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Mystery/Police Procedural

Fangs

Book Six in the Troy Adam / Mangrove Bayou mystery series

by Stephen Morrill

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Chapter 1

Thursday, September 7

Troy Adam, director of public safety for the southwest Florida town of Mangrove Bayou, stood in the center of the living room and sniffed the air. The blood gave the air a metallic smell. *Or, he thought, maybe I’m just imagining it.*

“Guy’s name was Paul Toforth,” Tom VanDyke said. Tom was Troy’s evidence specialist when not doing routine patrols.

“Is.” Troy said.

“What?”

“Your tenses. He is still Paul Toforth.”

“Oh. Yeah. Suppose so. Owns this house.”

The living room was furnished in darkness. There was a two-piece dark brown leather sofa set, large dark wood coffee table, a flat-screen television sitting on the mantelpiece above a fireplace that likely got little use in southwest Florida. The fireplace interior was painted black to match a screen and a set of fireplace tools. The walls were painted a dark brown, which Troy thought odd. He liked light-colored wood, white paint, and plenty of sunlight, and found all-dark rooms like this depressing. When he had first been hired as chief he had immediately had the station walls repainted from their drab two-tone official government green to a cheery pinkish-white.

At least here, light was not the problem. The house was a 1920s-era wood frame bungalow that had been built back when Mangrove Bayou was a lumber processing company town. At two in the afternoon the large single-hung six-over-one-light living room windows facing the front and one side lit the room with bright shafts of daylight. On a September afternoon Troy could feel, from several feet away, the heat load coming

through the single-pane windows. *Must have had a big electric bill*, Troy thought. With so many people inside and the front door being opened every few minutes, a central air unit was struggling to keep the inside temperature to the low 80s.

The floor was polished dark wood, two-inch tongue-and-groove, and had been polyurethaned. *That's good*, Troy thought. *No problem for someone to clean up the blood*. There was an expended Taser cartridge on the floor and the wires still led to prongs embedded in the man's back.

The body, a small, thin white man, mid-fifties and with iron-gray hair pulled back into a pony tail, wore shorts and a tee shirt and hung upside-down by his bare feet from a short rope tied to a ceiling fan. The pony tail now hung down incongruously, the tip almost touching the floor. *Yet another reason why a pony tail looks bad on a man*, Troy thought, himself the product of a career spent in the Army and several police departments with short-hair codes.

The man's wrists were handcuffed behind his back and there was duct tape across his mouth. A corner of a red rag stuck out from one side of the duct tape. Troy assumed the rest of the rag was inside the man's mouth. Four holes in the neck, a pair to each side, still oozed trickles of blood but so much blood had drained out that the body was pale, all but the purplish-toned head which was itself streaked with rivulets of blood that had coursed from the neck down across the chin and face, across the duct tape, and then dripped onto the floor below.

Troy got down on his hands and knees and leaned forward to look closely at the head and neck, avoiding the floor just around the body. He turned his head sideways to better read the tee shirt slogan. *Sorry, lads. I'm taken*. Troy wondered if there was a tee shirt in Mangrove Bayou without some cute saying on it. He realized he was looking into the man's eyes, open and staring and seeming puzzled as to why the whole world was upside down. The eyeballs looked dry and dusty and Troy decided he was imagining that too. He sat back on his heels and wondered if he would dream about this. Sometimes he did.

Tom VanDyke took photos and then samples of the small pool of blood on the floor beneath the body, dusting anything likely to have fingerprints and collecting samples of anything likely to have DNA.

Troy watched him. When Troy had taken over as the Mangrove Bayou police chief Tom had been lackadaisical about the evidence because the former chief hadn't cared. Troy had sharpened up the entire department with better uniforms suited to the local weather, better training, a brighter paint job on the station walls, and furniture that wasn't broken or losing its stuffing.

"That cartridge still live?" Tom asked. "Don't need to get a shock from it."

"Not in the Taser any more, and the gun is where the battery is." Troy reached down and picked up one of the thin wires and snapped it in two. "This breaks the circuit anyway," he said to Tom.

"Never use my Taser." Tom put his left hand on the one on his duty belt. "Kinda forgot the small details. But I already picked up some of the AFIDs. "Taped them down on a card." AFIDs, or Anti-Felon Identification, were tiny bits of paper confetti sprayed out from the Taser cartridge when fired and which identified by serial number the cartridge used. "I'll call Taser when I get back to the office, trace the cartridge buyer."

“This is good,” Troy said. He looked at the victim’s hands. “Pity we can’t trace the handcuffs as easily. But you can buy those over the counter or by mail order. Still, shiny surface good for prints. Take them off if your key works and bag ‘em.”

“Consider it done, Chief.”

Troy glanced at Tom. “All right. I will. Now check the duct tape for fingerprints or hairs or DNA,” Troy said. He and Tom were wearing pale blue latex gloves so that their own fingerprints wouldn’t contaminate the scene — or vice-versa.

Tom grinned. He had a roll of clear fingerprint tape from his evidence bag and had cut off a few inches of tape to lift some fingerprints he had found near a light switch. He used an old credit card he had donated to the kit to lay down the tape smoothly to avoid bubbles under it. “Will do, Chief. You think the guy did this is too dumb to wear gloves?”

“Well, we mostly catch the stupid ones. Also get a closeup photo of that knot up there,” Troy said. “And the one around the feet too.”

“What’s with the knots? They special or something?” Tom asked. He stuck the clear tape down onto a white latent-fingerprint card, turned that over and used a pen to fill in the description spaces on the card.

“Bowline at the feet. Clove hitch around the pipe between the ceiling and the fan motor. Likely did the hands first, then the feet — most people need both hands to tie a bowline — then hoisted up the body and did the clove hitch around the pipe. You can do that one-handed. Couple half-hitches to secure that.”

“What’s a bowlin?”

“Sorry. Bowline. Bow and line. Pronounced ‘bolin’.”

“So it’s, like, a line tied to the bow of the ship?”

Troy smiled. “It’s an imported word from Dutch, ‘bolin’. Not necessarily anything to do with the bow. A lot of nautical terms are originally Dutch.”

“Well, I don’t know how to tie a ... bowline,” Tom said, looking up at the feet and the rope there.

“Few people do. Not your normal knot. Sailor’s knot. And the line is Dacron, also used a lot on sailboats.”

“Well, Chief, you’re the sailor. What’s so wonderful about Dacron?”

“It doesn’t stretch under load.”

Tom nodded. “Making it perfect for hanging people by their feet.”

“Never thought about it that way before, but I guess you’re right. Let’s get that gag loose. I want to see what’s behind it.” Troy gently pulled away the duct tape and then pulled out a slightly damp red rag.

“Shop rag,” he said. “Sold by the bundle in home improvement stores. Give me an evidence bag.”

Tom handed Troy a bag. “Why bother? Just be the vic’s saliva anyway.”

“Well, the killer had to handle it. Maybe the victim bit him. Who knows?” He handed the bag back.

Troy was still sitting back on his heels. He looked around the room yet again. He always liked this part of an investigation. The scene was quiet, peaceful. Each officer worked efficiently and slowly. Troy had always emphasized that this was their one shot at evidence and there was never any hurry. He glanced up and wondered if feeling at peace with the world was a little perverted when there was a dead body hanging upside down in front of him.

“Chief, the fan is switched off but better shut down the power at the breaker box before we try to get that down,” Tom said, looking up as he put away a half-dozen cards and several swabs of blood. “That’s a lot of weight on that fan attachment.”

Troy nodded. “Go find the breaker box and do that.” At least the fan’s not turning, he thought. Small mercies. Bad enough to have to die this way without being turned into a human carousel.

Tom leaned in to take one more photo of the man’s neck. “What could have made these holes?” he asked.

“Teeth,” Troy said.

Chapter 2

Thursday, September 7

Through the front windows Troy could see the gold *Rescue* lettering on the boxy red ambulance truck parked outside on 16th Street. The driver and Doctor Vollmer were standing beside the truck, along with a curious neighbor.

Troy heard Juan Valdez, his newly-promoted detective-lieutenant, speaking in Spanish to Maria Martinez in the kitchen where they had ordered her to stay.

“You be a while yet here?” he asked Tom.

“Probably, Chief. Done with the body. Need to finish up a few things around the room. Why?”

“Might be nice to take Mr. Toforth down. He’s a little too ... *ornamental* ... for the space. But we need the doctor in here to certify the death.”

“Hell, Chief. He’s dead. Deadest guy I ever saw.”

Troy smiled. “Not until Doc Vollmer says so. Rules. Okay to bring in Vollmer now?”

“Sure. I’m mostly done in here. He won’t mess up anything.”

“Let’s get the Doc in and then I think I’ll go talk to the maid.”

Troy went to the front door and out onto a full-width screened porch, opened the porch screen door and waved to Vollmer. “Come on in, Doc. You’ll need the gurney.”

Vollmer and his driver carried the gurney up the wooden steps to the porch, unfolded the legs, and rolled it into the living room. Vollmer looked at the body hanging from the fan. “Now, that’s not something I see every day,” he said. “Is he dead?”

“You’re the doctor. You tell me. Officially.”

Vollmer looked again at the body. “Yeah. He’s dead.”

“I knew that already. You can tell this from ten feet away?”

“Sometimes, yes. He’s hypotonal.”

“Doc, I love it when you talk dirty.”

“Sorry. It’s the muscle tone. Even unconscious people still have muscle tone, exception being people in REM sleep. Dead people, no. Thus the term ‘dead weight’.”

“So, when I’m asleep and dreaming, I’m as good as dead?”

Vollmer grinned. “During REM sleep, your body effectively paralyzes you so that you don’t hurt yourself. You may dream about running somewhere — and even twitch a little — but there’s no danger that you’ll run into your bedroom wall in your sleep.”

“All right. Carry on.” Troy went back to the kitchen where Juan Valdez and Maria Martinez sat at a small corner table.

Troy sat at the table too. There were four twenty-dollar bills on the table and a yellow 3x3-inch Post-It note. He looked at the note. *Maria, thanks as always — Paul.* Neat, precise cursive handwriting.

“Juan, anyone teach you cursive writing in school? Elementary school, like first grade.”

Juan looked at the note and shook his head. “Nope, Chief. They said that took up too much time and we didn’t need it anyway. My generation mostly block-prints. You can write like this?”

“Yes. We geezers all learned to do this.”

Troy looked at Maria Martinez. She was, he guessed, in her thirties. Short, stout, with black hair pulled back in a bun, with dark eyes looking at him through small horn-rim bifocals. She was holding the glasses up with one hand and dabbing at her eyes and face with a paper towel she had pulled off a roll hung under a kitchen cabinet.

“Maria,” Troy said. “I remember you. You’re married to Eduardo Martinez, who works at the gas station, right? Got two kids, as I recall.”

“That’s right, Mr. Troy.” Martinez held the paper towel to one side for a moment. “You gave us money when we most needed it, just moved to town and that evil preacher took our rent money and we had to move out. We will always owe you our thanks.”

“Well, you and Eduardo paid me back,” Troy said. “You don’t owe me anything now.”

Martinez shook her head. “We will always owe you our gratitude, Mr. Troy.”

Troy knew that Maria Martinez wasn’t confused as to his last name. The “mister first-name” was a convention among Spanish speakers and he had heard it a lot in Tampa, where he had served as a police officer before being fired.

The Mangrove Bayou town council had hired him on probation because they paid so little that the only two people to answer the ad were Troy and a wall-eyed guy who hadn’t looked as if he could tie his shoelaces. After almost a year, Troy worked his way off probation and was now the permanent director of public safety.

“He’s that way,” Juan said to Martinez. “Gave up his raise back when they made him permanent. Promoted me to detective lieutenant and added his extra money to my salary.”

“You’re not supposed to know that,” Troy said to Juan.

Juan grinned. “What sort of detective would I be if I couldn’t find that out?”

“Not so good a one as you are, apparently.” Troy looked at the woman. “Tell us what you found, Maria. Start with when you came to work here.”

“I came at noon. Mr. Paul works weekdays some place in Naples. Let myself in ...”

“Mr. Paul being Paul Toforth?” Juan asked.

“You know him” Troy asked.

Juan shook his head. “Checked the property record,” he held up his phone. “And he keeps his bills and wallet in a little office in the back.” The phone started playing some song Troy had never heard. And Juan checked his phone for the twentieth time and then waved it at Troy. “Search warrant, Chief. Took ‘em long enough.”

“My phone just rings,” Troy said.

“You’re an old guy,” Juan said. In fact, Troy was in his mid-thirties.

“That explains why my phone just rings.” Troy read the warrant off Juan’s phone screen. “Good. I’ll print out a copy back at the station. For the file. And thirty minutes is not so long. You will learn patience, Grasshopper. Now go forth and search. I’ll do the same after you. Two sets of eyeballs, separately, are better than four all at the same time.”

“What am I looking for?”

“I have no idea. See anything interesting, note it, have Tom photograph it, and tell me.”

Juan left. Troy turned to Maria Martinez. “You have a key?”

“Of course, Mr. Troy. My people always give me copies of their keys. They usually want me to clean when they’re not home. So I let myself in. I was going to come back here to the kitchen. The broom and mop and vacuum are in that closet,” Maria pointed to a closet door at one side of the kitchen. She dabbed at her eyes again. “I still need to clean. Mr. Paul would have wanted that.”

“Maria, I think today is different. You can’t clean because we need to preserve the crime scene.” Troy pointed to the money on the table. “But I think Mr. Paul would want you to have his last payment.”

Martinez shook her head and pushed her chair back from the table. “I no take his money and not clean.”

“All right. Tell you what. Take the money now but once we’re done here, which might take a few days, you can come back and clean up.” *After we mop up the blood out in the living room first*, Troy thought. “Go on. You unlocked the door and came inside? Was the door on the deadbolt or just the doorknob lock?”

“That was strange. The little thing you turn on the doorknob was all. Usually Mr. Paul left the deadbolt locked too. They use the same key.”

“That reminds me,” Troy said. “I need that key, Maria.”

“Of course, Mr. Troy.” Martinez opened her purse and took out a large key ring and fingered her way through a dozen keys to find one that she slid off the ring. She handed that across to Troy. Troy walked a few feet to the back door and tried the key. It unlocked and then relocked that door.

“Same key works front door and back door,” Martinez said.

“Let me see your key ring,” Troy said. Maria handed it over. Troy compared the key in his hand to every other key on the ring. None matched.”

“I don’t have another key, Mr. Troy.”

Troy smiled at her. “I’m a policeman, Maria. I have to check everything. It’s not personal.” He handed back the key ring and kept the one key.

“Now how do I get in to clean, Mr. Troy?”

“Come by the station. The police station, when we’re done here and you’re ready to do that. I’ll label the key and put it away. I’ll have an officer come with you and let you in to clean. That all right?”

“I guess so.” She looked around the kitchen. “It’s just so sad.”

“Yes, it is. But go on. You unlocked the front door and came inside. You were going to come in here to get your cleaning things. Then what?”

“Well, first thing I saw was poor Mr. Paul hanging in the living room.” She put away the keys and sobbed once more into her paper towel. “I want to call Eduardo. Call my husband. Is that all right?”

“Of course.” But he can’t come in here and you need to stay here for the moment. I’m sorry.”

“I’m being foolish.”

“No. You’re not foolish at all. You’re being very brave. What was your first thought, Maria, when you saw Mr. Paul? First thing that came to mind.”

“I ... I don’t understand. I thought that there was poor Mr. Paul, upside down.”

“You didn’t think, ‘So-and-so must have killed Mr. Paul?’ Nobody came to mind?”

Maria gave that some thought. Troy waited. She blotted some more. “No. Mr. Paul was a nice man. Nobody would want to kill him.”

Well, someone sure did, Troy thought. And rather elaborately. Someone is sending a message. But to whom? “All right, Maria, what did you do next?”

“I get out my cell phone and call the police. And here you are.”

“Did you touch the body? Come close to the body? Mr. Paul?”

Martinez shook her head. “No. I was scared. I went back outside and waited until a policeman came. Poor Mr. Paul. Did he ... did he hang himself like that?”

“We don’t know, yet, Maria. We have to investigate. That’s what we’re doing now, collecting evidence.” Troy thought about Paul Toforth’s choice of tee shirt. “Maria,” he said as gently as possible. “Was Mr. Paul gay?”

She looked startled. “I don’t ... I not talk about my people.”

“Understood. But, Maria, this is important and I need every bit of information I can get here. And no homeowner has secrets from cleaning people. I need to know, Maria.”

She nodded. “He liked men. I no judge.”

“Good for you. In a few minutes we’ll take you to the station, have you give us a full statement as to what you found and saw.”

“I have to say it all again?”

Troy smiled. “Afraid so. For the record.”

“Will you come with me? Please.”

Troy started to say that he was pretty busy just now and Juan Valdez was the detective who took statements. Maria was blotting again with her paper towel and looking up at him.

“Of course I will, Maria” he said.

“Chief,” Juan called from the bedroom.

“Excuse me, Maria,” Troy said, standing. “Wait here and I’ll take you to the station in a little while. *After we get the body out of the way so you don’t have to look at Mr. Paul again,* he thought. *Or maybe take her out back and around the house.*”

“My truck is here,” Martinez said. She blotted some more. “I’ll be all right to drive. It’s just so ... awful!”

In the bedroom Troy found Juan squatted down looking under the bed. “See any monsters hiding under there?” he asked.

“Dust bunnies. Toforth was overdue on the housecleaning.” Juan stood and pointed to a night table by the bed. “Pull out that drawer.”

Troy did so. Inside were packages of condoms, a sex toy, and a set of false teeth. Looking closely, Troy realized the false teeth were actually uppers only, designed to fit

over the existing teeth, and the eyeteeth were almost an inch long and very pointed. He bent to look closer. There were stains on the eyeteeth.

“Maybe blood,” Juan said, watching Troy. “Weird.”

“That it is.”

“I bet those teeth would just about match up to the holes in the body’s neck.”

“Maybe so. Good thinking, Grasshopper. We’ll bag those. Have Tom photograph them first.”

“Guy has a lot of condoms.” Juan picked up the toy. “What’s this?”

“Butt plug,” Troy said.

“Gross. You stick this in your ass while you’re fucking?”

“I think that’s the plan.”

“You know about this stuff, Chief?” Juan was grinning.

“I’m the police chief of Mangrove Bayou. I know everything.”

“You use a butt plug when having sex?”

“Juan, whatever I choose to stick up my ass while having sex — or any other time — is my business, not yours.”

“I can ask Lee Bell. She would know.”

“You can ask. I were you I’d stand well back. She could pick you up and use you for a salt shaker.”

“Yeah. She is kinda tall. Stays in shape too. Muscular. I bet she’s a tiger in bed.”

Troy stared at Juan a long moment.

“I ...I’m sorry, Chief. Shouldn’t have said that.”

“Don’t say it again. Ever.”

“I won’t.” Juan looked down, realized he was still holding the toy and put it back, he looked at his hand. “Christ, Chief. That’s disgusting. Glad I’m wearing gloves.”

“Well I’m older than you, Grasshopper, and maybe less inclined to call other people’s desires and behaviors disgusting.”

“I get to be that old, Chief, I’ll just shoot myself.”

Troy grinned. “Anything else around here?”

“That was the cream of the crop.”

“So to speak. Okay, keep looking. And tell Tom to check in here for fingerprints.”

Back in the living room Troy found that Tom was done with evidence collecting and Doc Vollmer was on his knees, carefully clear of the small pool of blood under the body, peering at the head and neck.

“Guy’s been exsanguinated,” Vollmer said.

“Drained of blood? Well, there’s some on the floor.”

Vollmer sat back on his haunches and looked at the floor. “Red oak,” he said. “They used a lot of that in the old days. This is probably original. Some ancient termite damage visible under the polyurethane. Typical.”

“You’re a flooring expert too?”

Vollmer grinned. “Woodworking hobby. Wormy wood and pecky cypress were all the rage in the ‘20s and ‘30s. The Guide Club lobby over on Snake Key is done in pecky cypress.”

“Ah. Now I follow you, Doc. I thought that was just termite damage.”

“A fungus, actually. But wormy wood was also popular. The Mizner boys, Addison and Wilson, developers over in Boca Raton in the 1920s, used to set up new tables and chairs and fire shotguns with birdshot at them. Give them that instant-antique look.”

Vollmer looked at the body and shook his head. “Not nearly enough blood on the floor, not for this. Two holes, each side. Four total. He was hung up like this while still alive. Then someone punched into both of his external jugular veins. Bled him out. Head looks like that because it’s still got blood in it. Pooled. He’s been up here about a day.”

“I would think he might have objected to all this,” Troy said. “Thus the Taser.”

“Maybe,” Vollmer said. “I called the M.E. and they’ll be along in a half hour or so.” The Collier County Medical Examiner office was in Naples, north on U.S. 41.

“There’s blood around here,” Troy said. “But you’re right, not all that much.” He pointed to a semi-circle of blood on the hardwood floor to one side of the head.

“Someone collected it, maybe, in a pail set right there.”

“I think so,” Vollmer said. “Be a lot more with this sort of wound. Normally.”

“Doc, this may be a lot of things. But one thing it’s not is normal.”

Chapter 3

Monday, September 11

Troy was in his office reading reports when Alicia Sydney, the medical examiner, called. Troy took the call. Norris Compton, the dispatcher and phone-answerer, was off Sundays and Mondays and Troy was alone in the station.

“Tell me all about Paul Toforth,” Troy said.

“How do you know I’m calling about Paul Toforth?”

“Why else? I doubt that you’re calling to ask me out on a date.”

“Way my life’s been going, I might as well have been.”

“You feeling lonely, are you?”

“I commune with the dead. I spend my day cutting up dead people which, by the way, is not nearly so much fun as it sounds. When I do have a date — and that’s rare — the men think it’s cool that I’m a physician. Then they find out what I do. Then they fade away like the fog when the sun comes out. Nobody wants to take long walks on the beach with a corpse-cutter. And, since there’s only one of us per judicial district, it’s not like I can find someone nearby who’s single and does the same work. It’s depressing.”

“You’re starting to depress me,” Troy said. “I always heard that those AMA luncheons were just meetups for rich single people driving Jaguars.”

“Don’t get me started. Blizzard of business cards, people trying desperately to get on one another’s lists for referrals — not that this matters much since the insurance companies run their lives anyway. Oddly, no one seems to want a referral from me, or to refer anyone to me. And all this while watching some expert telling us to all wash our hands between patients.”

“Handwashing is good. Ignaz Semmelweis said so.”

“In fact, he did. Then he was beaten to death in 1865 in an insane asylum because nobody believed him. But there’s one advantage of being a medical examiner. Never had a patient complain.”

“Saves on lawsuits and insurance too,” Troy said.

“Got that right. One of the big benefits of being a medical examiner. Dead people don’t complain.”

“So what are the other benefits?”

“I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

“Do that. Now tell me all about Paul Toforth.”

“He’s dead,” Sydney said.

“That’s the benefit of a dozen years of education,” Troy said. “If I had gone to medical school instead of majoring in ancient and medieval history, I’d have known he was dead too instead of thinking he was just napping, hanging upside down like a bat.”

Across the office, Spots woke up in his large cat bed and looked to see who was talking. Spots was a backcross F1 Savannah who had been born sterile and a friend had bought him as a gift for Troy. Spots now ruled the police station. Troy had fitted a cat door into the red steel fire exit door in the side of his office so that Spots could go outside and terrorize the neighborhood too.

“What good is ancient history to a cop?” Sydney asked.

“Well, My original plan was to make a career of the Army. They need a degree, but don’t care what it is.”

“Apparently your plans changed.”

“Didn’t get along with authority.” Troy thought about that for a moment. “Come to think, that was sort of my problem with the Tampa Police Department too.”

“They fired you, I heard.”

“Well ... if you wish to put it so bluntly, yes. But with that degree and a driver license, I can get a job as a taxi driver.”

“Comical. Our Mr. Toforth bled to death. Hanging upside down like a bat. Maybe I’ll add that to the report. Nice imagery.”

“He probably didn’t enjoy that or agree to it,” Troy said. “Why would someone do a thing like that.” Spots walked over and leapt onto Troy’s desk. Troy put a hand on the cat’s large head to stop it from yelling. Spots seemed to assume that if Troy was speaking, he was talking to Spots; after all, they were the only two people in the room.

“Maybe they wanted him kosher,” Sydney said.

“Now you’re being comical. You Jewish?”

“Sometimes. But I’m not in charge of finding out who did this or why. You are.”

“I guess I am. Drugs in his system?”

“Drugs, yes. He had remnants of succinylcholine chloride in his system. Quite a bit of it.”

“And this suc-whatever is ... ?”

“It’s commonly called ‘sux’ in fact. It’s an artificially created form of curare. They use it a lot in hospitals for quick results. Paralyzes the muscles.”

“Making the patient hypotonal.”

“No. That’s something else. I got a room full of those people. Keep ‘em on ice.”

“You surely don’t use ice?”

“No. But you should see my electric bill. Sux is good for minor and quick procedures like intubations. Blocks the acetylcholine receptors in nerve cells. One shot and in about a minute the patient’s muscles are totally flaccid. It wears off quick too, in a few minutes.”

“This some kind of prescription thing? How would a person get hold of some “sux” for himself or herself?”

“Well, mail order from a half-dozen suppliers. You would need a prescription and letter from the hospital medical director.”

“Both of which can be faked in, oh, say, three minutes.”

“Why bother?” Sydney said. “Florida has a load of so-called doctors who run those strip-mall pain clinics with long lines of out-of-state visitors holding wads of narcotics prescriptions. I imagine one of those would readily write you a scrip for sux.”

“I’m shocked to hear that some physicians are capable of criminal acts.”

“You’re a boy scout, Troy. Know what people call a medical school student who graduated dead last in his class at the University of Some Caribbean Island? They call him ‘Doctor’.

“But here’s the good part: It’s not an anesthetic. The victim — Mr. Toforth in this case — would be conscious and fully aware of what was happening to him, just unable to move a muscle to help himself.”

“So he would have been able to watch his own blood pouring out and past his eyes and into a can on the floor.”

“At least until he lost consciousness and then died from blood loss. Being upside down, his brain would have been getting blood for as long as there was any left in his system. The drop in blood pressure and his brain cells burning up the oxygen in the pooled blood would knock him out but he’d be conscious for a time.”

“Not a pretty picture,” Troy said. “Anything else?”

“I found an injection site. It was under the blood on the neck. He also had several small punctures on his back. Recent.”

“Those would be from the Taser. We pulled out the darts before we sent him up to you.”

“Someone Tased him? Why wasn’t that in the paperwork I got?”

“I guess we’re not perfect,” Troy said. “Sorry.”

“Well, whatever. Perhaps the Taser would paralyze Mr. Toforth long enough to inject the sux. Then tie him up.”

“Knock him down with the Taser and then inject him,” Troy said. “Use the Taser as needed while handcuffing him or before the sux takes effect. Long as the wires and darts are intact, the Tasers we have will shoot another five-second electrical charge each time we pull the trigger. And some of those Tasers, sold for civilian use, the effect can last as long as thirty seconds.”

“You ever been Tased?”

“Oh yeah. Training. Not my best day ever. So Mr. Toforth was conscious but paralyzed when hung up like a slab of beef and then bitten on the neck.”

“I don’t think he was bitten. But he was punctured in such a way as to simulate bite marks.”

“Really? I had assumed those were bite marks. We even found some fake teeth in his bedroom that would have been perfect. We sent those to you too. Check the stains on the teeth.”

“Nope. Some pointy tool, but not teeth. Sorry. But cheer up, the fake teeth did, indeed, have blood on them. Human. Type O-positive.”

“What blood type was the victim?”

“Type O-positive.”

“He bit himself in the neck? Guy was supple.”

“He didn’t bite himself. Type O is the most common blood type. O-positive. Which both victim and fake teeth had.”

“Can we get some DNA analysis of all that?”

“Already on it,” Sydney said. “Sent samples up to FDLE. Maybe they can come up with something useful.”

“Oh good. So no chance at some saliva donated by the killer?”

“Sorry. Still, one wonders where the rest of him went?”

“What do you mean?”

“The bucket ’o blood,” Sydney said. On Troy’s desktop, Spots lay down on the paperwork that Troy had been looking at when Sydney called. Since Spots weighed 20 pounds and was more than three feet from nose to tail, when flopped flat he covered a lot of square inches. Troy scratched Spots’ ears. Spots half-closed his eyes.

“Aha,” Troy said. “We didn’t find any blood elsewhere, just under the body and not that much blood at that. Maybe the killer had a lid for the bucket. Size of the half-ring we found under the body, where the bucket or can sat for a moment, a paint can would be a good fit. And you can buy empty gallon-size paint cans at any home supply place.”

“Perfect,” Sydney said. “Toforth likely had about eight pints of blood in him — guy his size maybe slightly less. Not all comes out. One gallon can would be fine. So, get looking then. Those home supply places must have records.”

“A one-gallon empty tin can with lid and handle runs around three bucks at Home Depot,” Troy said.

“You already checked on this?”

“Yep. Me, I’d hand the clerk three one-dollar bills and walk away anonymous. And even that assumes he wanted a clean can. Could have used an old empty paint can if he or she wasn’t too picky about drinking blood with a tinge of matte white in it.”

“So, what’s our killer want with a bucket ’o blood?”

“Be nice to know that,” Troy said. “Pet with an odd dietary requirement? World’s largest mosquito, perhaps. Or maybe the killer just wanted people, people like you and me, to think he or she drinks blood.”

“Sort of like he or she wants us to think he or she actually bit Mr. Toforth’s neck.”

“Sort of.”

“And you plan to find this he or she? How?”

“I’ll start by rounding up the usual suspects.”

“And those are?”

“Damned if I know.”

Chapter 4

Wednesday, September 13

Troy did his morning run from the Sea Grape Inn where Mrs. Mackenzie, the manager, let him rent cheap, out to Government Key, on the road that connected Mangrove Bayou to the Tamiami Trail and the world, and then back into town. He worked out in the back room where they kept exercise equipment, showered, put on his shorts and short-sleeved uniform shirt from his locker, walked into his office, and found Tom VanDyke sitting in one of his visitor chairs.

“You do not appear to be out patrolling the mean streets of Mangrove Bayou, keeping order and suppressing nefarious activities,” Troy said. He walked around his desk and sat down. “For God’s sake, young women could be wearing thongs on the beach and you’re not there to observe.”

Tom ignored that. “Had the night shift. Just got off. Headed home. Got some bad news, Chief.”

“And that is?”

“Called the Taser people. Read them the code number off those AFIDs. They looked up the buyer of that cartridge.”

“And our lucky winner is?”

“Nobody.”

“Nobody?”

“Nobody.”

“What — is that like someone’s actual name?”

“No. A Taser and a bunch of those cartridges — and some guns too — were stolen from a gun shop in Hialeah. Last year.”

Outside Troy’s west window three men were launching a center console fishing boat. This involved loading into the boat fishing rods, a bucket that probably held live bait, and a large cooler that probably held beer. Troy pulled out his lower desk drawer and put a foot up on that and watched one man drive the truck away to the parking area while the other two held the boat by its dock lines.

He turned his head left and looked at Tom. “Gun shops are usually well-fortified. And the sales people all have concealed weapons licenses and sidearms. Might as well try to rob the Marines.”

“I called over. Apparently someone stole a pickup truck and then used that at three a.m. to ram the concrete block wall of the gun shop. Knocked a big hole in it.”

“Heard of that being done,” Troy said. “When I worked in Tampa we had several of those cases. If I built a gun store I’d fill the cells in the concrete blocks and use lots of rebar too. Then that wouldn’t happen.”

“Well it was also done in Hialeah. Surveillance cameras show three men — probably men, they were wearing hoods and anonymous clothing — run in, grab stuff, run out again. Store says they grabbed thirty-five handguns, four rifles and shotguns, and one Taser. They left the truck — they had a car waiting and it was stolen too — but the Hialeah cops didn’t get anything useful off the truck either. Or the car, which they found the next day.”

The men at the Sunset Bay boat ramp had popped open the first beers of what was probably going to be a long day of drinking and fishing. Troy sighed. Florida law for boaters was the same as for auto drivers; a .08 percent blood alcohol level, max. Boaters

usually ignored that even if they knew about it — which few did. Troy thought the law was off-base; boats didn't zoom past one another a few feet apart at 60 MPH. On the other hand, if you fell out of your car while parked, you didn't drown. It was common knowledge that half of males found drowned had their zippers down, having fallen off boats while trying to pee over the sides.

Still watching the boat pulling away from the pier, Troy said to Tom, "They got a list of serial numbers and descriptions of the stolen guns and the Taser?"

"Yep. I got that from them. In case we find anything locally. Put the list into the file."

"Good," Troy said. "Breaking into gun shops, that happens once in a while. But why would anyone steal a Taser?"

"No idea, Chief. But guns are common. You can buy a gun anywhere: gun shop if you're willing to show I.D. Gun shows where buyer checks are a joke. Out of some guy's car trunk with no questions asked. But Tasers are not so common. Hard to fight a gang war with a Taser. Not a lot of drive-bys with Tasers. But I suppose if you wanted one, knew about the AFIDS and wanted one anonymous, you might pay top dollar for it"

"Maybe. The Hialeah guys say anything else about the robbery?"

"Yeah. Now that they know it's over this side of the state, they want their Taser back."

Troy sighed. "Tell them they're welcome to come get it. If they can find it."

"What I said to them. So what now, Chief? We had assumed this would be easy. Now it's not."

"Think of it as a challenge, Tom. At least we still have the fingerprints and the blood DNA off those teeth. Maybe those will help.

"So we just sit here and wait for FDLE to match that stuff up?"

"No. I sit and wait. You go home."

Chapter 5

Wednesday, September 13

Officers Milo Binder and Avery Mead, a man in handcuffs, a teenage girl and two adults were gathered in a clump on a lawn when Troy drove up. There were two police Suburbans and a plain white Ford Focus sedan parked diagonally, partially blocking Florida Avenue.

He'd heard a call on the radio about a disturbance and had driven over to Florida Avenue west of 15th Street to see what that was all about. One of Mangrove Bayou's many parks was diagonally across the intersection from a new-looking craftsman-style bungalow with white-painted concrete sewer pipes holding up the front porch and side porte-cochère in place of the traditional squat Doric columns.

New builder house, Troy thought. Spend a fortune on the land and then toss up some bad imitation of an old style.

"What's all this, then?" Troy said, climbing out of his own department Suburban, the one with *Troy Adam, Director of Public Safety* in small and tasteful lettering on the doors.

Milo left the group to come to Troy's truck. "I know, Chief," he said. "Only two of us on patrol duty and one of us should be out patrolling. But Avery's new and I thought I'd stand by to help." Troy had recently hired Avery Mead to beef up the force to nine, including Troy.

"So what did Avery get himself into?" Avery Mead was white, with pale blond hair and startling light blue eyes. Troy had hired him just a few months before and Avery, who had gone through two years of law enforcement classes at a community college, followed by another six months of state-required qualification and then on-the-job training, seemed determined now to be the best cop in all of Florida, something Troy occasionally found tiresome.

Milo frowned. "It's complicated. That man," he pointed to the man in handcuffs, "tried to grab the girl. The man and woman grabbed him. One of them called 911 and Avery happened to be patrolling nearby. The man says he's a private investigator looking for a runaway and that he's within his rights to grab her. I think ..."

"I'll talk to him," Troy said. He walked over and introduced himself to everyone.

"He just grabbed me," the girl said.

"I did no such thing," the handcuffed man said.

"Whoa, everyone," Troy said. "Let's have some names."

Avery had a notebook to read from. "The girl is Christine Enger. The parents are Stephen and Stephanie Enger. This guy is Franklin Wendt. He has a Florida P.I. license."

"He carrying?"

"No sir. I searched him. He's clean." Avery looked at the white sedan. "Don't know about the car."

"What's your story," Troy asked Wendt. Wendt was fat, with greasy hair. He was so short that Troy wondered if he had to bring along a milk crate to stand on to peep in windows.

"Doing my job. All legal. The girl is Allya Sharif, from Michigan. She's fifteen and a runaway. I tracked her here."

"Hired by her parents in Michigan?"

"That's right."

"Kidnapping teenaged girls is not your legal job," Troy said. "Almost certain I've read that somewhere."

"I never touched her. Just asked her to come with me."

"Your name is really Allya Sharif?" Troy asked the girl. She was 5'8", skinny, with black hair pulled back and braided, light brown skin and black eyes, both a match for Troy's. She wore a tee shirt and her blue jeans were too short for her. The pants were also too big around and she had cinched in the belt.

She shook her head, her long black ponytail swishing from side to side. "I'm Christine Enger."

An orange Honda Civic drove up and pulled over to park across the street. The Civic had a loud muffler and a spoiler wing bolted to the rear trunk lid. Two young black people, one man and one woman, got out.

"Are you adopted or something?" Troy asked the girl. "You're light brown and the Engers — the other Engers — are pasty white."

"So you're a racist too?" Stephen Enger said. He was about 5'4" without his two-inch platform shoes, medium build, with brown hair and eyes and wore a plaid shirt and

blue jeans and bifocals. Allya's pants would fit him perfectly. "She's about the same color as you. So what?"

Across the street the man had a small camera and was apparently filming the scene. The woman had a cell phone and was texting, her concentration on the phone and her thumbs moving. Troy, whose text messages looked as if he had typed them with his toes, was envious. He looked back at Stephen Enger. "My point exactly. I happen to be part Asian, part black, part white. This girl is clearly not your biological child. So what's the deal?"

"She's adopted. Been with us for years now."

"So she would be registered in our school here?"

"Well ... we home-school her. We're both pastors." He indicated the older woman. "The World Family Faith Church."

"I don't recall such a church existing in Mangrove Bayou."

"It's an online church. Latest thing. Prosperity gospel. Outreach to the world, not just local."

"What's a prosperity gospel?" Troy asked.

"Truth. God's truth merged with modern business principles. The more prosperous you are, the more God loves you. And vice-versa."

Troy looked at the house. "I don't think God loves you enough yet."

"We're just starting out. Takes time to build, to get out the word, to reach the kind of followers we need."

"Fascinating. But if Allya is home-schooled, Christine, here — or Allya here as Mr. Wendt would have it — would be registered with the school district. Florida requires district supervision of homeschooled children."

"We may have been ... remiss in some of the paperwork," Stephanie Enger said. She was 5'6" in flats, with brown eyes and gray hair dyed a brassy blonde. She wore a different-colored plaid shirt and blue jeans. The main difference in the Enger wardrobes was that she didn't wear glasses.

"I see. Wait one." Troy walked a few feet away to talk to Milo. "Milo," he said quietly, "I want you to ask the girl some questions. Take her aside."

"What am I asking her, Chief?"

"I don't care. Ask her what her favorite sport is. How she likes Florida. Keep her talking."

Troy walked back to the Engers. "All right. Let's talk about today. What did you see?"

"Heard, not see," Stephen Enger said. "Christine screaming outside. She had gone out to water the plants. I ran out and pried her loose from that man."

"I helped," Stephanie Enger said. "That horrible man was trying to drag her into his car."

"Lucky you were here." Troy looked over to Milo and the girl. "Christine, what happened?" he said in a normal voice.

The girl was still talking to Milo and ignored Troy.

"Allya, what happened here," Troy said.

The girl looked at him and started to answer. She put her hand up to cover her mouth. "Oh," she said.

“Exactly,” Troy said. “Can we drop the Christine thing now? We’re not that stupid, even if we are Florida cops. So we’ve established that you are, in fact, Allya Sharif and you are, in fact, a runaway from Michigan. You are not the adopted daughter of the pastors Enger of The World Family Faith Church and you are not, in fact, registered as any sort of student, homeschooled or in the Mangrove Bayou high school. You’ve been here such a short time that you don’t have pants that fit. How am I doing so far? Anyone care to comment?” He looked around the group. He was only guessing at much of that and curious as to what the reaction might be.

No one had a comment. “Incidentally,” Troy said. “Young Allya, here, probably has some I.D. — school student card from home. Social Security card. Maybe even a learner permit driver license from Michigan, in her wallet, in her purse, inside your house. Do I need to get a search warrant to look for that? I’d have to keep you all out here in our pleasant Florida sunshine while we wait for the warrant, usually a few hours at minimum. Sorry about that.” Labor Day may have been the end of summer in upstate New York, where Troy had grown up, but here in south Florida the 90-degree heat and fog-like humidity didn’t break until the first week of November.

“Is ... er, misleading you about certain aspects of this some sort of legal big thing?” Stephen Enger asked.

“Technically, yes. But today’s special is that you get one free lie so long as you take advantage of our special within the next one minute. I’ve been lied to before, strange as that may seem. I can get over the hurt feelings.”

“Ah. Well, Allya here fled Michigan, and her Muslim parent’s home, because she had converted to Christianity. They wanted to kill her. They kill apostates, you know. She came to us and we baptized her and protected her. She’s now born again. As a Christian. We’ll do whatever it takes to help her. Get her into school, adopt her. Whatever.”

“If all that is true,” Troy said. “As of now you two have broken no law though I think you have badly bent some. So you and Allya go about your business. But do not leave town without checking first with me. Mr. Wendt, you get to wait here for the moment.

“Am I being arrested?” Wendt said. “Why?”

“You’re being detained. For questioning. If you let us search your car now we can do without all that towing and paperwork.”

“Well, sure, permission granted. Nothing in the car.”

“Good.” Troy looked at Avery. “Search the car. When I’m done here we’ll let Mr. Wendt drive it to the station.

“Allya and pastors Enger, let’s go inside your home for a moment and you will all show me identification. Are you hearing the words coming out of my mouth?”

When he came out of the Enger home a few minutes later, the orange Civic was gone. Avery had removed the handcuffs and Wendt was rubbing his wrists. “Milo and Avery,” Troy said, “get on about your patrolling before Mangrove Bayou sinks into an abyss of unmentionable crime. Mr. Wendt, hop into your car and follow me to the station. Don’t get lost on the way.”

Troy parked in the town hall parking lot behind the station and led Wendt to the plain steel rear door with “police” written on it with a Sharpie marker. He unlocked that and he and Wendt went in, sat in the small interrogation room just inside that door, and

had a chat. When that was done Wendt went his way and Troy walked down the hall past the lockups and through a door to the lobby.

The two young black people were inside the station, in Troy's office, arguing with Norris Compton, the dispatcher and receptionist.

"They waltzed in like they owned the place," Norris said. "Then they tried to go into the lockups corridor. When I told them they couldn't do that, they went down the other hall to your office."

"Really? Just made themselves at home? How precious. Norris, go back to your desk. I've got it now." Spots, the cat, Troy noticed, was growling from his cat bed, glaring at the two strangers. The man instinctively took a step back. "Have a seat," Troy said, indicating the two visitor chairs. He walked around his desk and sat too. The man and woman sat. The man had been filming the cat and now pointed his camera at Troy. The woman still had her cell phone in one hand.

"Who are you guys?" Troy asked.

"None of your damn business," CameraMan said. "We got a right to be here. Film the pigs in action."

Troy raised one eyebrow. He hoped that looked good on film; he'd been practicing that trick for years. He looked at PhoneWoman. "You on board with this rudeness display too?"

"Calm down, Donnie," PhoneWoman said to her partner. "I'm Shaniqua Williams. This is Donnie — Donald° — Barton.

"Troy Adam. Police chief hereabouts."

"Says 'Director of Public Safety' on your office door," Donald Barton said from behind his camera.

"I know it does. Why are you two here?"

"Catch the white establishment pigs abusing poor black folks," Barton said."

Troy looked around and back at Barton and his camera. "I only see three people here and we're all black, some more than me, admittedly. Maybe the cat is really white. And he is part of the establishment."

Williams almost smiled. "I think he's spotted. Like black 'oreos' maybe."

"Maybe so. Why are you here. I mean, why us? Why Mangrove Bayou? We have three black officers on a nine-person police force, and I would guess that's half the black folks in town. We wanted to abuse black people, we'd have to form a circle jerk and beat each other up. That camera still working? You need a plug for a recharge?"

"Donnie, leave off recording," Williams said. She looked to see that Barton obeyed and then back at Troy. "College course we're in. Florida SouthWestern, Naples campus. 'Race and Social Responsibility' with Doctor Grantham."

"And the camera and the attitude?"

"Well, we're assigned, in pairs, to go to nearby communities. Film the government in action. We started with the town hall office next door but some man with a three-piece suit and a necktie with a drawing of Tweety Bird on it chased us out. Then we ... what?"

Troy was laughing. "That would be Mortimer Potem, our town manager. I'd love to see the film of him chasing you out of his office." Troy took a business card from his desk drawer and leaned forward. "Email me a copy."

"Yeah. Sure. Then we saw you leave in your cop car and decided to follow to see what you were doing. What were you doing? We couldn't hear you guys talking."

“I was dealing with a major international incident involving race and social responsibility.”

“That’s it?” Williams said. “Tell us more.”

“Nah. Not today.”

“You’re conducting some sort of police operation. You arrested a man ...”

“Actually, I detained him for questioning. I questioned him.”

“So he’s locked up in back? Another victim of overzealous policing?”

“I don’t know where he is. We talked. We both then went about our separate businesses. He drove off.”

“You work for the people. We have a right to know what you’re doing.”

“Yeah, man,” Barton piped up. “Keeping secrets from us is ‘way not-cool.’”

“Strange as it probably sounds to you, Mr. Barton, being ‘not cool’ is part of the job description here. We don’t blab the details of our investigations until we’re done with those. Helps solve crimes, which is the goal for us, and not satisfying your idle curiosity.”

Barton raised his camera and switched it back on. Troy smiled. “You need me to repeat what I just said, this time for the camera?” He looked at Williams. “I do appreciate what you’re trying to accomplish here. Holding the police accountable for their actions. But you have been assigned to the wrong town. I were you, I’d ask Mr. Grantham ...”

“I think it’s Miss Grantham,” Williams said.

“Or Miss Grantham. Ask her for a different town and government. You’re not going to get much action in Mangrove Bayou. And now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do.”

“Go ahead. That’s why we’re here. To watch you do your work.”

“I think not. You may wait in the lobby if you insist upon hanging around here. Not my office. Now go. Go follow one of my patrol officers. Keep track of their doughnut consumption for me. I’ll expect regular reports.”

The students opted to leave. Troy walked them out and saw them off in the orange Civic. He went back to his office and ran the Civic’s plate, which only told him that Donnie Barton was driving a car his father had bought and registered.

He walked into the small office for Juan Valdez, his detective lieutenant. He explained about the runaway girl and the pastor-parents. “I want you to go there, your own pickup truck, and get your civvies out of your locker. If those adults make a run for it with the kid, stop them and call me.”

“You think they’ll run? Try to move the kid to someplace else?”

“No idea. But they seem to have contacts worldwide. I’m plugging you in like the cork in a bottle. Hold them until I can get Department of Children and Families on the case.”

“DCF has jurisdiction?”

“They do. They do indeed. We may get to meet investigator Olive Piotrowski again.”

“She scares the bejesus out of me.”

Troy grinned. “She is ... determined.”

Chapter 6

Wednesday, September 13

“There’s a vampire in town?” Lee Bell asked. She was a tall, thin redhead Troy had met when he first came to Mangrove Bayou. They were at her home on Airfield Key and she was dishing up some roast turkey breast and sweet potatoes. She had a glass of Chablis and Troy had his usual lime-flavored seltzer water.

“You seem to like French wine,” Troy said. “Also Spanish. Italian. Argentine and Chilean. Australian sometimes. But no Californian. You some kind of un-American boozier?”

“California wine is good but they put too much sulfite into it. Gives me headaches.”

“I used to drink. Got headaches. All part of the job.”

“Not that sort of headache, little boy. I don’t overdo it. But they do, in California, with the sulfite.”

“No flights tomorrow?” Troy said. Lee was punctilious about flight regulations and drinking.

“Cessna’s up in Ft. Myers,” she said. “At the Southwest Florida International Airport. KRSW. Annual inspection and some minor repair items. Could have waited there on the inspection and flown her back here. But the repairs needed some parts and I just caught a taxi back.”

“No Uber? They’re everywhere now. Uber alles. Even put Norris Compton out of his ad-hoc taxi business.”

“Took a regular taxi. Uber drivers don’t like to take such long trips one-way. Be like me flying someone to New York and deadheading back home on my own fuel bill. Can’t make any money that way. Taxi drivers don’t like it either but they have no choice. Tell me about this vampire. Has he got one of those flowing black cloaks with the red silk lining? Hair greased and slicked back?”

“No idea. I haven’t met the gentleman yet.”

“You know it’s a man?”

“Or a really strong, tall woman.” Troy thought a moment. “Like you.”

Lee ignored that. “Could be two people. Or ten.”

“Now you’re starting to think like a cop,” Troy said. “This turkey is excellent. Not dried out. Your best ever.”

“You can thank the Publix grocery store,” Lee said.

“Oops. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’ve decided I don’t do turkey. They do and they don’t mess it up. What else on your to-do list?”

Troy explained about the teenage runaway. “Got an appointment with DCF about her. I can’t just send her back home without more information.”

“What happened to the investigator. The one who tried to kidnap her?”

“That’s just his word against theirs. I have no doubt that he wanted to talk to Allya. Actually dragging her, resisting, into his car? I can’t see it. And then what? Drag her, bound and gagged, through airport security and onto a plane? Someone might ask questions. Drive her, resisting all the way, from here to Michigan? Not reasonable.”

“Yet you arrested him.”

“No, I just hauled him in for questioning. I questioned him, we searched his car, turned him loose. I think he went back home to Naples. He didn’t even have a firearm, let alone a suitcase to take to Michigan. Most P.I.s don’t carry or have any use for firearms.”

“Your friend from Tampa does.”

“Cord Macintosh. He’s different. He gets into things.” Troy grinned. “He’s as old-fashioned as I am. Uses the same gun, Colt Commander .45 caliber.”

“So what happens to Allya, Muslim turned Christian? Do you trust those people ...”

“Engers. The pastors Enger. Of The World Family Faith Church.”

“Yes. Them.”

“Ah. Them. They have a church that exists only in their computer and — oddly enough — in the Florida Secretary of State’s database of corporations. Tax-exempt. There are no gatherings of happy parishioners, no spaghetti church suppers in the basement with Kool-Ade. They do television specials on cheap cable channels and YouTube, tell viewers to send them money, ‘seed money’ that they, the Engers will pray over and bless, and spend themselves. And the senders will enjoy health, wealth and happiness.”

“So they’re fakes. How do you know all this?”

“They’re fakes. I saw some of the YouTube shows.”

“Troy, you couldn’t find a YouTube upload with both hands and a road map.”

“Angel Watson showed me.” Watson was the department’s electronics guru. “Do they actually still make road maps?”

“I don’t know. So do you leave this young girl with a pair of prophets of profit?”

“I like that. But as for Allya, I await word from DCF. That decision is above my pay grade.”

“Troy, all decisions are above your pay grade.”

“Well, true. I should have married a rich guy and then divorced him and taken half.”

“Don’t be jealous. I didn’t intend to divorce him when I married him. And I like you even if you are a poverty-stricken southern redneck cop.”

“It’s just the sex. We black men are gifted that way, you know.”

“I did not know. Maybe you’re not black enough. You’re sort of beige, according to our mayor.”

“Lester Groud is our town comedian.”

“That he is. And we all love him for it. Now, how does one go about catching a vampire?”

“Beats me. Wooden stake through the heart? Maybe I can call Cabela’s and see if they stock silver bullets.

“What’s a Cabela’s?”

“Outdoors store. Huge. Mail order. Got most sorts of guns and ammo. Your Second Amendment ‘prepper’ dream come true. It’s my go-to place for mail-order ammo.”

“Why doesn’t the town pay for your ammunition? I know you use up a lot, practicing every week.”

“I use a .45-caliber Colt and the town guns are 9-mm Glocks. So I have to buy my own.”

Lee frowned. “Someone — I think it was Milo Binder ...”

“The mayor’s nephew and one of my sidekicks at the station.”

“Yes. That one. Told me that your gun was a hundred-year-old design and inadequate.”

“Milo never said inadequate.” He’s only up to two-syllable words thus far.”

“I think his exact words were, ‘piece of shit’.” Lee said.

“Well, I like my .45. Paid good money to have it repaired after Pablo Galvan shot a hole through the handgrip. Not to mention my hand.”

“Oh. Good. I’m dating, sleeping with, a suicidal man with an old gun.”

“Not right now, you’re not.”

Lee drained her glass and stood. “Well, let’s get to it. Before your gun breaks again.”

Chapter 7

Thursday, September 14

Franklin Wendt, the private investigator, called Troy on Thursday morning.

“So what’s the scourge of Naples wife-cheaters doing calling me,” Troy said. He swiveled in his chair, leaned back and put a foot on an open lower desk drawer. Out his west windows he could see the boat ramps and piers at the south end of Sunset Bay.

A few minutes earlier a young man and two young women had backed a Cadillac Escalade with a boat trailer down one of the ramps and launched some kind of ski boat. The car and trailer were parked and now they climbed into the boat. The boat had a blue mica-flake hull and a pair of Honda 250s hanging off the back.

“Call me Frank,” Wendt said. “I put some cards and brochures in the mail for you. I happen to own a bail bondsman business on the side. Also a tow-truck business that’s on all the Charlotte and Lee counties police rotation lists.”

“A veritable caped crusader for law enforcement. I did check your record for priors and you came up clean. Or at least not-yet-too-obnoxious.” The young man at the boat ramp looked sixteen and he acted like the boat was his. Two new outboards like that would run \$35,000 or more; the hull and electronics about the same. Troy wondered where a teenage boy got \$70,000 to spend on a toy. Wise choice of parents, Troy suspected.

“Got no felonies of one year or more in prison, so I’m clear on the bail bondsman license,” Wendt was saying. “I do sort of nibble around the edges. Law enforcement can be very profitable for the side-businesses.”

“Get enough money and you can start your own private prison. With your private medical staff letting prisoners die in it. It’s all the rage here in Florida.”

“Hadn’t thought of that, Chief. Have to look into it. Florida is a wonderful place to be an entrepreneur. Hardly any regulation at all.”

“I’m happy for you. Why are you calling? Just to renew our friendship?”

The boy backed the boat away from the pier and turned it around. One of the girls sat on the bow with her feet dangling over the front — possibly the most dangerous thing a passenger could think of to do on a boat, especially a small boat that bounced. She wore

no life jacket but that not would matter if she fell. When 500 horsepower of slicing-dicing blades ran over her she would look like she'd been juiced in a blender.

"Wanted to ask you a favor," Wendt said. "I was hired to track down Allya Sharif. I did that. I'd like to collect my fee. Could you please confirm that I found her?"

"What, on the phone? Now?" The boat was out of sight and Troy focused on the conversation.

"Sure."

"You're a piece of work, Frank. You know as well as I do that in Florida both parties to a phone conversation need to know it's being recorded. Are you recording this?"

"Oh, no Chief. I would never do that to you."

"Of course you wouldn't. And you could let the parents up in Michigan listen to the recording you're not making at this moment and we down here would never know about it. What I'll say to the parents is this: Your man here almost got arrested for attempted kidnapping. Don't send another; I'm all over this case now."

"Cold, Chief. I'm ..." Troy disconnected the call.

Juan Valdez strolled in an hour later and sat in a visitor chair. He had an iPad to refer to. "Get out your file on the murder, Chief," he said. Troy picked up the file, which was on the corner of his desk.

"Whatcha got?" he said.

"Can't believe you still like paper," Juan said.

"You're my detective lieutenant, not my mother," Troy said.

"So to speak. As I recall you don't have a mother."

"I don't. No dad either. Only good thing about being an orphan is it cuts down on the shopping for birthdays and Christmas."

"You have Lee Bell now. You must shop for her. Special occasions."

"Any occasion with Lee is a special occasion. And she has expensive tastes."

"Too much for your budget, eh?"

"Absolutely. And worth every penny. FDLE find anything useful on that tooth-blood thing? Or the fingerprints?"

Juan shook his head. "Blood on the teeth was no good. Been dipped in something — lab guys thought probably hydrogen peroxide — and the sample was ruined."

"Fingerprints? Around the room and off the handcuffs or the Taser cartridge?"

"Nothing on the cuffs or cartridge. Lots of prints around the house, Toforth's obviously, also Maria, the maid. Some other prints belong to one Britt Sagant ..." Juan paused.

"Yes? So where were Mr. Sagant's prints and who is he?"

"The prints were on that butt plug you found. Sagant is in the system because he did a short term in a federal prison. Coleman, up in Sumter County. Some kind of money laundering."

Troy turned his chair to look out the window again at the boat ramp. After a moment he looked to his left at Juan. "Coleman is reputed to be a 'special needs' prison. One of those special needs is homosexual prisoners who need a safe place."

"Didn't know that."

"You do now," Troy said. "Find Mr. Sagant. I'd like to have a chat. So, what else do you have that's new?"

“Paul Toforth,” Juan said. “Worked out of his house here in town but also had a small office up in Naples. Some kind of consultant. Engineering projects. Bridges and such. Consulting, advising, sometimes trial gigs as an expert witness. One employee did some drafting. Went up there and talked to the employee — who is not employed any longer. He’s closing up the office and getting some other company to take over a couple of projects.”

“Toforth didn’t have relatives?”

“An aunt up north. Philadelphia. She hadn’t talked to him in years.” Juan looked at his iPad. “Active in the gay community here ...”

“What does ‘active’ mean. He on their board of directors or something?”

“I don’t know. Avery Mead told me. Avery knew him slightly, or at least knew of him. Our new-hire officer is gay too.”

“I know that,” Troy said.

“Really? He told me you never once asked him.”

“I didn’t need to ask.”

“You hired him anyway?”

“Why not?”

“Okay. Anyway, I checked with Toforth’s neighbors. He got occasional visitors, not terribly social at home. There was the maid but only a few other people, men mostly. The neighbors couldn’t identify any cars but one. One guy came to the Toforth home several times in a Tesla S model. Big black one.

“Aha. How many Teslas could be registered with addresses in Mangrove Bayou?”

“Don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll get on it. Sorry, Chief.”

“Go forth, Grasshopper, and locate those lucky winners. Then interview them.”

“What would I ask them?”

“I don’t know. How many miles they get with a battery charge? How many F-150 pickup trucks they could buy for one Tesla? Oh, and by the way, did they murder a guy recently by biting him in the neck.”

Chapter 8

Thursday, September 14

Juan Valdez had herded the Engers and Allya Sharif into the small interrogation room next to the rear door of the station and across a corridor from the four holding cells. Troy and Olive Piotrowski joined them there. The Engers and Allya were all in handcuffs.

“Ran, did they?” Troy said to Juan. Troy was in the corner turning on the camera and the omnidirectional microphone on the table.

“Lickety-split. This morning. Stopped them on Barron Road halfway to the Forty-One intersection. No question they were leaving town. Kid’s suitcase in the trunk.”

Troy sat down. “You know this, how?”

“Watched them load the car. In their driveway. Or actually in that port cochon thing. Overhanging roof. On Snake Key where the poor people live we’d call that a carport.”

“Porte Cochère. Carriage port. A cochon is a pig.”

“Whatever Chief. Only French I know is French fries.”

“It’s the same in Spanish. Cochino.”

“Oh. That’s right. Didn’t think of that. We got lots of other words for pig. Anyway, I watched them put the kid’s suitcase into the trunk of the car. In the pig-port.”

“How do you know it’s Allya’s suitcase?”

“She carried it out to the car. Is she likely to be carrying someone else’s suitcase?”

Troy smiled. “Maybe. She looks a lot stronger than the pastors Enger. But yours is a reasonable assumption. Let’s ask.” He looked at Allya. “Was that your suitcase?”

“Yes.”

“Observe, Grasshopper, how my trained investigative techniques forced her to reveal information you were only guessing at.”

“I’m in awe, oh Master Po.”

Troy shot Juan a startled look. “You have been studying, Grasshopper.” He looked around the table. “And where were you three going?” Troy asked. “It’s Stephen, right? Stephen and Stephanie.”

“Shopping in Ft. Myers,” Stephen Enger said.

“You pack a suitcase to go shopping? I dimly recall telling you not to leave town with Allya, here.”

“We weren’t under arrest or anything. We can do as we please.”

“Well, we shall see. At this moment you’re being detained for suspicion of having committed several felonies, including kidnapping and child endangerment. That was for my convenience in getting you here and in a mood to listen. If we all act polite here and now, those charges may dissipate like a bad fart and we all go home to our suppers.”

Troy tilted his head towards Piotrowski. “This is Olive Piotrowski, she’s an investigator with the Department of Children and Families. I take orders, in this instance, from her. Ms. Piotrowski, care to say anything?”

Piotrowski was 45, white, 5’6”, and stout, with her graying hair tied back in a severe bun. Her downturned mouth attested to twenty years of disappointment with the human race. Troy had rarely seen her smile. She gave the three people a stern look.

“Work with me and I’ll do what I can for the best interests of the child ...”

“I’m not a child,” Allya Sharif said. “I’m fifteen.”

“You’re a child. And in the absence of your parents, the State of Florida now dictates your movements and behaviors. Don’t interrupt me again.

“But cross me, like, for example, trying to run again, and I’m your worst nightmare. I’ll have Chief Adam, here, arrest the two adults and put the child into juvenile detention. Prison, in a word, for all of you. Does anyone here wish to challenge me on this?”

The Engers and Allya looked at the table top and remained silent.

“Good. Now let’s hear the story. You first, Allya. I understand you’re from Michigan and fifteen and you ran away because you wished to convert to Christianity.”

“My parents live in Hamtramck,” Allya said. “They’re Muslim. We’re from Pakistan. I was five when we came to America.”

“Are your parents citizens of the U.S.? Or you?”

“Yeah. Sure. They got citizenship ‘way back when. That made me a citizen too.”

“It’s called ‘derived’ citizenship,” Piotrowski said. “Children under eighteen where at least one parent becomes a naturalized citizen.”

“I see,” Troy said. He looked back at Allya. “And why did you run away?”

“I converted to Christianity. The Engers helped me.” She smiled at Stephen and Stephanie Enger and they smiled back and Stephen nodded. “My father swore that he would kill me ...”

“Did he really say that?” Piotrowski asked. “In those words?”

“Well, he was obligated to do that.”

“So he didn’t actually threaten to kill you.”

“He has to. It’s the law. Sharia law anyway. The penalty for leaving Islam is death. Father would have to kill me for the sake of the family’s honor.”

“What we have heard called honor killing,” Piotrowski said, “though there are other reasons for honor killings too — if you can call what those people think ‘reasons’. The theory being that the male head of household has absolute right of life and death over his wife and children. ...”

“So how come all the honor killings I ever hear of involve daughters,” Troy asked. “Never a son who, say, had out-of-marriage sex with some girl.”

Piotrowski glared at Troy. “Don’t interrupt me. And those sons are male so their transgressions are overlooked, though the girls they have sex with are in mortal danger.” She looked back at Allya. “So why come here. Long way from Hamtramck, Michigan.”

Allya nodded. “I was terrified. I knew father would be angry.”

“What about your mother?” Piotrowski asked.

Allya looked puzzled. “What about her? She’s old-fashioned Muslim. Thinks she’s just property. Like our cat.”

“The Prophet was kind to cats,” Troy said. “Once cut off the corner of his robe in order to put it on without waking his cat, Muezza, who was sleeping on it.”

Allya grinned. “I read that. Cat probably jumped up anyway the minute he walked away.”

Piotrowski ignored all this. “Any other children in your family?” she asked.

“No. Just me. Anyway, I knew the Engers from their web site and social media. The church.”

“Which is as real as Santa Claus,” Troy said.

“We’re not here to debate theology,” Piotrowski said sharply. “We’re here to discuss Allya Sharif’s situation in regards to her father and sharia law.”

“Oh. Sorry,” Troy said. “Don’t know what I was thinking.”

Piotrowski turned back to Allya. “Go on, child.”

“They had talked me through my conversion, emails and a few phone calls,” Allya said. “I knew they would look after me. Can’t I stay with them? They’re my family now.”

“Why didn’t you call DCF the moment she came into your home,” Piotrowski asked the Engers. “That would have been the legal thing to do.”

“I didn’t know.” Stephen Enger winced as he wiggled his wrists in the handcuffs. “Can’t we take off these handcuffs? We’re not going to run away.”

“You did once already. Twice for the kid,” Piotrowski said. “The cuffs stay. You don’t have the most trustworthy record here.” She thought a moment and then stood. “I’m going to make a call to my office. Get some legal advice.”

“You can use my office,” Troy said.

“I intend to. Stay put, all of you.” Piotrowski walked abruptly out of the small room, her low heels clicking rapidly away down the corridor. Troy thought that even her shoes sounded stern and unforgiving.

They all sat staring at one another a moment. “Juan, take off the cuffs,” Troy said. “Where’s their car?”

“Had one of the officers on duty stand by while a tow truck came. By now it’s at the impound lot on Government Key.” Juan was removing handcuffs as he spoke, putting them into a small pile in the center of the table next to the microphone.

“We’ll keep the car,” Troy said. “Mangrove Bayou is a walking town anyway. My advice to you three is to do whatever Piotrowski says. She eats roofing nails for breakfast. She tells me to arrest you guys, you’re going to be in the cold and stony by close of business.”

Olive Piotrowski walked back into the room and sat. She looked at the handcuffs but didn’t comment on them.

“The issue here,” she said without preamble, “is covered by Florida statutes: To be at substantial risk of imminent abuse, abandonment, or neglect by the parent or parents or legal custodians. There’s no question that a threat of imminent killing would be considered abuse. But there’s also no evidence that such a threat actually took place. I’ll find out.

“Here’s what I can do,” she said. “I wanted to have the Engers arrested, simply because then we could impose a bail on them that they would forfeit if they pulled another kidnapping stunt.”

Stephanie Enger protested. “We didn’t kidnap ...”

“Shut up. I was told not to do that because then they would have arrest records and that, in turn, would make it hard to declare them foster parents.

“So what I can do is this: The Engers will be designated the foster parents of Allya Sharif. There’s a procedure and someone in my office can explain all that and the paperwork. Allya Sharif will stay with the Engers while we sort all this out. I’m certainly not sending a fifteen-year-old girl back to Michigan if it puts her into any danger. I’ll be talking to her parents and the police up in Hamtramck.

“Meantime, Allya goes to school here. I’ll get someone from the school to walk you through the process. Is this acceptable to everyone here or do I tell Chief Adam to put the handcuffs back on and send all of you to the Collier County jail?”

Apparently this was acceptable. The Engers and Allya, and Olive Piotrowski, left. Troy and Juan went back to Troy’s office. Spots, the cat, crawled out from beneath Troy’s desk and looked around warily. Juan laughed. “I think Piotrowski scares even the cat.”

“Well, he’s a smart cat,” Troy said as he sat behind his desk.

Juan was standing by the door. “I know that you think the Engers are fraudsters. Bible-thumpers taking advantage of gullible people.”

“This is true. It’s not unlawful, strangely enough. If I tell you to give me a dollar so that you’ll feel better and be in the grace of God — and you do so, you’re down a dollar, however that makes you feel. And I’m up a dollar. I promised you something intangible that I didn’t even have to provide. And yet no law was broken.”

“So why didn’t you object to them being foster parents?”

Troy turned to look out the window at Sunset Bay. “I think they’re misguided and frauds, yes. But they seem sincere about Allya. I don’t see any way they profit from keeping her. It may be that they actually want to do some good. In some small way. Running a fake church to bilk gullible people out of money — and knowing what you’re doing — must be very emotionally wearying.”

“It’s true what Lee Bell says about you.”

Troy looked over at Juan. “What’s that?”

“That you’re a toasted marshmallow. All crusty and hard on the outside, soft and squishy in the middle.”

Chapter 9

Friday, September 15

Britt Sagant was tall and cadaverous and had long blond hair that was swept up in a comb over in front and a mullet down the back of his neck and to his shoulder blades. Troy thought it looked as if his hair had lost its grip on his scalp and was sliding down his back. Sagant was the second Tesla owner that Juan Valdez had interviewed. They were standing in Sagant’s living room in a 5000-square-foot home sitting on a half-million-dollar lot.

Inside the house, Troy wondered why a man who lived alone needed four bedrooms and five baths. *Maybe he’s got a really weak bladder*, Troy thought, *and lots of relatives visiting him every winter*. Juan had explained why he and Troy were there.

“I don’t know any Paul Toforth,” Sagant was saying. He hadn’t asked them to sit. He shook his head. “Never been near that address you mentioned. Sorry.”

“But your car was seen there,” Juan said. “Did you loan out your car to someone else?” In fact, Troy knew, the only two Teslas in town were both black and indistinguishable from one another, Juan had no plate number, and he was just fishing. Sagant wasn’t biting.

“I didn’t loan it out. Who loans out a Tesla? That’s a \$120,000 car. What’s your police squad car cost?”

Troy thought about that. “They’re Suburban trucks. All three probably equal your ride.”

“My point. I’m rich. Just stating a fact. But not even I loan out cars like that.”

“We lifted your fingerprints there,” Juan pressed on. “From a ... er ... sexual device.”

“Really? How odd. Proves nothing. I have some sexual ... enhancements ... around here. I sometimes give those away to friends. Perhaps one of those gave whatever you found to this Toforth fellow.” He looked at Troy. “You must have run my record to know about my fingerprints.”

“Actually, FDLE, the Florida department of Law Enforcement, did that. You spent time at Coleman.”

“I was foolish, Sagant said. “Failed to take proper precautions.”

“Precautions?” Troy said. “Against money laundering for a Mexican drug cartel?”

“Against getting caught.”

“Good to know you’re repentant.”

Sagant grinned. “Never claimed to be.”

“According to your file with the feds, you didn’t need to go to prison at all. You could have named names in the cartel and gotten off with probation.”

“Sure. Then they come after me.”

“ ‘They’ being the cartel.”

“Right. They’re great believers in revenge. Vengeance.” He thought a moment. “And so am I, now.”

“So what sort of vengeance do you want to get? And against whom?”

“Whom? Anyone who pisses me off, Chief. Vengeance is a good use for money, if you have money. But not to worry; it won’t concern you.”

“Tell us about your being rich,” Troy said. “How is that? What do you do for a living? I mean besides criminal activity.”

“Nothing. I don’t even need the criminal activity. It just fell into my lap and I thought it was fun. Gave it up. Money’s no good in prison. Inherited wealth. Grandfather made a fortune in telephone stocks. Dad kicked back his entire life, living off the dividends. I inherited granddad’s money and dad’s work ethic. What did your dad leave to you?”

“Nothing. No idea who the gentleman was. Probably an Asian of some sort.”

“Aha. Thus the eyes and hair.”

“Exactly. Tell us about Paul Toforth, recently deceased and in front of whose house your car was seen parked.”

Sagant shook his head. “I was never at that address. And I never heard of this Paul whatshisname.”

“Well, Paul whatshisname was murdered,” Juan said. He took a business card from his wallet and handed that to Sagant. “If you do hear anything that might help us find justice for Paul, let me know.”

“Sure.” Sagant said as he herded them to the hallway.

Troy stopped by a small table near the front door. A shallow wicker basket there held a wallet, a set of keys on a ring, a book and a magazine, an assortment of other pocket-junk, coins and the like — and a set of teeth.

“What’s with the teeth?” Troy asked. He picked up the teeth, They looked like the set he had seen in Paul Toforth’s bedside table.

“Leftover from last Halloween,” Sagant said. “Bought at a party store. Why?”

“Just curious.” Troy had not told Sagant about the bite marks on Paul Toforth’s neck. They were holding that tidbit back. He pulled a loose subscription card from the magazine and used the teeth to puncture two holes in the card. He set the teeth back down and put the folded card into his shirt pocket.

Juan and Troy got back into Troy’s Suburban truck. Troy had managed to get Juan promoted and Juan was now on days regularly, but there wasn’t a separate police truck for Juan. He used his own pickup and Troy paid for the gas whenever Juan remembered to tally up the mileage, which Juan rarely did.

“Guy’s lying,” Juan said as Troy drove. “My money’s on him.”

“Because?”

“The fake teeth, obviously. And nobody loans out a butt plug, for God’s sake. I mean, if you wanted one — I can’t imagine why but if — they must cost a buck, two-ninety-nine. Get your own. It’s the kind of thing you would want personalized.”

“Where would you buy one?” Troy asked. “I can’t think of a store in Mangrove Bayou that sells them.”

“You’re so twentieth-century, chief. You go online, buy your pervert toys from the pervert toy web site, have UPS deliver. You going to measure the distance between those bite-marks on the card? Compare that to the marks on the victim?”

“Good thinking, Detective Lieutenant Valdez.”

“You had no search warrant.”

“Got eyeballs. So do you. The teeth were in plain sight if it comes to that. But I was mostly just curious.”

“Can’t believe we’re looking for a vampire. Next thing, Mangrove Bayou’s going to be overrun with zombies.”

“That would be ridiculous,” Troy said.

“Yeah, it would. Just like this is.”

“We’re not actually looking for a vampire. We’re looking for someone who fakes being a vampire.”

“Well, he doesn’t fake being a killer. Someone paralyzes you, hangs you upside down, and pokes holes in your neck to drain out your blood, doesn’t much matter if he’s just faking being a vampire or if he’s the real thing.”

“I don’t believe there are real vampires,” Troy said.

“How are you on Santa Claus?”

“He must be real. NORAD tracks him on their radar every Christmas.”

“Yeah, doing seven billion b&e’s and trespassings, all in one night.”

“Spoken like a true detective lieutenant.”

“And, as a true detective lieutenant, I’m still suspicious of Britt Sagant. He lives alone and if he has a job anywhere I don’t know where that is.”

“I live alone,” Troy said. “And he explained that his job is spending grandpa’s money.”

“You have a girlfriend. Lee Bell. I asked around about Britt Sagant and his neighbors say he never has a visitor. Loners are suspicious.”

“Pretty broad net you’re casting there,” Troy said. “And he’s not joking either. Guy with a hundred-thousand-dollar ride and a house like that must have some money coming in. Or a hell of a credit card.”

“Maybe both. He owns the car. Didn’t just lease it. I checked that, being as I’m a detective lieutenant. So am I wrong?”

“Probably. I’ll check the property records too, back at the office. I like to browse through those. Sometimes odd things pop up. Like maybe the actual mortgage holder isn’t the person living there, things like that.”

“Wondered what you did all day, sitting in there staring at your computer. I always assumed you were checking porn sites.”

Troy smiled. “Probably be better use of my time. Places like property appraiser sites or Florida statutes are like dictionaries to me. I go to look up something, take just a few seconds. Hour later I’m still looking at things I never thought of before — and I’ve skipped lunch. Terrible habit.”

“Angel Watson says that you’re getting better at computers, really good. She says she plans to start you on iPhones next.”

“Every day, in every way, I’m better and better. Now, about the loner thing. Investigations always start like this, lots of wrong assumptions, maybe one or two good ones. It’s always that way and no matter how weird some of the assumptions are, you keep them all in your file until they get disproved, one by one. You don’t know which is which now. Time will sort it all out for you.”

“I’m learning. And I’m patient.”

“Yes, you are, Grasshopper. Did you notice the book?”

“Book?”

“Book on the hallway table. Library book. Had that special sticker on the spine. Probably ready to be returned. Title is *Nosferatu*.”

“Nose ... what?”

Nosferatu is the title of various books and a few films. About vampires.”

“Like Dracula?”

“Just like.”

“Holy shit! What about the magazine?”

“Nothing. AAA. So he has towing insurance. I would, too, if I owned a car with a 250-mile range that took hours to recharge between trips or even in the middle of a trip.”

“It’s the future, Chief. Electric cars are greener.”

“So they say. Where does the electricity come from?”

“Well, out of a special outlet. Hell, we got one out in front of the town hall.”

“And the outlet is connected to ... ?”

“Ah. I see where you’re going. The outlet gets electricity from the electric power plant. So what?”

“Which burns coal or some petroleum product to generate the electricity. Then there’s a considerable line loss to send that electricity miles away through wires, so they have to burn even more coal or oil just to get some of it all the way out here. All Mr. Sagant is really doing is burning coal at a long distance from his car. May as well say that a light bulb is ‘greener’ than a candle. One has a local fuel source, one has a twenty-mile-long wire.”

“But the Tesla people say the car is greener. Better for the Earth.”

“And no car company has ever lied or faked test results,” Troy said. “One British study found that the environmental cost over the car’s lifetime was actually higher for a Tesla than that for a standard gas-powered sedan. Mostly, though, that was because of the manufacturing process, especially the large and environmentally-nasty battery required. It’s a work in progress. Tesla, and the others, are on the right track. Electric cars will be the future once we get the battery issue better resolved.”

“Well, at least the fuel is all burned in one place, not in your nose, stuck up someone’s tailpipe in heavy traffic.”

“I suppose. Not that heavy traffic is a big concern around Mangrove Bayou. What else have you got on our case, here”

“Well, the other Tesla is owned by an entire family. Two parents and three kids, ages all under twelve. Husband and wife both have jobs here in town. He’s a dentist and she does his bookkeeping.”

“Probably part-time job in the wife’s case,” Troy said. “She could do bookkeeping at home and watch the kids too. Hard to do dentistry at home. I bet that she looks after the kids most of each day.”

“Why is that?” Juan asked. “How come married husbands don’t look after the kids and married wives go out to earn the bread?”

“No idea. But one possibility is that women still average about 85 cents to every male dollar of income. If someone has to give up earning to take care of kids, makes sense for it to be the lesser-earner.”

“That’s so sexist, Chief. I’m surprised at you.”

Troy looked at Juan and grinned. “I’m the sexist one just because I acknowledge reality? Your own wife, Elba, works at a restaurant as the hostess. When you and she have a kid, who gets to stay home and be there all the time? You? Or Elba.”

“Elba, of course.”

“And that’s because your salary is probably twice hers.”

“No. Because she’s the woman.”

Troy pulled into the parking lot behind the town hall. “Good thing you’re not as sexist as I am,” he said.

Chapter 10

Saturday, September 19

At nine a.m. on a Florida September morn the air was thick but the heat was not yet too bad. Troy and those officers who were off-duty had gathered at the small gun range on Government Key for a monthly practice session. They were in civilian clothes.

“Got a small surprise today,” Troy said. “No shooting. We’re going to learn more about Tasers.

The officers looked at one another. “What’s in the box, Chief,” Avery Brooks asked.

Troy had a small cardboard box. He bent to set the box on the ground. “Extra cartridges for the Taser. They’re past or near to their expiration dates anyway and I have fresh ones on the way. Everybody strip off your shirts. We’re going to take turns screaming and yelling.”

“I’m not taking off my shirt,” Angel Watson said.

“You’re wearing a bra. The bikini you wear at the beach is smaller,” Troy said. “I’ve seen it. If you leave your shirt on it gets holes in it and a little bloody. But that can be washed out. Your choice.”

“I’ll take off the shirt,” Angel said.

“Now,” Troy said, “we have someone in town who used a Taser and then murdered the victim. I don’t want that to happen to any of you. But let’s learn more, just in case. Way this works is one of you stands still and two of you hold onto our victim. Good grip on the upper arms. Avery, you get Tased in your training not long ago?”

“Yeah, I was. That was awful.”

“I bet. You do the shooting then. I’ve gone through it in Tampa. But these fine folks have never experienced it. Avery, aim at the upper back so the second dart hits just above the butt.” Troy handed Avery the Taser. “Let’s have our first victim. Angel, you’re up.”

Two of the officers held Angel’s arms. Avery backed off fifteen feet.

“Step closer, Avery,” Troy said. “Ten feet is better.”

“But they trained us to shoot from max range. Fifteen feet,” Avery said. “Get more spread on the darts.”

“The way this works,” Troy explained, “is that the darts stick in your skin, the Taser shoots 50,000 volts through the wires, and all major skeletal muscles between the two darts contract at once. The farther apart the darts, the more effect. It’s painful but that’s not really the point. It temporarily paralyzes you, giving the officer time to take other action, handcuffing, or drawing another weapon or just reminding the person being Tased of who’s in charge in this situation.” He looked at Avery. “Ten feet is good for this exercise.”

“Okay, Chief. Avery raised the Taser. “Three, two, one,” he fired. Angel screamed and stiffened, locked in agony for five seconds before the electricity shut off. “God damn! Mother fucker!” she shouted. When the Taser shut off she slumped and the two men holding her kept her from falling. In a few seconds she was fine again. “Fucking shit,” she said.

“Nasty words coming from such a little girl,” Jeremiah Brown said. Jeremiah was black and huge and the oldest officer on the force and he sang bass in his church choir. “You talk to your momma with that mouth, missy?”

“We’re not in church, Jeremiah,” Troy said. “And we call that ‘Taser-induced Tourettes.’ Perfectly natural.”

“Swearing is swearing, Boss. It’s an offense to God.”

Troy stepped up and snapped off the wires and swiftly plucked the darts out of Angel’s back. He stuck some bandaids on the small dart holes. “You’re done. Next up!” Someone handed Angel her shirt and she put that back on.

Over the next half hour the officers took turns. All screamed and cursed except Jeremiah. He just stood there, uncomplaining.

“No cursing?” Troy asked. “No begging God?” He was pulling the darts out of Jeremiah’s broad back. Jeremiah had been one of the arm-holders and now he was the last officer to be Tased.

“God didn’t make the Taser,” Jeremiah said. “Not his fault.”

“Got that right,” Troy said. “Anyway, now we all know a bit more. Two things you will find out now: First, you just got the equivalent of a good gym workout. You’ll feel loose and limber for a while, pretty good, actually. Second and more important, you’ll think twice about doing this to someone else, now that you know what it feels like.

“A Taser is a weapon, not a toy. Use it when you must but not before. And always remember that the person you tase will fall down and not protect their head, so be careful about the surface they will fall onto. If you can, that is.

“And don’t use it as a substitute for chasing someone. I know of a case in another department where a fat officer tased a girl because she was running away from the police station. Running from a misdemeanor too. She fell in the parking lot and had permanent and severe brain damage. That because a fatty didn’t want to run after her. I don’t ever

want to see that here. If someone runs, chase them down, don't just tase them for your personal convenience."

"What happened to the cop?" Angel asked.

"What happens to most cops in those situations," Troy said. "Nothing. He's still on the job, fat, lazy, stupid and vicious.

"Point of the Taser is that, bad as it is, it's a non-lethal alternative to shooting someone with your gun. In fact, it disables a person quicker than shooting them with a gun. Most times.

"But if your life is in danger, also remember the Taser is a one-shot thing and you can miss or the darts might not work right. In a life-or-death situation, a gun has multiple shots.

"Last item," Troy pointed to the colored confetti sprinkled around on the ground, "each cartridge has a code number and these AFIDs — the little paper things on the ground — can ID the specific cartridge used. We track those to the individual officers the cartridges were issued to. So if you use one, fill in the use-of-weapon form and tell me about it."

"What good is it to track the cartridges when some yahoo steals them out of a gun shop?" Avery asked."

"No system is perfect," Troy said. "Any other questions? I'm picking up the lunch tab at Bert's Crab Shack for all of you today. You did good."

"We're not done, Boss," Jeremiah said. "Gotta tase you too."

"But I've already done it."

"Not here you ain't. Not in front of us."

Troy grinned. "Tase me and I won't pick up the lunch tab."

There was a long silence. Then Angel Watson spoke up, "Tab's on me, guys."

Jeremiah smiled. "Strip off your shirt, Boss. Avery, pick up that Taser."

"You bet," Avery said, grinning.

Troy looked around at a wall of laughing officers. He sighed and took off his shirt and handed Angel Watson the box of bandaids.

"Ready" Avery called. Angel and Jeremiah held Troy's arms. "Three, two, one." And Avery laughed as Troy tensed up. Avery hadn't yet fired. "Just kidding, Chief."

"Stop joking aro ... God Damn!" Troy screamed as the darts hit him. "Son of a bitch!"

— end sample —