

Double Murder in New Orleans

By
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In previous writings, I have paid tribute to Lynell, beloved wife, and to Betty and Cindy, our beloved daughters.

Now I wish to say a few words about amateur radio and what this hobby means to me. I am by no means an expert in radio technology, even after more than forty years; furthermore, as radio science developed and new consumer devices emerged, the technical aspects of the hobby moved beyond my capabilities, but not my interests. I enjoy tinkering; using Morse code, RTTY, and PSK31 with a computer; using low power; and speculating about antenna theory. Like many amateurs, I visualize the perfect radio station, with the best antenna possible, running power to the legal limit, contacting hams all over the world and in space, and rag chewing with ham friends from across the years.

I acknowledge my debt to hams who have helped me along the way. My trip from Novice to Extra Class has been the stories of individuals who have taught me radio theory and instilled in me what I hope are desirable operating habits. Many of those helping hams are now Silent Keys.

I shall mention one person, who personifies all “helping hams,” as I have experienced them through the years. Elmer Langston, N5OCG, developed and maintains one of the Internet’s most informative web sites about amateur radio. Any person can click on <http://home.flash.net/~n5ocg/n5ous.html> and find guides to almost any aspect of the hobby. The site also contains information specific to amateur radio in Arkansas.

Finally, like many hams, I rely upon QST, the official journal of ARRL, The National Association for Amateur Radio. This organization (arrl.org) has championed both the science and the spirit of amateur radio since the days of Hiram Percy Maxim, starting in 1914.

1

Kill Victor Alonzo

Antonio Carbelle sat behind the massive oak desk in his penthouse office on top of the ten-story Carbelle Building, in uptown New Orleans. The spacious room, with genuine leather chairs, smelled of luxury. The sixty-year-old Italian pushed a button underneath the desk and watched see-through curtains drag over two walls of windows and soften the sun's mid-day glare; another punched button slid open a door in the wall to his right, revealing an office bar.

From her adjacent office, Carbelle's secretary keyed the intercom. "Mr. Vasari and Mr. Cellini are here, Mr. Carbelle."

Carbelle had not seen his former employees since their retirement five years previous. He contorted his mouth and nose like he smelled an unflushed toilet and pressed the talk button; he tried to sound delighted. "Send them in." He released the intercom switch and hoisted two hundred pounds of six-foot, fatless physique out of his executive chair. Brown skin stretched over cheekbones, and his long nose shadowed thin lips. He brushed his right hand over the top of his black hair, highlighted by streaks of gray. Plush, beige carpet muted the sound of black wingtips as he walked around the desk, and the legs of his tailored linen suit swished. He focused his black eyes on the two men entering the room.

In their grandfatherly seventies, Joe Vasari and Angelo Cellini were wearing off-the-rack, two-piece suits from Sears. Joe's suit was

creamed-coffee-color, worsted cotton. Angelo, a head shorter than Joe, was dressed in tan seersucker. Both had thinning, snowy hair and dark, Mediterranean features.

Carbelle took one step toward the men, offering his hand. "Come in, my friends. How long has it been? Five years?" He shook hands. "What would you like to drink?"

Joe Vasari answered, "Beer."

Angelo Cellini added, "Beer for me, too."

Carbelle motioned toward captain's chairs in front of his desk. "I remember, now; you drink only beer."

From the bar's refrigerator, he brought three frosted cans to the desk, gave one to each man, and popped the top of his can. He waited until two more cans popped and fizzed before raising his can in a salute. "To both of you. Thanks for coming." He drank three swallows of beer, belched, and walked to his chair behind the desk. His suit squeaked against the chair's leather seat, and he scuffed a wingtip against the footrest. He sat the sweating can on the glass desktop.

The Sicilians sipped beer and waited. Both men suspected that Carbelle had invited them to the office for something more than a cold beer.

Carbelle leaned against his high-back, leather chair and asked, "How are you enjoying retirement? How is your health?"

Angelo glanced at Joe and answered, "We are getting along just fine. Our health is good for old men who can no longer piss a strong stream."

Carbelle chuckled and leaned forward, using the back of his hand to push aside his sweating can. His chuckle disappeared. "I heard you are planning to move back to the old country?"

Angelo again looked at Joe, expecting his partner to answer.

Joe uncrossed his legs and sat straight. "Yes, sir. We bought my father's old house near Palermo."

"That's good; you will enjoy living among members of your family, after all these years in the States." Carbelle's nose flared. "I have one last job for you; the money will guarantee you a comfortable living in Sicily. I want you to kill Victor Alonzo."

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

A breeze wafting through the baseboard air conditioning duct made the only sound in the room. Five years had passed since Vasari and Cellini had triggered a silenced revolver or plunged an ice pick into a man's ear. Now, they knew: Carbelle was taking them out of retirement for a hit; refusal was not an option.

Carbelle sneered, "I want him killed soon. Do you know if Robert Frank is available to help with this job?"

Joe replied, "Robert lives in Venice. We'll talk to him."

"Make certain that you keep this hit under your hat. Come to see me at Delacroix...afterwards." Carbelle walked from behind the desk.

The Sicilians automatically stood.

Fabricating affection, Carbelle placed a hefty palm on each man's shoulder, nudging the men toward a door, which led into a hallway and a private elevator.

Joe and Angelo entered the waiting elevator, turned, and faced Carbelle, still standing in the hallway.

Carbelle reached inside the elevator and punched the button to start the elevator. "Do this favor for me, and I'll see that you live well in the old country."

The elevator's door closed before Joe or Angelo could respond. They rode in silence to the street-level garage, strolled among the parked automobiles, and climbed into their 1994 black Cadillac sedan.

Joe stretched his long legs and stared through the car's windshield, pensively studying graffiti scrawled across the garage's concrete wall. He waited until Angelo buckled himself behind the wheel. "What do you think?" he asked.

Angelo's accent was thicker than Joe's. "If Robert helps us make the job look like an accident, there will be no problem. But if Victor Alonzo's family thinks Carbelle ordered Victor's death, we will be in the middle of a war." Angelo's countenance took on the look of a person about to enter a funeral parlor, and he sighed deeply, as though worried. "I thought retirement would stop us from killing. Do you think we can kill Victor before our flight to Sicily?"

"I think so. We can be in Venice by mid-afternoon. Let's go talk to Robert." Joe noticed the change in Angelo's mood. Would one

more killing push Angelo back into his depression? He had been free of symptoms since their retirement, and he had been off the medication for three years. Joe looked out of the car window, wondering if he should suggest that Angelo resume taking his medication.

Angelo cranked the powerful engine, drove out of the garage, and headed toward Canal Street. “The trouble between Carbelle and Alonzo has been quiet for years. I wonder what got Antonio upset?” He stopped the car at a traffic light.

“I may know,” replied Joe. “A few weeks ago, when we ate spaghetti at Dominique’s, while you went to the can, I overheard a couple of Antonio’s soldiers talking. From what they said, I gathered that Antonio had asked Victor permission to invest in the Mississippi River casinos. When Victor refused, Antonio swore to expand his business anyway.”

Angelo drove over the up-town Mississippi River bridge, through Algiers, and south, toward Plaquemines Parish.

Joe started talking as memories flowed in his thoughts. “Years ago, Victor’s father and Antonio’s father were cousins, living in the same town in southern Italy. After World War I, the two men and their wives immigrated to New Orleans. By lot, they divided South Louisiana into territories. Antonio’s father got Jefferson and Plaquemines Parishes. Victor’s father got New Orleans and the rest of Louisiana.

“The Carbelle family made a killing in gambling, booze, and prostitution. The Alonzo family developed legitimate businesses along with their rackets. Later, Victor’s father gave Antonio’s father permission to build the Carbelle Building in New Orleans.

“When Victor and Antonio were about twenty, in 1964, their fathers died within a few months of each other. Victor’s father had cancer; a stroke killed Antonio’s father. Victor took over the family business. Antonio ran his father’s rackets in Jefferson and Plaquemines Parishes and maintained offices in the Carbelle Building. There’s always been bad blood between Antonio and Victor. Since 1964, Victor has expanded his business a hundred times over.

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

Antonio still runs the rackets in the two parishes outside New Orleans. Victor has grown respectable and legitimate. Antonio has gone deeper into gambling, prostitution, booze, and dope. Now, with the casino and lottery business busting wide open, Antonio wants part of the action.”

Angelo asked, “You think Antonio will try to take over Victor’s business, after we kill Victor?”

“Yes. As long as Victor is alive, Carbelle will be a two-bit hood from South Louisiana, hoping for a crumb from his master’s table.”

Algiers and New Orleans were an hour behind them, when Angelo maneuvered the black Cadillac around a flatbed truck loaded with fresh carrots. After another half-hour, the car bumped off the concrete highway onto the double-lane blacktop, still heading south, into Plaquemines Parish. Angelo tightened his fingers on the wheel and pushed his shoulders against the plush seat. “I’m not sure if Robert will want to help us kill Victor; he’s getting too old for this kind of work.”

Joe answered, “I agree, but Robert owes Carbelle.”

Angelo glanced at Joe. “Why does Antonio want old farts like us to kill Victor? Why not use some of the young Turks?”

“No one will suspect us because we haven’t worked for years.... But that’s not what worries me.... Carbelle tipped his hand, when he told us to keep this hit under our hats; we never talk about work.... I’m guessing that Carbelle will order us to hit Robert after we kill Victor; then, he will try to kill us.” He sighed deeply. “But we won’t kill Robert. Instead, we’ll ask Robert to build a bomb for Carbelle.”

2

Kill Sharon Bettis

Jerry Dalton, twenty-six and built like a linebacker for the New Orleans Saints, rhythmically deposited his semen in Ruby Sander's vagina, rolled off her, and drifted into sleep.

Ruby got off the bed and shuffled into the bathroom. She sat on the toilet, with elbows propped on her knees. Long red hair fell around her face. The forty-five-year-old menopausal woman glanced at her sagging breasts and almost cried.

The couple was in the second floor bedroom of a frame house, located in uptown New Orleans. The first floor housed the office of the Crescent City Secretarial Service.

Twenty years before, after working as a secretary and a free-lance prostitute, Ruby had saved enough money to open a secretarial business in Seattle. In ten years, she expanded to San Francisco, Denver, Dallas, and Houston. Each office was a legitimate business, franchised to a local owner. She moved to New Orleans and opened her most recent branch four years previously.

Ruby slipped into a silky smock and returned to the bedroom; she stood over Jerry, contemplating his open mouth, hairless chest, and limp organ. From the street, the faint growl of a bus's diesel filtered into the room.

As if Ruby's scrutiny had poked him awake, Jerry opened his blue eyes and looked up at her, like a thankful puppy.

Ruby sat on the bed and teased a lock of blond hair behind his right ear. "Let's take a vacation after we collect the insurance on Sharon."

Three years before, Jerry found Sharon Bettis in a Chicago bar, near the University where she was a student. He introduced her to cocaine and persuaded her to follow him to New Orleans. Months later, the Chicago police advised Sharon's frantic mother to abandon the search for her of-legal-age daughter.

Still on his back, Jerry yawned. "Sounds good to me." He reached for his shorts and started dressing. "What about the other girls?"

Ruby watched the symbol of her forgotten youth put on a sport shirt to match his tan slacks and brown oxfords. "Sharon will be back from vacation next week; her roommate and the other girls will be gone another week. After the accident, I'll close this office for a few months and transfer the girls to Dallas."

The downstairs telephone rang. Jerry said, "I'll get the phone and check the morning mail."

Ruby dressed and went downstairs to help Jerry finish the mail. Afterwards, they walked to Sharon's apartment, several blocks away on Prytania Street, and let themselves in with a key Sharon had given Jerry. They went into the kitchen.

He explained how he planned to kill Sharon. "Her washing machine is here in the kitchen. I've seen her sort clothes for washing on that table." He pointed to a roll-about utility table. "After I get her stoned, I'll pile some of her dirty things—towels, sheets, and such—on the table and roll it between the washing machine and the cook stove. Then, I'll set fire to a washcloth wrapped in aluminum foil and place the burning cloth inside a plastic garbage bag; the aluminum will keep the cloth from burning the bag. After the bag fills with smoke, I'll put it over Sharon's head and hold it until she suffocates."

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

“How will you set fire to the house?”

“I’ll start a gas leak in the cook stove and set the timer on the coffee-maker for four hours. The room will fill with gas, which will permeate the clothes. The electric spark from the coffee maker will explode the gas and start the fire. This room will fill with smoke and flames; the old house will burn like paper.”

3

Harry Ramsay: Insurance Investigator

Harry H. Ramsay sat at the kitchen table, lingering over his breakfast cup of coffee, searching the morning edition of the New Orleans newspaper for an article that he had skimmed during the first reading. He found the item inside the paper's first section, near the daily police reports, dated June 14, 1994. As he read, a dejected mood enveloped him like a gray pall being drawn over a closed casket.

Yesterday, Sharon Bettis, age 24, died from smoke inhalation, suffered in an apartment explosion and fire. Inspectors ruled the death an accident, caused when an electric coffee maker ignited a gas leak in the kitchen stove.

According to information from the Orleans Parish Coroner, Ms. Bettis lived with a roommate, who was on vacation at the time. The victim was an employee of the Crescent City Professional Secretarial Service. Ms. Ruby Sanders, proprietor of the secretarial company, stated that Ms. Bettis had been with the company for several years. She is survived by no known next of kin. Her employer is making funeral arrangements.

Harry folded the newspaper and drank the last of his coffee. He

didn't want to deal with any more grief than necessary; he was only now learning to cope with the surges of despair that too often slipped into his mind.

He rinsed the coffee cup, placed it in the cabinet, and glanced around the sparsely furnished, combination kitchen-dining room. He retrieved the newspaper from the table and carried it with him into the bedroom. After dressing in a casual shirt and trousers, he put on his golf cap and stripped the bed. Linens and newspaper finished filling the waiting suitcase.

After his daughter, Robin, had selected and moved what she wanted of the furniture and family memorabilia, Harry sold the house and the remaining furnishings as a package, keeping nothing, except his clothes and a family album. He started walking through the house to make sure he was leaving everything as he had promised the new owners. He had made arrangements to leave the utilities and telephone in service.

Five feet, seven inches tall, weighing 170 pounds, Harry appeared younger than sixty-three. His brown hair had started receding. Few people knew that he had been a professional jockey in his youth. He remembered the early years.

After finishing high school in Long Island, New York, Harry worked as a jockey, following the racing circuit for a couple of years. His body took a sudden growth spurt, and he grew too tall and too heavy to race; he continued working as an exercise jockey for a company that raced horses at various tracks around the country.

In 1954, when he was twenty-three, he met Martha at the Fair Grounds in New Orleans. Martha had grown up in New Orleans and still lived with her parents in a modest house near City Park. She was twenty-three, also, and a sociology student at Tulane University. Martha and a sorority sister were completing a sociology project about life around the racetrack; they needed to interview a jockey. The racing season was in full swing, and the track manager arranged for the coeds to meet Harry, the only available jockey.

The day Harry met Martha, she wore a dark-brown skirt that

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

swirled about her knees; white lace trimmed the square neck of her short-sleeved, tan blouse. She blushed when Harry stared at her cleavage; he took her to dinner that night.

One month later, Harry and Martha announced their decision to marry. Martha's parents did not like the idea of their daughter marrying a professional jockey.

Harry's response disarmed Martha's parents. "I'll stay in New Orleans and follow some other line, if that'll make you folks and Martha happy. I have saved enough money so that I won't have to work for a couple of years." Harry and Martha married and moved into the house that Harry was now leaving.

Martha's father was an accountant for an industrial insurance company. He introduced Harry to an acquaintance with Insurance Adjustment Unlimited, and Harry began a forty-year career as a claims investigator and adjuster.

Harry finished checking the house and ended in the bedroom. He paused at the bed, remembering when he and Martha had made their two girl babies.

Maria, the first child, graduated from Tulane and taught in the New Orleans Public Schools. She never married. Shortly after Maria's thirty-sixth birthday, an intestinal obstruction forced her into a hospital. Cancer killed her within a year.

Robin, five years younger than Maria, lived with her husband and child on the Mississippi Coast, near Mobile.

An impulse drew Harry from the bedroom back into the kitchen, where he stood near the kitchen sink and remembered the last time he saw Martha alive.

Harry and Martha had shared the dream of owning a motor home and driving around the border of the United States. Two years before his retirement date, they purchased an over-the-cab motor home and used it several times, to break it in.

One morning, Harry came into the kitchen before leaving to play golf. Martha was leaning over the kitchen sink, fussing with the

garbage disposal. "Harry, when we get back off the trip, I hope you'll get a new disposal for this damn sink!" Damn was Martha's strongest word.

Harry walked over to her and wrapped his arms around Martha's petite waist and nuzzled the back of her neck. "No reason to wait. I'll fix it tomorrow."

She turned to face him and sighed, as though tired, and rested her head on his shoulder. "Goodbye, Dear. Have a nice golf game." Those were her last words.

Martha collapsed in his arms and slid to the floor like a crumpled dishtowel, clutching at her head with both hands. She blanched white and suffered a series of convulsions.

Harry telephoned for an ambulance. During the minutes before the medics arrived, the convulsions stopped. Martha lay still, hardly breathing. He sat on the kitchen floor and held her, fearing the worst. He watched the emergency technicians load her into the ambulance; feeling helpless was a new experience for him.

At the hospital, the physician told Harry that the most skilled brain surgeon could not reverse the damage caused by Martha's subarachnoid hemorrhage.

Still standing near the kitchen sink, remembering, Harry could think only of Martha's convulsions, the terrible contortions of her face, the twisting, stretching, and stiffening of her arms, back, and legs, seconds before he felt her body grow limp and still in his arms.

The memory of her dying faded into the background of his thoughts, replaced by images of the first time he saw her at the funeral home. Too much powder on Martha's lifeless face gave her an artificial, too white appearance; the undertaker had folded her hands over her rigid abdomen, unnaturally; she seemed out of place in the pink coffin.

Harry could almost smell the pungent odor of funeral home flowers. Suddenly, as if commanded by a motion picture director's instruction, the image of Martha among other flowers emerged, with her standing in front of a bed of blooming azaleas at Audubon Park,

holding hands with the two girls. Harry had snapped the picture with the family camera; the picture was packed in the camper.

Rather than to suppress painful memories, Harry permitted painful images to flash into awareness, free-flowing, balancing feelings of death and loneliness with the sense of being alive in the present. Life goes on. Thinking about the snapshot of Martha, Maria, and Robin brought a smile to Harry's face.

He sighed, turned away, and carried the suitcase outside to the motor home. Uneasy because he did not remember turning off the kitchen lights, he went back inside the house to make sure. Sure enough, the light was still on. He flicked the switch and started through the hallway, toward the front door. The ringing telephone stopped him. He picked up the phone and said, "This is Harry Ramsay."

A man's deep voice spoke with authority, "Mr. Ramsay, Vance Contella gave me your name."

Vance Contella had been Harry's boss. Instead of speaking, he waited.

"Hello; are you there?" The man sounded impatient.

"I'm here," Harry said, wondering why Contella would give out his name.

"Vance said that you might investigate a matter for me."

Harry still did not respond. He had severed himself emotionally and practically from New Orleans and his former business. The call annoyed him.

The caller demanded, "Mr. Ramsay, if you are interested in the job, you'll have to be more responsive. After all, there are other investigators available."

"Then, I suggest you call one." Harry hung up the phone and started for the door, feeling ashamed for speaking abruptly. The phone rang again; he went back and lifted the receiver on the second ring.

Before Harry could speak, the man blurted, "Mr. Ramsay, forgive my rudeness. I'm upset more than I thought."

Harry explained, "Contella knows that I'm retired. I'm leaving New Orleans this morning."

The man pleaded, “Vance told me about your plans. Please, hear me out. I’m Victor Alonzo, and I need your help. I’ll be in your debt if you’ll see me for a few minutes.”

During Harry’s years with Insurance Adjustment, Victor Alonzo had been the CEO of the conglomerate that owned the company. Harry had never met Alonzo, but he had seen the man a couple of times over the years. “Where are you, Mr. Alonzo?”

“In the Fidelity Trust Building, off Canal Street; however, I’ll meet you anywhere you say.”

Harry glanced from the hallway through the open front door to the camper. “I’m about to drive across Pontchartrain, headed down the coast. Can you meet me at the Holiday Resort Inn, on the New Orleans end of the causeway?”

“Hold while I check my transportation.” After fifteen seconds, Alonzo asked, “Do you know the utility airfield at the lake at the end of the causeway?”

“I know it.”

“To keep you from losing time, I’ll meet you at that airport. A helicopter is waiting for me on the roof heliport.”

Harry replied, “Okay, I’ll be at the airport in about forty-five minutes. I’ll be driving a green and white, over-the-cab motor home.” Harry hung up and left.

Driving through familiar streets for the last time brought a fresh flood of grief. Harry could not distinguish between the pain associated with Martha’s death and leaving New Orleans. Fortunately, concentrating on driving through Crescent City traffic allows little time for preoccupation with grief.

Forty minutes later, he was over halfway across the twenty-two-mile-long bridge, pushing the motor home to the speed limit. He usually kept the speed under fifty, for better gas mileage. Without the slightest idea of what Alonzo wanted to discuss, Harry had decided to reject any work proposal.

Looking through the windshield, he watched pelicans diving for fish in Lake Pontchartrain’s choppy, blue water. Beyond the birds, he saw a single-mast sailboat keeling into the wind, running parallel

to the bridge.

Lulled by the engine's rhythmic pounding, Harry realized that selling out and going on this trip was the culmination of his year's work with grief. Perhaps he might delay the trip a couple of days or a week, at the most.

Three miles before reaching the end of the bridge, to his right, Harry spotted a red and white helicopter, flying low and parallel to the causeway. The pilot edged closer to the bridge. A passenger in the plane, apparently Victor Alonzo, waved in the direction of Harry's camper. Harry waved back and watched the plane pull away and fly toward the airport, located on the lake's east shore.

Ten minutes later, Harry guided the camper along an access road leading to the utility field, no more than a private landing strip with a small storage building. Harry pulled onto the edge of the asphalt runway and parked. About fifty yards away, the helicopter's rotor blades drooped toward the runway.

Harry watched Alonzo walk toward the camper, swinging a briefcase in his left hand. As he drew near, sun reflected against the past-middle-aged man's shocks of black, gray-streaked hair, and his olive complexion. The two-hundred-dollar, blue serge, pinstripe suit was appropriate for a high-level business executive. Harry got out of the camper.

Alonzo extended his hand. "May we talk inside, Mr. Ramsay?"

Harry accepted the moist hand. "Sure. Call me Harry."

Victor sat at the built-in table and placed the briefcase to his left, on the seat. He pulled a copy of the newspaper from the briefcase and handed it to Harry. "Please read the marked article."

Harry read the item reporting the accidental death of Sharon Bettis, the same article that he had read twice, earlier. His stomach did a flip-flop. Without comment, he looked up and returned the paper to Victor.

Victor turned pale and stared out of the window, fighting for composure. "That girl was my daughter." He turned to Harry and swallowed. "Do you have anything to drink?"

"Nothing but beer." The camper bounced slightly as Harry got

up, walked across the floor, and opened the gas refrigerator. He brought Victor a cold can.

Victor popped the top and drank half the contents. He sat the can on the table and wrapped both hands around the cold metal. "Sharon Bettis is a fake name, and the secretarial company she worked for is a front for a call girl setup."

Harry understood about call girl setups; he watched Victor grind his teeth and flex his jaw muscles.

Victor sipped again and replaced the can on the same wet ring. "Her name is Angelia. Her mother and I divorced when Angelia was born. They lived in Chicago. About three years ago, Angelia disappeared. Her mother tried to find her through the police, and she registered Angelia's dental records with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The New Orleans police found a dentist's card in Angelia's things; the dentist's records matched the FBI's records. They notified Angelia's mother, and she called me."

Victor swallowed a surge of emotion and turned aside to hide his flushed face. After a moment, he drained the beer and pushed the can aside. "When Angelia was born, I promised her mother that I would drop out of their life; you'll understand why in a moment."

Harry listened deadpan. *Why hire a retired insurance investigator to work on the accidental death of a disappeared daughter, working as a secretary-whore?*

Victor tightened his lips and stared into Harry's eyes. "I want you to find out if someone killed Angelia for insurance."

Men suffering grief find common cause. Harry felt sympathy for Victor. He could find out in a few days if someone had killed his daughter for insurance. An impulse prompted, "Victor, are you connected to the Alonzo mob's businesses?"

Victor never flinched. Sunlight streaming through the window highlighted the gray in his black hair. "I'm the head of the Alonzo Family. We own Fidelity Trust, the company you've just retired from." Victor had answered Harry's question without really answering it.

The detective shrugged his shoulders. "Who owns Fidelity Trust made no difference to me because we were legitimate."

Victor opened his palms to show that he was hiding nothing. “Then, we understand each other.”

Harry straightened his shoulders and placed his right palm flat on the table. “I’ll find out if someone murdered your daughter on two conditions. Outside of Vance, no one else may know that I am working for you. And, under no circumstances will you or anyone in your family contact me. If I have not found the answer to your question at the end of three months, I’ll resign.”

Without hesitation, Victor glanced at the gold watch on his wrist. “I accept your conditions. Now, about your fee: At 2 p.m., today, a \$300,000 trust fund that I’ve established in your name will become effective; the trust is in a Swiss bank, untraceable to me. Interest earned from the trust will be deposited to your local bank account, which Vance secured from Fidelity Trust’s personnel records. At the end of three months, regardless of what you discover, the trust will be dissolved and the principle will be paid to your bank account. If, for any reason, you don’t survive the next three months, the trust will go to your estate.” He looked at his watch again. “At 3 p.m., Vance will deposit \$50,000 expense money in your account.”

The money did not surprise Harry; he was being paid only to try, not to succeed. “The money is good with me.”

Victor removed a brown envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to Harry. “Here’s some information about Angelia’s mother and \$5,000. The cash is for meeting me today, even if you had decided not to take the case.”

Harry opened a button on his shirt and slipped the envelope inside. In a serious tone, he asked, “Besides the possibility of insurance fraud, do know of any other reason why someone may have murdered Angelia?”

Quiet determination colored Victor’s response. “Harry, you have asked the magic question.” He leaned against the seat and placed his left hand atop the leather briefcase. “Had you not been inquisitive, perhaps, it would have indicated that you are not as skilled an investigator as Vance led me to believe or that you might take my money and skip.

“You should know that, after hearing the peculiar circumstances surrounding my concerns, had you not demonstrated a commitment to this investigation, I was prepared accidentally to leave this briefcase in your camper. A bomb inside the briefcase would have wiped you off the face of the earth. I would have found someone else for the job.”

Harry did not blink, but he knew that for a few seconds his life had been balanced against his integrity.

Victor removed his hand from the briefcase. “We both know that many reputable companies carry life insurance on their employees; it’s good business. The secretarial company Angelia worked for has already filed an insurance claim. If Angelia died accidentally, then so be it; the company deserves the insurance. However, if someone murdered her for the insurance, I want to know who.” He paused and drew a deep breath. “You asked about another reason for her death.” His tone turned to cold steel. “Someone may have killed Angelia to get at me.”

Now, Harry understood why the police could not be brought into the investigation; he also knew that he might find himself in the middle of a vendetta.

Victor stood and lifted the briefcase in his left hand, obviously ready to leave. With a quiver in his voice, he said, “Vance told me about your deceased wife and daughter. I, too, know grief. Years ago, I made a vocational choice that deprived me of my daughter and her mother. I have lived with that choice; but I did not love my daughter any less.” To hide the surge of emotion, Victor stepped out of the camper, swinging the lethal briefcase in his hand, and walked toward the plane.

Moments later, the whirling blades lifted the helicopter above the asphalt surface, and the plane swept over the top of Harry’s camper. Victor signaled thumbs up. Harry waved.

With the helicopter’s blat...blat...blat sounding in his ears, Harry climbed behind the camper’s steering wheel and started the engine. He leaned over and looked through the windshield, watching Victor’s helicopter flying over Lake Pontchartrain, climbing, and growing

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

smaller in the distance. The plane's identification numbers blurred into a single dot.

Suddenly, the helicopter exploded in an orange-red flash of fire and black smoke.

4

Out of Retirement

Harry caught his breath and grasped the truck's steering wheel. Incredible horror widened his eyes; the hair on his neck stiffened; sweat beaded on his forehead. Chunks of Victor's helicopter plunged into the lake, churning water like fish in a feeding frenzy. He scrambled outside and shaded his eyes from the bright sun; his knees quivered. A line of cars was already forming on the bridge. He decided to leave the airstrip before someone came to investigate.

Forty minutes later, as he approached Slidel, Louisiana, Harry felt nauseous. Thinking that food might settle his stomach, he pulled into a truck stop, went inside, and ordered coffee, toast, and jelly. After his stomach settled, he paid the check, walked outside to a public telephone, and placed a call to Robin, his daughter.

After four rings, Robin's soft voice answered, "Hello."

"This is Dad."

"Where are you, Daddy? We are expecting you for supper."

"I'm still in New Orleans. Some business with the company has come up. I have to delay coming to your house for a few days. I'll rent space in a RV park and live in the motorhome. I'll let you know where I'll be."

"Okay. A man named Contella called here about five minutes ago, asking for you. He left a private number."

"Contella is the CEO of my company. Give me the number. I'll

call him.”

After speaking with Robin, he dialed Contella’s number. Someone picked up the telephone on the first ring. Harry identified himself. “This is Harry Ramsay.”

“Vance Contella, Harry; we need to talk.”

“I’m across Lake Pontchartrain, in Slidel.”

“Can you come back to New Orleans? The offices will be empty after 5:30 p.m. We’ll be alone.”

Harry assumed that Contella’s apparent need for secrecy had something to do with Victor Alonzo. “I’ll be there.”

“Take the elevator to my private entrance.”

Ten years previously, Insurance Adjustment’s profit margin stuck on eleven percent. The conglomerate wanted to boost the margin by at least six points and transferred Contella to New Orleans to work on the project.

Contella reorganized Insurance Adjustment, created the position of training supervisor for insurance investigators, and offered the new position to Harry. During the interview, when Harry declined the offer, Contella asked, “Would you mind telling me why you turned down the promotion?”

With no hesitation, Harry answered, “I’ve seen men struggle to reach a step on the ladder too high for them; when they fall, they usually make the company fall a little. A company makes a poor investment when it forces an employee into a job above the employee’s capabilities or interests. I don’t want the job because I am a field investigator, and I know where on the ladder of success I want to stand.”

Contella gazed at a picture on the wall, contemplating Harry’s remarks. Fifteen seconds was like fifteen minutes. Finally, he faced Harry. “I appreciate your honesty, Harry. Employees do not often make career decisions with the company’s best interests in mind. You have a job with this company as long as you desire.”

During the drive back to New Orleans, the image of Victor

Alonzo's exploding helicopter felt like a nightmare from which Harry could not awaken. He kept trying to avoid the obvious conclusion that something had detonated the briefcase bomb Victor had brought with him to the camper. Could the plane's vibrations have caused the bomb to explode? Not likely, since the helicopter had flown to the utility airfield from the heliport on top of Victor's office building. Could a spark from the engine cause the explosion? After all, no one can predict when a stray spark might cause a bizarre accident; but a stray spark? Not likely.

Harry wiped moist palms on his trousers. He had given his word to Victor and he had accepted payment; the money-stuffed envelope inside his shirt was a like a boil about to erupt.

In New Orleans, he exited the interstate at a ramp that took him to the old Airline Highway, heading north toward Baton Rouge. Near Norco and the New Orleans International Airport, he pulled into a recreational vehicle park, about which he knew, and rented trailer space in the rear. Before doing anything else, he locked the money envelope inside a fireproof box, which he kept in the camper closet. Then, he hooked the camper to the utilities and ate a late lunch of tuna and fruit.

At 4 p.m., he strolled through Norco, a bedroom community sprawled between the RV park and the airport, and caught a street bus to the airport terminal about five miles away. At the airport, he boarded an express bus and rode to the corner of Canal Street and St. Charles Avenue, in downtown New Orleans. He walked five blocks to Insurance Adjustment's fourteen-storied building; the company occupied the top six floors and leased the rest. He strolled by the first-floor shops and main elevators and pushed the button for a private elevator. At 5:29, he knocked on the unmarked door to Vance Contella's penthouse office.

Contella's beige business suit, tan tie, and white shirt made him look younger than fifty-five. He stood a head taller than Harry; his pudgy face flushed from too much whiskey. Gray sideburns contrasted with his lamp-black hair. The squarely built man glanced up and down the hallway, as if expecting to see someone other than

Harry standing in the shadows. Although distinctly Italian, his speech showed no accent. "Come in, Harry. Thanks for coming."

Harry followed Contella into the spacious executive office, furnished with a walnut desk, leather chairs, and mosquito-net curtains covering the doublewide window. Harry sat on a leather chair in front of the desk.

Contella sat behind the desk and rested his elbows on the glass top. His dark eyes showed a depressed mood, but he spoke without a trace of emotion. "You may wonder how I learned of Victor's accident so quickly?"

Harry admitted, "I had wondered."

"New Orleans airport radar saw the helicopter vanish from the screen and investigated immediately; the controller had given Victor's pilot clearance to come back into New Orleans air space less than one minute before the plane exploded." Contella twisted uncomfortably. "Harry, Victor's death has made some changes in my position with the company, which you need to know about; that is, if you accepted Victor's proposition?"

Harry decided to keep the conversation on a formal basis. "You obviously know that Mr. Alonzo offered me a proposition, which I accepted. I'm not sure why you and I need to discuss it."

Vance drew his hands away from the desk and rested his elbows on the chair. "I understand and appreciate your caution. Since you accepted Victor's proposition, I am obligated to tell you certain things about Victor."

A muscle on the back of Harry's right hand twitched.

Contella continued, "Years ago, Victor's father sent Victor to Chicago to organize and to manage legitimate businesses in the Midwest. The family was still in the rackets in the south.

"When his father died, Victor became head of the family and reduced the family's unlawful activities and invested in legitimate business: oil, gas, insurance, real estate, and entertainment. He moved to New Orleans, even though most of the company's legitimate holdings were concentrated in the Midwest.

"Victor organized the conglomerate into corporations, controlled

by an executive committee, with Victor as the chairman. Victor's death forced the committee to meet in an emergency telephone conference this afternoon; they elected me as the new chairman. After you and I finish this meeting, I'll move the conglomerate's headquarters to Chicago. You and I are discussing these facts because I'll honor any contract Victor made with you."

Harry leaned forward. "I assume you know that Victor wanted me to find out if someone killed his daughter for insurance or to get at him. But, Mr. Contella, can you tell me if my obligation to Victor has put me in the middle of a vendetta?"

Contella narrowed his eyelids, placed both hands on the table, with palms up, as a gesture that he was hiding nothing. "I won't know the answer to your question until I learn who killed Victor. While investigating his daughter's death, will you also investigate the bombing of Victor's helicopter?"

Harry could not hide the pathos in his tone. "Victor's helicopter exploded accidentally; the bomb was meant for me."

Harry's honesty caused Contella to smile. "I know about Victor's briefcase bomb. Someone detonated another bomb with a remote control device."

Harry considered the implication of Vance's statement: had a vendetta started?

Contella's voice approached the level of a whisper. "Do you know of a man named Antonio Carbelle?"

"I've heard that he runs the rackets in Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes."

"That is correct. Carbelle and Victor were enemies, like their fathers. Some of the details of their family differences, especially from before World War II, are matters of public record. I think Carbelle may have killed Victor."

"Do you think that Carbelle killed Victor's daughter?" Harry asked.

Contella's answer indicated that he had already raised and answered that question. "I doubt it. Even Victor did not know that his daughter was in New Orleans. How could Carbelle have known?"

No, I think Victor's murder and his daughter's death are unrelated; but I need to know for certain."

"Why not use the police or the company's resources to investigate both deaths?"

Contella held up the forefinger of his right hand. "A private investigator can protect Victor's former wife from publicity and from a possible vendetta." He held up the forefinger of his left hand. "Second, my reaction to Victor's death will be calculated to relax those who bombed his plane. After a few weeks, I'm certain that the people who killed Victor will approach me with a deal of some sort; in doing so, they will show their part in Victor's death. Your investigation will put me in front of such an eventuality."

Harry had gone too far to back out; he was in the investigative hunt again, as if he had never retired. It felt good. "What will I do with what I learn?"

Contella's face was like a judge announcing a death sentence on a convicted murderer. "Give it to me. If your evidence is too weak to use the legal system, I will decide about justice."

The idea that Vance Contella would administer justice to anyone who had killed Victor Alonzo or his daughter made a shiver run down Harry's back. "How much time will you give me?"

"Whatever time you and Victor agreed upon, plus double the money he promised."

Matter-of-factly, Harry listed the terms of his contract. "Victor and I agreed on three months. I was to work incognito and make no reports until finished with the investigation. I'll work on both investigations for the same money."

Vance stood, walked from behind the desk, and extended his hand. "Then, we have a deal."

Harry stood and accepted the handshake.

"If you need to contact me, call this office and leave your name and number. From anywhere in the country, I'll return your call within fifteen minutes."

Harry started to leave, paused, and said, "I need Insurance Adjustment's telephone credit card and the access codes to a couple

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

of computer data banks.”

Vance raised his eyebrows. Good managers always know what’s happening with company resources. “Why do you want access to data banks?” He waited for an answer that did not come.

Harry’s silence implied that he did not intend to answer.

Vance blushed and reached across the desk for a note pad. “Forgive me, Harry. Write the information and where you want it delivered. You’ll have it tomorrow.”

5

Initiating the Investigation

The next morning Harry slid out of his twin bed and peeked through the motor home window. A grove of century-old, live oak trees surrounded the trailer park, and Spanish moss swayed delicately from long, undulating limbs. Three male cardinals frolicked in a sun-splashed birdbath a few yards away. Harry stretched and yawned, pleased that he'd slept the entire night without his usual trip to the bathroom. After eating a bowl of cold cereal and finishing a second cup of coffee, he dressed in brown slacks, a white shirt with a brown tie, and brown shoes. He then walked to the park's office and bought a copy of the *Times Picayune*.

The article about Victor Alonzo's helicopter crash occupied the lower right side of the front page. The report speculated that an engine malfunction had caused the plane to explode and crash into Lake Pontchartrain. Information about the pilot was meager, mentioning only his name and that he worked for Fidelity Trust. Funeral details for both men would be announced later. In the newspaper's business section, Harry found a blurb announcing that, because of the sudden death of Victor Alonzo, Vance Contella was leaving Insurance Adjustment to be the CEO of Fidelity Trust.

Harry put aside the paper and opened the envelope, which Victor Alonzo had given him the day before, and emptied the contents on the breakfast table. He found \$5,000 in \$100 bills, the bank deposit

receipt for \$50,000, and the information about the Swiss bank account. The envelope also contained the name and Chicago address of Victor's former wife. He stuffed the \$5,000 in his billfold and put everything else back in the metal box.

After packing a suitcase, the newly employed detective locked the camper and walked to the public telephone near the park manager's office; he called for a cab to take him to the airport. While waiting for the cab to arrive, he told the park manager the lie that business had called him to Atlanta for a couple of days.

The manager assured Harry that the motor home would be safe.

The cab deposited Harry at the airport terminal's main gate. With bag in hand, Harry headed toward the car rental services, where he rented a budget car; he drove to a computer store near Tulane University. He paid cash for a laptop computer, loaded with programs he needed, a printer, and two reams of paper. After locking the equipment in the car's trunk, he drove to the Canal Street Post Office and claimed an envelope.

Thirty minutes later, near Airline Highway, Harry registered at a second class motel frequented by traveling salespeople. He requested a non-smoking, ground-floor room, and registered as Sam Hardy, from Orlando, Florida. He invented a company, Computer Software Distributors, and told the clerk that he would be using the telephone for business; he paid a \$200 deposit on the room.

Harry moved his suitcase and computer equipment from the car into the motel room. After lunch in the motel's dining room, he spent the next two hours programming the computer and printer. He retrieved the envelope, which he'd collected at the Post Office, and studied the access codes and identification numbers provided by Vance Contella. The machines in Washington would have no way of knowing that a private investigator was sitting in a New Orleans motel, sucking information from their master disks with a laptop computer.

Harry wrote a program, requesting a current list of five-year-old accidental deaths and unsolved homicides, involving females between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five; and autopsy findings in cases

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

with insurance settlements in excess of \$50,000. When he keyed the computer, tiny red lights on the laptop flashed and switched control via the modem into the telephone, and opened a line to the National Registry of Crime Information in Washington. Electrical impulses streaked into the Washington computer, which in turn sent a command to Harry's screen in New Orleans: ENTER ACCESS IDENTIFICATION CODE.

Harry typed Insurance Adjustment Unlimited's code. The laptop screen cleared, and the Washington computer instructed: YOU ARE LOGGED ONTO THE NATIONAL CRIME REGISTRY. RUN YOUR PROGRAM. Harry typed a series of keystrokes. In five seconds, information scrolled across Harry's computer screen. He watched the computer store the information in predetermined files. When the Washington computer finished spitting electronic impulses into Harry's laptop, a message appeared on the screen: DO YOU NEED FURTHER INFORMATION? Harry typed: NO, BYE. The computer disconnected the telephone line, and the screen went blank.

He checked to see if his program had stored the information properly. Satisfied, he next accessed the Insurance Adjusters Information Pool, secured, and stored the requested information on the computer's hard drive. Then, he disconnected and locked everything in the rental car.

He walked away from the motel and found a public telephone. Someone could trace his computerized calls to the motel, but they could not trace a call from a public phone to his daughter. He gave Robin the location and phone number of the recreational vehicle park. After a few moments of family chitchat, Harry broke the connection and walked back to the motel. Tired, he dropped off to sleep while watching television.

The next morning, he checked out of the motel and drove back to the park and his camper. He connected the computer and printer, which printed almost fifty sheets of information gleaned from the data he had stored the day before.

A telephone directory provided the street addresses of Sharon Bettis and Crescent City Professional Secretarial Service. He noted

that the dead girl's boss, Ruby Sanders, lived at the company's address, on Napoleon Avenue. Harry drove through Audubon Park, down Magazine Street to Napoleon Avenue; he followed Napoleon until he found the Crescent City Professional Secretarial Service, a business in a white with green trim, wooden, two-story house. A wrought-iron fence surrounded the yard, and azalea bushes lined the fence.

Still driving along Napoleon, he turned right on Prytania; three blocks farther, he spotted the burned duplex where Victor's daughter had died. The crime scene changed the case from an abstract idea to a concrete reality.

Harry drove back to the camper and wrote a program that he had helped design at Insurance Adjustment; the program would tag names of crime victims, similarity and locations of crimes, categories, and beneficiaries of insurance claims. He worked late and started again the next morning; after he finished flagging the files. He wrote a timeline on a sheet of paper.

June 13th: Angelia Alonzo possibly murdered in house fire.

June 14th: Victor Alonzo murdered in airplane explosion.

June 17th: Today.

6

Mood Swings and Statistics

A squall blew across Lake Pontchartrain before dawn. Harry awoke and peered through the window near his head and watched lightning slashing through black, boiling clouds. The camper shuddered in the turbulent wind, as the storm moved north. Harry got up and, after breakfast, printed a summary of his work.

1. ACCIDENTAL DEATHS

- a. Gender: Females
- b. Age range: 18-25
- c. Time frame: 1990-1994
- d. Location: All states
- e. Rank states by largest numbers: California, Florida, New York, Texas, Illinois

2. CAUSE OF DEATH IN SETTLED CASES, DETERMINED BY AUTOPSY:

- a. 241 related to drowning
- b. 416 related to vehicle accident
- c. 96 related to smoke inhalation
- d. 211 related to massive body burns
- e. 147 related to gunshot
- f. 48 related to stabbing

- g. 169 related to drug overdose
- h. 78 related to falling
- i. 44 related to explosions
- j. 635 related to unspecified accidental causes

3. NUMBER OF CASES WITH SETTLEMENTS EXCESS OF \$50,000:
2,085.

4. NAME OF COMPANIES AS SOLE BENEFICIARY

The computer printed the names of fifty-four firms that had carried insurance on employees, with the firm as sole beneficiary, including Crescent City Professional Secretarial Services of New Orleans. Seeing the New Orleans company listed so soon after an employee's death did not surprise the detective.

While contemplating the information, the detective suddenly felt lonely, a familiar feeling that he related to the death of his wife and daughter. Memories of those loved ones lay just below the surface of his awareness. A brisk walk usually helped to abate the loneliness; while walking he could listen to his thoughts streaming into and out of awareness, to experience what William James, the psychologist, called his stream of consciousness. Harry went outside and looked east, remembering the last time he had been at this park.

When they had bought the camper, to familiarize themselves with living in a motor home, Harry and Susan explored roads around Lake Pontchartrain, looking for camping spots near the city. They drove out Airline Highway to Norco and followed a narrow, blacktop road leading east. The numerous potholes in the blacktop indicated that the parish government had abandoned the road; weeds and grass grew through cracks in the asphalt. After five miles, the road guided them to the top of a high levee, which provided a panoramic view.

On either side and behind them, trees and tall grass painted a sea of green. Far to the south, passenger jets taking off from the airport

resembled model airplanes. Down the levee in front of them, a 100-acre orchard of mature pecan trees stretched to the west shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Posted signs marked the orchard as private property. Intent on finding a turn-around spot, Harry and Susan drove the camper down the levee and followed a meandering dirt lane through the orchard to a sandy beach, which also sported posted signs. Rather than to take a chance of being charged with trespassing, they drove back to the Airline Highway and camped for a couple of days where Harry was now staying.

Intent on taking his walk, Harry followed a footpath that he and Susan had used, which circled a shallow, stump-filled lake adjacent to the park. The lake was about the size of a city block. At the back of the lake, isolated from traffic noises, Harry sat on a tree stump at the edge of the lake and watched the reflection of a single cloud float across the brackish, blue-black water. The pastoral scene encouraged the sounds of Nature to enter his ears. From the lake, a bullfrog croaked; a redheaded woodpecker drilled into the trunk of a nearby tree; a fish slapped the water and left a lingering, spreading ripple on the surface; a turtle poked his head out of the dark water, saw Harry, and sank out of sight. The sun shined; butterflies probed at flowers; bees swarmed around a knothole in fallen tree. Memories of Susan and Maria blended into a blanket of warm emotions, and mist formed in Harry's eyes. *How long will grief persist?* Again, the question pounded in his mind; the answer that he always gave himself followed: *No matter how long I live, I will remember Susan and Maria; and each time I think of them, I will experience pain, which reminds me that I'm human and alive. Life goes on.*

Dots moving on the water surface attracted his attention; he looked up and watched six buzzards sailing in the blue sky. He stood, shook off the mood, and walked toward the park. The walk and the solitude refreshed Harry. As he approached his camper, he saw the park manager.

The manager commented, "Been for a walk, have you?"

"I walked around the lake. How's fishing?"

“Fishing is good. Frozen shrimp will catch white perch. I can carry my flat-bottom boat over to the lake in my truck, if you want to use it.”

“Thanks for the offer. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Harry went inside his camper and heated a cup of coffee in the microwave. While sipping, he sat at the computer and thought about the problem of too much material; he needed to re-structure the sort program.

An hour later, surprised at the suddenness with which the printer stopped typing, Harry stared at four company names: Northwest Pacific Secretarial, California Secretarial Suppliers, Texas Secretarial Group, and Crescent City Professional Secretarial Services. The similarity of names for the secretarial companies made him wonder if the same people might own all four companies. Each of the companies had collected accidental death insurance on employees; what are the odds for that happening? Had he stumbled on an insurance scam? He jotted notes on the printout, near the company names, and shut down the computer.

Harry remembered that Vance Contella had said that Victor Alonzo’s father and Antonio Carbelle’s father had been enemies; their criminal conflicts were matters of public record. Harry needed access to those records. He drove to the New Orleans Public Library, near Lee Circle, and asked a librarian where he could find the newspaper files for the *Times Picayune*.

She pointed across the room toward another librarian, a middle-aged man, obviously Italian, talking on a telephone.

Harry went over, waited for the man to finish his telephone conversation, and asked, “Would it be possible for me to see the *Times Picayune* for between 1914 and 1980?”

In a pleasant, intending-to-help tone, the librarian answered, “The days of each year are included on a single roll of film.” The man frowned, like he wanted to ask a question. “It’ll take you a long time to read sixty-six rolls of microfilm. If you tell me what you are looking for, perhaps I can help reduce the mass of material you are trying to cover.”

Harry fabricated, "I'm a writer, researching the history of crime in Louisiana after World War I."

The man's cheek twitched. "I'll show you our subject-specific scrapbook collection." He turned away.

Harry followed him through a hallway, into a windowless room equipped with four walls of wide, floor-to-ceiling shelves. Thick, hard-backed scrapbooks, the size of a newspaper page, lay flat on the shelves.

The librarian fingered through a four-drawer, card-file, checking three-by-five cards. He slid the drawer shut and instructed, "Sit at the table. I'll bring the first scrapbook." He rolled a ladder into place, climbed three steps, and lifted a thick scrapbook from the shelf. Dust filtered into his face; he blew the dust aside, climbed back to the floor, and brought the book to Harry. "This is the first scrapbook in the crime series. The rest of the collection is on the shelves in chronological order. Replace each book as you finish. Come to the desk if you need help." The man rushed away, as if preoccupied.

The librarian's manner made Harry anxious. The detective walked through the hallway leading to the main reading room and spotted the man dialing a phone. Harry returned to the scrapbooks, wondering if he had exposed himself to danger.

The scrapbooks contained the crime information Harry needed about murder, gambling, prostitution, illegal booze, gang warfare, political graft, the labor movement along the New Orleans waterfront, the numerous crime families, prohibition, speakeasies, and smuggling of booze from Cuba. He read about the infamous Al Capone's connections in New Orleans.

Harry worked steadily, finishing one scrapbook after another. Each time he found the Alonzo and Carbelle names, he wrote meticulous notes. One scrapbook highlighted the year when the Alonzo and Carbelle patriarchs died, both within a few weeks of each other. Editors and reporters speculated about which of the families would control crime in Louisiana and how Victor Alonzo had dominated Antonio Carbelle. The detective placed an asterisk beside the name of each person mentioned with connections to the Alonzo and

Carbelle families. After six hours, he had marked thirty-three names.

He replaced the last scrapbook and went into the main library, unsuccessfully looking for the Italian librarian, to thank him. Harry had no way of knowing that the man had left work early to tell Antonio Carbelle about a writer's research into the history of crime in New Orleans.

As he drove back to the trailer park, slowed by after-work-traffic, Harry's list of names felt like a hot coal in his pocket. Victor Alonzo had said that someone might have killed his daughter to get at him. Who would gain the most from Victor Alonzo's death? From what he had read, Antonio Carbelle was the only person who might.

At the camper, Harry ate supper and spent hours creating a second database containing names of persons associated with criminal activity; their territories, arrests, convictions; their death or present status. Tomorrow, he would access the Washington computer banks again; he dreaded exposing himself electronically a second time.

The next morning, Harry telephoned a company in Atlanta, Georgia, specializing in surveillance equipment for investigative and law enforcement agencies. With no hesitation the party assured Harry that his order would be on the first plane to New Orleans, charged to Harry's long-standing account. He could pick up the equipment at International Airport anytime after 3 p.m.

Harry cleaned the camper, washed clothes, and studied his notes. At 3 p.m., he drove to the airport and pulled into the Air Express receiving dock, where he accepted shipment of an overnighter suitcase. Back at the camper, he unpacked and tested a high-tech electronic monitoring and recording system.

The detective packed the monitoring equipment, the computer, and a change of clothes in the budget car and drove to another second class motel, where he registered under another alias. Once inside the room, he set up the computer and hooked the modem into the telephone system. As he had done previously, he gained access to the National Crime Registry in Washington and requested information about thirty-three people, whose names he had abstracted from the library scrapbooks.

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

Forty minutes later, he signed off, mumbling, “That’ll be my last electronic contact with the information banks. The watchdogs may be looking for me.”

7

Surveillance Solves One Murder

As Harry surmised, the watchdogs indeed were looking.

For billing and security purposes, crime information systems automatically register all calls, information requested, account numbers, and persons accessing the data. Each information system generates a report; a supervisor initials the report and instructs a clerk to send it to managers. At any point in the chain of command, a supervisor, clerk, division manager, or a secretary can earn big bucks by diverting an unauthorized copy of the report to the organization or persons being investigated. A copy of one such report was on the way to Antonio Carbelle on Delacroix Island, a few miles from New Orleans, Louisiana. Another copy was sent to Vance Contella in Chicago.

Harry knew that it would take several days for any report to move from the initial level to the end receiver. He estimated that he had no more than one week of incognito left.

Shortly before 5 p.m., one block from his motel, he hailed a cab and instructed the driver to take him to a truck rental business, which he had located from the motel's telephone directory. He rented a delivery van with closed panels, drove back to the motel, and loaded the surveillance equipment. He dressed in a khaki shirt and trousers and donned his golf cap; the detective was about to play a long shot.

An hour after dark, Harry drove the van along Napoleon Avenue

and parked at the curb, a few yards from Crescent City Professional Secretarial Services. Traffic on Napoleon Avenue was negligible. He saw lights in the downstairs rear of the house; a car occupied the garage.

He moved to the floor behind the passenger seat, cracked open the passenger window, and pushed a tiny, directional microphone to the outside, aiming the sensitive instrument toward the second floor. The distance was about right for audio pickup. He flipped on the power and turned the knobs to filter audio frequencies except those within the human voice range.

Near 8:30 p.m., he saw the downstairs lights in the house turn off and the upstairs lights come on; he started the recorder and fine-tuned the audio amplifier.

What sounded like a woman's voice said, "Jerry, I talked with the insurance company today; we'll get the \$150,000 on Sharon in two months."

The woman's words made Harry brace his back against the truck wall. Sweat formed in his hand as he touched the recorder's volume control, making certain that he was capturing the conversation. The long shot might pay off quicker than he expected. Satisfied that the equipment was working, still listening in the headphones, he moved to his knees and glanced toward the house. The expectation of hearing someone named Jerry caused Harry almost to hold his breath.

A man's voice asked, "That's great, Ruby. Did they mention the autopsy?"

The woman responded, "Death was caused by accidental smoke inhalation."

The man laughed as if bragging, "After I put the bag filled with smoke over her head, she died pretty quick. It don't take a rocket scientist to rig an electrical spark to explode escaping natural gas. We're home free, again."

Outside in the uncomfortably warm van, a shiver spread from Harry's shoulders down his legs. He moved to ease a cramp in his leg and glanced at his tape recorder, making sure it was working, and muttered, "Mister, you just think you are home free. I have your

names, your motive, and how you killed Victor's daughter."

Something rang in Harry's thoughts. Jerry had said that they were home free again. Had this couple murdered someone else for insurance? Several secretarial companies had collected on employee life insurance, Harry remembered from his computer-generated information.

Ruby's voice sounded in the headphones, "I also talked on the telephone to Mr. Sorrenson, in Nevada. I told him we would close the New Orleans office and relocate."

"What did he say?"

"Sorrenson wants us to go to Atlanta and find some girls to export to countries in the Middle and Far East. They'll pay us \$10,000 and expenses for each girl."

Jerry answered, "That's easy money."

"We have a month to find the first five girls. Sorrenson is sending a messenger tomorrow with the details."

After a brief silence, Jerry said, "Let's drive to the French Quarter and eat a late supper?"

"Good idea; we'll go where we can hear some jazz."

The voices stopped, and the upstairs lights went off. Harry turned off the equipment, withdrew the microphone, and waited. A first-floor light flashed inside the house and the front door opened. The light shined on the man and woman.

The detective estimated Jerry to be twenty-five, six-foot tall, one-hundred-ninety pounds. Broad shoulders tapered to his waist; waves of blond hair lay back from his high forehead. Cream slacks, open-neck sport shirt, and loafers gave him the appearance of a university student.

Ruby was at least forty-five, about five-feet-seven, over 150 pounds. Underneath a loose-fitting blouse, buxom breasts bounced as she stalked across the porch; her skirt swirled about her knees. Brushed, shoulder-length, red hair framed her oval, light-skinned face; too much face color made her look like a roaring-twenties, dance hall girl.

Harry watched the couple walk toward the blue 1994 Lincoln

sedan and climb in, with Jerry driving. Harry memorized the license numbers. After the Lincoln was out of sight, he packed the equipment and drove to his motel, pondering his next step.

At mid-morning the next day, at the house on Napoleon Avenue, Jerry opened the front door for a tall, thin man, about sixty, who squinted through plastic-rimmed glasses. His morning plane ride from Atlanta had wrinkled his suit. A string tie hung around the collar of his yellow shirt. Dust covered his brown shoes. A medical bag swung from his left hand, and he spoke with a southern drawl, "I'm Dr. Merle Gardner. I represent Mr. Sorrenson."

Jerry shook hands. "I'm Jerry Dalton. Ruby is upstairs." He ushered Dalton up the steps into Ruby's informal sitting room.

Gardner shook Ruby's hand and licked his lips. From where he was standing, he could see into Ruby's bedroom, and he kept shifting his gaze to her bed, still ruffled from the night before. He sat on an overstuffed chair, across from Jerry's and Ruby's couch, and spoke in high-brow tones, "In addition to my medical practice in Atlanta, I own a farm, located a few miles from the city; the land is in timber and pasture, with a restored antebellum house and an air strip. The farm is far enough from the nearest neighbor to avoid curiosity seekers. I use the farm and house as a cover for providing medical care for girls in trouble; you know, for girls who need abortions and that sort of thing. As you collect the girls, you will bring them to farm. I'll keep them sedated until we are ready to fly them out west."

Jerry shifted his feet, and Ruby nodded.

"Each girl must be no less than twelve or thirteen and no more than seventeen years of age. Virgins are preferable, but not essential. Don't take more than one girl from Atlanta; work the surrounding towns. We'll work the Southeast for a couple of years before moving to another region." He glanced at Jerry, "You look like a stud; you may sample each girl, if you like."

Jerry beamed.

Gardner continued, "Select blondes and redheads, with light skin, unmarked by scars or acne. After you have five products, I'll pay

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

you \$50,000; my pilot will fly them to Nevada. If we are successful with the first group, we can ship three or four girls each month.”

He pulled a card and a key from his coat pocket and handed them to Ruby. “Here are my telephone numbers and the address of a furnished condo that I own. Go to Atlanta and occupy the condo; after you get settled, call me. I’ll show you the farm.” He handed Ruby an envelope. “This \$10,000 is for expenses.”

Dr. Gardner then reached for his medical bag, which he had sat on the floor to his left, and took out a pint bottle filled with capsules of clear liquid. “This is chloral hydrate. If you put one of these capsules into a girl’s soda, within seconds she will be malleable, unable to do anything or to make any kind of decision. In another five minutes, she will fall into a deep sleep, lasting ten or twelve hours. Any questions?”

Across town, Harry had returned the rented van and checked out of the motel. Now, he was driving the budget car back to his camper. Earlier that morning, he had listened to the tape of Ruby and Jerry telling about how they had murdered Victor Alonzo’s daughter. He also noted that the killers were planning to travel to Atlanta; he could find them later if necessary. Now he must concentrate on finding out who killed Victor Alonzo.

But the detective felt like something was wrong. He had covered his trail sufficiently to avoid immediate discovery. However, the Italian librarian worried him; crime families have ears everywhere; in addition, Harry had exposed himself twice by using the computer to access informational systems. He needed to play it safe; he would lay a false trail.

Upon driving into the RV park, Harry stopped at the manager’s office and told the manager that he was leaving New Orleans.

In response, the gregarious manager said, “I hoped you might stay a few more days, so we could take the boat to the lake and fish.”

“Next time I’m in New Orleans, I’ll stop here; we’ll fish then. Can you have my bill ready when I get back from returning this rental car?”

“Sure. Stop at the office when you are ready to leave.”

Harry began to lay his false trail by telling a lie. “My daughter and a business associate may call here looking for me. May I leave a message, so you can tell them where I’m headed?”

“Sure.” The manager reached for a note pad.

Harry explained, “I’ve tried to call them, but no one answered the telephones. If they contact you, tell them that I’m on my way to Denver, Colorado, following the freeway route up the Arkansas River, to Colorado Springs. If I haven’t connected with them before I arrive in Denver, I’ll call them when I get there.”

The manager finished writing the information and handed Harry a brochure. “Here’s a directory for trailer parks between here and Denver. You might like to call ahead for reservations.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied, as he left the manager’s office.

After he returned the rental car to the airport, a cab brought Harry back to the park. He disconnected the camper, paid his bill, and shook hands with the manager. He headed north on the Interstate, toward Baton Rouge. At the Hammond exit, he pulled off the Interstate, drove through town, and checked into a locally owned recreational vehicle park.

By mid-afternoon, seventy miles north of New Orleans, with his motor home hooked to the utilities, he ran another computer program, which printed the current status of each of the thirty-three names on which he had requested criminal information.

Twenty-two were dead. Victor Alonzo’s name was the last on the list of deceased persons; he had been dead only a short time, but his record was already updated. Four persons were serving life sentences in the Louisiana State Prison; two were on parole, living in Maine and Utah; four were living in Louisiana. Those four names interested Harry.

ANTONIO CARBELLE: Delicrox, Louisiana; suspected head of rackets in Jefferson and Plaquemines Parishes; no convictions.

JOSEPH VASARI: Algiers, Louisiana; suspected assassin for Carbelle Family; no convictions.

ANGELO CELLINI: Algiers, Louisiana; suspected assassin for

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

Carbelle Family; no convictions.

ROBERT FRANK: Venice, Louisiana; explosives expert; formerly employed by Carbelle Family; no convictions.

Harry leaned back in his chair and studied the list, focusing on the last name and wondering, *Victor Alonzo's helicopter exploded. Could Robert Frank have killed Victor Alonzo?*

8

The False Trail

Perhaps he was being too careful, Harry pondered.

Nevertheless, after forty years of investigating criminals trying to cheat insurance companies, the detective knew that a crime organization would do anything to avoid detection. If word leaked that he was snooping too close to the perpetrators, Harry knew that he would be in danger; he decided to arrange some personal insurance by laying a false trail.

Harry found the park manager and told him that an emergency required him to fly to Florida; he would return in two or three days.

The detective hired a taxi to carry him to the Baton Rouge Airport, a few miles west. Instead of buying tickets to Florida, he boarded the first flight to Dallas. At 4:30 p.m., he left the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport on a non-stop flight to Denver. Late that night, he registered in a motel near the Denver airport.

The next morning, he telephoned Robin, his daughter, and told her that he was in Colorado, for a three-week camping trip into the mountains. "I'll put a letter in the mail today, with my route; in an emergency, the police can find me."

Robin sensed that her father was working on a case and knew better than to inquire into his real situation. Instead, she chatted about plans for his visit to her house, when he returned from Colorado.

After his conversation with Robin, Harry went to the Colorado

Tourism Department, where a clerk helped him map a trip into the wilderness. He registered his camper license, paid the required fees, and left Robin's telephone number. Later, he wrote a letter on the motel's stationery and express mailed his fake itinerary to Robin. Should anyone come to her home looking for him, she could show them the letter and instructions. Next, Harry went to the airport and boarded a non-stop flight to Memphis, Tennessee; from Memphis, he flew to Baton Rouge. A cab took him to his camper; he had been gone forty-eight hours.

The next morning, Harry checked out of the park and started for Venice, a village about 100 miles south of New Orleans. He intended to search for one of the men on the computer-generated list of criminals living in Louisiana, a man named Robert Frank, an explosive expert.

He followed the interstate through New Orleans, crossed the newest Mississippi River bridge, and stopped at a chicken place for lunch. While eating, he remembered when he and Susan took their young daughters for Sunday drives around the New Orleans countryside. The girls enjoyed riding the Canal Street ferry to Algiers; once they had driven to Venice for an overnight visit.

The only highway to Venice runs south, parallel to the Mississippi River's west bank. He drove through Port Sulphur, a mining town, where yellow, sulphur dust stains everything. At Empire, a fishing village, the road ran up and over a bridge-lock-and-dam. The fish smell saturated the air; a dozen trawlers rode at anchor in the canal west of the locks. The narrow canal underneath the bridge provided a waterway from the river, through the marsh to the Gulf of Mexico, fifty miles away.

Farther south, the road exited Jefferson Parish and entered Plaquemines Parish, where the strip of habitable land is never more than five miles wide and borders the west side of the Mississippi River; the remainder of the parish is marsh, which spreads westward from the Mississippi into Barataria Bay and the Gulf. The sun was setting when Harry passed through Burris, another fishing village, where the asphalt road changed into a corduroy lane covered with

crushed seashells.

Twenty miles after leaving Burriss, in Venice, Harry passed two service stations, a public school, a Catholic Church, and a few houses. He registered at the only motel, a recently built facility, with twenty rooms and a café. Using the directory in his room, he found a telephone listing for Robert Frank.

The next morning after breakfast, Harry went for a walk on a seashell lane leading to the river, about two blocks east. The lane ended at the river levee. He climbed to the top of the levee and watched the wide ribbon of muddy water flowing south, washing the levee in the race to the Gulf. In the distance, the rhythmic sounds of a ship's propeller slapping the water drew Harry's attention. A twin-stack merchant ship steamed down the river, throwing a swirling wake along the water's edge.

Harry walked along the levee toward the Venice Post Office, two hundred yards away. The river breeze cooled the warm, humid air. He entered the wooden building, a single room divided by a wall of bronze mailboxes; a grill covered the service window.

A short, stout woman with thinning, sable hair peeked from behind the iron grill. "May I help you?"

Harry pushed a five-dollar bill toward her. "Yes, Ma'am. Five post cards, please."

She handed him the cards and change. "Will that be all?"

He slipped the cards into his shirt pocket. "Nothing more, thanks." He started to turn away, hesitated, and asked, "Excuse me. Did a hotel once stand across the road from here?" He pointed through the front window toward a vacant lot.

The woman glanced across the street and back at Harry. "Sure did. The '68 hurricane blew the hotel into the marsh, along with everything else. How did you know about the hotel?"

"Years ago, when I lived in New Orleans, I visited Venice with my family. We spent the night at the hotel."

"That was the Elton Hotel."

Harry cocked his head to one side, as if trying to remember something. "Do folks around here trap musk rats?"

“Rats are about gone, like the citrus trees. But we’ve still got commercial fishing, down at the Jump.”

“I don’t remember the Jump. What’s that?”

“During high water, in the last century, the river jumped through the bank and cut a canal to the Gulf; that’s why we call it the Jump. Only shrimp boats use it because it is too shallow for anything else.”

“Do I remember a place called Budwood?”

She corrected, “That’s Burrwood, in Southwest Pass. During World War II, Burrwood was a navy base, where the navy guarded against German U-boats. A mail boat went down to Burrwood and back to Venice. Everything closed after the war.”

Harry added, “I remembered buying fresh oysters in Venice.”

She explained, “In those days, fishermen lived in shacks at the Jump and sold oysters and shrimp off their boats; now, only a couple of old men live at the Jump. One is a blind, black man; the other fellow is Mr. Frank. He has lived at the Jump for as long as I can remember; he docks the *Capone* near his house.”

Harry’s right leg stiffened. “*Capone*?”

Amused by his surprise, she chuckled, “That’s the name of his boat.”

Harry turned his head aside, wondering if he had found the man he had traveled to Venice to find. “*Capone* seems like a strange name for a boat.”

She leaned on her elbows. “I suppose so; but Capone used the boat to haul rum from Cuba, you know, during prohibition. Mr. Frank drove the boat; he’s at least seventy-five or eighty, I’d say. Seems to be in good health, though; he comes to the Post Office about once a week; lives alone; spends most of his time in his house trailer with his gadgets. You’d be surprised at the radio stuff he’s got; he’s an amateur radio operator; talks all over the world, I hear.” She straightened her shoulders and frowned. “The strangest thing happened a few days ago. A couple of men came in a helicopter and carried Mr. Frank on a trip; they brought him back the next day.”

Harry stepped back from the window cage, turned, and said over his shoulder, “Time to move along. Thanks for the chat.”

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

The mail clerk waved. "Come again."

Harry walked to the motel, pondering the information about Mr. Frank, helicopters, electronics, and a boat named *Capone*.

After lunch, he drove the four miles from Venice to the Jump and stopped in a public parking lot near a deserted boat dock. Trees, thick underbrush, and wild flowers surrounded the pear-shaped bay, about the size of six football fields. Currents from the river flowed through a break in the levee, spread out in the body of the bay, and continued to the Gulf through a narrow canal. Overhanging limbs on either side of the canal created a tunnel effect.

Harry climbed out of the camper and watched another merchant ship ply up the river, headed for New Orleans. Afterward, he shaded his eyes from the sun and panned the bay. A quarter of a mile down the canal, he saw the aluminum elements of a beam antenna, extending several feet above the tree tops, undoubtedly Robert Frank's, he concluded.

He walked along the sea shell lane, looking for a way through the woods to the antenna. Out of sight of the camper, he found and followed a path through the trees and underbrush. Ferns rubbed against his legs, and sharp Palmetto leaves stabbed at his arms. Fifty yards farther, he stood on the edge of a rectangular clearing, about thirty yards wide. A house trailer sat in the middle of the clearing, and a steel antenna tower extended up the side of the house. On top of the tower, a six-element beam rocked lazily in the slight breeze.

No longer hidden by the dense undergrowth, anyone in the house could see him. He felt unprotected.

9

Joseph Vasari and Angelo Cellini

While Harry was in Venice to learn about Robert Frank, 125 miles north and east of the Mississippi River, a black Cadillac limousine sped along a dredged-up, single-lane, seashell road. Seen from the air, the road was a white line drawn across a green canvas of treeless prairie, suitable habitat for rabbits, muskrats, and snakes. The tires whipped clouds of dust, which spread a chalky film on the car's black enamel. The air conditioning thermostat called for maximum cooling.

Angelo Cellini tried to keep the automobile's front frame, cross-member from dragging against the road's high center. "I wish Antonio would blacktop this road. Just look at our dust."

Joe Vasari answered, "Yeah, but then anyone could approach Delacroix without being seen."

Still three miles away, the men spotted the only hill within their horizon's circle; from that distance Delacroix resembled a child's building block sitting on the top of a green table. Actually, the hill was a ten foot high plateau, the size of a football field. Antonio Carbelle's building contractor had dredged the plateau from the marsh and had erected the Spanish style house in the center. A four foot high, block wall surrounded the plateau, and St. Augustine grass covered ground not taken by the house and driveways. Red roof tiles, the windows, and doors came into focus as the Italians came

closer.

Angelo slowed the Cadillac and pulled up the steep grade leading to the closed, wrought iron gate.

Joe asked, "Do you have the bomb?"

Angelo eased one hand off the steering wheel to his jacket and pressed a flat box, the size of a tobacco can. "I'll find an excuse to leave you and Carbelle and plant it."

Angelo stopped the car, tapped the horn, and waited for the double, wrought iron gates to swing inward; he drove along the concrete drive to the garage and parking spaces behind the house.

They walked to the side entrance and rang the doorbell. Joe muttered, "I don't see any other cars. Carbelle must be alone."

Carbelle opened the door. He was wearing a linen, sport shirt, matching trousers, and deck shoes. His nose twitched like he smelled something unpleasant. "Joe, Angelo, come into the dining room. I just finished brunch."

The three went into a spacious dining room. Through the screened picture windows, they could see the vast, green marsh stretching away from the house. Carbelle poured three cups of coffee and motioned for Joe and Angelo to sit on his left and right. He sat at the end of the large dining table and watched them sip coffee. "How's your luck with the horses, Angelo?"

"I'm twenty percent ahead of the track."

Carbelle frowned. "In our business, we must have at least forty percent." He pushed away from the table, walked across the room, and slid open one of the screened windows. A mid-morning breeze fluttered the window curtains. A lamp table sat nearby. He opened a drawer, withdrew a business envelope, and brought it to Joe. "I asked you to come to Delacroix to compliment you on the way you took care of Victor and to give you this payment for a final hit that I have for you."

Joe slid the envelope inside his shirt and glanced at Angelo. They both had thought Victor was their last hit; they had guessed Carbelle would order them to kill Robert Frank. Acting on their suspicions, they had made plans to protect Frank and themselves. The trip to

Delacroix was part of their plan.

Carbelle returned to his chair and screwed his face into a hateful mask. "I have a cousin who works at the public library in New Orleans; he told me that some guy came to the library and looked through newspaper clippings about the old days. In addition, other sources tell me that someone from Insurance Adjustment requested information from the crime data computers in Washington about Victor, Robert, each of you, and me." Carbelle's face flushed.

He continued, "The man snooping at the library and requesting information from Washington is a retired investigator at Insurance Adjustment, named Harry Ramsay. On the afternoon after Victor's helicopter accident, one of my people saw Ramsay enter Contella's office; he's working for Contella. I want you to find Ramsay and kill him."

Angelo crossed his legs and glanced at Joe.

Joe shrugged his shoulders. He and Angelo had no choice but to agree to take the contract on Ramsay; the detective might put a kink in their plans to leave the United States for the old country. He said, "We'll take care of him."

Carbelle drained the last of his coffee. "You might find Ramsay at his daughter's home on the Mississippi coast; her address and telephone number are in the envelope." He placed his cup on the saucer; for a moment his hand appeared to shake, as if his thoughts made him nervous. "Robert Frank is senile; old age might cause him to talk to the wrong people. After you kill Ramsay, kill Robert."

Angelo abruptly stood and placed his hand on his lower abdomen, above his bladder. "Pardon me, Mr. Carbelle. I need to use the bathroom. I have a problem with my prostate; you know how it is with us old men." He forced a smile.

Carbelle pointed toward the hallway leading away from the dining room. "Third door on your left."

Joe watched Angelo leave.

Angelo went inside the bathroom and slammed the door loud enough for them to know that he'd entered the toilet. He finished urinating and removed the bomb from his jacket. He peeled away

the protective covering of a strip of double side stick tape and attached the bomb under the bottom side of the lowest shelf in the utility closet, well out of sight. He flushed the commode and left the bathroom, with the sound of the refilling toilet tank following him up the hallway. He entered the dining room and said, "That feels better."

Carbelle flashed Angelo a tolerated smile.

Joe stood and looked at Angelo. "We are ready to leave."

Outside, standing near their Cadillac, Carbelle stood between the old men. "Take care of Ramsay and Frank in no more than five days from today. Come to Delacroix when you finish. I'll have a bonus waiting; then, you are off to Sicily."

The killers climbed into the car and drove away. Clear of Delacroix, Angelo pushed the car's air conditioning to maximum. "What do you think?"

Joe twisted in the plush seat and looked at the dust cloud blocking his view of Delacroix. He turned back toward the front. "We have three problems: a man named Harry Ramsay, our friend Robert, and Carbelle."

Angelo said, "We can kill Carbelle any time; the bomb is in the linen closet."

"Good. Carbelle won't try to feed us to the alligators until after we kill Ramsay and Robert; we have at least five days to do what has to be done."

That afternoon, Angelo swung the limousine into the driveway of their Algiers duplex. Before Angelo turned off the ignition, Joe said, "Give me the envelope. I'll go inside and see what information Antonio gave us. You pick up some oysters and beer for supper."

Angelo gave him the envelope and waited for Joe to get out of the car. Joe bent over to speak through the open car door. "I'll have the table ready by the time you get back." He slammed the door and watched his lover drive away.

Joseph Vasari and Angelo Cellini were born in 1924 in Sicily, in neighboring communities, and knew each other by reputation. Both

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

men grew up in mafioso traditions; their reputations as assassins preceded them to the United States, when they immigrated at age twenty-four. Their Sicilian-American connections advised each man to sell his services in the South. During their first two years in Louisiana, Angelo and Joe met several times; their life together started as a coincidence.

Without Joe or Angelo knowing about the other, two different bosses gave each killer a contract on the same nasty, New Orleans police sergeant, who had threatened to expose the bosses for stealing from waterfront warehouses in the sergeant's district. Such threats are not permitted. By chance, Joe and Angelo planned to hit the mark on the same night.

On that fatal evening, dense fog settled over the Port of New Orleans, and mournful foghorns doled navigational warnings. Joe walked along the twelve foot wide, five mile long, wooden wharf, which opened to the river on one side and butted against metal warehouses on the other. Twenty feet below the thick, creosote timbers, the river gurgled against the round pilings supporting the wharf. Single, incandescent bulbs at each warehouse door offered poor lighting for the dark night. One block from where he expected to meet the mark, Joe began to stagger and weave like a drunk.

Earlier, Angelo had arrived at where he had decided to ambush the mark and unscrewed the light over the door. Now, he pressed his back against the cold metal of the warehouse door and shivered in the damp darkness; beyond a few steps, he could see nothing but fog. From within the gray veil, he heard the approaching policeman banging his nightstick against metal doors. A different sound, from the opposite direction, demanded Angelo's attention; a witness would complicate his plan. He pressed deeper into the shadow.

The two approaching noises converged on the wharf in front of Angelo's hiding place, and a breeze puffed a hole in the fog. A wino stumbled into Angelo's view, dangerously near the wharf's precipitous edge. Angelo recognized Joe.

The policeman bounced his stick twice against a metal door and stepped into view, rolling fog along the boardwalk with his feet. He

saw the wino, not two steps away, staggering, flaying with both arms, and cursing. The wino grappled for the blue-suited officer, like a drunk trying to keep from falling. He stumbled, and the policeman cracked Joe on the head with the nightstick.

Frozen in bewilderment, Angelo watched the policeman pull his pistol and place the barrel against Joe's nose.

The officer shouted, "You mother fucking wop. Smell lead, you shit!" He squeezed the trigger. The gun did not fire; he had forgotten to remove the safety.

During the half breath for the policeman to finger the safety, Angelo pounced like a panther and plunged an ice pick into the man's left ear and swished the handle back and forth twice, sectioning the officer's brain. The policeman went down without a sound; his arms and legs twisted decerebrately, signaling death.

Joe moaned and struggled to his knees. Blood from the split on his head flowed down his face and chin. Dazed, he recognized Angelo, who was struggling to roll the bulky, dead man to the wharf's edge. He crawled over to help.

Just before they rolled the body over the edge, Angelo took the policeman's watch and wallet and removed the cash; he threw the watch, wallet, and pistol into the river. Anyone finding the body would think that someone had killed and robbed the policeman. After they shoved the body into the river, Angelo carried Joe to his bachelor's apartment and nursed the wounded man.

Two weeks later, they rented a larger apartment in an Algiers duplex and started living together. Angelo and Joe also started working as a killing team.

As the years passed, myth claimed at least forty hits; fact claimed fewer. Although associated with the Gulf Coast underworld, neither man was ever indicted for a crime. For the twenty years before their retirement, they had worked exclusively for the Carbelle family. Now in their seventieth year, the men were agile, deadly, and monogamous lovers.

Joe had the table ready when Angelo arrived with fresh oysters

and beer. They finished supper, cleaned the kitchen, and went into the living room to watch television. Joe opened the envelope, given to them by Carbelle.

“How much is there?” Angelo asked.

“Twenty thousand. Carbelle is serious about killing Robert and the detective.” Joe lifted a slip of paper from the envelope. “Here’s the daughter’s telephone number on the coast.” He direct dialed the telephone. The line opened.

Harry Ramsay’s daughter, Robin, spoke, “Hello.”

Joe lied. “This is Michael Carwell, with your father’s former company. I need to discuss a case with Mr. Ramsay. Can you tell me where I can find him?”

“Daddy is not here, Mr. Carwell.” Robin had received Harry’s express letter from Denver. “A letter from Daddy came today. Please wait while I get it.” After a moment, Robin came back on the line. “Are you there, Mr. Carwell?”

Joe answered, “Yes, thank you.”

“Daddy wrote this letter on stationary from a Denver motel. He is taking a motor home trip into the mountains. The Colorado Parks Commission has his route and, in an emergency, the state police can locate him.” Robin gave Joe the emergency number.

Joe jotted the number on a note pad. “I appreciate your help. Would you like for me to give your father a message when I contact him?”

“Tell him that I’m expecting a visit, after his trip.”

“I’ll tell him.” Joe hung up the telephone.

Angelo saw Joe’s worried look. “You don’t seem satisfied?”

“Why would a man go to such lengths to be found?”

Angelo played the devil’s advocate. “He sounds like a man who keeps in touch with his family.”

Joe remained quiet for several minutes. “Tomorrow, we’ll call Colorado and confirm if Ramsay is actually on a trip into the mountains; then, we’ll drive to Venice and visit Robert.”

“I’m sad about Robert.”

“We won’t kill Robert, but we’ll tell him about Ramsay.”

10

Robert Frank, Explosive Expert

Harry felt like someone was watching, even though thick brush and tall trees partially hid him. He was about four miles from Venice, looking toward a mobile home resting on concrete blocks and surrounded by a patch of mowed St. Augustine grass. Brown stains streaked the mobile home's corrugated sides, dulling the original, white finish. Shades covered the four windows. Boards blocked one door to the home; a stoop protected three steps and a narrow porch leading into the other entrance. Beyond the house, Harry saw the narrow canal carrying river currents from the Jump to the Gulf.

The unmistakable squeal of a short-wave radio sounded from inside the house, causing Harry to glance at the radio antenna, which had been resting at near treetop level. The hydraulically operated tower was extruding itself and the beam antenna higher; when the tower finished lifting the beam to about sixty feet above the ground, it stopped and slowly rotated to the southwest.

A man's voice called from inside the house, "CQ, CQ, CQ. THIS IS WHISKEY ALPHA FIVE KELO TANGO X-RAY."

Immediately, a Spanish sounding voice responded from the static of short-wave reception, "WA5KTX, THIS IS XE1KW. GO AHEAD, OLD MAN."

From the house, Harry heard, "XE1KW, THIS IS WA5KTX. THE HANDLE IS ROBERT. QTH IS VENICE, LOUISIANA, 150 MILES

SOUTH OF NEW ORLEANS. HOW COPY?"

Again, Harry heard a Spanish voice, "GOOD AFTERNOON, ROBERT. YOUR SIGNAL IS 579, ARMCHAIR COPY. MY HANDLE IS CARLOS. QTH IS THIRTY MILES WEST OF MEXICO CITY—"

The signal volume from Mexico weakened too much for Harry to hear clearly. Intent on trying to hear the radio conversation, the detective did not notice the trailer door open slightly.

Suddenly, the door swung wide open, and a stalwart man stepped onto the porch and glared at Harry. His sun-browed skin contrasted with his denim shirt and matching jeans. A ridge of wispy, white hair ringed his bald head. He waved and called out, "Stranger, you better come inside away from the mosquitoes!"

Up to that moment, Harry had tried to ignore the pesky stings; but now, as if given an attack signal, dozens of buzzing insects filled the air around Harry's head, each intent on drilling a new hole in his skin. He trotted across the yard, darted up the steps, and entered a combination kitchen, dining, and living room.

The man slammed the door and held out his hand. "I'm Robert Frank. What can I do for you?"

Harry accepted the warm hand. "My name is Harry Ramsay, Mr. Frank. The lady at the Post Office told me where to find you."

He chuckled, "You mean Mrs. Busy Body." He motioned toward the radio room and muffled sounds of the Spanish voice. "Let me finish talking with this Mexican ham." He pointed to the refrigerator near the back door. "Help yourself to a beer and come into the radio shack." He walked into the other room.

"Thanks," Harry said. He opened the refrigerator, took out a can of beer, and popped the top. Through a window near the rear door, he saw the Jump canal and a boathouse, thirty yards away. He sipped beer and glanced around the room. Dishes were washed and stacked; a kitchen table with four chairs sat a few steps from the stove; a television console occupied one corner; a platform rocker sat in front of the television; books lined wall shelves.

Harry sipped beer again and stepped to the entrance of the radio

room. He saw the window near the radio console and knew how Robert Frank had seen him across the yard. What he thought was a shade was one-way window glass.

Robert Frank sat with his back to Harry, working the controls of a console.

Harry surveyed the room. A workbench stood against the wall to the left of the radio station; equipment included an oscilloscope, audio and radio frequency generators, volt and current meters, soldering irons, and holding devices. Everything had a place and everything was in place. Apparently, Robert Frank was a perfectionist. Beyond the workbench, additional shelves held more electronic equipment; two metal cabinets with closed doors sat at the end of the shelves. The bathroom and bedroom were adjacent to the radio room.

The Mexican ham operator stopped transmitting, and Robert Frank pressed the transmit bar on the chrome microphone. "Carlos, a guest has come into the shack, and I need to shut down the station. Let's make contact another time. Thanks for the QSO and 73. XE1KW, this is WA5KTX. QRT."

Robert flipped off the transmitter and receiver and threw another switch to lower the antenna. When satisfied that the antenna was down and locked in place, he turned to Harry and explained, "Once I forgot and left the antenna up. A squall tied the beam into knots." He pushed out of the captain's swivel chair. "Let's go into the other room, Mr. Ramsay."

Harry followed, still holding his beer can.

In the living room, Frank pointed toward the platform rocker, indicating where Harry was to sit. He got another beer from the refrigerator, popped the top, and pulled a chair from under the kitchen table for himself. "He sat the can on the table. "You look familiar, Mr. Ramsay. Have we met?"

"No, sir, not that I remember."

Robert continued looking at Harry, squinted a wrinkle into his forehead. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute." He bolted across the room to a bookshelf and pulled down a scrapbook,

thicker than a mail-order catalogue, and thumbed the pages. "Here it is." He returned to Harry's chair. "I knew I'd seen you before; you are Harry Ramsay, the racehorse jockey. Where in the hell have you been all these years?" He handed the scrapbook to Harry.

Confused, Harry stared at the page, as the picture stimulated decades old memories. The photo showed Harry sitting on a horse in the winner's circle at the New Orleans racetrack.

Sensing nostalgia in his visitor, Robert silently waited.

Harry swallowed two gulps of beer and returned the can to the wet ring on the table. "I haven't seen these pictures in years." He handed the book to Robert.

"You won me \$400 at the track that day. I would never forget a man who won me that much money." He returned the book to the shelf. "I never heard of you again. What happened?"

"My hormones kicked in and grew me too tall and too heavy to race. I was an exercise jockey for awhile; then, I married and went into the insurance business."

Robert's tone changed from sprightly to wistful. "Getting married changes a lot of things." He looked across the room, seeing nothing but images from the past. "I was married once; my wife drowned. We were sailing from Cuba when a squall hit and a wave swept her overboard. I'll remember that night as long as I live." Robert shook off his preoccupation. "What brings you to Venice, Mr. Ramsay. Can I call you Harry? Call me Robert or Frank. I'll answer to either."

Harry fabricated, "I retired after my wife died and decided to write a novel about New Orleans during prohibition." For a fraction of a second, he thought Robert's gray eyes flickered. "I went to the public library and looked in back issues of the newspapers and found information about prohibition in Jefferson and Orleans Parishes. The name Robert Frank is in some of the stories about transporting booze from Cuba. On a hunch, I found the name in a regional telephone directory and came to Venice to check it out. If you're the man in the articles, I'd be grateful if you'd let me interview you for my book."

For as long as it took to drain the last of his beer, Robert said nothing. Finally, he lowered the can and looked into Harry's eyes.

Instead of denying his past, he admitted, "I'm the man you read about. I've been out of the rackets since the end of prohibition. I worked as an explosives technician in the oil fields after I retired, fifteen years ago."

Harry noticed a twitching muscle under Robert's right eye.

"I sailed booze from Cuba to New Orleans. My wife drowned on one of my trips." He looked out of the window, as if reliving a memory. "I doubt if I can give you details more than what you found in the papers, but I'm willing to answer questions." Before Harry could respond, Robert straightened his shoulders. His eyes sparkled with elation. "I have a suggestion. The *Capone* needs some exercise. Come with me tomorrow, and we'll take her down river." He saw the question on Harry's face and explained, "*Capone* is the boat I used to make the Cuban run; she's a good vessel, just old like me. I keep her repaired and take her out every week or so. The trip might help your story. Interested?"

Harry leaned forward. "I certainly am interested."

"Are you staying at the motel?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tomorrow at dawn, I'll bring the boat through the Jump into the river and meet you at the boat dock, across the levee from the Post Office. You won't have any trouble finding the dock; just follow the path leading up and over the levee. How much time will you have, tomorrow?"

"As much time as we need."

"We'll go down the east side of the river and take the South Pass to the Gulf. We'll sail westward in the Gulf and come back into the river through the Southwest Pass, to Burrwood. We'll get back to Venice about midnight."

"I'll pay for your time and expenses."

"No, I was planning a trip anyway."

11

The *Capone* Sinks

Why would an ex-mobster, ex-rum-runner, suspected maker of assassination bombs offer to take a stranger on a boat trip to talk about his life of crime?

Long after midnight, Harry finally arrived at two possible answers to the troubling question. Either Robert Frank would try to kill him, or the old man had accepted Harry's lie at face value and genuinely wanted to help Harry write about New Orleans crime.

Harry was confident that he could protect himself from the old man if necessary. More troubling, however, Harry had grown overwhelmingly fond of Robert Frank, a strange fondness especially in view of the brief time they were together. This was one of the few times in Harry's career when he formed an emotional attachment to a person under investigation. Harry stopped trying to understand his affinity for Robert and just accepted it, which meant of course, he would have to stay alert in case the old man had murder on his mind.

A half-hour before dawn, Harry dressed in a khaki shirt, matching pants, and his golf cap. He skipped breakfast because the café was not open; no one saw him leave the motel. A languishing moon and glistening stars lighted the road to the levee and the path Robert had told him to follow.

He climbed to the top of the levee. A widening ribbon of light blue sky wedged the night above the eastern horizon and spread dawn

across the river.

At the bottom of the levee, Harry saw the *Capone*, tied fore and aft to a floating dock. The current kept her moorings tight and leaned her slightly upriver. A cool breeze filtered through the willow trees. He walked down the levee and stopped at a narrow gangplank reaching from the levee to the dock. A flock of seagulls flashed across his view and dipped toward the water. Nearby, four preening pelicans rested on the tops of creosote pilings, which protruded ten feet above the river's surface. In the growing light, the river's east bank was a black pencil mark on the horizon. The middle of the river created the illusion of a solid mass of flat, brown water. A few yards from where Harry stood, clusters of foam, spinning in deepening whirlpools, reminded Harry that the current was flowing fast. He crossed the gangplank and the dock and stood near the *Capone*.

She had a round hull constructed of wooden strips of shiplap siding. The covered bow deck was large enough for one man to stand; a bronze cleat protruded from the bow's center. The cabin's glass window, at the bow, was closed. The cabin started at the bow deck and covered almost the entire hull. A foot wide walk, on each side of the cabin, reached fore and aft; stainless steel rods extended the length of each side of the cabin roof and provided handholds. The cabin ended at the stern deck, where several people could stand.

Harry estimated the boat's length to be about thirty feet and about twelve feet across at mid-ships. He stepped onto the stern deck. An oil spill in one corner of the deck made a dark stain in the varnished wood. The deck wheel and engine controls were mounted on the cabin's starboard stern.

Harry expected to find Robert inside the cabin. He opened the narrow door and, stooping slightly, stumbled down three steps into the deserted cabin. The air smelled of gasoline and exhaust fumes. In near darkness, he saw the eight-cylinder, marine engine; the muffler and exhaust extended through the cabin roof. A bench lined one wall of the cabin. The boat had cargo space for at least twenty-four whiskey barrels. More cautious than when he entered the cabin, Harry climbed the steps to the stern deck.

Pausing, he listened to the mingled sounds of the gurgling water and a person whistling, approaching.

Robert Frank walked down the levee and bounced across the gangplank. He was wearing the same jeans and shirt of the day before, but a gold-braided Captain's cap now perched on his head. "Good morning, Harry. Ready to go?"

"I'm ready." Harry felt his hand shake slightly. The man's friendliness from the day before seemed amplified, but the detective resolved to stay alert. Harry reminded himself that in a moment of distraction, the old man could simply shove him overboard. With no witness to the contrary, no one would question an accidental drowning on the Mississippi River.

Robert walked past Harry. "I stopped at the Post Office to check my mailbox." Whistling, he opened the bilge to let accumulated gasoline fumes escape.

Harry waited on the stern deck and tried to evaluate his growing anxiety. He had known Robert Frank for less than twenty-four hours; yet, he felt like he had known the man for years. Was Robert planning to take him into the Gulf of Mexico and feed him to the sharks? He had come to Venice to find a smuggler and a gangster; instead, he had found a grandfatherly man keeping memories alive. He had embarked on a search for someone who may have murdered Victor Alonzo and a helicopter pilot; he had found a retired explosive technician with a hobby in amateur radio.

Robert went forward, stepping along the starboard foot walk and holding to the safety rod on top of the cabin; he untied the bowline and lay the coiled line on the deck. While there, he opened the cabin window. The bow drifted away from the dock. Robert returned to the wheel and started the engine. The muffler dampened the motor noise to below a conversational level. Robert cast off the stern line and headed the *Capone* down river.

Harry stood at Robert's elbow. "She's a fine boat, Robert."

Robert caressed the wheel. "She is, for a fact; this is her third engine." He pointed toward a school of porpoises swimming parallel to the boat, diving in and out of the water.

The levees on either side of the river were now narrow strips of land, only a few feet higher than the river's surface. Ten miles farther, the river divided into three channels. Robert pointed to a shack down river. "That's Pilot Town, where ships take on and put off pilots. You can see the shuttle skiff."

From what Harry saw, Pilot Town consisted of no more than three shacks on stilts. He saw a skiff racing from the Pilot Town dock, headed for mid-river.

The blast of a ship's horn startled Harry; he turned and saw a freighter, flying a Brazilian flag. The ship slowed and the pilot shuttle came alongside a loading platform suspended over the side by the ship's hoist. When the shuttle matched the ship's speed, the pilot jumped from the ship to the shuttle; the shuttle broke away from the ship and sped back to Pilot Town.

Harry was so intent on watching the pilot transfer off the Brazilian ship that he did not hear the ship's approaching wake. Without warning, the *Capone* lurched and rolled. Harry grabbed the aft rail to keep from pitching onto the deck. The river disgorged debris and tree limbs in each succeeding wave; seconds later, the river returned to normal, and the *Capone* stabilized.

Robert laughed. "Sorry about that. I forgot to tell you about the wash from ships. I'm always concerned that a submerged tree will torpedo the *Capone*." Robert turned the boat closer to the bank and pointed to the mouth of a canal, which meandered into the marsh and disappeared. "This is Northeast Pass, too shallow for the ships. "This is the route I took when I ran rum from Cuba."

A couple of miles beyond Pilot Town, Robert headed the *Capone* into another canal; he explained, "This is South Pass; it will take us to the Gulf, at Port Eades, about ten miles down river. There's nothing at Port Eades; it's just a name. We'll sail west in the Gulf for a couple of hours, to Southwest Pass. That's where we'll come back into the river and head to Venice."

They plied in the Gulf for two hours, with Port Eades behind them. Time lost meaning for Harry; he enjoyed listening to Robert's stories about his contraband trips to Cuba. He noticed that Robert

avoided using names of people. An hour before sunset, they entered Southwest Pass, marked by mud banks no higher than several feet above the water's surface. Pushing against the Mississippi's current slowed the *Capone*. After an hour, the mud banks grew more pronounced, but Harry could still see the Gulf, shimmering to the horizons.

Robert pointed to the east bank, to a dilapidated shack built on stilts and surrounded by creosote pilings sticking out of the water. "This is Burrwood. We'll stop here for a spell."

He pulled up to a piling, secured the bowline, and turned off the motor. The boat drifted in the current. The sudden cessation of motor noise amplified the natural sounds. Four sea gulls perched on other pilings, and a row of turtles slipped off a log and splashed into the muddy water. A brown snake undulated away from the boat. They were still fifty yards from the disintegrating building. Robert explained, "Burrwood's been deserted for years. During World War II, a naval attachment protected the river from German U-Boats."

After Robert opened the bilge to keep gasoline fumes from accumulating, he removed a large umbrella from a storage compartment and fit the handle into a rod-holding device. The raised umbrella spread a shade over the stern deck, and a breeze cooled them. From another compartment, he brought out deck chairs, fresh water, and sandwiches. "Let's eat and watch the sunset." The luminous, red ball rested on the Gulf's flat surface and painted a shimmering rainbow on the bluish water.

Harry munched a ham and cheese on rye and wondered about Robert's quiet preoccupation, like he was in mourning.

Robert broke the funereal silence, "Over there," he pointed southwest, "is where I lost my wife."

Harry looked toward the sunset and almost whispered, "Coming here helps you think about her."

Robert gazed across the water, seeing memories. "She had golden hair and green eyes.... We were on our way from Cuba, about this time of day. I felt the wind change, but I never thought we were in trouble. Squalls happen that way sometimes. She was standing behind

me at the wheel, leaning against the rail. The waves rolled over us; one knocked me down and swept her overboard. I didn't know she was gone; if she cried for help, I didn't hear her."

In the following silence, clouds floated across the last of the sun's red circumference, and pastel colors on the water faded to gray. Night approached.

Pathos filled Robert's voice as he sadly said, "I looked for her until I nearly ran out of fuel. The Coast Guard and I searched for a week. We never found her."

Harry softly responded, "She's been dead a long time."

After a pause, Robert muttered, "Yes, a long, long time." Several minutes passed. As if to shake off the painful mood, Robert popped the top on two beer cans and handed one to Harry. "Well, do you have anything you can use in your novel?"

"Yes, even a romance angle; but I won't use it if you wish."

"Use whatever you can. What else would you like to know?" Hesitating, Harry asked, "How did you make a living after you gave up the trips to Cuba?"

Robert frowned, but answered, "I combined my radio hobby with my understanding of explosives and made radio controlled explosive devices. Oil companies used my inventions for shooting wells and extinguishing oil fires. My little bombs are obsolete, now; but in their day, they were good enough for me to make a comfortable living."

Harry gazed at the last light in the western sky. *Robert was in the rackets; he's an expert in explosives and electronics; he could have been the bomber in Victor Alonzo's murder.*

Robert stood and closed the hatch over the bilge. "We'd better head back." He started the engine and cast off the bowline. "It'll be midnight by the time we get to Venice."

Three merchant ships passed them within an hour. The *Capone* heaved and rolled with each convulsing wake. Clouds moved in from the Gulf, and a brisk wind blew across the night-shrouded river. Westward, miles away in the Gulf, oil field flares were like sulfur matches glowing inside a deep cave.

Harry felt safe with Robert. He sat on the deck, with his back to the rail, watching Robert guide the *Capone* by following navigation lights spaced a mile apart along the riverbank.

Robert noticed Harry nodding against the bulkhead. "Why not go into the cabin and stretch out on the bench? You'll find a pillow in the cabin locker. I'll call you when we get to Venice." He aimed the bow toward a speck of light on the west bank, four miles upriver.

Harry was glad for the opportunity to stretch out, even if on a hard bench. He waved from the cabin door and stepped down the three steps. The red ceiling light cast shadows on the engine and cabin walls. He found a pillow and lay on his back on the cabin bench, listening to the throbbing engine.

An hour later, a violent jolt interrupted Harry's dream about a monstrous, black bull butting a barn door. He heard Robert shouting. "Harry! Harry! Come on deck quick! We hit a log!"

Harry swung his feet to the cabin floor and tried to stand in water gushing through the boat's bow with the full force of a fire fighter's hose. The stream of cold, muddy water knocked him off balance and threw him against a bulkhead. He reached up and grabbed at a life jacket in the ceiling rack, but missed. The cascading water was now hip deep. The submerged engine choked and died. The ceiling light flickered, but stayed on, still drawing current from the battery.

From the deck, Robert screamed instructions, "Harry, go out the cabin window! Get to the bow!"

Harry grabbed a ceiling brace and climbed hand-over-hand above the flooding water; he reached the window, swung his feet and legs, and scrambled outside.

The moon and stars cast a night glow on the river. On hands and knees, he grabbed the bow cleat to keep from pitching off the boat. The boat listed to a near vertical plane, with only the bow deck and cabin roof above water. The red glow from the cabin light blinked twice and went out.

Robert was crouching on the cabin roof, above Harry, holding to the safety rail with one hand and gesturing with the other, shouting, "We're drifting close to the bank! Jump!"

Harry glanced toward the bank, ten yards away, and sprang feet-first into the swift current. The cold, muddy water made him gasp for breath. Using his hands and feet to stay afloat, he let the current carry him; when his feet touched the bottom, he sloshed up the bank. Safe, standing in knee-deep water, he turned, expecting to see Robert following; instead, he saw the boat drifting down river, with Robert kneeling, holding to the *Capone's* bow cleat. Harry hollered, "Jump, Robert! Jump!"

Robert screamed, incredibly, "I can't swim!"

Harry stumbled along the riverbank, clawing over roots and water-soaked logs, keeping pace with the drifting, sinking boat. Although he wanted to try, he realized that he could not swim fast enough to reach the boat before she would drift away. In the dim light, he saw Robert, still crouching on the boat's bow, coiling the bowline.

"Throw the line, Robert!"

Kneeling on the slippery bow, as if danger did not exist, Robert swung the line like a lasso.

Harry caught the line and snagged a loop around a tree root. The drifting boat took out the slack, and the line snapped taut; the current swung the boat to the bank.

Robert lay across the bow to keep from falling into the river. When the propeller struck the mud bottom, the boat shuttered and stopped drifting. The *Capone* was aground; only the tip of her bow was above the water. She would hold if the line did not break or if the current did not suck it free of the sticky bottom. Robert grasped the line, slid into the river, and started to hand-walk to safety.

Harry held to the line and waded toward Robert.

Two yards from the boat, Robert stopped and shouted, "Stay there, Harry! I need to catch my breath!"

Harry backed up to reduce stress on the line. Then, he saw a freighter plowing down river, throwing a wake as high as a house. Harry pointed. "Robert, a wake is coming!"

Robert started hand-walking the lifeline again. The current jerked at his soaked clothes and extended body. Still only halfway to safety, his left hand slipped off the line, and his arm floated uselessly. His

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

right hand locked on the line. His prone body thrashed in the current like a snagged fish. The man's face twisted into a grotesque mask and foam bubbled from his lips.

Harry grabbed the line and pulled himself into the water toward Robert. The line sagged deeper with the weight of two men. Still four feet from Robert, Harry heard a noise like an approaching locomotive; the first wave of the ship's wake hit. Harry swung his legs, trying unsuccessfully to catch Robert in a scissors hold.

The wake rolled the *Capone*, snapped the line, and hurled Harry against the bank, knocking him unconscious.

Thirty minutes later, Harry opened his eyes to a yellow moon shining in his face. Dazed, he realized what had happened. When his head stopped swimming and the pounding in his head diminished. He staggered to his feet and looked around.

Robert and the boat were gone.

12

Resolving the Robert Frank Matter

Robert Frank was dead. Of that fact, Harry was certain.

Harry's waterproof watch indicated 12:10 a.m. He looked upriver and saw the steady glow of electric lights, at least three miles away. For a moment, he contemplated his situation. He was on the west bank of the river; he could walk to Venice. If the accident had occurred on the east bank or at a greater distance from the shore, Harry may have drowned also.

He started walking toward the lights. His shoes slogged and water dripped from his clothes; he had lost his cap when he jumped off the *Capone* into the river.

After thirty minutes, guided by moonlight, he turned away from the river into the shadows of the dry swamp forest, where palmetto plants and tall, thick weeds plucked at his wet clothes. He found and followed a hunter's all-terrain-vehicle trail, still meandering northward.

Steady walking brought him to the south bank of the Jump canal. He would have to swim across the canal—at least 100 yards—to reach the road to Venice. To his left, he could see Robert's mobile home and radio tower; eastward, the wide mouth of the Jump Canal opened into the Mississippi River. Harry broke a twig and watched it float toward Robert's house. Swimming against the current would be impossible; he would have to go with the flow.

He found a fallen limb and dragged it to the canal and pushed it into the current. He slid into the water and, using the limb for buoyancy, guided the limb with his feet and soon landed on the canal's north bank, about fifty yards below Robert's house. He climbed out of the water and slogged to the rear of the mobile home; water had stopped dripping from his clothes by the time he reached the back door to Robert's house.

Harry intended to search Robert's home for evidence that might connect the dead man to the bombing of Victor Alonzo's helicopter. Breaking and entering a private residence is a crime; with Robert dead, how else could he look for evidence?

The unlocked door did not surprise Harry. He went through the living room, into the radio shack, and pulled down the window shade before turning on a ceiling light. Next, he opened the metal cabinets at the end of Robert's workbench. Seeing two pounds of clearly labeled plastic explosives caused him to step back and whistle quietly. One pound of the putty-like, nitro-cellulose could destroy a large house. The cabinet also held screws, bolts, boxes, and electronic components.

In the second cabinet, he found cardboard boxes, each the size of a shoebox, which contained switches, wire, power packs, miniature receivers, matching transmitters, circuit boards, and related modular components. Six boxes stacked on the bottom shelf held completed bombs. Harry placed one of the boxes on the workbench under a light, removed the lid, and studied the bomb with the eyes of an experienced investigator.

Electrician's tape bound one pound of nitro-cellulose to a crystal-controlled, single frequency receiver, no larger than a pack of cigarettes. Metal clips held four, miniature batteries wired in series. Wires connected the receiver to a micro-switch. Another set of wires completed the electrical circuit between the battery pack, the receiver, the switch, and the explosive. When activated by a radio signal, the switch would close and send an electrical charge into the plastic, detonating the bomb.

In addition, also the size of a package of cigarettes, Harry

identified the crystal-controlled transmitter, with a battery pack of its own, equipped with an externally mounted micro-switch. He examined the frequency numbers stamped on the aluminum case of each crystal. The crystals were tuned to the same restricted, ultra high frequency; the use of low power and line-of-sight frequencies prevented any accidental detonation of the bombs.

Harry had not anticipated finding such strong circumstantial evidence that Robert was a bomber; neither had he expected to feel responsible for Robert's death. If he had not lied about being a writer, Robert would not have invited him to make the trip on the *Capone*. Harry wiped away a bead of sweat from his forehead and made a series of decisions.

He would tell Vance Contella about the bombs Robert made, presumably to kill Victor. Contella could draw his own conclusions as to whether or not Robert was the bomber.

However, Harry felt no obligation to tell the police about the bombs and his suspicion that Robert might have made the bombs that killed Victor. With him dead, finding Robert guilty of murder and punishing him would be a mute question.

More urgently, Harry decided to neutralize the remaining explosives to prevent someone from accidentally setting off the plastic in Robert's house, especially some police officer coming to investigate Robert's disappearance.

Harry's thoughts raced. Exploding the bombs would be the best way to neutralize the explosives. Obviously, such an explosion would destroy the house and everything within fifty yards. The house sat in an isolated spot in the woods, over two miles from any structure, and no one would be in the vicinity of Robert's house at such an early hour. The authorities might assume that the plastic grew unstable and exploded.

Harry wanted to avoid any association with Robert's death; he needed to complete his investigations without sharing his information with the police. Legally, he should report to the police; he could rationalize away any necessity to abide by that aspect of the law.

A complication occurred to Harry: Someone surely would find

the wrecked *Capone* and report the accident. Robert had stopped at the Post Office before the boat left Venice. Just in case the dead man had mentioned Harry to anyone, Harry could say that the hike back to Venice exhausted him and that, when he got to the motel, he fell asleep before reporting the drowning; he could say that he had no knowledge of how Robert's house exploded.

To make certain that he understood how the bomb operated, Harry disconnected the wire to the plastic, making the bomb inoperative. He turned on the receiver and the transmitter and pressed the transmit button. A spark jumped across the relay contacts of the mercury switch.

He disconnected the power pack and reconnected the plastic to the receiver. He left the receiver on and went into the kitchen to find a plastic garbage bag. Such a large amount of explosives would expand the damage area to an unacceptable limit. Later, he would find a way to destroy the remaining explosives. He loaded four of the boxed bombs and the extra transmitter into the bag, plus a roll of electrician's tape. He turned out the light and left, taking the bombs with him.

At 4 a.m., he approached the Venice Motel and walked in the shadows around several automobiles. His over-the-cab camper sat nearby, dripping with recently formed dew. He slipped into his room, went into the bathroom, and turned on the light. He placed the sack of bombs on the floor and lifted out the extra transmitter, the trigger to the bomb resting on the workbench in Robert's mobile home. His hands shook. He cradled the transmitter in his left hand, turned off the bathroom light, and went into the bedroom. Cautiously, he opened the door and leaned his head outside, to see if other guests were stirring. All rooms were dark. The moon hung low in the west, and a morning breeze rustled his hair. He faced south, pictured the bomb sitting on Robert's workbench, and pushed the transmitter's micro-switch with his left forefinger.

Beyond the trees south of the motel, a brilliant flash filled the sky, followed by two thunderous explosions. The motel shook and the windows rattled. Startled by the intensity of the blast, Harry closed

the door and peeked between the window blinds. People wearing sleeping clothes came outside their rooms and watched reflections of the fire in the sky. Moments later, a fire engine whizzed past the motel, red lights flashing and siren wailing. He went into his bathroom, bathed, and went to bed.

Harry slept until almost 11 a.m. After shaving, he stuffed his soiled clothes and shoes into the bag with the bombs and dressed in a fresh suit of khakis and another pair of shoes.

A knock on the door and a woman calling startled him, "Maid. Can I clean the room?"

Harry opened the door to a middle-aged, black woman dressed in a blue uniform. "Come in." He picked up the garbage bag. "I'll carry this laundry to my camper on the way to the café. I'll be checking out after lunch." At the door, he paused. "Did I dream it or was there an explosion during the night?"

She rolled a bed sheet into a ball. "There was an explosion and fire. Too bad about Mr. Frank."

Harry tried to act surprised. "Who is Mr. Frank?"

"An old man who lived at the Jump. His house blew up."

"I didn't dream the explosion then."

"No, sir. Everybody knows Mr. Frank worked with explosives and kept it in his house. I heard the sheriff say that some of it turned unstable and went off by itself. But Mr. Frank was not at home because he drowned."

Harry stiffened. "Drowned?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Frank has a boat, which he took out yesterday, like he does every week or so. This morning, a shrimp fishermen found the *Capone* stuck on a mud bank across the river from Pilot Town, with a big hole in the bow; probably hit a log. They didn't find Mr. Frank. The sheriff thinks he washed out to sea, like his wife, years ago. The lady at the Post Office saw him check his mail yesterday morning. She says that Mr. Frank was alone. Did you say that you'll be checking out?"

"Yes, I'll leave after lunch." Harry went to his camper and stored the bombs inside the closet with the computer equipment. At the

café, he ordered the lunch special with coffee. Two customers at a nearby table talked loud enough for Harry to hear.

One man said, "There was nothing left but twisted metal from Robert's radio tower. I was at the Post Office and heard the sheriff talking to a couple of his friends, who came into town yesterday looking for him. When they learned Robert was on the boat, they checked into the motel to wait till he got back. They learned about his accident after the explosion, this morning. I heard them tell the sheriff that Robert had no relatives and that they'll have a funeral for him in Algiers." The speaker was facing the entrance and noticed a tall man, dressed in a dark suit, enter the café. A short man, similarly dressed, followed. The local man leaned to his friend, as if telling a secret. "Here come Robert's friends."

Harry raised his coffee cup to his lips and watched. The pair stood at the dining room door, hesitating, as if trying to decide whether or not to eat. The tall man looked at his companion, shrugged, and walked out. The short man followed. Through the window, Harry watched them drive away in a black Cadillac. He finished eating, checked out of the motel, and started for New Orleans.

Harry's job was over; he would report to Vance Contella that Robert had killed Victor Alonzo and that the couple at the New Orleans secretarial agency had killed Victor's daughter for insurance. He clasped and unclasped the steering wheel, trying to understand why he felt like he was about to step on a rattlesnake.

He reviewed his movements for the last four days. Laying a false trail in Colorado did not make him anxious. Committing four crimes—by not reporting Robert's drowning, by breaking into his house, by stealing his bombs, and by blowing up his home—did not make him anxious. What, then?

Harry drove across the Mississippi River bridge in New Orleans and continued through town to the Chef Menteur Highway. He checked into a motel, near a shopping mall. After eating supper in a cafeteria, he went to a public telephone and dialed Vance Contella's special number.

A woman answered, "State your business, please."

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

“This is Harry Ramsay. I wish to speak with Mr. Contella.”

“Oh, yes. Give me a number where you can be reached in fifteen minutes, Mr. Ramsay.”

Harry gave her the telephone number and hung up. When the telephone rang, he lifted the receiver. “This is Harry Ramsay.”

Vance Contella said, “I’m glad to hear from you, Harry.”

“I am ready to report.”

“Can you be in Memphis by 6 p.m. tomorrow?”

“Yes,” the detective replied.

“A room will be waiting for you at the Peabody Hotel. My car will pick you up at the front entrance at 6:30.”

The phone disconnected. Harry returned to the motel, called the airport, and made a reservation on a flight to Memphis.

13

Multiple Bombing Murders

In their Algiers duplex, Angelo Cellini propped his elbows on the breakfast table and sipped thick, black coffee and thought about his years with Joe Vasari. Although bisexual, Angelo had never tried to figure out Joe's homosexuality; he accepted it as a personal convenience. He put his empty cup in the saucer and left the breakfast table, knowing that Joe would clean up, and walked into their bedroom and started making the twin beds.

Joe finished in the kitchen and came into the bedroom, bringing the morning paper with him. "Want to hear what's in the paper about Robert?"

Angelo pulled a wrinkle out of a bedspread. "Sure."

Joe double-folded the paper and moved under the ceiling light. "Robert Frank, a long-time, resident of Venice, Louisiana, drowned in the Mississippi River, the day before yesterday. Fishermen discovered his wrecked boat near Pilot Town shortly after dawn; apparently, a floating log had pierced the boat's hull. The Coast Guard was unable to find the body. The Parish Coroner ruled accidental death by drowning. Coincidental to Mr. Frank's death, a fire and explosion destroyed his residence in Venice. Because he was a well-known explosives expert, the authorities assume that some of Mr. Frank's dynamite became unstable and exploded." Joe stopped reading and looked wistfully at Angelo. "That's not much to say

about our friend. Carbelle will see this notice and think we hit Robert; he'll assume that we are now looking for the detective." Joe placed the newspaper under his arm. "Robert's death cut our insurance in half. If we can convince Carbelle that we have hit the detective and that the body will not be discovered, I expect Carbelle will try kill us."

Angelo responded, "We'll hit Carbelle before he comes at us. Let's book passage to Italy for as soon as possible."

"What if our flight leaves before we find the detective?"

"We'll look for Ramsay until time for our flight; if we don't find him, he can thank the stars that we ran out of time."

Angelo reached for the bedside telephone. "Before we go after Carbelle, I'll call Colorado, to find out if Ramsay is really there." He dialed the Colorado number Harry's daughter had given them. To the clerk who answered, Angelo identified himself as Mr. Lawson from New Orleans, and stated the purpose of the call. "I understand that Mr. Ramsay filed an itinerary with your office?"

The Denver clerk answered, "Yes, sir. If you need to reach him for an emergency, we can find him for you."

Angelo responded, "This is no emergency. I'll contact him when he returns. Thank you."

While Angelo talked on the telephone, Joe got his gun case from the closet, sat in a chair near the bed, and cleaned a .38 revolver and silencer.

Angelo hung up the telephone. "I suppose Ramsay really is in Colorado; but I wish we knew for certain."

Joe said with finality, "We'll take care of Carbelle and leave Ramsay until later."

Angelo asked, "Want me to call Carbelle?"

"I want the pleasure of setting him up." He returned the gun to the closet, picked up the phone, and dialed. When someone at Delacroix answered, Joe said, "This is Joe Vasari."

"This is Kohler, Joe."

Joe knew Kohler, one of Carbelle's soldiers and bodyguards. "I need to speak to Mr. Carbelle."

“He’s outside checking with the cook about the bash planned for this afternoon. Hold on. I’ll get him.”

When Carbelle came on the line several moments later, Joe said, “Mr. Carbelle, this is Joe Vasari. I know that you told Angelo and me to drive out to Delacroix without calling, after we finished the jobs you gave us; but I wanted to make certain that you are home. Have you seen the morning paper?”

“Yeah. Blowing up Robert’s house was a nice touch. What about the detective?”

“No one will find his body.”

Carbelle paused only long enough to decide that today he would feed Joe and Angelo to the alligators. “You and Angelo drive to Delacroix and get here about 4 p.m. I’m giving my boys a cook-out. I’ll have you a surprise...uh, I mean...a bonus.”

“We’ll be there,” Joe obediently answered. He cradled the instrument and turned to Angelo. “Carbelle and his guys will be at Delacroix this afternoon.”

“Call the airport and charter a plane. Tell them we want to inspect some land east of Lake Borne. I’ll get the transmitter.”

Joe dialed the Lake Front Airport.

Angelo came back into the living room, carrying the miniature transmitter supplied by Robert Frank. He slid the device inside his shirt pocket.

They drove the Cadillac to New Orleans and took the freeway to the International Airport, where they made reservations on a first class flight to Rome, scheduled to leave New Orleans at midnight, three nights later.

After leaving the airport, they drove to Global Transfer, a company specializing in shipping personal property worldwide. The agent assured Joe and Angelo that their requirements were not the least bit complicated or unusual. Global agreed on a date to pack, load, and transport their household property and personal things to a storage facility in Rome. The men signed a contract and paid a \$5,000 deposit.

At 3:15 p.m., Joe and Angelo arrived at the Lake Front Airport, where a single-engine, four-place Piper charter was waiting. They

went into the flight office, gave the pilot instructions concerning their trip, and paid in advance.

The pilot filed a flight plan and led them to the plane. "Which of you gentlemen want to sit up front?"

Joe said, "My legs are longer. I'll take the front."

Angelo climbed into the seat behind the pilot and fastened the seat belt.

The young pilot, young and eager to please, wore a brown uniform and a captain's hat, and gold-rim sunglasses. He prattled about the weather, the perfect flying day, and how long it would take to fly across Lake Borne. After revving the engine and gaining clearance, he took off and put the plane into a slow, climbing turn on a southeast heading.

Joe and Angelo were old hands at flying over New Orleans. Lake Pontchartrain lay to their left and Lake Borne on the front horizon. Below and stretching east and south, from the Mississippi River to the Gulf, marsh covered the earth like an endless, green carpet. Meandering pencil-lines of blue water in narrow drainage canals streaked the carpet's surface.

After leveling off, the plane passed over a section of marsh bisected by a long, straight lane of crushed seashells. Carabelle's stronghold stood at the end of the lane. Flying at 6,000 feet, the plane passed over Carabelle's red-roofed house.

Joe looked down and counted four cars and one stick-like man standing in the yard, tending to an outside grill. Joe turned toward the pilot and distracted him with a question and winked at Angelo.

As he had done to explode the bomb in Victor Alonzo's helicopter, Angelo removed the transmitter from his pocket and pressed the micro-switch. He leaned over to the window.

Joe turned from the pilot and looked down also.

Delacroix disappeared in bellowing dust cloud. The Piper's engine and the wind noise blocked sounds of the explosion. The unsuspecting pilot noticed the plane slip slightly and adjusted his course, commenting about wind pockets and down drafts; he could not see below and behind them.

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

After crossing Lake Borne, the pilot informed his passengers they were over the designated area. As planned, he banked the plane, dropped to five hundred feet above tree level, and started crisscrossing sections of pine forests.

Joe and Angelo commented about the status of tree growth.

After covering the target area, the pilot asked, "Would you like to make another pass?"

Joe answered, "We've seen enough. Let's go to New Orleans."

When they were flying over Lake Borne, Angelo leaned forward and asked the pilot, "Do you mind if I crack open the window? It's a little stuffy back here."

The pilot tilted his head to one side. "Just raise the lever on the bottom of the window and push out."

Angelo pushed open the window. A few moments of rushing wind cooled the cabin. He reached to pull the window shut and dropped the radio into Lake Borne.

Forty minutes later, Joe and Angelo thanked their pilot, gave him a handsome tip, and left the airport. At 7 p.m., they were in their Algiers apartment watching television.

An announcer interrupted the program to give a breaking story about an explosion and fire that had destroyed the Delacroix estate of Mr. Antonio Carbelle and killed Mr. Carbelle and four of his staff. The explosion happened because Carbelle and his guests were barbecuing over an open fire in the yard, near the estate's Butane gas tanks, which were leaking.

The next morning, the *Times Picayune* published an elaboration of the story, with pictures of the victims. Joe handed Angelo the paper.

A frown wrinkled Angelo's face.

"What's bothering you?"

The frown lingered. "I'm not sure we ought to hit Ramsay. With Carbelle dead, no one knows about the contract."

Joe pushed aside an empty coffee cup. "But Carbelle told us that Ramsay is investigating us; he might find out enough to bring us down." After a few moments, Joe continued, "Ramsay's daughter

DONALD CORLEY

gave us a description of his camper and license number. There can't be more than a dozen recreational vehicle parks in New Orleans; let's drive through each of them and look for his camper. If we don't find him before time for our flight, we won't kill him. He won't follow us to Sicily."

14

An Unemployed Detective

Harry awoke the following morning with a feeling of danger. Had he overlooked some detail about the information he planned to give Vance Contella?

The discomfort followed him to the long-term parking lot at the New Orleans airport, where he left the camper and boarded his noon flight to Memphis. He napped during the flight, but he dreamed of swimming in the Mississippi River underneath a gigantic ship's wake. He jerked awake, remembering Robert Frank's face just before he disappeared in the river. What was there about the trip to Venice that kept dogging him?

He rode a shuttle bus from the Memphis airport to the Peabody Hotel in downtown Memphis and claimed his room. A hot shower and a nap refreshed him. At 5:30 the telephone rang. He muted the television and lifted the phone. "This is Harry Ramsay."

"Harry, this is Contella. I'm speaking to you on my car phone. I'll pick you up in about fifteen minutes."

Thirteen minutes later, dressed in a light suit, Harry walked across the Peabody's lobby, past the famous parading ducks, and went through the revolving doors at the front entrance. A silver stretch limousine pulled into the passenger zone. Harry didn't need to guess whose car it was.

A uniformed driver sat under the wheel, unperturbed by the hotel

doorman's stare. Another man, wearing a cream colored suit with brown accessories, got out of the passenger seat and opened the back door. "This way, Mr. Ramsay."

Harry bent and stepped inside the dark, rear compartment. The door clicked behind him, and a soft fluorescent light filled the space. Custom designed tinted windows blocked outside light, and extra insulation made the car soundproof. The back seat was a micro-office, designed for working while traveling. Even though the roof was only a few inches above his head, Harry didn't feel cramped, as he sat in the velour jump seat.

Vance Contella leaned forward and extended his hand. "Good to see you, Harry. Can I get you anything?" He motioned toward a stocked mini-bar.

Harry braced himself as the car moved. "No, thanks."

Contella flipped a switch on a panel next to his left arm and spoke. "Hogue, take us for a fifteen minute conference."

"Yes, sir," a voice responded over the speaker.

Contella said, "Harry, when I suggested that we meet in Memphis, I had in mind for us to sit down over a steak. Since we made the date, pressing business requires me to drive to Kansas City tonight. I'm sorry that we won't have more time."

"I understand, Mr. Contella." Harry immediately began his report, speaking conversationally, "Although illegally obtained, I have incontrovertible evidence that a man and a woman killed Victor Alonzo's daughter for insurance; they have no connections to Alonzo's interests. I have them under surveillance. The child's murder is coincidental to her father's murder.

"Second, I have circumstantial evidence, also illegally obtained, that a man named Robert Frank made the bomb that killed Victor and his pilot; two other men, Joe Vasari and Angelo Cellini, may be involved. A couple of days ago, Robert Frank accidentally drowned in the Mississippi River, south of Venice. Vasari and Cellini live in Algiers." Harry leaned against the seat, finished with his report.

Contella reached under a stack of papers and handed Harry a quarter-folded newspaper. "Have you seen today's paper?"

Harry had not read a paper since leaving New Orleans. He glanced at a picture of Antonio Carbelle and read the article about his death at Delacroix. He handed Contella the paper.

Contella tapped the newspaper with the tip of his finger, “Carbelle would never allow a Butane leak at Delacroix. I suspect this is the work of Frank, Vasari, and Cellini.

“Now that both Victor and Carbelle are dead, the feud between the Alonzo and Carbelle families is over. In addition, I have no further interest in the couple whom you say killed Victor’s daughter.” Contella pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket and handed it to Harry. “This is a bonus for your excellent work. I know that Victor made arrangements to pay you; but, please, accept this from me.”

To refuse the gift would insult Contella. Harry accepted the envelope.

Vance continued, “Your word that the murders of Victor and his daughter are unrelated satisfies me and my people.” Contella wet his lips. “There is one other matter. I have news from New Orleans that Joe Vasari and Angelo Cellini are looking for you.”

Harry never blinked. He now knew why he had been so anxious since leaving New Orleans.

Vance asked, “Do you want me to remove any danger from Vasari and Cellini?”

“No. I know about these men. I’ll take my chances.”

A smile opened Vance’s lips. “I could have bet money on your answer. But don’t underestimate these old men, Harry.”

The limousine lurched to a stop. The driver’s voice came over the car’s speaker system, “Peabody, Mr. Contella.”

Vance extended his hand, indicating the end of the interview. “Harry, if you must protect yourself from the old men or if a sense of justice regarding the couple who killed Victor’s daughter demands further involvement from you, I have no objections so long as my company is unrelated.” He repeated, “Totally unrelated.”

“I understand. My connection to your company will end the moment I step out of this car.” He opened the door. The dome light went dark, and a rush of street noise spilled into the mobile office.

Harry stepped outside to the sidewalk and walked unceremoniously through the Peabody Hotel's revolving doors; he did not stop until inside his room.

The detective counted twenty-five, \$1,000 bills in the envelope that Contella had given him. He telephoned the airport; the earliest plane reservation available would land him in New Orleans at 10 p.m. the next night. He had time to plan a defense against the two old men. Perhaps Robert's bombs would be useful after all.

In their Algiers apartment, Angelo examined the airplane tickets to Rome and said to Joe, "Let's pack our bags in the car in the morning and look for Ramsay until ten o'clock, tomorrow night. If we find him by then, we'll have time to finish him. We'll allow two hours to get to the airport."

Joe seemed preoccupied and only grunted.

Angelo asked, "Are you okay?"

Joe shook off his glazed stare. "Yeah, just nervous. I don't like the stress of working again. I feel like something might happen to keep us from going to Sicily."

Angelo understood Joe's stress. He too had been unhappy about coming out of retirement; and the detective was an unanticipated complication. To distract Joe, he asked, "What have you decided about the Cadillac?"

"I called the leasing company and told them that we are giving up the lease. We'll leave it in the airport parking lot. They will pick it up the day after we're gone."

Harry's plane landed in New Orleans on schedule. He went to the parking lot and unlocked the camper. He found the computer printout with the names and addresses of Joseph Vasari and Angelo Cellini and checked them against the current Algiers telephone directory. He drove through New Orleans, over the river bridge into Algiers, and followed a street map until he located the duplex apartment. The address was in the middle of the block, away from streetlights. The Cadillac sat in black silence in the driveway. The

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

house was dark.

He parked in the next block and carried a bomb and the roll of electrician's tape with him to the Cadillac. Staying in the shadows, the detective approached the car and scooted underneath, feeling with his fingers along the drive shaft. He located the center brace near the front universal joint, and attached the receiver and bomb against the metal frame with electrician's tape; now, he had an edge.

He returned to New Orleans, to the recreational vehicle park where he had stayed previously, and rented a space from the night clerk. He connected the utilities and went to bed.

Two questions had dogged him since he left Contella in Memphis. How could he allow the man and woman who killed Victor's daughter go free? How could he keep Vasari and Cellini from killing him?

15

Standoff on Lake Ponchartrain

The last day of June dawned warm, bright, and cloudless. Harry lay in bed thinking about the possibility that two assassins were on his tail. Remembering the bomb underneath the killers' Cadillac gave him some comfort; at the moment, he felt safe. He had yet to decide what to do about the man and woman who killed Victor Alonzo's daughter for insurance. He could not go to the police with his inadmissible evidence, and he could not confront the killers directly.

He felt tired and lonely.

After breakfast, he took a long walk around the lake behind the RV park. Instead of enjoying retirement with his children, he was a virtual stranger in a town where he had lived most of his life. Why not contact one of his golfing buddies, and forget detective work for a day?

He walked to the public telephone near the park's office and called a friend, who agreed to drive to the RV park to get Harry and his golf clubs. The friend called a couple of their regular golfing group, who agreed to meet at the Fair Park Golf Course. The group played golf and ended the holiday with dinner at a family café near Lake Pontchartrain.

Harry's friend returned him to the camper an hour after dark. Harry put away his golf clubs. A knock at the camper's door stopped him from starting his shower.

The park manager gave him a message. "Mr. Ramsay, a couple of your friends were looking for you this afternoon.

Harry blushed. "Did they give names?"

"No. They said they would call you later. They drove a black Cadillac."

Harry cleared his throat to steady his voice. "I know who they are. I'll call them on the telephone." He went to the public telephone and thumbed through the Algiers directory for a listing for Joe Vasari and Angelo Cellini. If they answered the phone, he would have time to leave New Orleans; if not, he would have no idea about where the two men might be. Either way, he would have to run for safety.

After a dozen rings, he hung up the phone, stepped to the manager's office, and concocted a lie. "I contacted my friends; they have invited me to park my camper in their driveway and visit for a few days."

A few minutes before 9 p.m., after Harry paid his bill, he unhooked from the park utilities and pulled into Airline Highway's northbound traffic. Since the Italians had not answered their telephone, they could be anywhere.

Two men sitting in a black Cadillac enjoyed a clear view of the entrance to the RV park, less than a block from where Harry entered the highway.

Joe Vasari pointed through the windshield. "There he goes; now we've got the bastard." He cranked the engine and followed.

"He can't lose us in that camper," Angelo commented. "After he gets out in the country, we'll force him off the road and kill him. We can still get back to the airport in time for our midnight flight to Rome." He glanced at Joe. "What will you do with your piece afterwards?"

Joe kept the black car a half block behind Harry's camper and pressed his left elbow against the pistol underneath his arm. "There are some drainage ditches between us and La Place. I'll dismantle it and toss the parts into the ditches. No one will ever find it. What about your friend?"

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

Angelo shrugged his shoulders. "You know the ice pick in the kitchen drawer, the one with the broken handle?"

"Yeah."

"I left it in the drawer. That's the pick I used the night we hit the cop, down on the docks."

"If you hadn't stuck the ice pick through his ear, I wouldn't be here," Joe replied.

Through the camper's west coast mirrors, Harry spotted the black Cadillac following him. He felt the hair on his hands stiffen; his palms moistened. He touched the camper's brakes, slowing, preparing to switch lanes. The black car followed. The highway offered little protection; professional killers can strike at any moment, often in public places. He looked again into his mirrors. The reflection of the monster's two bright eyes glared at him. He moved to the extreme right lane. The Cadillac followed. The pursued detective decided to end the chase. Planting the bomb under their Cadillac had given him the advantage.

He headed toward the place on Lake Ponchartrain's west bank, where he and Susan had visited when they first bought the vehicle. If he survived this night, he would have another reason to remember the place.

Harry left Airline Highway at the Norco exit and drove through the bedroom community, careful to permit the Cadillac to keep him in sight. On the edge of town where the street divided, he took a blacktop road to the right, headed northeast.

Inside the Cadillac, Angelo commented, "He must know of another park out here or he may be headed to someone's house."

Joe frowned. "From the looks of this road, I'd say we are headed toward Pontchartrain, away from houses. He may know of a lakeside camping spot. That rig is self-contained."

Harry's plan was working. He had seen no other car since leaving Norco, five miles behind him. He turned off the blacktop onto a

seashell road, slowing to miss the increasing number of potholes. Dust billowed behind the camper's tires. Cypress trees shrouded with Spanish moss and high, swamp grass grew to the road's edges. Three miles later, the dusty road brought him to a flood control levee, taller than the trees. He pulled to the top of the steep grade and stopped.

The camper's headlights shined over the top of an orchard of pecan trees, beyond which, a-quarter mile away, Lake Pontchartrain formed a dark void. At least ten miles, to the southwest, lights from Norco reflected on the horizon. Behind, the Cadillac's headlights bounced, as the heavy car's tires hit potholes. Inside the levee, in the pale moonlight, Harry saw the remnants of a deserted landfill. Except for the farmers, who cultivated the pecan trees, and a few bank fishermen, no one came to this private property on Lake Pontchartrain's west shore.

After Harry checked to see if the Cadillac still followed, he eased the camper down the steep grade, gliding into the dark forest. He wiped his palms on his shirt and touched the transmitter in his shirt pocket. The next several minutes were crucial to the success of his ambush.

He followed a lane through the orchard and drove from under the trees. Water's edge was fifty yards across a sandy beach. He stopped a few steps from the lapping waves, turned off the engine and lights, and bounded out.

He looked toward the levee, watching the Cadillac's headlights start up the steep hill, probing the sky like parallel search beams. Behind him, moonlight shimmered on the water's surface. With the transmitter in his hand, he prepared to press the switch. He would know the car had reached the top of the levee when the headlights were parallel to the ground.

In the car, halfway up the grade, Angelo shouted, "Stop!"

Joe stabbed the brake with his right foot and held the car on the upward incline. "What is it?"

"I don't know, but I've got a bad feeling."

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

Harry saw the lights stop moving and wondered why. He shifted the transmitter to his left hand and wiped his moist right hand against his trousers. The lights started moving, slowly climbing the levee. Harry returned the detonator to his right hand. The twin beams began a downward tilt.

On an impulse, instead of pressing the button to detonate the bomb, Harry moved his thumb off the switch. He could not kill two men in cold blood.

The headlights vanished, as if someone turned off a switch.

Harry could see nothing on top of the levee but stars resting on the horizon. He stiffened. Were they driving through the orchard without lights? He held his breath and strained to hear the sound of an approaching car engine. He heard only shallow waves rippling along the shore behind him. Had they left the car and were walking toward the lake? The bomb was his only weapon; he must hide.

He bent low and sprinted along the beach, hoping that his shoes crunching in the sand would not give away his position. Fifty yards into the blackness, he stopped, squatted, and listened. Again, he heard only sounds of water lapping the shore. He darted across the beach into the shadows of the first row of pecan trees, snuggled against a tree, and panted.

Twenty miles southwest, a jet took off from the International Airport on a flight path south of the orchard. Harry watched the plane's blinking lights turn and disappear in the direction of the Gulf. A breeze rustled leaves.

Where are the two men? Hesitant to move, he clutched the transmitter and started slipping from tree to tree, careful to stay in the shadows. He intended to reach the levee, circle the Cadillac, and escape to Norco; he would return for the camper later, if he were alive. A squeaking noise overhead stopped him; the breeze was rubbing limbs together. He scooted to the next tree, avoiding patches of moonlight.

Standing together behind a pecan tree, ten yards from Harry,

Angelo touched Joe's shoulder and pointed. Joe aimed his pistol at the slipping man and started to squeeze.

Harry sensed danger and saw a shaft of moonlight flash on the pistol. Instinctively taking the offensive, he palmed the radio, raised his hands shoulder high, and spoke in an incredibly cheerful tone, "Good evening, Joe and Angelo."

Startled by Harry's familiarity, Joe snarled, "Keep your hands up. Frisk him, Angelo."

Angelo expertly moved around Harry. "He's clean."

Harry said, "I'm glad to see you gentlemen...again."

Joe aimed at Harry's head. "I've never seen you before."

"I saw you in Venice, when you came to visit Robert."

Joe dipped the gun, demanding, "How do you know Robert?"

"I was with him when he died."

Angelo said, "You couldn't have been with him. Robert drowned in the Mississippi."

"I was with him; do you want to hear about it?"

Joe lowered the gun and braced his elbow against his side, still pointing the weapon at Harry's chest. "Talk."

"Vance Contella hired me to investigate Victor Alonzo's murder; my work led me to Robert, and I learned of your friendship with him. I went to see Robert and pretended to be a writer, working on a book about crime in New Orleans during prohibition. He believed me and offered to show me the route he followed during his booze-smuggling days. That's why we went out on the *Capone*. He showed me where his wife drowned. On the way back, a log sank the boat near the west bank. Robert helped me get off the boat first and saved my life. He threw me the bowline and I tied it to a tree root. That's when I learned that he could not swim. The boat sank and drifted into the mud bank. Robert got in the water and started hand-walking the rope toward the bank. I think he had a stroke, which made him lose his hold on the rope. Before I could reach him, a ship's wake capsized the boat and broke the line. Robert went under."

"Why are you the only person who knows how he died?"

“No one knew that I went with him on the boat. When I got back to Venice, instead of reporting the accident, I used one of his bombs and blew up his house, to destroy evidence that he was involved in Victor Alonzo’s murder.” Harry paused.

Angelo snarled, “Why would you destroy evidence, Detective?”

“His death made the case mute. Besides, I owe him my life.”

No one could think up such a story, especially with a pistol pointing at his gut. Angelo broke the silence. “Why did you come to this part of Ponchartrain? Did you lead us here to trap us?”

“Yes, but a development made killing you unnecessary.”

Angelo demanded, “What development?”

Harry played his ace. “After the evidence in Robert’s house convinced me that he killed Victor Alonzo, I flew to Memphis and gave Vance Contella my report. In the meantime, Contella had learned of Antonio Carbelle’s death. Since both Carbelle and Robert were dead, the war between the two families ended. Contella was satisfied and took me off the case. The possibility that you fellows blew up Carbelle did not concern Contella, but he also told me that you fellows were looking for me. I came back to New Orleans and took measures to protect myself from you.”

Moonlight shined in Angelo’s eyes. “What measures?”

“I put one of Robert’s bombs under your car.”

Joe insisted, “A bomb on our car? I don’t believe you.”

Harry slyly said, “The bomb is near the Cadillac’s universal joint. But with you out of the car, the bomb is useless to me.”

Joe raised the gun in anger.

Angelo stopped Joe with a motion of his hand. “You mean, you could have taken us out any time? Why didn’t you?”

“I have no reason to kill you except to protect myself.”

Joe snapped at Angelo, “He’s stalling.”

Harry asked, “I can prove it. Where is the Cadillac?”

Joe boasted, “On top of the levee.”

Harry said, “Listen.” He pressed the button on the miniature transmitter.

Bright, orange and red light flashed on the levee above the trees,

followed by the thunder of a summer storm. Flecks of steel showered them, like ripe pecans falling from trees.

Joe kept the gun pointed at Harry, and Angelo grabbed the transmitter from Harry and examined it. "It is one of Robert's."

Then, Harry observed the most unexpected development.

Joe lowered his gun and whined like a frustrated child, "Angelo, with the car gone, we'll miss our plane to Rome." He slid to the ground, sobbing. Joe was no longer a killer; he was an old man experiencing an overwhelming disappointment.

Angelo kneeled beside Joe, pushed aside the gun, and cradled his lover in his arm. "Don't worry, Joe. We'll get home."

Harry stood quietly, trying to decide if he should jump and grab the gun. The sight of two old men on the ground trying to comfort one another made him hesitate. When the sobbing stopped, Harry said, "I'm sorry about the car."

Angelo kept his arms wrapped around Joe and looked up at Harry, obviously trying to keep from crying. "Joe and I are booked on a flight for Italy later tonight. Should you have evaded us by the time of our flight, we had agreed to ignore any threat you might be for us."

Harry offered, "I didn't want to kill you, only to keep you from killing me. I'll drive you to the airport in the camper."

Joe tearfully said, "Angelo, I've had enough killing."

Angelo helped Joe off the ground and faced Harry. "We'll forget about killing you, if you'll take us to the airport."

"Let's go." The moment of truth had arrived. Harry turned and walked slowly toward the camper, realizing how simple it would be for Joe to shoot him in the back and steal the camper.

The Italians followed.

When Harry reached the camper, Joe called out. "Wait, Ramsay." Joe still held the pistol.

Harry thought Joe had decided to shoot him after all.

"How deep is the lake here?" The question sounded ominous.

Harry's mouth felt dry. "At least thirty feet."

Joe looked down at his pistol, studying the cold, black metal with

the compassion of a father toward a child. He kissed the inanimate steel and threw the gun into the air like a baseball. The gun arched upward, hung for an eye-blink in the moonlight, and splashed into the water. Joe stepped inside the camper and sat on the second passenger seat.

Wordless, Angelo followed, taking the front passenger seat.

Harry walked around to the driver's side, got in, and started the engine. For the first time in many minutes, he breathed freely. He backed the camper away from the lake and drove through the orchard.

As the camper started up the levee, Joe and Angelo strained to see traces of their automobile. Portions of rubber tires cluttered the road. The Cadillac's engine block lay to the side. Twisted bits of metal shined in the camper's headlights.

Harry drove down the levee, followed the road to Norco, and reached the Airline Highway. At the airport exit, he guided the camper into the self-service parking area and turned off the ignition. "Do you fellows have any baggage?"

Angelo sighed, "Our bags were in the Cadillac."

Harry pulled his wallet and counted ten, one thousand dollar bills, part of the bonus he'd received from Vance Contella. He handed the money to Angelo. "For new clothes."

Angelo took the money and looked at Joe, who said, "Less than an hour ago, we were about to kill each other; now, you are seeing us off to Italy and giving us money to boot."

The trio walked into the terminal. Harry and Joe waited for Angelo to show their tickets to the agent and get their boarding passes. Harry invited them to the lunchroom for coffee.

Although old men, the Italians were dangerous, professional killers. Harry hoped their truce would hold until the men were airborne. What could he say to keep the truce in place? "You know, Fellows, blowing up the Cadillac might be a good thing."

Joe responded, "It was a leased car. What do you mean?"

Harry explained, "The police will investigate and use the motor's serial number to identify the owner and lessee. Since they will find no bodies, the police might assume that the explosion blew your

remains into the swamp; they might list your deaths as an unsolved mob killing. The lease company will collect on the insurance, and you won't have to look over your shoulder for the rest of your life."

Moments later, the flight attendant removed the barrier ropes from the boarding lane. Harry shook hands with Angelo and Joe and watched them board. When the airplane moved away from the dock, he saw Angelo and Joe at a window, waving.

16

Lydia Schoenfelt

After watching the Sicilians' plane leave, Harry walked to his camper and decided to spend the remainder of the night in the airport's parking lot, too exhausted from his brush with death to drive to the RV camp. He washed his face and crashed on the bed.

He got up at dawn and made breakfast. By 8:30, he was ready to start for the coast to visit his daughter. He opened the closet and made certain the last of Robert Frank's bombs were safe. When he saw the tape recorder, with voices of Ruby Sanders and Jerry Dalton confessing to the murder of Sharon Bettis, he brought the recorder to the table and played the tape.

Why did listening to the tape stimulate his lack of closure?

Should he share what he knew with the girl's mother?

Victor had given him the woman's address and phone number: Lydia Schoenfelt, 12234 South Shore Court, Chicago, Illinois.

Harry went into the airport terminal, found a telephone booth, and dialed the Chicago number.

After two rings, a soft, female voice said, "Hello."

"Mrs. Schoenfelt, my name is Harry Ramsay. I'm a retired insurance investigator, calling from New Orleans, Louisiana. I'm not sure that I have the right party, but if you'll permit, I'll say a person's name. If the name is meaningful to you, I'll tell you my reason for calling. If the name means nothing, you have my apology

for calling the wrong party.” Harry thought he heard the woman gasp.

After a couple of seconds, she replied, “Since you are calling from New Orleans, I’m likely the person you are seeking.”

Harry tried to sound compassionate. “The name is Angelia.”

Her voice almost broke. “I am Angelia’s mother.”

“Mrs. Shoenfelt, please accept my sympathy for your loss. I hope my information will bring you some comfort. As I mentioned, I’m an insurance investigator. In the course of my work, I made a tape recording related to Angelia’s death. If you will permit me to do so, I’ll bring this information to you at my expense?” During the pause, he assumed she was deciding if he could be a con man working a scam.

Finally, she replied, “I would like to have the information. When could you get to Chicago?”

“I’m at the airport now. I’ll make a reservation on the first plane available and call you back with my schedule.” Harry regretted that he had inflicted painful memories on the woman. But he could not back out now.

“Very well,” she replied.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry dialed the Chicago number again and gave Mrs. Schoenfelt his arrival time and flight number.

She responded by saying, “I’ll meet you at the airport.”

After Harry informed the parking lot attendant that he would be leaving the camper in the long-term parking for a couple of days, he went back to the camper and packed an overnighter, making certain to include the tape recorder and tape. An hour before his departure time, he dressed in a suit and walked into the airport.

Harry’s plane landed at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport at 4:30 p.m. He reserved a small, private dining room at the Concourse Restaurant, near the Delta area.

Fifteen minutes later, while sitting near the Delta ticket counter, he saw a woman approach and read the departure and arrival schedules on the public monitor.

She was slightly shorter than Harry’s five feet seven and at least

fifty-five, ten years younger than he; she was stocky, but not fat. A flat, brown mole, the size of a match head, dotted the crest of her left cheek, like a beauty spot; tan skin suggested a Middle East blood line. She had brushed her pitch black hair back into a bun. The charcoal skirt, white blouse, quarter-heel shoes, and gold-wire glasses made her look studious.

With his suitcase in hand, Harry approached her from behind and softly spoke. "Ms. Schoenfelt?"

She turned and blushed slightly.

He extended his hand. "I'm Harry Ramsay. I've reserved a dining room in the Concourse Restaurant, where we can talk in private." He pointed courteously.

She hesitated, obviously apprehensive, but took his hand. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Ramsay."

Harry felt the moisture in her pudgy palm. "I realize this situation is difficult for you, but I do have information about your daughter." He led the way to the restaurant.

The hostess escorted them to the room, left a menu, and said, "A waiter will come to take your order."

Immediately, the waiter came.

Harry informed him, "Bring a pot of coffee for me and anything the lady would like. After that, please leave us undisturbed until I call you."

The waiter asked, "What will you have, Ma'am?"

"Coffee will do."

After the waiter left, Harry opened his suitcase and placed the recorder on the table. "You must be anxious to hear the tape, but first, would you like to know anything about me?"

"Such as, Mr. Ramsay?"

"Such as how I came to be involved in your private life."

She looked at him over the top of her wire frames. "Tell me what you think I should know."

Harry turned toward the entrance to the room, noting the approaching waiter. He covered the tape recorder with a napkin and watched the waiter place the pot on the table, leave, and close the

door.

Then, Harry faced Ms. Schoenfelt. “For years, I worked as an investigator for a company owned by Victor Alonzo.” He saw nothing in her face to indicate recognition. “Before he died in the helicopter crash, Mr. Alonzo hired me to investigate the circumstances of your daughter’s death; he also told me about you.” He paused to give a silent warning that he was about to tell her something painful; he counted five blinks of her black eyes. “I have found the people who murdered Angelia.”

She stared at him, like a lioness ready to pounce. Her voice quivered. “Did you know my daughter?”

“No.” His answer sounded too short, even to him.

“Then, why have you taken an interest in her death?”

Harry detected agitation in her question. He tried to sound honest without being arrogant. “Victor paid me to do a job; with him alive or dead, I am obligated to finish it.” On impulse, he added, “Ms. Schoenfelt, I lost a daughter to cancer. I don’t know how you feel, but I know what it means to lose a child.” Revealing his feelings to this stranger surprised Harry; he lowered his head, as if ashamed.

Lydia Schoenfelt saw the pain in his face. She reached across the white tablecloth and touched his right hand with her fingers. “I’m ready to hear the tape.”

Harry had underestimated his reaction to the stress of the past several days; he lowered his head to hide the haze forming in his eyes. Her fingertips felt warm. He looked into her black eyes. “I secured this recording illegally; it cannot be used as evidence.” He pressed the play button and adjusted the volume.

Lydia gave unblushing attention, as she listened to the murderers discuss how they had suffocated her daughter and caused a fire to make her death look like an accident; she turned pale and pursed her lips.

Finally, the tape ended, and Harry turned off the recorder.

“Why you can’t use this tape in a legal way, Mr. Ramsay.”

“I violated their civil rights to make the recording.”

She looked into space, as if daydreaming. Abruptly, she

straightened in her chair. Almost cheerfully, she asked, “Mr. Ramsay, I haven’t eaten since breakfast. May we order dinner?”

Her sudden interest in food surprised Harry. He slid his chair back and stood. “I’ll call the waiter.”

She ordered shrimp salad and a small steak. Harry ordered a green salad and broiled codfish. Their conversation flowed as though the tragic circumstances that had thrown them together had never occurred.

As they finished the meal, she offered, “Mr. Ramsay, I owe you an explanation about me and Victor Alonzo.”

“You have no obligation to me, Ms. Schoenfelt.”

“But I want you to know. And I need to talk about it.”

“I don’t mind. Please, call me Harry.”

She traced her lips with her tongue and smiled. “And you call me Lydia.” She propped her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “My parents were Orthodox Jews. When I married an Italian, Roman Catholic, they disowned me and moved to Israel; after they moved, I never heard from them again. A relative told me they both died about fifteen years ago. When Victor and I married, I knew nothing about his business; we had been married only a few months when I learned about his illegal activities. I threatened to divorce him if he didn’t quit the business. He could not, of course; unfortunately, I did not understand about Italian families, if you know what I mean.”

Harry nodded; he understood about Italian crime families.

She tilted her head in a gesture of futility. “I got a divorce, moved to Chicago, and learned that I was carrying Victor’s child. When she was born, he came to see her in the hospital. He offered to send money for our support, but I refused. I have not seen him since. Angelia and I lived off money I earned from teaching.

“Three years ago, Angelia and I developed serious mother-daughter conflicts. She accused me of suffocating her, like Jewish women often treat their daughters; truthfully, I was overprotective. We agreed for her to live in an apartment near the university, where she was enrolled. I seldom saw her. After about six months, she dropped out of sight. The police could find no trace. For the first

time since Angelia's birth, I contacted Victor; he could not locate her even with his connections. She became one of thousands of missing young people in this country." She stopped talking and looked at Harry, as if waiting for him to complete the story of Angelia's disappearance.

He said, "At some point in time after Angelia moved into her apartment, Jerry Dalton seduced her and took her to New Orleans. He and Ruby Sanders introduced her to drugs and prostitution and kept her malignantly associated with their secretarial service. They killed her for insurance."

Lydia gazed into her coffee cup. The muffled, outside sounds of a passenger jet docking filtered into the room. She raised her head. "What can be done about this man and woman?"

Without hesitation, Harry said, "After I spend a few days with my daughter and her family, on the Mississippi coast, I'm going to Atlanta and find them. I'll keep in touch with you, if you wish."

Her tight lips made her look like an angry teacher about to speak harshly to a child. "Earlier, you said that cancer killed your daughter. Will your wife go with you?"

Harry's face blanched. "My wife died a year ago."

The sternness in Lydia's face vanished. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I didn't mean to bring up painful memories."

"No problem; working helps me adjust."

"You have other cases besides Angelia's murder?"

He hesitated. "Do you want to know about Victor's murder?"

Her black eyes widened. "Yes, I'd like to know."

"A man named Carbelle hired an explosives expert to hide a bomb on Victor's helicopter. The bomber and Carbelle are dead; in a sense, justice there has been served."

Lydia studied Harry's face. "I have a feeling that you are partly responsible for this justice."

At that moment, the waiter entered the room, interrupting Harry's answer. The waiter presented the bill, which Harry paid. The waiter left, and Harry replaced the recorder inside the suitcase. He glanced at his watch. "Lydia, do you realize that it's almost ten?"

She followed him toward the door. "I lost track of time. Excuse me, while I go to the ladies room."

"I'll meet you outside the restaurant." When she was out of sight, he hurried into the men's room. She was waiting for him when he came out. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "I'll walk you to your car."

As they were walking across the O'Hare parking lot, she asked, "When will you leave Chicago?"

"About noon tomorrow."

They arrived at her 1990 Dodge sedan. She unlocked the door and asked, "Where will you spend the night?"

"I'll take a cab to a nearby hotel."

"I'll drive you."

"Okay, thanks." He walked around the Dodge and slid into the passenger seat, holding the suitcase in his lap.

She drove like a Chicago cabby, guiding the car into the fast traffic lane. "Do you have a hotel in mind?"

"Pull into the first one we see."

She drove for ten minutes, passing several hotels.

Harry commented, "We just passed a suitable hotel."

"You can sleep in my extra bedroom, unless you object?"

Harry had not been in a woman's bedroom since his wife died. "I don't want to be a bother."

Lydia switched lanes and approached an exit ramp. Once out of the heavy traffic, she selected a through street, drove for several blocks, and stopped in front of a four-apartment duplex. She led him to the downstairs, left apartment, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

Harry followed her into a small living room. Modern, blond furniture gave the room a cozy look. A television console sat in one corner. Books filled a wall bookcase. Photographs covered the top of a narrow table, with an eight-by-ten photo of Angelia in the center. The room appeared seldom used.

Lydia locked and chained the door. "I live in a high crime neighborhood," she explained, as she led him to a side room and

turned on the light. "This was Angelia's room."

Harry sat his suitcase on the floor. The bedroom wore the decorations of a teenage female: flowered bedcovers, a stuffed doll on the pillows, pictures of animals on the walls, a chair, a night stand with a telephone, and a woven throw rug.

Lydia said, "I would like to hear the tape again. Would you like some coffee?" She started through the door.

"Coffee will be good," he responded. "I'll bring the recorder." Harry lifted out his tape recorder and walked through the living room into the combination kitchen-dining room. Lydia was brewing the coffee. "You have a nice place."

"The bank and I own the building. My school is within walking distance. School's out for summer vacation."

Harry sat at the kitchen table where she had placed cups.

Lydia brought a plate of homemade, chocolate chip cookies to the table. "Would you like eggs and bacon for breakfast, Harry?"

"What would you eat, if I weren't here?"

"Cooked oats, a banana, fruit juice, dry toast, and coffee."

"I'll have the same." He placed the recorder on the table. "I'll leave the tape and recorder with you. As I said, the tape is useless for evidence. If you hear anything on the tape that you don't understand, you can call or write to me."

Lydia reached to a nearby shelf, secured a pencil and pad, and asked, "What address do I need?"

"While I'm in Atlanta, I'll live in my over-the-cab camper, in an RV park. I'll give you my daughter's name and number in Fair Haven, Mississippi. I stay in touch with her. I'll call you from Atlanta, if you wish."

Lydia blushed slightly, "You already have my number. Let me have your daughter's number and address."

Harry watched Lydia write in a delicate, scroll style.

After they heard the tape again, Harry answered a question or two. The late hour, a degree of intimacy, and a natural bonding encouraged conversation about personal matters.

He told her about Susan, Maria, and Robin. He talked about his

work as a jockey and, later, as an insurance investigator.

She told him of her work as an English teacher and of her bitterness toward her parents for their rejection.

By 1 a.m., fatigue smarted Harry's eyes.

Lydia saw his red eyes and stood. "I didn't realize how late it is. What time in the morning would you like to get up?"

Almost embarrassed, he responded, "I wake up early, but I don't want to inconvenience you."

"You won't. I walk a couple of miles before breakfast. When I leave, I'll knock on your door. I'm usually gone about forty-five minutes." She escorted him to the bedroom, turned on the bathroom lights, and checked the towels. "See you in the morning." She closed the door as she left.

He turned off the lights, undressed, and slid between the soft sheets. The catharsis with Lydia had relaxed him. For the first time since Susan died, he did not feel lonely.

17

Two Lonely People

A majestic eagle soared in a cloudless, azure sky until a knock on the bedroom door and a woman's voice caused Harry's dream to vanish.

"Are you awake?" called Lydia Schoenfelt.

Harry opened his eyes and smelled frying bacon and simmering coffee. "I'm awake. Are you leaving for your walk?"

Through the door, she chuckled, "I'm back from walking. You didn't hear me when I tried to roust you an hour ago. Breakfast will be ready in about ten minutes."

"Okay." Ten minutes later, shaved and wearing his suit of the day before, he walked into the kitchen, where Lydia was sitting at the kitchen table reading the morning newspaper. She was wearing jogging shoes and a beige sweat suit, stained by damp spots under her arms. She had tied her shoulder-length, black hair in a ponytail. She poured his coffee. "I decided on bacon and eggs instead of cereal; hope you don't mind."

"Not at all." He sipped hot coffee. "This is good."

After breakfast, Lydia excused herself, leaving Harry to read the *Chicago Tribune* and to drink his second cup of coffee. He could hear her shower running.

She came into the kitchen later, dressed in a skirt and blouse and low-heel shoes. A narrow, white ribbon replaced the rubber band

holding her ponytail. "What time is your flight?"

"I should be at the airport by 11:30."

"Would you like to see some of Chicago? We have time."

"I'd like that."

"Have you been to the Windy City before?"

"Once, years ago. I stayed at the Palmer House."

"The Palmer House is still here."

Lydia drove around the Loop and later, on the way to O'Hare, she showed him the University of Chicago. At the airport, she parked at the passenger curb, left the Dodge's engine running, and faced him. "I appreciate what you have done for me; is there a way I can pay you, at least your expenses?"

"This trip is part of my obligation to Victor."

Her next question startled Harry. "Would you consider working for me? I mean, can I hire you to find the people who killed Angelia and bring them to justice?"

Harry searched for words to refuse the request without rejecting her. "Lydia, I intend to see that those responsible for Angelia's death pay for what they have done. I don't know exactly how justice will become a part of what will happen. I consider that I'm still working for Victor and, indirectly, for you." His hand was on the door handle.

Lydia clinched her teeth and insisted, "But I want to be a part of what you are doing."

He moved his hand from the door and looked into her moist, black eyes. "Revenge is a cruel taskmaster, Lydia. It can turn happy memories of dead loved ones into hate."

Her eyes softened. "I'll remember that." She placed her right palm against his hand. "Call me soon. Last evening and today have been my brightest hours since Angelia disappeared."

Harry blushed and squeezed her hand. "I'll call you in a few days." He pressed her hand once more, slid out of the car, and disappeared into the terminal.

Aboard the jet, from his window, Harry watched the billowing clouds flowing underneath the airplane, and a phrase from some forgotten poet flowed in his thoughts: *lonely as a cloud*. He felt again

the pain of Susan's death and wondered, why...now?

An image of Lydia at the breakfast table replaced his memory of Susan; he felt guilty.

At the New Orleans airport, Harry retrieved his bag and made his way to the camper. He pulled off his tie and started the engine and air-conditioning; the suitcase went inside the closet next to the computer. He drove out of New Orleans on Interstate 10 and stopped at Slidell for fuel and to call Robin, to tell her that he was coming for a visit.

Over the Independence Day holidays, during one of their father and daughter talks, Harry told Robin, "Tomorrow, I'll head for Atlanta to work on a case." He handed her a slip of paper. "I've made a reservation at an RV park. Here's the address and phone number where you can reach me."

Robin fastened the note to her refrigerator door with a magnet, noting that her father had something more to say.

Slightly embarrassed, Harry added, "I have a client in Chicago, a woman named Lydia Schoenfelt. I've given her your number. If she calls, give her the Atlanta information."

"A client, Daddy?" Robin teased.

His face tinted. "Well, yes. I'm helping her find a missing relative." Harry didn't hesitate to lie when necessary.

Unconvinced, Robin chuckled mischievously.

Harry started for Atlanta, expecting to complete the two-day trip by July 7th. He spent the first night in a recreational vehicle park, halfway to Atlanta.

July heat and high humidity forced him to run the camper's air-conditioner all night. The motor noise bothered his sleep; the lumpy pillow felt like rocks under his head; his Mexican food supper gave him indigestion. He knew better than to eat Mexican food at night; a dose of anti-acid eased the burning in his stomach.

Unable to sleep, he tuned the radio dial across the spectrum of clear channel stations and found KBBM, Chicago's twenty-four-hour, all-news-station. Harry fell asleep thinking about Lydia.

Late in the afternoon of the following day, weary from the drive from the Gulf Coast, Harry hooked his camper to the plumbing and electrical utilities at the Atlanta RV park. After a hot shower, he watched the television until late in the night.

The next morning he dressed in a wrinkle-free business suit and caught a cab to a car rental service.

He searched unsuccessfully for Ruby Sanders and Jerry Dalton for two days. He tried the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, inquiring about new temporary secretarial services in town. He visited Atlanta's utility companies, but found no record of new scribes for services. Harry was growing impatient, and the July heat and humidity were almost intolerable. The telephone company had no listing for Jerry Dalton or Ruby Sanders. The Welcome Wagon Agency had no relevant information. His quarry had said they were coming to Atlanta, but they might still be in New Orleans. Should he fly to New Orleans and try to pick up their trail?

Besides failing to find Sanders and Dalton, Harry kept thinking of Lydia Schoenfelt, a preoccupation for which he was unprepared. He fought the impulse to call her on the telephone.

At three o'clock in the afternoon of his third day of fruitless searching, temperatures reached 101 degrees in the shade. Discouraged and hungry, he decided to return to the camper. Atlanta's congested traffic compounded his discomfort, and the rental car's air-conditioning system was marginally efficient. He focused the airflow vents directly into his face.

He arrived at the park at 4:30 p.m. and drove past the trailer park's front office and followed the tree-bordered lane toward his camper. He nearly lost control of the car when he spotted Lydia Schoenfelt sitting on the steps of his camper. He slammed on the breaks and jumped out.

Lydia grinned and stood.

Harry was face-to-face with her in four steps. He clutched her extended right hand. "What a wonderful surprise."

She was wearing brown oxford shoes, slacks, and a lightweight blouse. For all of her fifty-five years, with her black hair in the tight

ball, she looked nearer thirty-five. Perspiration caused her wire-rim glasses to slip down the bridge of her nose. "I hope you don't mind that I've come."

"Of course I don't mind." Harry fumbled with the key to the camper and stood aside for her to enter. He picked up her suitcase and followed her inside.

She said, "I need to use your bathroom."

"It's through the narrow door, next to the closet."

Harry sat her suitcase on the floor and lowered the thermostat on the rooftop air-conditioning units.

Momentarily, Lydia came out of the bathroom. "That's better. I thought I might have to find a bush."

"I'm sorry you were uncomfortable. How did you find me?"

"I called your daughter. A cab brought me from the airport. Robin is nice, Harry."

"Robin is a fine person," he responded, looking around the camper, as if distracted. "I'll take you to a motel; after you get settled, we can go have a steak together."

Without vulgarity or illicit suggestion, she replied, "I prefer to stay with you."

Momentarily confused, he answered, "Oh, okay." He glanced about the camper, deciding how he could arrange for her privacy. She could sleep in one of the twin beds; he would sleep in the over-the-cab bed. "I'll wash up, and we'll go eat."

While in the bathroom, he heard Lydia walking about the camper. When he came out, she was looking inside the food pantry. "Can we stop at a grocery after we eat? I intend to cook while I'm here."

Slightly puzzled, Harry responded, "There's a supermarket nearby." He felt comfortable with Lydia.

The drive to the steak house required ten minutes. They settled into a corner of the half-filled dining room, placed identical orders, and waited for their meal.

Lydia asked, "How goes the hunt?"

"Not too well. If I don't find their trail in a day or so, we'll fly to New Orleans and start again from there." Including Lydia in his plans

seemed a natural thing to do.

While they were eating, Harry told Lydia of the blind alleys he'd encountered. As they lingered over coffee, he blurted, "I'm really pleased you came."

She glowed. "I realize that coming might complicate your investigation; but I have never missed anyone as much as I missed you." A faraway look came to her eyes. "After you left Chicago, I realized that I lost Angelia over three years ago.... Harry, I was lonely for you, in ways that I've not felt in many years."

He reached across the table and touched her hand. "I feel good about you, too."

She shivered. "Can we go to the food store now?"

Forty-five minutes later, they were walking in the aisles of the grocery store, with Harry pushing the loaded shopping cart.

Lydia observed, "This will be all we need for several days." She opened her purse. "I'll pay for the groceries."

"Not on your life." Harry pushed the basket into the checkout line and pulled out his wallet.

In a few moments, they were headed to the trailer camp, loaded with slightly more than sixty dollars worth of food.

They brought the groceries inside and stored them in the pantry. Afterwards, they watched prime time television.

After the late news, Harry told Lydia of his sleeping arrangements. "You take either of the beds. I'll sleep in the over-the-cab bed."

Lydia stepped close and gazed into his eyes. "We can both sleep in the bedroom."

He took her into his arms.

She cuddled against his chest and whispered, "I was afraid you would not let me stay." She felt his searching fingers on her back and hips. With quick, deft movements she unpinned the bun, allowing her hair to swing free about her shoulders.

Harry buried his face in her soft, black hair.

The world outside the camper did not exist for the lonely man and woman, as their individual needs merged into an unspoken willingness...too long delayed.

18

Tracking the Killers

Harry and Lydia climbed into bed naked, and he ejaculated immediately.

His premature response did not perturb her. She whispered in his ear, “Hold me, Harry. There will be more.”

She was right; afterwards, they slept.

Harry awoke at dawn, recalling the exuberant experience of the evening before. Sunlight crept underneath the camper’s closed window curtain, casting soft light on the naked pair. Harry looked at Lydia, sleeping with her head resting on his extended arm, cramping his muscles. He tolerated the discomfort for fear that moving might awaken her. In the growing light, he studied her tan skin, her square frame, her inverted navel, and her symmetrical breasts, with dark brown, erect nipples. He pulled the sheet over her.

She opened her eyes, leaned over, and kissed his cheek. “What would you like for breakfast?”

“Bacon and eggs sounds about right.”

While Lydia cooked, Harry shaved and dressed in slacks, a white sport shirt, and slip-on shoes. The aroma of frying bacon and fresh coffee filled the camper.

After breakfast, while Lydia showered, Harry walked to the newsstand and bought the morning edition of *The Atlanta Constitution*.

Lydia finished her shower and dressed in a cream-colored cotton skirt, white blouse, and oxford shoes. She twisted the long black hair into the bun and slipped on the gold rim glasses. She came into the breakfast nook, where Harry was sitting and reading the paper, and asked, "May I turn on the television?"

Harry hesitated for a second and glanced at the TV. "Let that be the last time you ask my permission to do anything. Is that clear, young lady?"

She teased him by lowering her head in a gesture of obedience. "Yes, Harry."

She tuned the television to a local news station and noticed Harry frowning at something in the paper; she leaned over his shoulder and saw a single-column picture of a teenage girl, with the caption: HAVE YOU SEE THIS GIRL? The fourteen-year-old girl had disappeared from Carmel, Georgia, ninety miles from Atlanta.

Harry mumbled, "Such a shame that children disappear."

Lydia saw the sad expression in Harry's eyes and felt a warm glow in her chest. She knew from his attitude that Harry would not stop looking for the people who had murdered her child. She stepped into the bedroom and straightened the sheets, not wishing to intrude into his thoughts.

From the breakfast table, Harry called, "Lydia, I have a hunch about how we might look for Dalton and Sanders. It is a long shot, but it is the only shot we have."

He stepped into the bedroom with her and explained, "If they came to Atlanta within the last two weeks, they will have put over one thousand miles on their car. People who own expensive cars usually take very good care of them, with regular servicing. We might be able to find Sanders and Dalton by finding a blue Lincoln with a Louisiana license number. If they are persnickety, they'll service the car at a Lincoln dealership."

Moments later, before they drove out of the park, Harry stopped at the public telephone and tore out a yellow page from the Atlanta Phone Directory and showed it to Lydia, saying, "There are four Lincoln automobile dealers in Atlanta; one is not far from here. We'll

try it first and pretend to be a couple looking to buy a new car.”

Twenty minutes later, slowed by the rush hour traffic, Harry pulled the rented car into the Lincoln dealership, motioned for Lydia to follow, and walked toward the salesman coming out of the showroom to meet his prospective customers. Harry held out his hand toward the salesman. “My name’s Tappin.” He motioned toward Lydia. “This is Mrs. Tappin. We’re shopping for a car.”

The salesman beamed, introduced himself, and asked, “What do you have in mind, Mr. Tappin?”

“We’re interested in a Lincoln Towncar.”

“Step into the showroom out of the heat, we may have a car that interests you.”

Four luxury automobiles sat in shiny silence, with untarnished tires resting on white sheets of paper. Harry looked over the automobiles and turned to Lydia and, making sure the salesman could hear, commented, “I realize that neither of these cars is blue, but how do they look otherwise, my dear?”

Not knowing what Harry wanted her to say, Lydia opened the driver’s door of the first car, looked inside, and slammed the door. “As you said, they’re not blue.”

Like a hen-pecked husband at the end of his patience, Harry turned to the salesman. “Blue is the only color for us. How can we manage a blue Lincoln?”

“We can custom order the car.”

Harry tilted his head. “Well, that’s a possibility. But I wouldn’t order one unless I could see the color on a car. You know how it is; the color in a book is not the same as it will be on the car. Would you happen to know of a Lincoln owner whose car is this color?”

The salesman had a hot prospect; if he could get past the color barrier, he could sell a \$35,000 car. He pulled down his reference books, turned to the color codes, and opened a brochure to a blue Lincoln. “Is this what you have in mind?”

Harry only glanced at the brochure before he handed it to Lydia and winked.

She pretended to study the pictures. “That’s the color. But I’d

like to see it on a car before we order it.”

The salesman pounced. “I know of a Lincoln this color.”

“I don’t want to bother anyone,” Harry answered.

The elated salesman said, “Oh, you won’t be a bother. Make yourselves comfortable, while I check our service department records. If I find what I’m looking for, I’ll telephone the owner and ask permission for you to see his car.”

Harry and Lydia sat next to each other on a plush waiting room settee, sipping hot coffee from paper cups, playing the part of prospective customers. Harry commented, “I can’t believe anything could be so easy, Lydia. Just goes to show you: sometimes, a man can make a job more difficult than it is.”

She asked, “You are thinking that the couple from New Orleans may have used this company for service on their car?”

“Exactly,” Harry answered. “If this company serviced their car, they will have a record of it; if he doesn’t, we’ll try the other dealerships in Atlanta. As I said, this is a long shot, but one worth taking. Here comes the salesman.”

The salesman walked toward them, holding a three-by-five index card. “Mr. Tappin, a man with a car from Louisiana brought his blue Lincoln in for service just last week; he won’t answer his phone now, but here is his address and phone number. I’m sure he won’t mind if you call him.”

Harry accepted the card. “May I have your business card? We’ll ask for you, when we come back.”

The salesman was so eager for the sale that he forgot to ask the couple for a phone number or address. He stood in the showroom watching Harry and Lydia leave, thinking how fortunate that his dealership kept such good service records.

After following an Atlanta street map, Harry drove in front of a row of newly constructed condominiums, not far from the interstate circling Atlanta. Lydia spotted the address first, and Harry drove past the house. A blue Lincoln with a Louisiana license sat in the driveway. “That’s them,” Harry calmly said, unaware that he was squeezing the steering wheel.

Lydia glared at the car, knowing that the people who had killed her daughter were only a few yards away.

Harry patted her leg. "I know this is hard on you. Now that we've found Sanders and Dalton, I'll take you back to the camper to get some equipment that I need. I'll come back here after dark." He did not wait for Lydia to answer, but drove around the block to the street behind the condominium, where a construction crew was working on another series of apartments. A framed, roofed building sat directly behind where the killers lived. "This is what I am looking for," he said, watching Lydia from his side vision.

She remained quiet during the drive back to the RV park.

He let them inside the camper.

Lydia remained moody, as if in deep thought, and watched Harry remove the electronic listening gear from the closet.

He placed the equipment on the dining room table and tested it. Satisfied that everything worked, he said, "Lydia, I intend to commit a crime tonight. If you stay with the camper, you won't be implicated if I'm caught."

"What are you intending to do?"

"I intend to listen to the private conversations between Sanders and Dalton. This is how I made the tape that I brought to you in Chicago. Nothing that I record can be used as evidence, but we need to know what they are doing in Atlanta."

Lydia's tone was flat, unemotional. "I'll go with you." She watched him retrieve a shoebox, which she assumed contained more listening equipment.

Harry loaded the gear and the shoebox into the car and took Lydia to lunch. While eating, he said, "We can't start our stakeout until after dark. To take our mind off what we are planning, let's visit some of Atlanta's historic places and have a nice supper. We'll go to the condominium after dark."

She nodded and walked to the car.

Hot July days are long enough, but waiting for time to pass adds length to the day. They took in some of the Civil War sights, visited Stone Mountain, and spent time at the city zoo. To pass the time

more comfortably, they strolled through a cool shopping mall and spent two hours in a movie.

While in the mall, they ate supper in a sit-down restaurant and arrived back at the camper at 7 p.m. Darkness finally drove the last of the July sun out of the sky, and at 9 p.m., Harry drove past the condominium. The Lincoln sat in the driveway; light shined through the draped front windows.

“Look’s like they are home, Lydia.”

She remained silent but stared at the lighted windows. She felt warm toward Harry because he tolerated her somber mood, brought on by inexpressible hate.

Harry drove around the corner and parked on the street behind the condominium, in front of a partially finished two-story house. An alley separated the new from the occupied condominiums. He told Lydia, “The utility company has not hooked up the street lights, but the moon and stars will give us light enough to see. We’ll set up the equipment on the second floor at a window facing the alley.”

Harry exercised no caution with regard to noise and he showed no fear of being seen. The moon and stars cast shadows, as the couple walked from the car into the framed building. The odor of fresh-cut pine lumber permeated the air. With Lydia following, he carried the electronic gear to a second floor, rear bedroom, and fixed the sensitive microphone to the unfinished windowsill. A carpenter’s workbench provided a table on which to place the electronic gear. He turned on the battery power.

Calmly, he said, “From the lights and the only noise I can hear, I’m think they are downstairs watching television.” He looked at his watch. “It is almost ten; they should go upstairs to the bedrooms soon.” He put on earphones and tuned the amplifier. After listening for fifteen minutes, he said, “The television noise went off.”

Lydia leaned forward. “The second floor lights came on.”

After listening for several more minutes, Harry grinned at Lydia so broadly the moonlight sparkled against his white teeth. “I recognize their voices; we’ve got Sanders and Dalton.” He removed the headphones and handed them to Lydia. “You listen while I go check

their car.”

Lydia’s hands trembled with excitement. “Don’t stay gone too long; it’s scary here.” She adjusted the headphones against her ears and heard the voices of a man and woman. She turned to tell Harry that she could hear, but he was gone.

Harry went to the rental car and got the last of Robert Frank’s bombs. Fastening the bomb underneath the car would insure that Dalton and Sanders would pay the ultimate price for killing Lydia’s daughter. He went to the alley separating the new buildings from the old and slipped across the open space. He paused in the shadows and glanced up, toward Lydia’s window; he saw her unmoving form near the window.

With the earphones tight against her ears, Lydia listened to the conversation between Dalton and Sanders.

Dalton said, “I’m going to Phoenix City tomorrow, to get the fifth girl. You want to come along?”

Sanders answered, “What time should we leave?”

“If we leave by ten, we’ll be in Phoenix City around noon. There’s a mall on the edge of town where the kids hang out. We’ll have no trouble finding a girl. With you along, it’ll be easier. We can pick her up and be back at the farm before dark. I’ve rented a van to be delivered in the morning.”

Lydia struggled to control her anger; she wanted to claw the faces of the man and woman who had killed her child.

She heard Dalton say, “After the payoff from these five girls, I hope the Nevada syndicate wants more.”

Sanders responded, “It is so easy, especially with the nurse keeping the kids in limbo with dope.”

The voices in Lydia’s earphones faded. She saw the lights in the condo go off, and heard Harry coming up the unfinished stairs. Wide-eyed and almost in tears, she told him, “They are planning to get another girl tomorrow. They have four girls on a farm, where a nurse

keeps them sedated. Can we stop them?"

Even in the dark, Harry could see the distress in Lydia's eyes, and he heard the frantic pathos in her voice. Before answering, he started putting away the electronic gear. Then, he paused, took her in his arms, and whispered, "We'll stop them, Lydia, but if they suspect we are on their trail, they may abandon or kill the children. Let's go to the camper and decide what to do."

19

Witnessing a Kidnapping

Harry realized that what Lydia had heard of the conversation between Sanders and Dalton had disturbed her.

During the drive toward the camper, she gazed out of the car's side window, as if she didn't want Harry to see her contorted face. Upon arriving at the camper, without speaking, Lydia went into the bathroom.

While alone, Harry listened to the tape, regretting that he had not protected Lydia from such brutal conversation; however, he decided she should know about the people they were dealing with. As Lydia came out of the bathroom, he switched off the recorder.

She stood behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Listening to that man and woman talk made me want to kill them." She pressed her fingers into his skin.

Harry stood, put his arms around her, and looked into her eyes. Crying had added a red hue to the whites. "You are a mother struggling to understand the tragic death of your child. Do you want to go back to Chicago or see this through with me?"

She put her palms on his chest and tried to squeeze the tears from her eyes. Determination punctuated her words. "I'll stay."

Harry slid his hands from her shoulders to her hips and spoke like an experienced detective. "The only way we can find and rescue the children is to follow that man and woman to Phoenix City and to

the farm.”

She raised her voice, “You mean we can’t stop them from taking a child?”

“If we stop them now, we may never find the other children.”

“Oh. I never thought of that.”

“In addition,” Harry continued, “Dalton and Sanders have been in Atlanta only about two weeks. They did not have time to arrange for a place to keep sedated girls; someone must have helped them. This whole business smells of organized crime.”

“What shall we do?”

“Let’s follow Dalton and Sanders tomorrow. Afterwards, we’ll inform the police. To make certain that the police will take us seriously, we need proof about what we report.... From what you heard and what is on the tape, they have taken other girls. If girls have disappeared from this region over the past two weeks, the newspaper will have stories about their disappearance.

“The library is closed this late, but we may be able to access the newspaper files with a computer. I’ll drive over to the Atlanta airport as see if they have computer lines for patrons.” Harry secured the laptop computer from the closet and started to leave.

She bounded after him. “I’m going with you.”

They arrived at the Atlanta airport at midnight and walked along the concourse and found a row of telephones designed for customers who use computers while in transit. Harry plugged the computer into the telephone line, secured access to the newspaper’s electronic library, and asked for stories about missing children published within the past two weeks. Seconds later, he had twelve stories stored on his hard disk. He disconnected the computer and told Lydia, “We’ll go to the camper and study the files.”

At the camper, Harry pulled up the computer files on the missing children. Five girls and four boys were from states other than Georgia; one girl was from Atlanta; two were from nearby towns. To the list of three Georgia girls, he added the girl whose disappearance had been reported in the most recent edition of the morning newspaper. He leaned away from the computer.

Lydia observed him relax. “You look like the proverbial cat with a canary stuck in its mouth.”

“Counting the girl in today’s paper, four girls have been reported missing from towns within 100 miles of Atlanta.” He showed her the highway map of Georgia. “Carmel is eighty miles northwest of Atlanta, Milledgeville is southeast, Columbus is south, and Augusta is east. These towns ring Atlanta. It seems statistically unlikely that four girls of similar ages would be missing within two weeks of each other from such a limited area.”

Lydia sadly said, “Young people can be lost so easily.”

“Evil people find ways to profit off children,” he added.

“Can we do anything about it?”

“One way or another, we’ll stop Sanders and Dalton.”

Before dawn, Harry eased into the bathroom, shaved, and dressed in khaki pants, a sports shirt, and walking shoes. He put on the coffee and started to fry bacon. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Lydia slip into the bathroom. He noticed that she was wearing slacks, a blouse, and walking shoes. A narrow, white ribbon held her bouncy ponytail; a touch of makeup highlighted her cheeks and lips.

He finished placing strips of bacon across a paper napkin to soak grease and, when she came out of the bathroom, asked, “Ready to eat?”

She twisted onto a chair. “What time shall we leave?”

“Right after breakfast.”

The drive to the condominium required twenty minutes. Harry parked two blocks from the blue Lincoln, but near enough to observe anyone entering or leaving the condo. July sun drilled shafts of light through the trees. Forty minutes later, he pointed through the windshield. “There’s the van. It’s orange and white, from Atlanta Van Rental, with a Georgia tag: TOL-897.”

An enclosed delivery van, pulling a second car, parked in front of the condo. The driver got out, walked to the condo, and rang the doorbell.

Jerry Dalton opened the door and signed for the van.

The driver went back to the street, unhooked his service vehicle, and left.

Moments later, Sanders and Dalton came out and drove away.

Harry cranked the rental car and followed.

When they reached the bypass around Atlanta, he commented, "This is the highway to Phoenix City. We'll keep them in front of us by several minutes."

The tension of following the suspects prevented Harry and Lydia from enjoying the picturesque countryside.

Finally, after what seemed like at least two hours, Harry followed the van off the highway into a mall parking lot, on the eastern outskirts of Phoenix City. The colonial brick and glass structure covered almost fifty acres. Saturday afternoon shoppers swarmed. Harry and Lydia parked far enough from the van to avoid being noticed. They saw Dalton and Sanders disappear inside the mall.

Harry said, "Let's find a spot inside from where we can watch their van."

The mall entrance opened into a glass-covered food court, filled with about two hundred people sitting at tables and eating fast food. To blend with the crowd, Harry bought a couple of hot dogs and soft drinks and herded Lydia to a table near the door. "From here, we can watch their van if they decide to leave. Incidentally, don't feel obligated to eat this food, Lydia. It look's too greasy."

Lydia took one bite. "I'm too excited to eat."

Harry touched her arm. "Sanders and Dalton are the couple sitting at the table nearest the taco serving line."

Lydia flushed red and almost spilled her drink.

Moments later, the matinee ended at six theaters. Teenagers spilled into the food court and formed lines at the concessions. Music blaring from ceiling speakers and youthful chatter sounded like a rock concert.

Harry and Lydia watched Dalton walk away from Sanders and nonchalantly join a line of rambunctious teenagers, waiting to place food orders.

Dalton's acid-treated jeans and multicolored, open-neck shirt

made him look like an older adolescent. His gym shoes scuffed against the tiled floor, as he meandered among the crowd, with his hands crammed into his pockets. Ignored by the hyperactive teenagers, with the skill of a surgeon, Dalton cut a path toward a girl standing alone.

She was wearing a simple, cotton dress that reached to her knobby knees. The dress's square neck showed white skin; slightly mounding breasts suggested an age of no more than thirteen. Every few seconds, she flipped her head to swing her shoulder-length, yellow hair away from her freckled face. Pink rouge on her cheeks clashed with her dress. Self-conscious, as the serving line inched forward, she shifted her clutch purse from one hand to the other and folded and unfolded her spindly arms.

Dalton stopped behind the flaxen-haired girl, standing close enough for her to notice him. When she turned around, he looked directly into her green eyes and smiled.

She blushed and managed a polite grin, as she turned to the clerk and ordered a medium drink and hotdog.

Dalton placed an order and followed the girl to a table on the edge of the crowd. He nodded at Sanders, waiting nearby.

Ruby's tight jeans, her red, western style shirt, and gym shoes could not disguise her middle age. She fixed her gaze on the drama unfolding between Dalton and the unsuspecting child. Occasionally, she glanced around the food court, as if watching for anyone approaching the girl and Dalton, such as the child's parents or friends.

From their table, thirty steps away, Harry and Lydia continued watching.

Dalton talked to her, and she nervously swung her hair over her shoulders. She sucked on the straw in her drink, and her face stayed red. Dalton said something and pointed. The girl turned toward the theater marquee, as if trying to read the time on a large clock. During the three seconds she was looking away, Dalton dropped something into the child's drink. When the girl turned back around, she took a bite of her sandwich and sucked up several swallows from her cup. Dalton kept talking so the girl would continue eating and drinking.

As soon as the girl put down her empty cup, Dalton turned toward Sanders and nodded. Sanders started toward the exit.

Harry leaned over to Lydia and whispered, "Sanders is going for the van. Let's get to the car." The swish of Lydia's slacks told him that she was following. As they climbed into the car, Harry explained, "Dalton drugged the girl." He pointed through the window. "Sanders stopped the van at the food court door."

Lydia almost shouted, "There comes Dalton with the child!"

Dalton emerged from the mall, with his arm tucked around the girl supporting her. Her legs buckled, and her eyes opened and closed, as if she were dizzy or about to vomit.

To an observer, a young man was helping a sick girl to a van driven by an older woman. Everything appeared innocent.

Dalton maneuvered the girl into the van's side door, climbed in beside her, and slid shut the door.

Sanders drove the van to the freeway.

Again, the trip back to Atlanta seemed never to end.

Lydia angrily commented, "Harry, it is unbelievable that a man can walk into a shopping center and kidnap a child in daylight."

20

Finding the Hideout

Harry and Lydia narrowed the distance between the rental car and the van when they merged into Atlanta's beltway traffic. "Are we near any exits from the freeway?" Harry asked.

Lydia referred to the folded map in her lap. "We should be coming up on an exit for Leachville."

Harry peered ahead. "I see the overpass. The van's brake lights flickered, like Dalton and Sanders might take the exit." He slowed and followed the van off the freeway and turned left at the service road's intersection. He saw the van two blocks away and increased the car's speed. "It'll be dark soon; we could lose them." He tried to hide the tension in his voice. If lost, finding the van after dark would be difficult. "See if any secondary roads lead off this road."

"There's an intersection a couple of miles in front of us. The road we are on continues north, to a town fifteen miles away. The east and west roads go into the countryside; there's not a town for twenty or thirty miles." She, too, sounded anxious.

He patted her leg reassuringly. "We're doing all right."

The van disappeared around a sharp curve. When Harry approached the intersection, he didn't see the van on the straight stretch of highway.

Dalton and Sanders had turned either east or west.

He looked east and saw a line of cars waiting for construction

crews to give permission for traffic to move. He said, "If the van turned right, we could see it. We'll take the west road." He turned left onto a narrow, asphalt road.

Lydia strained to find the van. "Have we lost them?"

"They have to be on this road; we'll find them." Was he attempting to reassure himself or Lydia?

Five miles into the countryside, Harry slowed the car at the bottom of a steep decline and turned sharply onto a single lane, concrete bridge, with three feet high abutments.

Lydia glanced out of the window, over the abutments. "What a beautiful stream; it's like a picture postcard."

Harry concentrated on driving across the antiquated bridge, a relic from before World War II. He eased the car off the bridge onto a gravel road, which carried them up and down a series of hills, treeless due to clear-cutting. At one point, the dusty road crossed a meadow and curved to the top of yet another hill, now covered with beautiful Georgia pine and hardwood trees; then, the road curved back to the left. Where the road curved, a lane continued straight, passed under a stone arch, and ended in the driveway of an antebellum house.

Lydia commented, "That house reminds me of a Civil War movie." She studied the white, two-story structure, with a porch extending across the front. Four columns supported the second floor balcony. Lydia exclaimed, "There's the van, Harry!"

Harry continued driving away from the house. "We might draw their attention if we stop too soon. Look at the map and see where this gravel road leads."

Lydia traced her finger on the map. "It winds west for several miles and joins a blacktop, which leads to Atlanta."

"Good. The roads make a circle around the farm. Dalton and Sanders have only two ways in or out. Let's check the road from here to the blacktop. We'll come back after dark."

A few miles away, where the gravel road intersected the blacktop, Harry parked on the side of the road and brought the electronic equipment from the trunk to the back seat. He heard Lydia crunching in the gravel beside him.

“I need to find a toilet, Harry. Can I step off the road?”

“Sure. It’s almost dark. No one will see you.”

Lydia walked into the woods.

Harry finished testing the electronic gear, stepped to the side of the car away from Lydia, and relieved himself. He did not notice Lydia standing at the rear of the car, watching.

She chuckled, “That’s a relief, isn’t it.”

Embarrassed, Harry agreed.

Dark was moments away; moon and stars began to shine. The valley was quiet and, for July, the temperature was surprisingly cool. The smell of dust permeated the air. From deep in the forest, an owl hooted.

Lydia climbed into the passenger side of the car.

Harry sat in the driver’s seat, but hesitated to start the car. He affectionately touched her arm. “How are you doing?”

She placed her hand over his. “I’m nervous.”

“We’ll drive almost to the house and walk near enough to pick up sounds from inside. We need to know their next move.”

Harry started the car and eased along the gravel road, moving slow to avoid stirring too much dust. Moonlight reflected on the roadbed.

When he arrived at the last turn before approaching the house, he turned off the headlights and stopped. “I see an old logging trail where I can park the car off the road without getting stuck. We’ll back into the bushes, out of sight. We are about two hundred yards from the house.”

Carefully, without racing the motor, Harry maneuvered the car backward, turning the wheels sharply, swinging the back bumper into the brush. “Not even the car’s dome light will show from this position. We’ll have to carry the gear closer.” He got out and loaded the battery pack and instruments under his arms. He asked Lydia, “Can you carry the tape recorder?”

She answered by picking up the recorder. “I’m ready.”

“We’ll walk along the road until we get close enough to use the gear. Don’t talk above a whisper.”

They crunched along the gravel, moving steadily toward the house, and slipped under the arch over the entrance. When it seemed to Lydia that Harry was planning to walk straight into the house, he stopped and leaned to Lydia's ear and whispered. "We'll hide behind the van."

Lydia cat-walked behind him.

Harry switched on the listening device and tuned the frequencies to pick up human voices. When he found the correct tuning positions, he turned on the recorder and winked at Lydia. He raised the earphones so she could lean her head near and listen with him.

They heard a man ask, "How about a drink?"

Another man's voice answered, "Whiskey for me; that trip to Phoenix City wore me out."

Harry whispered to Lydia, "That's Dalton talking."

They heard a woman say, "Whiskey, also, Dr. Gardner."

Harry whispered again, "Ruby Sanders just gave us another name. Remember the name Dr. Gardner."

Gardner spoke, "I'll call Sorrenson, in Las Vegas, and tell him that we have the five girls. When you come tomorrow, I'll pay you the \$50,000."

"I'll drink to that," Dalton said.

Less than fifty yards away, Lydia whispered to Harry, "Gardner gave another name: Sorrenson, in Las Vegas."

Gardner continued, "Get here about 10 a.m. The pilot will help load the girls on the plane. You take a month's vacation. When you get back, we'll snatch the next five girls from Florida, Alabama, and Tennessee. By the way, the five girls sleeping in the other room are perfect for our market. The yellow-haired kid you brought today will bring top price."

Harry switched off the equipment. "We have what we need."

They retreated to the car, put away the electronic gear, and drove away. Harry and Lydia said nothing until they approached the Atlanta beltway. Then, he simply stated, "We need the police to rescue the girls and catch the criminals."

Lydia wondered how he would contact the police, but she hesitated

to ask questions.

Safe in the camper, without speaking further, Harry spread the highway map across the dining table. Along with towns from which four girls had disappeared, he added Phoenix City. Next, he studied the printout of the news stories about the other girls.

Lydia sat at the table, speechless but watching.

After several moments, Harry folded the map. "Okay, let's go to the airport and call the Atlanta newspaper."

At an airport telephone booth, Harry held his information in readiness and kept the door ajar, so Lydia could hear. He dialed the number and noted the time: 12:30 a.m.

The line opened and a receptionist responded to Harry's request to speak to someone in charge. "I'll connect you with the Night Managing Editor."

A man's business-like voice said, "This is Mark Hopewell."

Harry said, "Mr. Hopewell, I have some information about four, missing, teenage girls, whose stories your paper carried. If you are interested, look on your wire service and see if a report has reached you concerning a missing girl from Phoenix City. I'll stay on the line."

With a newsman's instinct, Hopewell stood at his desk and replied, "The Teletype is across the room, hold on."

Harry heard the phone plop on the desk.

Presently, Hopewell came back on the line. "Caller, are you still there?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"I found the blurb. I'll read it: Phoenix City, Alabama: Sandie Lou Charles, aged thirteen, has been reported missing by her parents, Karl and Kelly Charles. Mrs. Charles told the Phoenix City police that Sandie Lou was to meet her parents in the Phoenix City Mall's food pavilion, following a movie."

Harry interrupted, "I saw the Phoenix City child taken, and I know where she and four other girls are being held captive. I also know that tomorrow morning the kidnappers will load the girls on an airplane, to take them somewhere out west. Are you interested?"

The startled newsman answered, "Damn right, I'm interested. But, why don't you call the police?"

"I want you to call the police. With your paper prodding them, the police will have to investigate."

"Give me what you've got. I'll talk to my boss."

"One more thing," Harry cautioned, "don't try to discover my identity. You'll only be wasting valuable time."

"My friend," replied Hopewell, "your identity won't be an issue. If your story doesn't check out, the egg will be on my face and, frankly, I don't mind a little egg."

Harry told everything he knew about the kidnapping scam and described the route to the farm hideaway.

Hopewell said, "With these directions, the police will have no trouble finding the farm."

"Good hunting." Harry hung up the telephone.

The next morning after breakfast, while Lydia was in the bathroom, Harry retrieved the last of Robert Frank's radio transmitters, tuned to activate the last of Robert's bombs, presently attached to the kidnappers' car. He shoved the miniature transmitter into his pant pocket.

By 8 a.m., he and Lydia were parked two blocks from the condo, where Dalton and Sanders were staying. The blue Lincoln was in the driveway.

At 8:20, Harry said, "There they come. We'll take the back way to the farm."

21

Justice and Romance

Harry and Lydia sped along the route of the night before and approached the farm from the back way, on the dusty, gravel road. Near the antebellum home, Harry found the logging road, where he had parked previously, and hid the car.

Before he opened the car door, he looked around. “The brush here is too thick to see the house. We’ll have to walk through the woods to get closer.”

Followed by Lydia, Harry pushed a path through the undergrowth, to a three-strand, barbed wire fence. He pushed down the middle wire with his foot and, with his hands, lifted the top wire, spreading an opening for Lydia to crawl through.

They pushed through the weeds for another fifty yards until the underbrush stopped their progress. Towering trees provided shade, but humid, July heat penetrated the Georgia pine thicket.

Harry pointed toward the house. “There’s the air strip.”

Lydia exclaimed, “I see their blue car near the house.”

Harry looked at his watch. It was almost 9:30. Anxiously, he thought, *What if the newspaperman was unable to convince the police to raid the farm?*

Lydia nudged Harry. “I hear a plane.”

Harry glanced upward and realized that they were exposed from the air. He grabbed Lydia’s arm and pulled. “Quick, squat under the

brush and don't look up until the plane passes over."

Seconds later, they watched a twin engine Bonanza roar over the trees and land on the airstrip. The wheels skipped puffs of brown dust. The plane taxied, turned around, and rolled back to the house. Two men and two women came out of the house.

Harry spoke softly. "I see Dalton and Sanders; the other man and woman must be Gardner and the nurse."

Harry and Lydia watched the pilot climb out of the airplane and walk over to the four people. The men went inside the house, leaving the women near the airplane. Moments later, the men emerged, with each man carrying a drugged girl across his shoulder. The girls appeared to be dressed in jeans and shirts.

Aghast, Lydia pressed her hand against her mouth.

The police were not here. Frantically, Harry tried to think of some way to keep the airplane from taking off. While the plane's engines warmed, he could grab a limb, run to the airplane, and throw the limb into one of the airplane's propellers.

While looking around for a suitable limb, Harry saw Dalton and Gardner bring two more girls out of the house and load them into the plane.

Then, the hiding couple heard rotors slapping the air, looked up, and saw three helicopters flash over treetop high. Two choppers carried the insignia of the Georgia State Police; the third chopper was from CNN, Atlanta's television station.

The helicopters churned a whirlwind of pine needles and dust and landed on either side of the Bonanza, blocking escape. Armed policemen bounded to the ground. CNN's chopper landed a few yards away; a man with a television camera jumped out and ran toward the house.

Seconds before the helicopters arrived, the pilot and Dr. Gardner had climbed into the Bonanza. The nurse, Sanders, and Dalton had gone into the house. They heard the helicopters and ran to a kitchen window to see the commotion.

The sight of the police frightened the nurse so badly, she fainted.

Dalton and Sanders ran out the front door and dashed for the blue

Lincoln. Under cover of the helicopter rotors and bellowing dust, they drove away.

From where she stood under the trees, Lydia saw the blue Lincoln leaving; she shouted, "Harry, they are getting away!"

Harry saw and made a decision. He grabbed Lydia's hand and almost pulled her off balance, "Run! We'll follow them!" With his free hand, he felt for the bomb detonation transmitter in his pocket. At the fence, he held the wires apart while Lydia scurried through.

Lydia was frantic. "Will they get away, Harry?"

"No. They won't get away." A troubling question flashed in his mind: *How can I be with Lydia if she finds out that I killed Sanders and Dalton, as deliberately as they killed her daughter?*

At the car, he bounded inside and started the motor, waiting for Lydia to slam her door. When he gunned the motor, the car jerked forward to the edge of the gravel road, but the rear wheels lost traction in the soft ground and dug a rut. Trying to keep from spinning the tires, he let up on the accelerator to permit the tires to grab. The car inched forward to the gravel road and, in the distance, he saw the Lincoln roaring down the gravel road followed by a dust cloud.

Harry realized that the Lincoln had such a head start, he could not drive fast enough to catch Dalton and Sanders. He slipped his hand into his pocket to detonate the bomb under the Lincoln, determined to execute the fleeing killers.

He clutched the transmitter, but the noise of a helicopter overhead stopped him from pushing the detonator button. He glanced through the front window and saw CNN's helicopter skimming the treetops headed after the Lincoln. Harry had a reprieve as executioner. "Lydia, the helicopter is chasing the Lincoln! They can't escape now." He opened the car door and stepped to the ground, watching the helicopter hover over the racing Lincoln.

Lydia jumped out, hurried around the car, and stood by Harry, shading her eyes from the mid-morning sunlight.

Although they could not see the car, they had a clear view of the chopper, darting back and forth over the trees, following the Lincoln, making every turn and twist in the gravel road.

Once, when the Lincoln topped a ridge, Lydia exclaimed, "There's the car!"

Harry responded, "And the chopper is right over them."

Inside the racing blue Lincoln, Dalton glanced over his shoulder. Boiling dust blocked his view of the road. Rocks banged against the car's metal body, making a deafening noise. He could not hear CNN's helicopter soaring above. "I think we got away!"

Sanders tightened her seatbelt. "I wonder what went wrong?"

"Someone tipped the cops," Dalton replied. "When we get to the freeway, we'll head for the airport, ditch the Lincoln in the parking lot, and catch the first flight to anywhere."

Dalton punched the accelerator, forcing the Lincoln's powerful engine to shift down. "This gravel road is rough." The speedometer registered sixty-eight miles per hour. He touched the brakes, banked around a curve, and increased speed as the car raced across a bottomland stretch of road.

Dalton saw the sharp curve, leading onto the end of a narrow concrete bridge. Beyond the bridge, the blacktop promised freedom. He slowed the Lincoln to make the hairpin turn onto the bridge; but he was going too fast. The tires lost traction in the unstable gravel, and the car slid to the outside of the curve. He turned the steering wheel, trying to center the car between the concrete abutments. The car's right front fender scraped against the concrete, ripped off, and flew into the Lincoln's windshield.

Ruby screamed as glass shards sliced across her arms and face. A fragment pierced her throat.

Jerry fought to control the automobile. The steering wheel jerked from his hands. The car whipped sideways and crashed against the concrete abutment.

The impact detonated Robert Frank's last bomb.

The explosion shook the ground where Harry and Lydia were standing.

Harry thought the chopper had crashed, but then he saw the plane

hovering.

Lydia excitedly asked, "What was that noise?"

Harry remembered the sounds of Robert Frank's bombs. "I don't know. Dalton and Sanders may have crashed and exploded the car's gas tank."

Harry knew that the bomb had exploded, but he did not know how. The transmitter was still in his pocket. He turned to Lydia. "We need to get away from here before someone spots us."

Moments later, they were traveling west, away from the farm.

Somber and driving slow to keep from stirring a dust cloud, Harry thought, *Ironic: The man who made the bomb that killed Lydia's husband also made the bomb that killed the murderers of Lydia's child.*

When still a mile from where the gravel road intersects the blacktop, he stopped on another narrow, concrete bridge, which spanned a Georgia creek. "Lydia, I need to use the bathroom."

"Me, too." She scooted out of the car and scampered into the bushes.

Harry walked to the center of the bridge, keeping his back toward Lydia and the car. He leaned against the abutment and started to relieve himself.

With his left side away from her view, he took the transmitter out of his pocket and looked at the switch, still in the off position, confirming that he had not detonated the bomb. He stretched his arm over the top of the abutment, as if leaning to support himself, and dropped the transmitter. He heard the splash. "That's the last trace of Robert Frank's bombs."

Lydia was waiting in the front seat when Harry got in.

They remained quiet until on the Atlanta beltway. Finally, he said, "Let's shower. We need to wash off the dust."

Instead of speaking, Lydia nodded.

At the camper, while Lydia bathed, Harry tuned the television to the CNN station, took off his dusty clothes, and pulled on a robe.

Lydia came out of the bath wrapped in a towel.

Harry started into the shower. “Call me if they break in with some news.”

“Okay,” she replied.

While waiting for Harry to finish bathing, Lydia dressed in fresh slacks and shirt. As she sat to put on her shoes, the television announcer said, “We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin. One moment, please.” The television screen went blank.

Lydia sprang to the bathroom door and called, “News is on the television.”

“I’m coming.” He switched off the water and grabbed his robe.

An announcer sat at a desk, trying to appear calm, and started to read from a script. “We interrupt the regular broadcast to bring you this breaking news from CNN. Based upon an anonymous tip to the *Atlanta Constitution*, this morning the Georgia State Police raided a farm about fifteen miles northwest of Atlanta and rescued five teenage girls, who have been abducted over the past two weeks. The most recent kidnapping took place yesterday, in Phoenix City, Alabama.

“The girls had been drugged and were being loaded aboard a private airplane. A police helicopter flew the girls to an Atlanta hospital for observation. The girls are minors and their identity is confidential. Each child’s parents have been notified and are en route to their children.

“During the raid, the police arrested two men and a woman and charged them with five counts of kidnapping. They will be arraigned tomorrow. One of the men is a well-known Atlanta physician, Dr. Merle Gardner, who owns the farm where the girls were held. The second man charged is Matthew Watson, the pilot and an employee of Dr. Gardner’s. The woman is Bonnie Jackson, Dr. Gardner’s nurse.

“Jerry Dalton and Ruby Sanders, who recently moved to Atlanta from New Orleans, Louisiana, died in an attempt to escape. Their car crashed into a bridge, exploded, and burned. Watch CNN evening news for further information.” The scheduled television program resumed.

Harry started to dress. “Now we know what happened to Dalton and Sanders.”

DOUBLE MURDER IN NEW ORLEANS

Lydia gazed at the television in silence.

Harry assumed that Lydia was thinking about the death of the people who had killed her daughter. He respected her need for privacy and went into the bedroom to continue dressing. *I have completed my obligations. The double murders in New Orleans are solved.* He returned to the living room.

Lydia was adjusting the camper's thermostat. "It's cold in here."

She seemed distant, reserved. "Yes, it is," Harry responded and looked at the time. "Let's find a place to eat."

Still emotionally flat, she replied, "If you like."

They found a sit-down restaurant and spent the next hour pretending to enjoy the food and the forced conversation. Actually, neither was hungry, even though they had missed lunch. They drove back to the camper.

Harry turned on the television.

Lydia went into the bathroom. When she came out, she sat next to him on the couch and stared at the television. They watched the early news segment.

CNN's reporters showed film and provided running comments about the helicopter assault on the farm, the rescue of the missing teenage girls, and the capture of the kidnapers. When finished, the announcer introduced CNN's General Manager, who read an editorial on the value of citizen participation in crime detection and the value of a free press. He told of the unknown caller, who had provided information that led to the rescue of the girls and the capture of the kidnapers. The station manager thanked the anonymous tipper.

When the news was over, Lydia picked up the television's remote control and pressed the mute button. She looked at Harry. "Will you go back to New Orleans?"

He stared out of the window into the dark night. "No, my life there is over."

"Where will you go, then?"

Still looking away, he quietly answered, "I may drive up the east coast, to see the Maine lighthouses."

Lydia placed her hand on his arm.

“What about work? Do you plan to work anymore?”

Her question helped him forge a decision. “After Maine, I’m thinking of driving to Nevada to look for a man named Sorrenson.”

Lydia squeezed his arm. “I still have two months of vacation before my school starts. Can I go with you?”

He faced her. “I’d love for you to go with me.”

She kissed him. When they separated, she shyly asked, “Can we go to Maine by way of Chicago. I need fresh clothes.”

“Sure. We’ll start for Chicago tomorrow.”

Lydia wrapped both arms around Harry’s neck. “Then, we’ll enjoy our last night in Atlanta.”