, rotting and moldy. The ammonia stench was so strong it made Troy's eyes water. The cheap pull-down window shades had probably been white originally but now they were a mottled yellow from cigarette smoke. There was trash strewn across the floors and on the furniture. Every surface was sticky from a combination of old nicotine and other substances. In the afternoon heat with no air conditioning and all the windows shut, the house was an oven.

As his eyes adjusted, it got worse. The floor, walls, even the ceiling seemed to ripple and move. Troy pulled his flashlight off his duty belt and shone it on a wall. He realized he was looking at masses of German roaches, thousands of them. Interspersed

among their smaller cousins were hundreds of two-inch American cockroaches, what the locals called 'palmetto bugs' in an effort to not scare the tourists away. Since these could also fly, there were always a few flitting around the room with faint clattering of their wings.

Because the Daniels family was sitting down on the sofa, roaches soon started to scuttle right over them. They paid no attention. Troy felt something brush against his ankle and realized the floor was covered with roaches too. He stamped his feet. Troy heard a sound to his right and Milo Binder ran outside, then bent over beside the engine block flower pot, and vomited. Beyond him, Troy saw Manny Gonzalez, at the rear of his truck, adroitly hoisting Spawn the pit bull into Gonzalez' camper that served as temporary dog jail. Troy waited until Milo came back in, wiping his mouth. "You okay now?" he asked.

Milo nodded. "Sorry. Never seen anything like this. Or smelled it."

"Could have done that right in here," Troy said. "Wouldn't have made any difference. Keep moving your feet or you'll have roaches up your undershorts."

"Jesus Christ!" Milo said.

Milo stood guard in the living room, hopping from foot to foot. Troy and Olive Piotrowski searched the house. At almost every step Troy took he could feel a crackling underfoot, as if he were walking on broken eggshells. He realized he was squashing roaches as he walked. Occasionally he felt one drop onto his head from the ceiling so that as he walked he was constantly brushing himself off.

He checked the kitchen while Piotrowski checked the two bedrooms. In the kitchen there were rats too. Apparently Spawn the attack dog didn't do rat. *Probably*, Troy thought, *poor dog can't even smell the rats*. The refrigerator didn't work, of course but it did have rotted food covered in multi-colored mold. There were roaches running around in there too. Troy paused, gazing into the refrigerator and thinking that there was a strange beauty to the different pastel molds. On the counters, among the garbage, there were piles of soup cans and other food that didn't need refrigeration, and bags of potato chips and candy bars and cookies. Troy tried the faucet at the sink and it at least worked. The one sink and all the counters had dirty dishes stacked up. There were piles of empty cardboard food boxes and plastic wrapping from the food boxes.

In a hallway he opened a door into what had once been a walk-in closet. He peered in, flashlight in one hand. At his feet he felt something stir and he leapt back, thinking a rat had run over his foot. He bent to look. He saw a pair of eyes looking up at his. No, not *at* him, *through* him. Brown and open wide, unfocused, unblinking. It was a child, a small girl.

She lay on a moldy mattress on the closet floor, curled on her side, legs tucked into her emaciated chest. Her ribs, hip bones and shoulder blades protruded under her pale skin. Troy could have put his forefinger and thumb together around her arm. Long brown hair was matted, crawling with lice. Her skin was raw with bug bites, rashes and sores. Troy guessed her age at four or five but was to learn later she was actually eight years old. She was naked and lying in a pool of urine, smeared with her own feces, roaches crawling over her. A plastic bowl lay on the floor of the closet, with just a few traces of dog food still in it, the food scraps covered in roaches. An empty water bowl sat next to it.

He called Piotrowski. She came, looked, and Troy heard a strange noise come out of her, a half sob on an indrawn breath. The girl had not made a sound. She stared up at nothing. "Honey, what's your name?" Troy asked. The girl didn't even look directly at him. It was as if he had said nothing. It was as if he didn't exist.

"She's starved. We have to get her to a hospital," Piotrowski said.

Troy nodded. He used his radio to call June at the station and ask her to send the ambulance. As he did this he kept hopping from foot to foot. Piotrowski picked up the child.

"You find anyone else?" Troy asked. Piotrowski tried to speak but choked on a sob. She shook her head. They walked out into the living room.

He pointed at the child in Piotrowski's arms and screamed at the mother, "Why, in God's name, did you let this happen? You feed your dog better." He realized he had his hand on his gun and had half drawn it, and he pushed that back into its holster.

"I'm doing the best I can," Harriett Daniels said. She had lit a fresh cigarette; the still-smoking butt of the old one lay on the floor in front of her. She put out a foot and crushed the butt, and three or four roaches, with her shoe.

"What's her name?" Troy asked.

"Rose. It's not my fault. Ain't got the money to feed everyone."

Troy had to struggle to stay calm. Milo spoke up. "You got the money to pork up yourself and these two fatties too. You got the money to buy cigarettes for three chain smokers. You got the money to feed that dog."

"Why didn't you just call us?" Troy asked. "We have all sorts of social services to help."

"Ain't got no phone. Hey, there, where you going?" The last to Piotrowski who was heading for the door. "You can't take her. She's mine."

"Not any more," Piotrowski said. "If she survives, she'll be in foster care."

Harriett stood up and came forward. The two boys just sat there staring. Troy put an outstretched hand on Harriett's ample chest to stop her, and a big roach ran up his wrist. He jerked his hand back and shook his arm.

"Can I arrest these vermin?" he asked Piotrowski. "I refer to the humans."

"Not yet. Let me make a case." She walked out with the girl.

"Christ, what does it take to 'make the case'?" Troy said to no one in particular. "Come on," he said to Milo. They backed out of the house and then stood in the yard trying to flick roaches from their clothes.

"Saw you make a move for your gun back there," Milo said.

"You didn't stop me."

"No, Chief. I did not."

Harriett Daniels stuck her head out the front door. "Ah gets ma dog back?" she asked.

Troy looked over to Manuel Gonzalez. "What do you say, Manny?"

"Not back into that hellhole," Gonzalez said.

"I guess not," Troy said to Harriett Daniels.

"Goddam!" Daniels said. "Ah laked that dog." She slammed the door.

Troy heard someone crying. He turned to look. Piotrowski still held the girl. The girl was slowly turning her head to look at the outside world. Piotrowski was weeping,

tears running down her hard, weathered face. "This is just unbelievable," she said. "Worst I've ever seen. Twenty years. Worst ever."

Troy gripped her shoulder. She didn't look up but put a hand over his, still clutching the child to her chest with her other arm. In the distance he heard a siren. "Help is on the way," he said. He took a deep breath. The air smelled of salt and oxygen. It smelled clean. He didn't.

— end sample —

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