

Cri du Coeur

M. Kenyon Charboneaux

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M. Kenyon Charboneaux

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AT THE START:

It was Carlos who began it all; Carlos who was the best friend I ever had, not excluding Timmy Teetlebaum, my psychological Siamese twin in grammar school; Carlos who was as gay as a Spring Cotillion in the Garden District; Carlos who believed with a child's faith mated to an adult's dogmatic certainty that happiness is environmental, genetic to butterflies and communicable to any human being by even the mere depiction of a butterfly, like some strange viral agent of life.

It was Carlos who plucked me out of the miserable self-pity I indulged in after my wife left me and I threw away my lucrative, if unsatisfying, career as personal injury lawyer to the masses. He persuaded me, just at a time I was panting to be persuaded to do *something* by *someone*, to open a detective agency, and he cast himself in the roles of Friday to my Crusoe, fall guy to my straight man, Captain Kirk to my seamless Spock. So, you see, Carlos did issue his own death warrant, but I'm the idiot who signed it.

During my divorce, which was acrimonious to extremes usually reached only by the pulp novelist or a Lorena Bobbitt, I let my law practice slide downhill faster than a kid riding a Flexible Flyer on hard packed snow. I neglected my clients, never returned my phone calls, missed so many court appearances the judges began to believe the rumor I'd absconded with the firm's escrow account, and prescribed a couple of suits. Well. More than a couple.

My secretary, dear, competent, anything but sweet, Elanora Maculay Barker, tried mightily to do both her job and mine, to save my reputation and the firm, and she almost succeeded, would have succeeded, if I'd wanted to be saved, but I didn't. Still, I was neither insensible of her efforts, nor ungrateful for them and the day I told her I was cashing in my few remaining chips and leaving the table a loser, I also told her that she had been a better lawyer during the past eighteen months than I had been in the preceding twelve years. I meant it.

She was thrilled that I'd noticed. I advised her to make it official and go to law school and she gently advised me that her mother had raised no scumbags. There had been no lawyers in her family since the time of Shakespeare, only honest working folk and one Nobel Prize winner and gosh, Richard, but this severance check is awfully small, don't you think? By that time I wasn't thinking at all, so I added five grand to her check and Elanora was thrilled all over again.

The next day she went to work for my worst rival, Buddy Bennett, who'd been trying to steal her from me for at least a decade. A single girl with no sugar-daddy has to make a living, she said, but she'd rather make her living with me and as soon as I stopped masquerading as an invertebrate of the jellyfish class of coelenterates and got back into business, she'd dump Buddy Bennett and his spandex clad legion of secretaries for the pleasure of returning to my employ.

She really was thrilled with that severance check.

The Bar's disciplinary committee wasn't so thrilled with me. They suspended my license to practice with an ostentatious show of comradely regret, but in the next month's issue of the LTLA journal there was a self-righteous and preening article about the dangers of being a sole practitioner of personal injury law. They

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didn't name me in the article, but New Orleans is a small town dressed up as a big city and everyone in the legal community knew I was the poor bastard used as the reason d'etre for the piece and even the American Gladiators wannabe who spots for me at the New Orleans Athletic Club had an opinion on the LTLA article he wanted to articulate over guava juice at the club one weekend.

Georgie. He thought I should sue those suckers for slander. Libel. Something. I tried to explain the law to him. Can't sue, Georgie. All true. How 'bout mental anguish? Georgie persisted.

Georgie's a true believer in the strategy of mental anguish.

A few years back, Georgie was in a fender-bender and I managed to get him a very nice settlement on the grounds of mental anguish. I sure couldn't get him anything for physical pain and suffering. He was benchpressing four hundred fifty pounds every damn day over there at the club and doing it, moreover, in front of the defense attorney who worked out the same time as Georgie, both of them being on their 'lunch' break between two and three o'clock. The only reason I got him any settlement at all was because one night they both showed up at the same place at the same time the domicile of one Harold H.T. Breaux in Fat City to purchase their respective weekly supplies of an illegal anabolic steroid/hormone combination spiced with a bit of amphetamine to give it real boost and an old friend of mine who owns a detective agency coincidentally videotaped the ensuing screamfest for me.

I admit I engineered that coincidence, which is one of the things I am sure Elanora was thinking of when she tendered that observation about her mother's childrearing accomplishments.

Georgie, though, he thought I was Vincent Bugliosi after that, or maybe God's twin brother, and explaining to him the way the law works in the real world outside of personal injury was impossible. He was not convinced. You fought for me, why won't you fight for yourself? he demanded. Nothing to fight with, Georgie, my man, I said. You can't profit from your own mistakes, I told him, a statement to which he disagreed with surly vehemence, since he had so obviously done just that with the help of a videotape and a bit of polite blackmail. Bullshit, Georgie said. Don't be a wuss. I'm a lawyer, I reminded him, not a hero. Bullshit, Georgie said (his vocabulary is a little limited). What about Vietnam? Vietnam, I said, was just another example of my propensity to fight for someone else and not myself.

Georgie shrugged. That made sense some kind of perfect sense to him.

I went to work for the friend who runs the detective agency in Fat City. He paid me what he pays any novice trainee, milked me for all the legal advice he could get on my so-called wages and when that advice pleased him, he'd let me sit stakeout on divorce cases, an assignment considered prime and easy duty and one he mostly reserved for himself.

Sitting those stakeouts, camcorder at the ready, I thought about my lost law practice, my suspended-for-two-years-at-least license and my failed marriage that hadn't simply failed like the marriages I was staking out, but had instead blown up somewhat like the space shuttle Challenger. Karyn's complaint that I didn't understand her took on a whole new meaning in light of who she left me for a bleach blond female executive with Hibernia Bank who boasted killer legs, a set of silicone titties and a tanning salon tan.

After work, when I went home to my new apartment in the French Quarter (Karyn having secured the right of domicile at our old marital abode in the French Quarter), I laid on the bed, usually in the dark, and thought about the same things until I got so bored with myself that I'd walk up to Napoleon's, get drunk, play the poker machines and think about the same things. But at Napoleon's I also talked about them.

Obsessively.

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With a succession of bartenders, many, many waitresses, tourists from Albuquerque and Seattle and Twin Falls, cab drivers born in Egypt or Iran or Ethiopia, Japanese salesman with sushi on their breath and contempt in their eyes, East German manufacturers new to the delights of western commercialism and impulse buying, Vietnamese gardeners working for the City who, in my youth, were probably the same little guys in p.j.'s I used to shoot at simply because they were shooting at me, pimps and whores (lots of whores) of all ages and colors and degrees of physical attractiveness (the whores, not the pimps), and sometimes a gutterpunk with purple or lime green hair, nipple rings, a diamond in one nostril and safety pins in both ears. If Satan had popped in one night for a Budweiser, I'd have talked to him, so, of course, I finally got around to talking to Carlos.

I'd been a regular at Napoleon's for five or six years and Carlos was a regularly seen and just as regularly ignored face during that time. He was very gay, so light on his feet, he nearly floated to the ceiling like an untethered helium balloon. Just the thought of talking to him during those years when my life was in order, my practice flourishing and my marriage happy (at least, I thought it was happy!) stirred fears in me that I'd catch limp wrists and pouting lips from him like a disease for which there is no cure. Like, well. Like AIDS, for instance.

I was waterproof in those days. Hell, I was disaster-proof and just a wee bit homophobic or else a lot stupid. But then Karyn left me for an artificially enhanced woman at Hibernia Bank and I thought that if anyone could explain this cataclysm of the heart to me, it would have to be, ipso facto, another homosexual. Elementary, my dear Holmes. I didn't know any lesbians to consult (or, at least, if I did, I didn't have a clue that I did, just like I'd never had a clue about Karyn), so Carlos seemed a grand choice, after I'd drowned long enough in Kamikazes to make any foolishness seem like a logical plan.

So Carlos talked to me and I didn't catch limp wrists from him and my lips didn't pout even when the rest of me was positively puckered with self-pity, and he turned into a friend somehow during those nights he was filling me in on what he termed 'the really real world of sexual preference and gender typing'. Carlos was well-read, marvelously articulate, the possessor of a Ph.D. in medieval French balladry (specializing in the Arthurian Cycle) and a philosophical conversationalist as entertaining, funny and disturbingly honest as Henry Miller on a roll.

Being gay, Carlos told me bluntly, wasn't a matter of personal choice. You either is or you isn't.

Like Karyn, he had once made a heterosexual marriage and like Karyn, he'd come to realize that he couldn't fool himself into believing he was straight or even bisexual. There was no reason for me to wallow around in this sludge of self-pity. I had not terminally failed Karyn and she had not cut off my dick to spite my heart.

"You see any blood on the front of your jeans?" Carlos asked. "No? Then you're still intact."

Once Carlos had explained this to me, several times in fact, over weeks of hard drinking and sloshed conversation, I began to feel better about the divorce and myself and we began to talk about other things. Everything, actually. We even talked about AIDS one night. Sort of.

Carlos didn't usually pick up his lovers at Napoleon's, but this particular night in late April, Jazz Fest was slopping its thousands of tourists over into the Quarter and a guy who looked like a Bulls' linebacker caught his heart or his libido. Before I could quite clear what I was seeing through my drunk mental circuitry, they'd left together, which didn't disgust me as much as it pissed me off, since Carlos was leaving me with a half-played game of chess I was winning and the sole responsibility for our mutual bar tab, and if it had been me, leaving with a hot lady from Winnipeg or Minneapolis, I wouldn't have been back to Napoleon's until her plane left bearing her back home. But Carlos was back, within an hour, if fact, and I was so wrecked by then with booze and self-pity that I let my curiosity override the impeccable manners my mama taught me.

"Carlos," I said, "aren't you afraid of catching AIDS?"

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"Sure," he said, like only some heterosexual fool full of Kamikazes wouldn't be afraid of it, "but I always wear a raincoat."

"What about your partners?" I pressed on, despite my discomfort with this conversation I'd been indelicate enough to initiate. "Like that linebacker you left with?"

"Fullback. For the Miami Dolphins," he said and grinned. "Guy was into water sports, too, just like a dolphin. Very clean."

"OK, OK, that's nothing I need to know. What I'm asking is, your partners, do they always wear raincoats?"

"I am definitely into safe sex," Carlos said. "If he won't wear a rubber, he don't get moi. No condom equals suicidal and I don't hang out with suicidal people."

"I'm suicidal," I pointed out.

"That's different," Carlos said with something that might have been mistaken for seriousness coloring his voice. "With you, it's a temporary condition."

"Oh," I said and that was the end of our conversation on AIDS.

It was not, however, the end of our conversations about anything else. We talked literature, politics, art, sports, social problems. We talked personal histories, growing up, family backgrounds, siblings, if any. We talked about Carlos' dreams, him quoting Jung and me countering with Freud, and we talked about the new TV show, The X-Files, which I loved (I hadn't been out of my apartment on a Friday night since it debuted) and which he thought was silly (but he watched it just as compulsively as I did).

One night, as February was approaching the timeless days of Mardi Gras, Carlos was grouching about how much he hated working as a waiter at the Convention Hall, so I told him about practicing law.

I never enjoyed the practice of personal injury law. Sure, there's money in it. Luxurious feast or terrible famine money. But the field itself ... full of whiners and crybabies who think they're totally disabled and rendered incapable of ever doing another lick of work just because they had a minor fenderbender or fell down at the grocery store and got a little lumbar strain, while responsible people like Elanora go to work everyday with only an occasional bitch despite arthritis of the neck so bad she eats Aleve like I used to eat Roloids and I ate Roloids as if they were jelly beans and I was Ronald Reagan.

And eighty-five, maybe ninety, percent of my clients weren't hurt at all, I told Carlos glumly. Insurance fraud, that's all their cases were to be rigidly honest, and it was easy to be that honest with Carlos in the dark of Napoleon's after four or five Kamikazes. I sent my clients to my stable of doctors (plaintiff whores, the defense attorneys called them with blatant disgust), and my doctors swore that my clients were severely and permanently impaired physically and/or mentally. Defense counsel had my clients examined by their doctors (defense sluts, we plaintiff attorneys called them with righteous indignation) and their doctors swore my clients were either faking or exaggerating their injuries and sometimes we settled and sometimes we didn't, sometimes I won at trial and less often I didn't, but more and more it just seemed to weigh on me as a slimy business at best, a form of legal prostitution at worst.

Two years had now passed in the darkness of Napoleon's and I could have my license back with only a minimum amount of asskissing over at the Ethics committee, if I wanted to go through that, I told Carlos, but I wasn't all that sure I did want it back and, in fact, I said, this very day I had picked up a private investigator's license of my very own and it was hanging in a nice cherrywood frame over the mantle in my apartment.

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I invited Carlos over to see it.

"Oh, honey," he said. "I'd love to see your etchings."

"Cut it out, Carlo," I said, but I knew he was just kidding around. If I hadn't known that after two years, I wouldn't have invited him to my place at all and he knew I knew so he just laughed and that was when the real friendship began that evening standing in front of my newly acquired PI license, glaring owlishly at it through the bottoms of our empty wine glasses.

"Well, Dickie," Carlos said, "looks like you already have a valid license to practice. Don't need to go get that old one renewed, do you?"

"What?" I said, not getting it, even though I wasn't drunk.

"You just spent a couple of hours telling me how much you despised what you were doing as a lawyer. Why not open your own detective agency?"

"Why?" I asked.

He flopped down on my loveseat and gestured toward the mantle. "You like PI work? Right?"

"Yeah, I enjoy it, I guess. It's kind of peaceful."

"So, why not then?"

"And what would I do for clients?" I asked, flopping down next to him and pouring him another glass of Chianti from the bottle on the monk's table at my elbow.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about clients," Carlos said, with an airy movement that almost slopped wine onto my antique loveseat. "I'll bring you clients. I've got lots of contacts from over at the Convention Hall and no, they're not all in the gay community, honey."

"I'll think about it," I said, intending to do no such thing. At least, not seriously.

"OK, Dickie," Carlos said. He reached over and tapped my shoulder. "But you better rustle up some interest in your life before being suicidal does become a permanent condition with you."

"Huh?" I croaked, startled.

"I'm serious as an outbreak of herpes, Dickie," Carlos said, but then he laughed. "Let's go to a Karoke bar, what'ja say?"

I looked at him. We never went anywhere together. We always just met, at some point, a few nights a week, at Napoleon's, and drank and talked until he decided to go out and get lucky. I never went out and got lucky. I just got drunk. Like I was getting drunk now.

"OK," I said. "If you promise not to swish."

"I promise not to swish," he said. "Where you can see me."

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And that's how, later that night, I realized that Carlos was a friend of mine and I did think seriously about starting my own investigative firm and I decided to do it. I wasn't even drunk when I asked Carlos to come in as a junior partner and he wasn't even drunk when he agreed, just sweaty and jubilant from singing Respect up on the stage of the Karoke bar.

On the day we opened 'Denker Investigations', Carlos brought in a calendar where each month was depicted as a different kind of butterfly, a pillow shaped like a Monarch butterfly for the waiting room couch and a letteropener for Elanora (who'd been impatiently waiting for the day I would rescue her from Buddy Bennett and all that spandex), with cloisonne butterflies inlaid into the handle.

"Happiness is environmental," he said.

A year later we had mucho business, money piling up in our personal and corporate accounts, Elanora was studying for her PI credentials while still handling the secretarial and bookkeeping end of things and I was, well, happy.

Then Miles O'Brian, Carlos' latest lover and a New Orleans cop, came to the office at eight o'clock of the Friday morning following Mardi Gras and asked us to investigate the death of Martinique St. Johns, the singer who had been found dead in St. Louis Cathedral on Ash Wednesday morning, dead of self-murder, and her name did not reverberate with sinister echoes nor did I hear the great bell of destiny tolling and wonder for whom it tolled or the ticking of the Deathwatch beetle in the elevator shaft. I had never heard of Martinique St. Johns.

"Never heard of her," I said.

"Me, either," Elanora said.

"She was just beginning to make a local name for herself," Miles said. "Jazz singer. Kind of a combination of Billie Holiday and Sade."

"So, what's to investigate?" Carlos asked. "She killed herself, right?"

"And why doesn't the NOPD do the investigating?" Elanora asked.

"Who's footing the bill?" Carlos asked.

"And if it's NOPD, the check's gotta clear before we do one thing on this," Elanora said firmly. Very firmly.

I liked Miles quite a bit, even if he had tried to flirt with me when we first met. My eyes drove him to it, he said. Multi-colored eyes always turned him on, he said, and he meant it as an apology. I let it go and the next time Carlos brought him to the office, Miles and I started the process of becoming friendly acquaintances. I could relate to his fixation with eye color. I, myself, melt into a booby when confronted with a woman who has those blue eyes so light they look like deep glacial ice; almost, but not quite, white. I suspect I married Karyn just because her eyes were that color, ignoring the rest of her, or the fact that there was a rest of her, and if that's true, it's no wonder she left me.

"This is important to you," I said to Miles.

He nodded. He was looking a bit wistful, kind of sad, over the death of this singer, and I could relate to that, too. I was feeling a tad wistful and sad myself, although in my case it was entirely due to boredom.

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Investigating a suicide as odd as this one definitely appealed to me. I'd feel like a real gumshoe, I thought. Like Mike Hammer, maybe. It would have to be more interesting than skip traces and philandering spouses and certainly no more dangerous, so I said, "What is it you want us to do?"

And with that single, routine question that I had asked a hundred or more clients in the year just past, I killed my best friend Carlos.

MARTINIQUE

She entered St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square just as the last Mass of the evening was beginning. The din and laughter of Mardi Gras burst through the church doors with her, but no one stirred or turned to acknowledge the commotion of her entrance, nor did they feel the bleak chill of her unintentional evil as she passed among them to a seat in the back pew on the left of the center pews which marched straight as the road Heaven down to the altar and the gold tabernacle where the Body of Christ was kept locked in, a Divine Prisoner, as she herself was a damned prisoner of an older and far plainer locked tabernacle of tulipwood and its less benign deity.

The Mass was in French, as she had hoped. She sat in the shadow of a pillar, listening with both ears and body, skin, muscle, blood and bone, to the lyrical chant of her native language, floating in its sound like a child immersed in placental fluid, resting, but not yet safe. No, not safe. Not yet.

With the approach of Communion, the Mea Culpa rang out and she bent her head, sagging in her seat, beating her breast with no force and no hope, and whispering, "J'accuse. J'accuse. J'accuse."

She knew it then, but hadn't she always known it, from that first moment standing beside Ariviste and the two of them humbly meeting his eyes in the darkness of the old mambo's porch? Yes, she had known then, too. She had always known the general, if not the specifics, of the pact she had made with him. There could be no forgiveness.

"J'accuse," she whispered again as the people around her stood to go down to the altar to eat the body of God. A very few scattered among the pews did not rise for Communion, as she did not, and she smiled thinly thinking how petty their sins were compared to those which rimmed her heart in ice and pitch and black sulphur. Not one of these good people, she thought, not one knew what a truly mortal sin was, but they would go without Communion because of unconfessed innocent adulteries or even simple harsh thoughts. They would go to Confession on Friday night, be forgiven, and once again shuffle down the aisle in reverent silence to feed their souls with God's food, but she could not. Never again.

"J'accuse." It was her first cry of the heart.

She had thought that she, too, would rise and walk down the great center aisle to receive the Body of her Lord on this final night of her life, but she understood now that this was impossible. The Host would mutate, would turn to polluted blood in her mouth. She could taste its despair, the sour pollution of moral failure and self-damnation, without actually needing to consume it.

"Je suis desolee, mon bon Dieu," she whispered and it was the second cry of her heart. Her eyes closed, her head fallen forward, she heard Ariviste's voice then, as if he sat beside her, speaking directly into her ear. "There is no escape for us, my poor Martinique," he had said. "Not even in death."

She raised her head. Sat up straight with shoulders no longer bowed forward, chin held very high. She knew his

words were not truth.

There was a final hope available to her here, or at least a final escape. No matter what they might do to her body after she died tonight, her soul would have escaped, even if only to the less painful, compared to these she suffered now, tortures of hell. They could not, he could not, bind her soul if she took her own life here, where his influence could not reach.

"Go in peace. The Mass is ended," the priest said in the singing Parisian French that she had not heard since Maman died. She wished she could go to the priest, speak with him in the language of her innocent years, kneel before him and beg him to send her to her death with a sure promise that in the fire and cold of Hell she would be granted peace. This, too, was impossible. A fantasy or a dream.

She knelt instead in the pew, deep in the shadow of the pillar, forehead against hands fisted around the garnet rosary Ariviste had given for her eighteenth birthday and waited. She waited as the church emptied and the altar boys finished the snuffing of the candles, waited for the minute, perhaps two, when even the tourists would be gone and she would be alone.

The moment came. She rose quickly and stepped, as she had planned since last Sunday to do, into the confessional.

Not into one of the two side booths for penitents, but into the center one, where the priest sat during confession. It had a wooden door extending halfway up, instead of mere curtains extending halfway down, as the penitent's booths did and heavy yellow drapes that were always pulled tightly closed hanging down to, and slightly above, the wooden half-door.

She had watched the caretaker make his rounds before closing and locking the church several times in the past weeks and he never gave the Confessionals more than a glance. She could hide safely, if not comfortably, there behind the wood and drapes until the Cathedral was bolted closed for the night and then, then she would be safe forever.

Safe, she thought, her body relaxing at the relief of that promise. Safe, but not saved.

There would be no escape. There could be no forgiveness.

The escalating roar of Mardi Gras was only partially dampened by the heavy, thick walls of the old Cathedral. She could still hear it, washing through the silent church and it was somehow lulling in its frenzy. She slept, her head resting against the grill she had often lied through to the priest

(by omission, sweet Jesus, not by commission, at least and forever, not willingly ...)

as a penitent in the side booth. She did not hear the caretaker pass on his closing rounds. She heard only the voice of her dream; Maman's voice saying, "Baby Jesus gave you the gift of singing, ma petite, Martinique"; her own voice, soaring beneath the palace ceiling in Prot-au-Prince; Ariviste's voice, "I will always protect you, my poor Martinique. I will take care of you."

In her dream, his face appeared, the scars on his cheeks phosphorescent seen by firelight or moonlight, but she did not hear his voice. Once she had said "yes" to him, there was nothing more to be said between them.

Into her dream, too, the voices of Mardi Gras intruded, the shouts and screams and laughter of children playing at decadence and pretending to wickedness.

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At midnight, the mounted police on their horses clattered through the French Quarter, announcing the end of Mardi Gras and clearing out the last revelers. The new silence outside the Cathedral, melding with the perfect silence within, awakened her. Her neck was stiff from sleeping at an awkward angle and her legs tingling with sleepy needles, but this physical suffering was too trivial to bother noticing. She hurried to the left side of the very front of the church and fell to her knees on the stone floor before the statue of the Madonna and Child.

She had wanted to light a candle here, as she had wished earlier to take Communion before she died, but this also, like Communion, like salvation, was to be denied her. Every candle was already lit, aflame with the petitions of those who were worthy of a hearing before the throne of God, as she was not.

She had thought, too, to pray here before dying, but she was unable to find a single word to say, to explain, to request, to excuse, anything. She sighed and shook her head at her foolishness. She could not ask of God for His forgiveness. Incapable of forgiving herself, she had no basis on which to believe that He would be capable of doing so.

It was simply time. Nothing else remained to her.

She looped her purse around her neck and over her chest, so it would remain on her body. Inside was her wallet with her identification and a note addressed only to The Priest.

There was also the 9mm automatic she had stolen from Ariviste's bedroom late this afternoon.

And, of course, money.

The money she'd believed to be the most important thing in the world to acquire.

The money she'd believed would give her final safety and, with safety, peace.

The money that stank of blood and brine, roasting flesh, the screaming of infants and the dust from a zombie's eye.

She wished she could plead ignorance here at the end, but she had known. Hadn't she seen it in his eyes, there in darkness and the night fragrance of the voyente woman's porch that spring, Ariviste beside her, holding her hand tightly and both of them trembling at the flowing scars of his face, the bottomlessness of *his* eyes upon them? Yes. She had.

She had known or suspected and yet she had not torn her hand from Ariviste's and fled from the porch. Later Ariviste, attempting to comfort her, told her it had been too late by then to run. It was too late once they had met him. Everything they were, and might be, became his the moment they stepped onto that porch. Too late and, now, past time.

She drew the gun out of the purse and placed the muzzle against her heart, or where she hoped her heart was, on the left side of her chest. When she and Ariviste discussed, no, quarrelled, about whether even this could be a means of escape, he had told her that to be sure and to do it right, one must put the gun in the mouth and bite down on the rear sight, but she could not do it that way.

That way would destroy her face and she could not bear that. Not her face, as beautiful, people said, as her voice, and her only gift from God, other than her voice.

She lifted her eyes to the statue of the Holy Virgin and found that she did have something left to ask of God's Mother. "Blessed Mary," she said. "My heart was never evil, my soul never willing. I was weak and my weakness

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was born of fear, but I was never evil intentionally. Beg your Son not to send me to Hell. Beg Him to utterly destroy my soul and send me into nothingness. Give me the peace of annihilation." It was her third, and final, cry of the heart.

She cocked the gun.

"And now, Blessed Mother, my last request. I beg you, don't let me tremble. Make my hands steady. Let it be over."

She closed her eyes.

She did not tremble.

A moment later, it was over.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 29TH

1.

This is a photocopy of her note," Miles said. He did a funny little roll with his eyes as he handed the paper to me, a kind of flirty wink.

Miles was the end result of some city councilwoman's idea that gays should be recruited into NOPD to service the growing gay population in the French Quarter and Uptown. He loved being a cop, took his Protect And Serve oath seriously and never called in sick even when more than half the department was out with the Blue Flu, but he would never advance in the department the way his straight colleagues would and he knew it. He wasn't bitter about it, but he was angling for another job. Carlos wanted me to bring Miles into Denker Investigations as a second junior partner and I assumed that odd little roll of the eyes was some kind of attempt at reminding me that I was supposed to be thinking about hiring him.

I pretended not to notice the flirty little wink. I looked down at the note in my hand.

Elanora read aloud over my shoulder.

"Bury me in consecrated ground that my body may escape the fate of my soul. Whatever money is left after I am buried, I wish to be used for the purchase of Masses to be sung for the souls of murdered children.' How much money was there?" Elanora asked.

"Almost fifty thousand in cash," Miles said. "\$49,945.00, I think."

"Holy shit," Carlos said. His eyes were starting to sparkle. Carlos' imagination was beginning to engage.

"What's your interest in her?" Elanora asked. Elanora's very sharp. She always asks the questions I would if she weren't around to do it for me. Unfortunately, she can also be very cold, rather like a chip off the iceberg that sank the Titanic, only blunter. "I mean, you weren't be-bopping the lady, Miles, so what's your interest in her death?"

"I don't know. Not really," Miles said. He tilted his eyes toward Carlos. "You remember that night we went to the Jazz Hole last summer with that Judge from the Civil District Court and his lover from Chicago?"

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"Sure," Carlos said. "Our legal-beagle double date. I remember how the Judge tried to hit on you and dump his boychild on me."

"Water under the bridge," Miles said smoothly. "You remember the woman singing 'Divine Lover'?"

"Was that her?" Carlos gasped, as excited now as a kid discovering there's still one more unopened present under the Christmas tree.

Miles nodded. "Ah, Dickie," he said, turning back to me. "You should have seen her. Heard her. She was so goddamned beautiful. Her face, her voice. If I were gonna fall for a woman, she'd have been the one. Skin like white chocolate. Huge eyes. Sad, but not sad, you know? And a voice, oh, like some smooth, dark syrup, like molasses on a winter day. I don't know. I can't describe it."

"You cried," Carlos said. "I remember you cried during 'Divine Lover'."

"I cried when I saw her lying in the aisle of St. Louis', too," Miles said simply. "I just couldn't believe she capped herself. Made no sense to me at all."

"You don't think it's suicide, then?" Elanora asked.

"Oh, I'm sure she pulled the trigger on herself," Miles said. "I just want to know why. That's all. I feel like I have to know why."

"And you're paying for the investigation, right?" Elanora pressed. "Not NOPD, you personally?"

"Yes," Miles said.

"No," I said. "We'll do it gratis."

"Gratis?" Elanora squeaked.

"Yes," I said. Elanora-style firmly. I do sign the paychecks around here, after all. Elanora writes them, but I still sign them.

"Gratis," Carlos said happily.

"Thanks, Dickie," Miles said. "And I want to help. Be in on this. Anything I can do through the Department or whatever."

Elanora was trying to smile, but she just couldn't get much beyond a tic at one corner of her mouth. People, like my grandparents, who lost everything in the Great Depression were never able to fully trust their assets to banks again for the rest of their lives. After surviving the crash and total cremation of my law practice, Elanora was leery unto death of anything that smacked, smelled or sounded of pro bono, expense reimbursement or contingency fees. She's had no human lover in years, as far as I know, but she definitely has an ongoing love affair with sending out my monthly invoices, all stamped in a bright, cherry red NOW DUE!. I patted her hand in an attempt to placate her and she stuck her tongue out at me.

"Oh, my!" Carlos said and winked at Miles.

"Alright," I said. "Assignments. Miles, I want to start by talking to whoever claimed up her body. It'll probably be simplest if you get me a copy of the NOPD and Coroner's office reports. I want to know who her landlord was,

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her agent, if she had one, family, men, anyone. Contacts."

"Not a problem, Miles said. "It's a closed case. I'll have it on your desk in the morning."

Tomorrow's Saturday," I said, "I want it today. This afternoon. Latest."

"Yessir," Miles said. He almost saluted. Mentally, I am sure he was saluting, probably with the back of his hand slapped against his forehead, British style. I sighed. Sometimes all that Boy Scout earnestness exhausted me. I didn't know if I could face it every day if I gave in and hired Miles.

"Elanora, open a file," I said and retreated to my private office, closing the door and hanging the do-not-disturb sign off the doorknob to ensure conditional privacy. If I don't hang my X-Files do not disturb sign (the one that says, "The Truth Is Not In Here, So Don't Bother Me!"), Elanora feels free to pop in anytime, closed door or no. Carlos, apparently, only reads Butterfly with any fluency he thinks the sign on the knob says, 'Sashay In Anytime And Let's Shoot The Shit For Several Hours'.

I sat at my desk and looked at her suicide note.

Very fine handwriting. The distinctive boldness of stroke characteristic of a fountain pen. Filigreed capital letters. Formal sentence structure, a bit awkward, as if English were her second language.

In my mind, I saw a shadow woman, like an actress glimpsed in the wings waiting to enter stage left. She was beautiful, educated and, unfortunately, a ghost. I could not see her face.

I jumped up and stuck my head out the door. Miles and Carlos were giggling over by the water cooler. Miles was blushing, his plain, Irish face turning a shade of pink usually found only in a debutante's corsage.

"Hey!" I hollered. "Get me pictures, too. Anything in the files, but I'd prefer something taken when she was alive. Maybe the Times-Picayune has some stock photos."

"I'll take care of the newspaper," Carlos said.

"OK, Dickie," Miles said.

They looked at me. I looked at them, standing by the watercooler Elanora insisted we needed, with the same bottle of water perched on it that came with the damn thing a year ago, and sighed. "This afternoon, kids."

"No problem," Miles said. He put his NOPD gimmee cap on, signalling his return to duty and I closed the door.

I sat at my desk again. I picked up the photocopy of the note.

Beautiful, talented, educated, classy and certainly not broke. And young, Miles had said. Very young.

Why would a woman like this murder herself? Why this bizarre note? If she was starting to get a reputation as a local artist, if she was still singing in an unpretentious, little known, Bourbon Street club like the Jazz Hole, where had the fifty grand come from and was it somehow a reason for her suicide?

I hadn't investigated any murders at that time (although now that's considered my specialty) and certainly no suicides, although in the past nine or ten years I'd had two friends that I knew for sure had opted for suicide as the most viable option and one friend who I suspected had he died when a train hit him as he lay passed out on the tracks on Mardi Gras night and his insurance company was never able to prove it wasn't an accident but I figured

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the best place to begin was by getting to know Martinique St. Johns as thoroughly as one person can ever know another. With relatively the same level of intimacy, say, as we know the person we marry.

I was like Miles, I wanted to know why the woman I could glimpse in her note and his description of her, had taken her own life at a time when everything seemed to be breaking so nicely for her. Unlike Miles, I knew, because of my two (maybe three) friends, who had unplugged themselves from life, that the chances of finding out why she did it were so minimal no profit minded bookie down on Canal Street would've even given us odds on it.

Suicide is like falling in love. The deepest reasons why we love who we love, and not another, are as hidden from us as those that lead us to kill ourselves. The investigation would turn up a reason, maybe even the reason St. Johns herself thought was her motive, but I didn't believe we could ever uncover the real 'why'. That 'why' is like a seed of ice that takes root in a person's heart and grows only in darkness and avid stealth. When you try to seize it, handle it, examine it, it melts in your hands, leaving nothing but a faint, oddly perfumed scent on your fingers, like the smell of sex with a stranger the morning after.

I know. With me it had been a temporary condition, as Carlos said, but I'd been suicidal myself and I knew the odor of that icy seed living in my guts. Carlos had helped me to uproot it, but I'd still never seen its true face.

I put Martinique's note under a cutglass butterfly paperweight Carlos gave me for Christmas. Moved it back and forth under the glass. Turned it upside down. Turned it rightside up again so that the handwriting was magnified by the angle of the wings.

I felt ... hinky. Yeah, hinky's the right word. Le mot juste.

As if there were a bad surprise out there waiting for me to find it and claim it as my very own. A mail bomb, maybe, nestled among the correspondence and junk circulars on Elanora's desk, just waiting for me pick it up and see my name written all over the fucking thing.

Elanora stuck her head around the door. "About relocating the office," she said.

No one had told me we were moving the office, but I wasn't surprised to hear we were. When it came to 'decor' or anything having to do with 'the arts', Carlos and Elanora were determined that I didn't have the sensitivity of a waterbug and they rarely bothered consulting me on such refined issues, even when the money they were spending was mine. "Anything else you've decided to spare me?" I asked innocently.

"We talked about this," Elanora said. "You remember."

I didn't. I couldn't. I had no desire to move the office. I liked my bland suite in the Pan American Life Center just fine. Also, this was an old trick of hers. In the old days when she was my better half as an attorney, she used to sprout that same line to cover me in guilt when I stood up my ex-wife, who was then still my wife, for one of her political fundraisers, so now I didn't say a word.

"They've finished renovating the old Hotel Astor on Royal Street. Rates are very cheap. Cheaper than here," she said. "Our lease is up at the end of the week," she said. "The leasing agent over there ran through everything with me yesterday and I recommend that we do it," she said. "It looks better, having our office in the French Quarter," she said. "It's more New Orleans than the Central Business District. It has more atmosphere. More Character," she said, capitalizing Character the way Carlos did when he talked about that decaying Creole cottage he bought in Uptown after Denker Investigations began to roll in money like a Lucky Lotto winner.

I still wasn't saying a word. Not one.

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"I'll let the agent know we want to start moving in this weekend," she said, which translated from Elanora—speak meant we were moving in this weekend or there would be blood and body parts all over Royal Street, all of them belonging to the leasing agent. "I'll let him know we want one entire floor. That will give you room for expansion. In case you decide to take on another partner," she said. "I'll go take care of that now, in fact," she said. Her head disappeared. My office door closed.

I knew that Miles was not the partner she envisioned my taking on; she was getting her license in a couple of months more, remember, but I didn't think I could survive without Elanora as my secretary/office manager/accountant, so I'd been ignoring her upcoming accreditation and her hints regarding same.

I grunted. I moved the note around under the paperweight.

"Just be sure there's room for the damn butterflies," I yelled at my closed door. "And I refuse to work in Sam Spade `decor'!"

I heard Carlos laughing.

I could also hear the investment counselor in the next suite thumping on our connecting wall and shouting, "Keep it down, Denker! You're scaring my clients!"

"Right," I muttered.

I decided to stroll over to Royal Street and take a look at the Hotel Astor. It was still early morning, the weather was gorgeous and if I was going to be spending more hours of my waking life in an office than I do at home (like most of us do God help us), I wanted to see where those hours were going to be spent.

"It's across from the Holiday Inn," Elanora said when I asked for the address.

"I can't miss it, right?"

"Well," she said, giving me an indulgent look, "it's doubtful."

Barely minutes later, I stood under the awning of the Holiday Inn and bent my head so far back to look up the facade of my new office building that my neck creaked and groaned like Elanora's on a stormy day.

The Hotel Astor was, even to my architecturally indifferent eye, a beautiful old building. Vintage French Quarter. Four stories, no balconies, but bowed bay windows and lacy fire escapes criss-crossing the front like the crossed bandoliers of Poncho Villa. Pigeons roosting under the eaves. Very picturesque, but I hate pigeons. They shit on everything, rather like the majority of the attorneys I used to deal with back in my life as a personal injury lawyer to the masses.

I could envision 'Denker Investigations' lettered in gold on the top floor center window overlooking Royal Street, a hat rack that would be just visible through the glass, and me, seated behind my old oak desk, a fedora (gray, of course) on the hat rack and a babe, wearing brilliant red three inch spike heels with lipstick to match and rubies in her earlobes and the hollow of her throat, crossing legs that started at the floor and went all the way up to her voluptuous hooters, jetting the smoke of a Player's cigarette in an ivory holder across my desk, into my face, and saying ...

I couldn't hear what she was saying. My imagination gave up at that point. I'd never read the Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe novels (although I had seen *The Maltese Falcon* on late night TV a couple of times when I was married to Karyn) so I really had no idea what such a babe would say. I knew only that she had killed her husband (for the

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insurance, of course) and that I looked like a cross between Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney in this fantasy.

I let it go. Women like that never came into my life. Even if this were 1940, a woman like that would never have sought my private investigative skills. A Truman Capote voice-alike was more the type of client I was likely to find on the other side of my desk.

I let it go, but I could still see how very smart 'Denker Investigations' would look in goldleaf on the bowed window, 'Denker' in an arch over 'Investigations'. Ah, 1940. A glorious year. More than a decade before I'd become a gleam in my daddy's eye, as they say. I'd just waltz back to my generic office over at Pan American Life, that hideously modern skyscraper, and tell Elanora to make it so, like Captain Picard of the Good Ship Enterprise speaking to his Number One.

But first I wanted to see the inside.

I crossed the street and read the sign hung on the wrought iron gate at the entrance to the Astor. Below the contractor and architect names it said, 'Viewing By Appointment Only'. I couldn't get in. A large Kryptonite lock, the type guaranteed to foil the better than average bicycle thief, hung on the inside of the gate. Oh, well.

The hotel was set over a men's clothing store, of the kind usually run by a smallish man of the darker skin and foreign accent persuasion, Iranian or possibly Pakistani. In the window of the store another sign was propped that read, 'Grand Opening The Hotel Astor', giving Monday's date and promising free food to potential lessees.

Elanora's efficiency is sometimes frightening, but rarely surprising. She probably got an early-bird discount on the rent by being one of the first tenants. And, oh, gee, just look. The McDonald's that fronted on Canal Street was right next door so I'd never have to wonder where my next lunch was coming from. Uh-huh. Lot's of atmosphere, here, I thought. McDonald's, for Christ's sake.

There was an absurdly large black man leaning against the wall next to the Royal entrance of Mickey D's. I violated, quite unintentionally, one of the most engrained rules of city living and made eye contact with him. Just for a microsecond, but that was long enough.

"Hey, man," he said, "They got a sale on Big Macs. You spare a couple bucks so's I can get some food?"

I just looked at him.

"Hey," he said. "I'm not shittin' you. I'm not gonna drink your money up. I just want some food, man."

I considered. I decided to be sly.

"OK," I said. "I haven't eaten yet this morning. Come on in with me and we'll do breakfast."

The way his face lit up under his beard, I could tell I'd just made a bad mistake. The kind that costs money. He hadn't been lying. He was hungry. He wanted food, not booze or drugs. He was already holding open the door for me and saying happily, "They really do got a sale on them Big Macs, but it's too early for 'em now. We can get some French Toast sticks and stuff, though."

Well, how expensive could breakfast at McDonald's be? I consoled myself and went in, the black man following at my heels like a faithful valet.

I discovered that McDonald's can be plenty expensive when a man eats as much as this one did. He managed a scrambled egg breakfast, three orders of hash browns, two of French Toast sticks, a carton of OJ and one of Apple

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juice and a bacon, egg and cheese biscuit before he came up for air, conversation or coffee.

"You looking for work?" I asked, when I thought he might be able to hear me over the sound of his chewing.

"Everybody lookin' for work, man," he said.

"Not so," I said. "Plenty of people on the street these days begging from the tourists and sleeping on the sidewalks as a profession."

"That's not me, man," he said. "Say, how about I go get you another cup of coffee and maybe some more of these French Toast sticks for me?"

I pushed another twenty across the table. "Get what you need."

He jumped up and headed for the counter. I thought he looked well fed enough sitting on the other side of the table from me, but as he stood at the counter waiting his turn, I saw he wore two pairs of jeans and, at the least, two sweaters under his jacket. That well-fed appearance was entirely a matter of clothing padding him out, giving the illusion of roundness to his body.

He came back to our table, balancing another scrambled egg breakfast, some French Toast sticks, a carton of milk, and coffee for me. He deposited my change on the tray next to my uneaten hash browns.

"If you want a job," I said, wondering if I was making another mistake, "I might have something to offer you. It's not great, but it'll keep you in Mickey D's."

"I went to Catholic school when I was comin' up," he said looking right at me. "You know what that means?"

I'm Catholic, but I didn't know what he meant. I shook my head. "So, what does that mean?"

"Means those nuns taught me that ain't no work is demeaning or beneath a man unless it's something illegal or wrong, like dealin' drugs or running' a string of biscuits. I'd clean toilets if I could get the work. There just ain't no jobs for someone like me."

"How's that?" I asked.

"I didn't stay in school beyond the ninth grade. I used to work construction but I got hurt on the job a couple of years ago and they didn't pay me no disability or nothing. SSI doctors say there's nothing wrong with me, but you gotta be missing a leg and an arm before they'll admit you might be disabled. I got no education and no training and no experience in nothin' but being a hod carrier and I can't carry hod no more with my back the way it is and I been on the street so long now, people just looks at me as if I was some lazy ass fool who don't want no better or else like I'm invisible. So if you got a toilet needs cleaning or a broom to push, I'll take it. Today."

"What happened to you?" I asked, the ghost of the personal injury lawyer I used to be raising his shroud in a tweak of curiosity.

"Dump truck dumped its load on me 'stead of on the ground," he laughed. "Big like I am, too, you'd of thought that kid driving would've seen me."

"Why didn't you get an attorney? Fight for your rights under the Workers' Compensation Act?"

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"Me? I ain't got no money for a lawyer." He looked at me, honestly flamboozed at the concept that a poor man might be able to retain a lawyer without a retainer fee. This guy must never watch TV. How else could he have avoided Buddy Bennett's once-an-hour, every hour of every day, commercials, on most of the 54 channels the local cable company provides New Orleans' viewers.

"Well," he said, swooping up the last of his syrup with his last French Toast stick, "you got a broom for me?"

"Not exactly," I said. "I'm moving my office down here. Into the Astor next door. I suspect I'll be expanding, too, and I'll be needing a go-fer. You know?"

"Sure," he said. "I know go-fer. Go fer coffee, go fer whatever. What kind of business you in?"

"I'm a private eye," I said. Funny how saying that gave me a twinge of pride that being a lawyer had never given me.

"Honest?" he grinned. "Well, I can't lift nothin' heavy, but I can go-fer. Maybe even learn to follow cheatin' husbands and take their pictures, what ya think? I learn real fast for someone never finished school and over forty besides."

"I think you've got a job," I grinned back. "What's your name?"

"William Washington," he said and stuck his hand across the massive ruins of his McDonald's feast. I took it.

"Richard Denker. When can you start?"

"I'm ready now, man," he said and right then the Muzak, low and not overtly irritating, cut out and was replaced with a local station booming through the Mickey D's. Somebody back in management turned it down, but not before the the local DJ, The Fisher King, caught my attention by saying, "OK. Here's one in memory of that dynamite talent, Martinique St. Johns. Yass sir kiddies, this is 'Caribbean Love' and we are surely gonna miss you, Lady. Wish you were still here, as your own song says."

Low, hard and sweet, her voice filled the room and it filled me. Like dark syrup, all right, or heavily sweetened coffee spiced by too many cigarettes and a broken heart. Like love in the dark with only a candle to light the planes of your woman's face, the curves of her body lying next to you on cool sheets beside open balcony doors in summer. Oh, it was the most beautiful, the most haunting and evocative voice I'd ever heard, and it started an earthquake in my heart. That's how strangely lovely her voice was. How darkly magic. How luminous.

"Too bad she's dead," William Washington said. "She would of been bigger than Sade."

"Did you know her?" I asked. Stupid question, but I asked it anyway. I was prepared to envy anyone who'd so much as passed her on the street, or met her once at the pickup counter of Billy Bob's Chinese Soul Laundry in the French Quarter.

"We didn't move in the same social circles," he said in a self-mocking way. "I just seen her, lots of times, down at that Jazz Hole. I'd stand on the sidewalk and listen to her sing and think of palm trees for some reason. Palm trees and water the color of emeralds." He stopped talking and ducked his head. He might have been blushing at his own eloquence, but his skin was too dark and his beard too heavy for me to tell.

We sat there, immobile and silent, until her voice faded, shimmering, from the air around us. Then we left for the Pan American building, his new life, and Elanora's disapproval that I had added another mouth to feed to our payroll without her permission. Disapproval which, to her credit, would be subtle enough that William would

never notice it, but blatant enough that I couldn't help noticing it for at least the next six weeks.

Dear Elanora.

She's the wife I'll always be grateful I didn't marry, I thought with a sigh. My dear, dear, exasperating, frustratingly organized Elanora.

2.

I left William with Elanora and retreated to the safety of my office. I hung the X-Files sign on the knob, left the door open a tiny bit, and then hovered over the crack, anxious to hear how stormy my life was going to be and for how long. I would know, within certain parameters for error, Elanora's approximate attitude regarding my bringing William in, like a stray puppy that followed me home, by the first few paragraphs she spoke to him.

"You're not going to be as helpful to me as I'd like with moving things, what with your bad back, but I guess you can pack boxes, can't you?" she said. "I don't suppose you've a decent place to live, do you?" she said. "When's the last time you had a healthy meal?" she said. "Wait here a minute," she commanded and started in my direction.

X-Files sign or not, she was coming in. I hurried to my desk and picked up the first document I laid my hands on, which happened to be the new lease for the Hotel Astor, and pretended to be seriously scrutinizing it for loopholes just as Elanora burst through the door in that cute Mother Superior Tornado way of hers.

"Richard," she said in her severest Elanora voice, usually reserved for clients late on their bills, "that man is living on the streets."

"He's staying at the Mission over on Rampart," I said, casually flipping a page of the lease. After all these years as her employer, Elanora may have me well trained, but I, in turn, know the secret keyboard sequence to her heart (what there is of it that's not primeval granite) and just which buttons to press to deactivate its security lock. Most of the time, anyway. I was gleefully certain that this was one of those times. "The Mission's fine till he earns enough to get his own place," I said. I flipped another page of the lease.

Elanora bit, but typically, she didn't stay on the line long.

"Nonsense," she said. "The Mission's nothing but the street with walls. He might as well be living in a Port-A-Potty. We've got the entire third floor of the Astor. He can stay there. Be on-site security."

"He can't live in an office," I protested, finally looking at her. "Where will he shower? You maybe expect him to eat healthy at McDonald's everyday?"

"If you'd been reading that lease, instead of using it as a prop, you'd know that each floor has a fully equipped efficiency apartment," Elanora said, and to my shock, she smiled. I stared at her. I couldn't ever remember having seen Elanora's teeth before. "And," she said, "it's furnished."

"Why?" I asked, finally.

"No idea," she said. "Absolutely clueless. Maybe for nostalgia's sake, like not changing the name from Hotel Astor to something modern and tasteless like Rue Royal Office Suites, but for whatever reason, it seems the

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perfect solution for all of us. William has an apartment and we don't have to pay extra for outside security."

Elanora was off the line and I was firmly on it. As usual. I sighed in self-pity. "OK," I said. "It's not what I had in mind, but OK."

"I know what you had in mind, Richard," she said. "But I think it's more cost efficient to give him an advance for new clothes instead."

"Oh, you're surely right," I said innocently. "Clothes are absolutely cheaper than an apartment, unless you're a woman, of course."

"Excuse me, ya'all," William said, poking his head around the door. That X-Files sign was really doing a fine job today, I thought. "Some cop left this for you, Mr. Denker."

"Call him Richard," Elanora said, taking her revenge for my sexist comment on women and clothes, "no one does anymore but me since his wife left him."

"Thanks, Elanora," I muttered.

William grinned. He stepped into my office, the Martinique St. Johns file in his large, but too-thin, hand. Elanora took it from him and, in her best secretary mode, set it done on my desk right under my nose and atop the lease agreement. I knew she was itching like a woman with a new tattoo to rip that file open and read it, but she was showing William her secretary/office manager/Richard can't live without me, function without me, indeed, breath competently without me, face, and apropos of that, she suddenly pulled the lease out, flipped it open to the last page and thrust that under my nose instead. Actually, she tapped my nose with it in mid-thrust.

"Sign here, Richard," she said, handing me the Cross pen she always keeps secreted somewhere on her person.

"I haven't read it," I objected. "I'm a lawyer. I never sign legal documents without reading them first."

"Sign," Elanora said. "You're not a lawyer anymore. Sign so I can get William into his new digs before sundown."

"His what?" I asked, pen poised on the signature line. William was still grinning, but he'd started to look a trifle uneasy around the edges of his grin.

"Execute the damn lease, Richard," Elanora said, her use of profanity signalling that she was dead serious, at the end of her patience, and if I didn't sign in the next sixty seconds and counting down, she'd forge my signature her own self.

"What's the hurry? I'd like to know the terms before I bind myself to this," I said.

"Richard, it's too close to lunch and I've got too much to do to fart around with you. The hurry is that I've still got to pack up your office and the movers will be here at three."

I knew they would, too, or Elanora would, for sure, raise hell and withhold the tip and in that precise order.

"Alright," I said, signing and dating. "But my mother would not approve." I handed her the lease.

"Your mother's been dead for fifteen years," Elanora said, tucking the documents to our new home under her arm and the Cross pen wherever it is she hides it. "It's too late to hide behind her skirts now, Richard."

"Excuse me," William said.

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We both turned to look at him. I think we'd probably forgotten him, we'd been so busy arguing over him under the guise of arguing about the lease.

"I do thank you, both of you, for what you're doin' for me, but don't you think you're maybe trusting me just a bit much? You don't know who I am or what kind of man I am and y'all fixin' to put me in an apartment and give me money for work I ain't done yet?"

"Oh, you'll do the work," I said. "Elanora's a slave driver."

"Very tactful, Richard," Elanora said. "He'll think I have a plantation mentality now."

"He knows what I mean," I said. "And so do you."

"Still," she said.

"Still," he said. "Don't you think you should run a check on me or something? I mean, maybe I'm some common thief or conman or ..."

"Nonsense," Elanora cut him off. "If you were one of the bad guys, you wouldn't bother to draw our attention to that fact and besides, you just passed the final test."

"I did?" William's uneasiness was rapidly metamorphasizing into bewilderment. He looked at me, but I didn't know what Elanora was talking about either, so all I did was shrug.

"You did," Elanora said, grabbing his arm and herding him toward the outer office. "You didn't run when you saw the NOPD at the door. Now. Let's get back to work. Enough philosophizing."

"Oh, that's tactful," I murmured.

William looked down at Elanora, who was barely tall enough to come even with his elbow and then over his shoulder at me. The expression on his face said he might laugh as soon as he figured out whether we were dangerous lunatics or only the same old garden variety he was used to down at the Mission.

"And you, Richard," Elanora said, towing William through the door, "take that file and go home or go to Napoleon's or go do some investigating on one of our paying accounts, but get out of your office so William can box it up. I mean us to be completely moved by Monday."

"Aren't you going to give me keys for my new office?" I yelled at her disappearing back.

"They're in your top drawer," she yelled back.

I picked up the St. Johns' file and took a last look at my generic office anonymously cocooned among the upper reaches of the Pan American Life building. I tried to imagine remembering it with nostalgia and couldn't. Perhaps generic and nostalgia have nothing in common, or perhaps my eagerness to dig into the St. Johns case was blotting out everything else from my imagination.

I fished the keys from my drawer, spun the glass butterfly for luck (my version of rubbing a Happy Buddha tummy) and managed to slip out unseen by Elanora who was in Carlos' office telling William highly flattering things about me. "Richard's idea of going undercover is to put on that stupid X-Files baseball cap and a pair of jeans," I heard her say as I snuck out the office door. Well, that's Elanora for you.

Cri du Coeur

I took the elevator down to the eleventh floor, bought coffee at the building cafeteria and decided to go to the smoking lounge pretty much without thinking at all. My apartment and Napoleon's were both a several block walk and I didn't want to put off reading the file for the time it would take me to get there. Hearing her voice at McDonald's had really sunk a hook in me. One roughly about the size required to land a Great White or a small whale. Having the file in my hands was just the addition of properly gauged fishing line needed to complete reeling me in and the smoking lounge was also on the eleventh floor, just around the corner.

I grabbed the prime corner of the most sought after couch, the one by the window where sunlight poured through thick and hot, wished I'd never quit smoking and opened the file.

A black and white morgue shot of her face filled the world.

Beautiful? My God, if she were only that.

Flawless skin, that even the harsh light of the morgue, even in black and white death, appeared to be as soft as refined silk and as smooth as dairy cream. Straight, black hair, that you knew fell all the way to her ass without having to see it with our own eyes walking behind her on St. Charles Avenue or Decatur Street.

Oh, yes, she was beautiful, but if she'd lived to be seventy-five, people would have called her 'handsome', for her beauty was a matter of structural perfection: high and strong cheekbones, enormous, haunting, faintly almond shaped eyes and a delicate symmetry of feature. Hers was that beauty that a man never forgets, even if indifference or hatred replaces love for its possessor. The kind that age can't weather or diminish nor the soft fat of seventy or eighty years of living obscure.

Not that this woman would ever have gotten fat. Alive, she had been filled with a fire that consumed such trivia as unwanted weight gain, sagging breasts, hair on the upper lip, moles, warts, dandruff and pimples. I knew it, staring into her huge, dead eyes.

Staring into those eyes, I knew everything about her. I knew she was a mystery I would never solve and that this was everything I could ever hope to know about Martinique St. Johns.

The morgue card gave her height and weight—'11", 125 pounds. She had been thin, then. Tall and regally thin. Her eyes, so light in the black and white photograph they seemed to be made of light, were listed as green. The coroner had classified her in curt, stock words as a 'light-skinned, black female, twenty-two years of age'.

Twenty-two. I found it foul, loathsome, that she had killed herself at only twenty-two years of age. Nothing in her life, I thought with all the stupid certainty the living bring to judge the dead by suicide, nothing in her life could have been that bad.

The Greeks believed the truly beautiful incites terror in the human heart. If, in life, I had been confronted with her in some intimate way, would I have been too terrified by her beauty to do anything more physical than shake her hand?

What would it be like to touch a woman so beautiful, to make love to a woman alight with an inner fire? Would her skin have been cool to the touch or warm and tranquillizing? Skin like white chocolate, Miles had said. Were her nipples the color of dark chocolate, then? Was the rest of her body as flawless, as impossibly perfect, as magnetic, as her face? Was her smile addictive? Was her speaking voice as hypnotic as her singing? Was she intelligent, a good conversationalist, a reader of literature or trash or both?

Was it even possible to love a woman so beautiful, so talented, or would a man only be capable of worship, of service and never intimacy?

Cri du Coeur

Was her life one of loneliness because her beauty made a wall between her and others more unscalable or unbreakable than the Berlin Wall?

I lifted my eyes from the morgue photo and saw her coming toward me from out of the glare of sunlight on the other side of the lounge, saw her walk with the majesty of approaching divinity or perhaps mere royalty, saw the magnificent hair lift and blow about her face like a flag and its tendrils curl and curve about her waist like the tender hands of a lover and, as her voice had that morning in McDonald's, this vision of her, imaginary as it was, started an earthquake somewhere in the complex geometries of my soul. Our eyes met. She lifted a hand toward me. She opened her mouth to speak. I leaned forward to listen and –

"I suppose you wanna sponge a cigarette." Big Ed Minuti, who looks a lot like Yul Brenner, right down to the thick, muscular forearms and who supervises Pan Am's computer system, flopped down on the couch beside me. "Only reason makes sense to me that you're sitting in my spot, but I thought you'd quit."

"I did," I said.

"Yeah? For how long?" Ed asked, honestly interested. He's been trying to quit since I've known him, which is a long time now. Ed Minuti was one of my first clients the year I passed the Bar, and no, Virginia, that was not when T-Rex ruled the world.

Ed handed me a Kool, lit his own, and repeated, "For how long?"

"Counting today?" I asked, holding my cigarette out for him to light.

"Hell, no, not counting today," Ed laughed, handing me the lighter. "You're mooching my smokes today. And light it yourself. You ain't pretty enough for me to do it for ya."

I looked at my watch, lit the cigarette and inhaled. Deeply. "Not counting today, nine months, twenty-two days, thirteen hours and forty-six minutes. Christ, Ed, this thing tastes like shit."

"It's stale," Ed said comfortably. "The pack's been sitting on my dashboard for about a month."

I took another drag. "Tastes like a Mexican donkey dung brand."

"Quit carping. Any port in a hurricane, right? You love it, and if you don't, then put it out and go buy your own."

The cigarette did taste terrible and it was making me dizzy, but it also tasted damn fine and I wasn't putting it out till I was down to trying to smoke the filter and Ed knew it. "Ed," I said, "you're a jewel."

"I know," he said. "You know. Even my dickhead boss knows. So someone tell my wife, huh?"

"She's still taking you for granted, huh?"

"Always, dumb bitch," Ed said. "How many guys you know even buy their wives an anniversary present besides me? How many that never fail to say 'I love you' before they leave for work in the morning, and that after twenty-four years of marriage?"

"Maybe you should get a mistress, make her jealous."

"Maybe I should get a divorce. Quit my job, buy a sailboat. Go to Tahiti."

Cri du Coeur

"That would teach her," I agreed.

He leaned over and tapped the photograph of Martinique still resting in the open file on my knees. "Friend of yours, Denker, or client? Nice looking honey, even in that mug shot. How about introducing me?"

"Martinique St. Johns," I said. "And it's not a mug shot, it's a morgue photo."

"By God," Ed said, leaning closer. "You mean she's dead? I never saw a morgue picture before. So, who was she?"

"Jazz singer," I said.

"No shit," Ed said. He flopped back on the couch again, crunched out his cigarette and immediately lit another. "Now that's what I call pretty fucking exotic. I'll bet you're investigating her murder for the family, huh?"

"Suicide," I said. I put out my cigarette, which was down to the filter, already wanting another one. Actually, a whole pack of other ones.

"No shit," Ed said again. "I tell you, Denker, I envy you. You've got a real life."

"Sure, I do," I said. "Every day's an adventure. Just like on TV. Screaming bullets, high speed car chases, seductive honeys trying to seductive their way into my pants. It's awesome, if you're into that kind of thing."

"You sure seem to be," Ed said, checking his watch. "You look a helleva lot healthier than you used to when ya was a lawyer." He put out his half-smoked cigarette and stood. "Break time's over," he said, "but say, Denker, if you need any help ever, you know, I'd be glad to lend you a hand and no charge. No bullshit."

"What kind of help?" I asked, visions of Big Ed Minuti stalking an unfaithful husband with a telephoto lens and then sweet talking the tearful wife over copies of the damning photos flashing like a suddenly remembered nightmare before my, not as horrified as it should have been, inner eye.

"Oh, computer stuff. Searches, maybe. Gotta go, take care."

"Thanks, Ed," I said. "You, too."

"Keep me in mind, Denker," he said and tromped out of the lounge.

"Right," I said, even though he was already gone. I should have told him that we already had a system even more state-of-the-artish than Pan Am's and how Carlos once used it to hack into the Navy's system out at Belle Chasse in pursuit of what he termed 'deepsixed UFO files'. That's how good Carlos was (and how cracked).

Asking Ed for computer assistance was about as necessary as adding William Washington to the payroll, Elanora would say, and a lot less understandable. I should have told him that, but I felt sorry for the guy, glued down tight to his boring job and deadened marriage. Maybe I could find some busy work for him, I thought, but then my eyes drifted down to the photograph of Martinique St. Johns and Ed Minuti became about as important to me as the debate over expanding versus steady state theories of the universe.

Why had she done it? Did it matter? Knowing wasn't going to help anyone, wasn't going to bring her back or keep anyone else from dying. Why did I even care, much less so deeply? No answer. My brain had apparently gone on vacation.

Cri du Coeur

After awhile I decided to walk down to the tobacconist on Toulouse Street and pick up a carton of Camels. I would forget Martinique St. Johns until tomorrow. The weekend was the proper time for pro bono work, I thought. Besides, I had an appointment in the afternoon with Niemeyer, Senior who was fairly sure Niemeyer, Junior was embezzling his old man into Chapter Eleven bankruptcy and *The X-Files* was on at eight o'clock. It was a repeat, but I didn't care. (I'm a true Xphile. We're more loyal than a Trekkie and a lot more intelligent than a *Babylon 5* freak [which is not to say Elanora's not intelligent]. Even now, years after the show's been canceled, I still watch my videotaped segments faithfully every Friday night.)

Outside the Pan Am building, the warmth of the sun and the rising humidity signalled the approach of spring. I put Martinique out of my mind and pointed myself toward Toulouse Street enjoying the day, the walk, my life.

It was the last time I'd be able to put her out of my thoughts so easily.

SATURDAY, MARCH 1ST

1.

"Geez, Elanora, talk about nostalgia," I said, even though that worthy lady was probably still sleeping soundly amid her cats and first editions, visions of sugarplum futures and mutual funds dancing in her head. It was a breath after six on Saturday morning and I'd just let myself into my new office at the Hotel Astor.

Every door had windows of frosted glass set into them. The suite number, 300, was painted onto the pebbly glass of the outer door in genuine 1940's gold-leaf. The front office, where Elanora would reign like a dictator in a third-world country (but unlike a dictator, she would always reign unchallenged), was still packed and chaotic, but my office was completely stowed away and ship-shape, just the way I liked it to be, Saturday or not. She must have been up till midnight unboxing my things and putting them all in place. What a secretary! What a gem! (And I say this in all sincerity, because if I didn't, Elanora would surely castrate me.)

The huge oak desk of my grandfather's looked as if it had come home, sitting there below the bowed windows that overlooked Royal Street. The light fixture hanging in the center of the ceiling was a globe of white glass, faux 1924 Art Deco, surrounded by the wooden paddles of a ceiling fan. The shades in the windows were the kind you pull down by a ring on a string, and God help me, there was even a hatrack to the left of the desk beside the file cabinets and probably visible through the window from the street.

At my shoulder, the frosted glass of my personal office door caught tints of pink and gold and mauve in its pebbles from the sunrise beyond the windows. Any minute now a newspaper boy would run up Royal Street calling excitedly the latest news of Allied victories in Europe and a huge man who looked like Sidney Greenstreet would burst into my office, gun in hand, maybe even putting a bullet in one blade of the lazily circling ceiling fan to convince me of his sincerity and he would say ...

"It's something, ain't it?" William asked, coming up silently behind me and scaring me silly.

"I don't even own a fedora," I said, helplessly beginning to laugh.

"Miz Ellie say these file cabinets got to go," William said, politely ignoring my hysteria. "She ordered you some old-fashioned wood ones and said they'd be delivered today."

"You think she can find me a gray fedora?" I asked, snorting out the last bit of laughter.

Cri du Coeur

"Mr. Denker," William said, seriously as a good politician, "I believe that lady is capable of everything short of cold-blooded slaughter, if it's you doin' the askin'. She reminds me of my grandmama. Unstoppable."

"She is that," I agreed, going to my desk and dropping the St. Johns file in the middle of its immense immaculateness. "So, how's your new digs, William? Satisfactory?"

"More than satisfactory, Mr. Denker. My apartment's right down the hall and a little alarm goes off when the front office door opens. That's how I knew you was here."

"Aside from the alarm," I laughed. "Do you have everything you need?"

"Oh, yessir. We went shopping last night and Miz Ellie even got me a color TV. She said she'll call those cable people and have them hook me up with HBO and all that on Monday." He stopped. Cleared his throat. Looked me square in the eyes and, with a not-unnatural dignity, said, "Mr. Denker, I don't know how to thank you and Miz Elanora for giving me this chance to get myself back together again, except to do my best for you and I promise you that for sure. You're real special folks, as my grandmama would of said if she'd met you."

"Believe me, William," I said, turning away from him in embarrassment, "you're very special, too. Elanora wouldn't get cable for you if you weren't." I went to the filing cabinet, pulled out my .38 from the top drawer and clipped it to the waistband of my jeans. "When I moved into my apartment, after my divorce, I had to ask her a dozen times to get the cable people out to hook me up and when they did, they refused me any premium channels because Elanora said it cost too much and I could just make do with basic programming."

"You goin' out investigatin' that singer's death now?" William asked, eyeing the .38 as I pulled on my sport coat.

"Yeah."

"You goin' down to the projects?"

"I don't think so, no. I have no information that Martinique lived in the projects or had close friends who do," I said.

"You want I should come with you?"

Just what I needed. A bodyguard with a bad back dressed in really hideous striped pajamas. Did Elanora pick those out? I wondered. Was she already dominating poor William like she did Carlos and me? I made a mental note not to be surprised if William fled back to the Mission before the end of the week.

"It might make things easier if I came with you," William said, mistaking my silence for decision making.

"Thanks, but not this time," I said. "Elanora needs you today and tomorrow and it's usually wisest to defer to her needs before my own."

"I'd say that's right," William said ponderously, though his mouth was struggling against a wide grin that was threatening to break out all over his face. "Yessir, I would."

"I'll be back this afternoon," I said and gave the butterfly a spin before leaving.

I was almost out the front door with its gold-leaf 300, William at my heels, when he said, "Anything you want I should tell Miz Ellie for you?"

Cri du Coeur

"Yeah," I said stopping in the doorway. "Tell her I want 'Denker–Santiago Investigations' in matching gold–leaf on this door and my office window; the 'Denker–Santiago' in an arch like this (and I demonstrated with my hands what I wanted) over 'Investigations'. About time Carlos was made a full partner. Name on the stationary and all that."

"Yessir." William gave into the grin. He knew 40's kitsch when he heard it.

"And tell her to find me a lava lamp for my file cabinet."

"She won't like that," William pointed out.

"I know," I said and tipped him a wink as I closed the door on his laughter.

2.

I'd skipped the autopsy report on Martinique in favor of the NOPD investigative report. Tiny and hurried as it was, the police report listed an address for her in Uptown on Coliseum Circle where just lately a bunch of nouveau riche movie stars and television personalities had begun to buy up the old 18th Century mansions and talk about turning the whole area, including the park, into a compound like the Mafia dons of yesteryear used to have a la *The Godfather*. It also listed her place of employment as the Jazz Hole down on the raunchier end of Bourbon Street, and the name of the man who'd claimed her body as Ariviste Pontreaux, her business manager, home address the same as Martinique's.

While it was too early in the morning to be ringing doorbells up on the snooty Circle, it was the perfect time to stroll down Bourbon Street to the Jazz Hole. The bars had closed down an hour or so before and most would be in the process of final cleanup; sweeping out the interior and then hosing the trash into the gutter where the streetcleaners might or might not rumble through to dispose of it later.

On the tourist end of Bourbon, the larger bars reopened almost immediately, upholding the reputation of New Orleans as the Big Easy where the party never ends and even at nine a.m. you can see a drunk vomiting into the street against a background of cheerful, foot–stomping Cajun music and cheering onlookers. I've heard tourists, and some natives, complain that my beloved French Quarter stinks. It does have a distinctive odor and one which I find mildly enchanting, composed of stale beer, not quite rotten food, that wet wood smell of hundred year old buildings decaying mellowly in the spring sun, a hint of old marijuana, sweaty leather vests and, on Bourbon Street in particular, a whisper of vomit. I've always thought of this odor as the smell of home, even though I never actually made my home here until I married.

Of, course, the Quarter really did have a stink, and a pretty disgusting one, before the City put in a new sewer system for the World's Fair (the only party, they say, that New Orleans ever gave that no one came to) and I certainly don't miss eau–de–feces wafting on the morning breeze when I throw open my balcony doors and gaze out over Dauphine Street as the sun rises, but then, in some probably very perverse way, I do. Like I still miss my ex–wife sometimes.

Karyn never allowed herself to be overwhelmed by the charms of the Quarter. Not even true love could have persuaded her to make this early morning stroll down Bourbon dodging waterhoses and pushbrooms indifferently wielded by bar employees walleied with fatigue. She would have said, in her classically cliched way, something like, "These people all look like they smell bad, Richard." But where she saw body odor and cigarette breath, I saw enhanced opportunity.

People who are tired often talk more readily and more generously than they do even when drunk. They ramble,

Cri du Coeur

but they talk. In vino veritas and all that, but it's been my experience that a man baffed to the gills is more often tight-tongued and suspicious of strangers bearing questions than the man who's just too tired to give a shit. Women, now.

Women are always more suspicious than men, drunk, tired or freshly showered after a refreshing night of sweet dreaming. God built suspicion of the commensense variety into women originally and then, like grace, like beauty, she took it, embellished it, honed it, mated it to intuition and made it her own. You're probably thinking I'm sappy about women. Karyn accused me of that. And of romanticizing them. And of being short on respect for them.

I was thinking so hard about Karyn, of whom it might, not unkindly, be said that she was critical of me because she didn't want to be married to a man, she wanted to be married to a woman, that I didn't notice I'd crossed over from the tourist end of Bourbon to the He/She bars and Mammie Carter voodoo shops end until I literally tripped over a boxy marble gravestone in front of the Seven African Powers Voodoo Emporium. Chalked on the dirty marble was a veve, probably of the protective sort, and some of the chalk transferred from the stone to my jeans. The elderly woman who'd just wheeled it out of her shop watched me with eyes that wanted to be hostile, but only managed wary.

"You gonna sue?" she said. "It was your own fault, boy. You wasn't lookin' at nothin' outside of yourself and that's the truth."

"Until your husband leaves you for another man, you have no idea how devastated your self-image can be," I said, wondering if it was bad manners to whip chalk dust from a veve off your jeans as if it were just any other type of dirt.

"That yo problem? We ain't open yet, but you just step on in, son. I gots somethin' bring her back to you," the woman said. She smiled a big, toothless smile at me.

"I don't want her back," I said politely.

"Well, I gots something I gives you to heal your heart, then, seeings how you ain't gonna sue," she said, nodding happily.

Two blocks further down I saw the Jazz Hole's neon sign still lit but looking dim and surreal in the brightness of the morning sun. Even as I looked at it, the neon flickered out. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'll have to come back sometime. I'm meeting someone just now."

"I'm Mama Evangeline," she said. "I's the real thing, baby. You kin come to me and I'll help you. That's the barest truth."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll remember that." I lifted a hand to wave goodbye and she grabbed it, bending so low over it, her nose touched my palm. Then she released me and backed away.

"You needs to be wary," she said. There was nothing sinister in her tone. She sounded like my grandmother giving me advice on dating non-Catholic girls. "You needs to keep a watch on your insides, oh, yes, we all does, but don't let your insides blind you to what's outside. Go along now. Come back, if you wants. I'm Mama Evangeline and I be the real thing, child. The real thing."

The real thing, huh?

Cri du Coeur

Well, you couldn't grow up in the Louisiana back bayou country where I did without knowing the real thing does exist, black cat bones, High John The Conqueror Root and all, but I found it difficult to believe that it existed here, on Bourbon Street, sandwiched between the AIDS clinic and a shop specializing in cock-rings, nipple clamps, spiked dog collars and rhinestone handcuffs for the fashionable S&M aficionado. But her eyes were so serious above her smile that all I said was, "Yes, Ma'am, I'll remember." and hurried away, down the last two blocks to the Jazz Hole, still vaguely worrying about the chalk dust decorating my legs.

At least the encounter had jarred Karyn from my thoughts.

A young, black man who looked as if a wolf might be lurking under his skin sat idly smoking on the steps leading into the club. His eyes skimmed over me, lighting for a moment on the chalk dust, and then turned inward again. A black kid, wearing a white butcher's apron, head down, sluiced water from the sidewalk into the street with a tired looking pushbroom.

A four foot poster of Martinique St. Johns hung in a glass case to the right of the door, a glittering banner with spangles and stars draped over it that read, predictably enough, 'Appearing Nitely!'. I stood in front of the poster, caught, held, imprisoned by her not quite believable beauty and felt something that resembled light flicker through me.

It was just a standard pose, that poster, her head flung back, her right hand holding a microphone high and close to her lips, her left hand held out from her body like a bird in flight. She was wearing a floor-length gown of blue velvet with spaghetti straps and the long, slim line of her throat ended first in delicate collarbones and then the soft swell of tiny, but perfect, model's breasts. I had been wrong about her hair. It didn't come down to her ass. It fell all the way to her knees.

I felt a real grief that she was dead, that such a treasure as Martinique St. Johns had once walked and sung and been alive, down here at the end of Bourbon Street and I had been unaware of her existence until she was past my meeting, knowing, perhaps loving.

"She dead," the kid with the pushbroom said. "She won't sing here no more, huh, Mister?"

I looked down at him and saw the slightly moony, always happy face of Down's Syndrome tilting up at me. I had never seen a black with Down's before and it struck me as obscene in some way. "Yes, she's dead," I said gently. Maybe I didn't want to scare him.

"I'm glad," the dopey, sunny face said, scaring me. "She won't come back, huh, Mister?"

"Beanie," the werewolf on the steps said softly, "get to work now."

"Sure, Bobby," the kid said. He ducked his head and began earnestly sweeping at the water again.

I went up the steps toward the darkness of the open door. As I passed him, Bobby reached out and wrapped a hand around my ankle.

"We closed," he said.

"I know that," I said. I kept my eyes fastened on his until he let them drop down to the chalk dust still clinging to my jeans.

"Been playing in the garden of good and evil, my man?" he asked.

Cri du Coeur

"Take your hand off my ankle," I said.

He winked at me, drawing his hand away. Then he brought it to his mouth and licked at the chalk dust on his fingers as if it were chocolate. Or blood.

"Enjoy your breakfast," I said and moved past him into the bar.

It wasn't as dark inside as the brightness outside promised, nor as small as its facade indicated. The wooden floor gave up the ghosts of decades of draft beer with every step. One of those old disco balls hung over the stage at the far end of the room. A vividly gorgeous woman who was really a man growled, "Allo, cher" at me from a side table and the bartender, his face the curdled cheese color of the night worker or the recently incarcerated, dried his hands on a small towel and watched me approach with an expressionless face.

"What can I get ya, Two-Tone?" he asked.

I perched on a barstool that felt decidedly unsafe and smiled, despite the 'Two-Tone' business. I hate cracks about my eyes probably as much as he would remarks about his weight. God gave me my one blue eye and one green, but this guy had surely had to work to get the gut that bulged out above his belt and below the Grateful Dead T-shirt like a cream colored sausage. But I smiled, smiled and said, "Thought you were closed."

He shrugged. "We are. But business been down the past couple of nights and I ain't here to stop you from spending your money, now am I?"

"I'll have a Coke," I said, taking out my wallet. In places like the Jazz Hole, a Coke costs more than a beer and about as much as a mixed drink, so I wasn't surprised when he said, "three-fifty" and plopped the glass down on a souvenir napkin in front of me. I was surprised that the glass was as clean as one you'd get at the Biltmore and that two cherries bobbed cheerfully atop the ice cubes. I dug out a five and handed it to him.

"So what else?" he said, laying my five on the counter as if he expected me to run a tab on it.

"Pardon me?" I asked.

"You wanna talk about Martinique, right?" he said. "You a reporter, a cop or just a ghoul?"

"Just a ghoul," I said, showing him my PI credentials.

"That's what I thought," he said, almost smiling. "A fucking ghoul. Well, you ain't the first, but at least you got some kinda half-assed reason for being here."

"Who was here before me, besides cops and reporters?"

He shrugged again. "About the only business we done since Thursday are fucking tourists comin' round to see where she worked, askin' fucking tourist ghoul questions like did I see her body or was it true her heart was blown out and layin' on a pew in front of the Holy Mother." There was deep and genuine grief in his voice, overlaid with rage or disgust.

He had loved her, I realized, but I kept my face as expressionless as his.

"Ah, hell," he said, snatching up my five and walking it over to the cash register. "So whatis it you wanna know?"

"Why she killed herself," I said.

Cri du Coeur

He dipped his head as if suddenly praying, then slammed the cash drawer shut. "How the fuck would I know?" he said, without force.

"Why'd the kid outside tell me he was glad she was dead?"

"Fucking voodoo magic," the He/She at the side table sang out. I turned to look at him and he blushed. "That's from *Predator II*, cher," she mumbled and began furiously filing her nails. It really was hard to believe it wasn't a woman when you were looking right at it. I turned back to the bartender.

"She hang out here regular?" I asked.

"That? Oh, yeah. Dusk to dawn and then some. Fancied itself a girlfriend of Martinique's, but Martinique didn't have no girlfriends. No time for them, she'd say. I gotta career to build. Personally, I think she was too beautiful. She intimidated other women. Men, too. Being so beautiful, I mean." He put my change in front me. He was blushing, too.

"Was there anyone she was close to? Any confidants?" I asked.

He thought about it. While he did, I thought about the He/She/It at the side table.

Carlos wasn't into transvestites, transsexuals or whatever this particular He/She/It was. He liked 'real' men; football players, cops, construction workers, an occasional politician or TV news anchor. But.

He also liked undercover work, so I decided to send him down to the Jazz Hole that night to tap Our Lady of the Side Table for whatever he knew or thought he knew. Chances were that he had known Martinique a lot better than anyone else around here suspected if the bartender was right and Martinique had difficulties in establishing relationships with her own and the opposite sex. The man in the evening gown and rhinestones at the side table would be a third sex, not in competition with her like another woman and not desirous of her like a man and therefore not intimidated by her or intimidating to her. And then there was the inarguable fact that most people would see He/She/It only as a freak, with his sequins, bulging bosom and five o'clock shadow. If he was a bonafide fixture in the club, verging himself on being a tourist attraction, the management and staff probably ignored him the way that kings used to ignore their court fools.

The bartender had finished thinking. "I don't know. Other than Ariviste, I don't know. Her maid, maybe. The maid spoke French with her, so maybe. But I can't say for sure. Do women still confide in their maids?"

"Could be," I said. "So what about that kid out there? That's pretty hard, saying you're glad someone's dead. Why would he say something like that?"

"I fucking don't know. Beanie's an idiot. One of them mongoloids. He's about two tacos and an enchilada short of a combination plate. I ain't got any idea why he says anything ever." The bartender was moving one of my quarters around with the tip of his finger and not looking at me when he said this. My internal lie detector pinged.

"OK," I said. "And you never noticed anything, even in retrospect, that would give you any idea why she killed herself, right?"

"No," he said and he looked right at me then, his eyes angry. As happens so often with people left behind by a suicide, including me, it was anger directed at himself. "No. I saw her every night for three fucking years. A lot of days, too. She smiled more than anyone I knew in fifty-something years of living in this shithole town. She'd been through a hell in her past I heard, but things were OK for her now. Really taking off. She'd just signed a contract with Big Easy Records over at Canal Place and her and Ariviste were getting married in May. She was

almost always smiling."

"People smile through their tears sometimes, as my mother used to say. Especially very private people."

"Yeah. Well. I never saw no tear," he said. He was stilling making eye contact with me when he said it, but my internal lie detector pinged anyway. It was a muted ping though. Maybe he hadn't seen anything, but he surely did suspect, maybe even know, something important.

"OK," I said. "You say Martinique and her business manager, Ariviste Pontreaux, were getting married soon?"

"In May, yeah. But he wasn't really her business manager. Martinique handled her own business. I heard her tell the owner here that Ariviste was weak. Not stupid. Just weak. She only ever used him as a front man when she didn't want to take some gig, you know, or like when she didn't want to be bothered. 'You'll have to speak with my business manager', like that."

"Did she do that often?"

"Not very," he said. "I only seen her do it a couple of times. Like when that Playboy photographer was hounding her last November."

"No agent, either?"

"Naw, she didn't have no need for an agent. It was just her and Ariviste and she took care of them both."

"How'd she come to be hired here? Three years ago, you said?"

"The owner caught her singing when she was out in Fat City." He shrugged.

"Who's the owner?" I asked patiently.

"Mr. Santini," he said, not patiently.

"Johnnie Santini?" I asked, surprised. After the Marcello family pretty much lost their hold on New Orleans following the death of old man Carlos Marcello, who, they say, set up the hit on JFK, the Santini's, originally from Chicago and by way of Miami, inherited most of the gambling and topless clubs. Carlos' kid, Joey, still maintained an interest in some of the business, but he'd recently been indicted in the Poker Machine mess and word was that Santini had set the indictment up.

The Jazz Hole was not the type of club I'd have associated with Johnnie Santini. There were no poker machines, no topless dancers and the closest thing to a sexy waitress in a g-string was the He/She at the side table, who was now humming and painting her nails. Why would Santini own a hole like the Jazz Hole and why hide a gem like Martinique St. Johns here, when rumor had it that he controlled most of the popular jazz bars on Bourbon and Basin Streets?

"Johnnie Santini?" I repeated.

"Yeah," the bartender said, "Johnnie Santini," and his eyes ticked across mine like an uncomfortable kiss. An expression I couldn't read raced over his face. Disgust, uneasiness? Fear? "Hey, Lulu!" he yelled suddenly over my shoulder at the He/She/It. "Whyn't the fuck you get the fuck outta here? I gotta close up!"

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Lulu squeaked, grabbed his purse, spilled his nail polish and exited stage left, squeezing past Bobby the werewolf who was standing in the door, blocking the light from the outside.

The bartender had that undecipherable look on his face again for just an instant, then it collapsed into the blankness he'd worn when I came in. "I gotta close, mister," he said, sweeping my change off the bar as a sort of do-it-yourself tip.

"Just a couple more questions," I said. I heard Bobby padding up softly behind me and casually opened my sport coat, putting my hand on the butt of the .38. The padding behind me stopped. Something new flicked in and out of the bartender's eyes. Respect, maybe. It was almost a happy expression.

"Ask," he said. "Maybe I'll answer."

"These are harmless questions," I said, pulling a pack of Camels out of my pocket and lighting a cigarette. I listened to see if Bobby would start moving again now my hand was off the gun. I didn't hear him.

"Ask," the bartender said again.

"You told me Martinique just signed a recording contract but I heard her on the radio yesterday," I said, still listening for Bobby behind me.

"Sure," the bartender said. "That was one of these." He reached under the bar, pulled out two cassette tapes and slapped them down on the bar in front of me. "She gotta a lot of local airplay from these. That Fisher King, he loved her music. He's

the one hyped her so heavy to Big Easy they finally paid attention and came down here to sign her."

"Can I buy these?" I asked, turning the tapes over to read their titles. *Caribbean Love* and *Tropical Pop*, both, the boxes assured me, 'Recorded LIVE at New Orleans' Own JAZZ HOLE!!!!'.

"That's what they be for, man, and you's had your couple of questions now," said Bobby, leaning his elbows on the bar beside me. He grinned, a big, white grin at me. A predatory grin that said, 'If I don't want you should hear me moving on you, man, then you fucking won't.'

I grinned back. "Last question," I said. "What's Mr. Santini plan to do with that poster out there?"

"Shit man, you want it, it's yours," Bobby said. He snapped his fingers at the bartender, who moved off to get the poster for me.

"You sure this is OK with Mr. Santini, huh?" I said, plucking one of the drowning cherries out of my Coke.

"I practically run this shithole for Johnnie when he not around," Bobby said, turning to wink at himself in the mirror behind the bar. "How's about an autographed picture, too? Or an official-like invite to her burial this afternoon? I'll sell you tickets, man. Gonna be a real N'Awlins jazz buryin', yessir." He continued to smile at the mirror, eyes riveted to himself, the fingers of one hand twirling a dreadlock. "Yep. Highsteppers, umbrellas, Dixieland Jazz. Gonna give that stupid bitch a real N'Awlins' sendoff."

"She wasn't a bitch, Bobby," the bartender said, returning with the poster neatly rolled up in one hand. The other hand was clenched in a fist.

Cri du Coeur

"Depends on who you ask," Bobby said philosophically. "Now me, I'd say, if you asked me, she was just a high yellow bitch and a stupid bitch, too."

The bartender looked at him with the flat eyes of a snake and I suddenly thought, opps, poor Bobby, without knowing why, since he seemed to have the bartender cowed or at least outranked. "How much do I owe you?" I asked the bartender, quiet and easy. He handed me the poster and shrugged.

"Hundred bucks," Bobby said.

"A hundred bucks?" I said.

"One hundred George Washington's." he agreed. "You buyin' two cassettes and you buyin' a one and only of a kind of poster and you buyin' (and here he turned that big, white grin on me again) my time," he said. "All of which is collectibles, mothafucka. Hundred bucks."

I counted out the hundred. He stashed it in his jeans and motioned at the door. "Come back any time," he said, all the ebonics, with accent, gone from his voice.

"No doubt," I said. I passed a fifty over the bar to the bartender. "Call me if you remember anything," I said, "and thank you for your collectible time."

He nodded. I left.

Out in the full, bright light of the morning, Beanie leaned on his broom, his moony, idiot face lifted, eyes staring into the sun, tongue tentatively poking out of his mouth.

"She won't come back, right, mister?" he asked as I stepped past him.

"No," I said, stopping. "Why do you think she might, Beanie?"

He turned eyes to me that either fear or the sun had filled with tears. "Well, sometimes, mister, sometimes dead folks do come back, don't they? When they's bad folks?"

"The dead don't come back, Beanie," I said.

"Yessir, they do," he disagreed politely. The tears spilled out and down his still sunny, mongoloid face. "Papa tole me."

He went back to staring into the sun and after a moment I left him to walk back to my apartment, drop off my 'collectibles', pick up my car and head out to Coliseum Circle.

3.

A Vietnamese woman answered the door of Martinique's Greek Revival mansion and we recognized each other immediately: she smelled Vietnam vet all over me and I caught the odor of innocent civilian ("No VC! No VC, Joe!") wafting from her. Martinique's maid, her possible confidant, and I doubted the woman would be inclined to speak with me anytime in this incarnation or maybe even in the next. Well, I could always send Elanora over later to interview her. She led me silently to a parlor and left me there.

It was a beautiful room, an *Architectural Digest* cover type room. Twelve foot ceilings, golden hardwood floors,

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an ocean green Italian marble fireplace, massive clusters of fresh flowers among live miniature palms, furniture and wallpaper in Caribbean pastels and, on the fireplace mantel, the endtables, the walls, photographs of Martinique St. Johns. It was a room so imbued with her life and cool fire, I could not believe that she herself would not open the pocketdoors and enter to greet me with outstretched hands and delighted pleasure.

She didn't. Ariviste Pontreaux entered and he was not delighted to receive me.

"Mr. Denker," he said, extending my card back to me rather than his hand to shake, "who are you working for?"

"Myself," I said. Yesterday that statement was a half-lie. Today, after hearing her voice, seeing her face, it was a revealed truth, like 'God created the heavens and the earth' or 'E=MC²'.

"Ah," he said. He seated himself on a wicker loveseat but did not ask me to take a chair and make myself at home. I did anyway, choosing a soft pillow sofa because it looked to me like something Martinique would have liked to lounge in on a lazy afternoon. It wasn't even noon yet and I was already exhausted.

Pontreaux watched me over steepled fingers, like a bad actor trapped in a play beyond his meager talents, and I watched him right back. He was an average sized, pecan and coffee colored man, somewhere around my own age, which is to say early 40-something, and with very unaverage light brown eyes that in direct sunlight were probably close to true gold in color.

"What are you looking for, Mr. Denker?" he asked at last from behind those artistically steepled fingers. His voice was melodic with the French accent of the islands, just as Martinique's must have been when she spoke.

"A reason," I said. "A reason why."

"Martinique never acted without reason," Pontreaux said, sounding like a man reading lines off a teleprompter.

"Do you know what her reason for suicide was, then?"

"No," he said. He turned away when he said it and my interior polygraph made a mild pinging.

"How long did you know her?"

"Since she was only seventeen years old and fresh from Haiti," he said, and now he looked at me. "I rescued her from a terrible situation, a truly horrible man, in Miami. I brought her here, I loved her, and I always tried to keep her safe, Mr. Denker. I wanted only her happiness. I have nothing to reproach myself for, no guilt in her death."

I wanted to ask him if that was so, why was he setting off my LIAR LIAR bells, but instead I said, "Tell me about it. Tell me about Martinique."

He rose. Clapped his hands. Went to the mantel and took a cigarette from a sterling silver box. He didn't offer me one, but that was OK. I had my Camels and a lot of gall. I lit one up.

"Why do you care?" Pontreaux asked. "You did not know her."

"And I regret that," I said. "But I know her music. I want to know the woman behind that voice. I want to know why she felt she had no choice but self-murder."

He lit his own cigarette. There was a soft stirring outside the pocketdoors that he seemed not to hear, but I did. The maid, in the grand and ancient tradition of maids, eavesdropping. Good.

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"Ma pauve Martinique," Pontreaux said, verbally squeezing out a tear and then, with his back still to me, he began to talk. "In the beginning, you see, Mr. Denker," he said, "there was always and only her voice. That incredible face, the magnificent beauty, came later, almost like an afterthought on the part of the Gods."

MARTINIQUE

From the beginning, there had always been her voice.

Her earliest memory was of singing: singing Christmas carols in the tarpaper shack with the white clapboard cross over the door that served for a church in the small village in Haiti where she'd been born. She was three years old and Christmas day was also her birthday.

What she remembered best about that time was her mother dressing her all in white to go down to the church to sing and telling her that the Christ Child always bestowed a special gift on the children born on His birthday. "To you," Maman would say, adjusting the white ribbons in Martinique's hair, "he gave the voice of the angels."

White dress, white ribbons and the dust of Haiti turning her bare feet white as they walked to the church on Christmas morning. These things she remembered with an almost tactile vividness, but she did not remember her father. He was never present to hear her sing. Baby Doc Duvalier's secret police, the Tontons Macoutes, had come and taken him from Maman and Martinique only a few weeks after her birth. So Martinique remembered the white dresses and white ribbons and her mother sitting with her newest man friend among the neighbors as Martinique sang in the tarpaper church and she remembered that, as she grew older, she wondered what the man sitting next to Maman would look like if, instead of a boyfriend, he had been her kidnapped father.

By the time she was seven years old, Maman was taking her to other villages to sing, sometimes at weddings or funerals, sometimes in churches. The people lavished her with praise and her Maman with food, clothes, pots, bedding, whatever they had or could afford to part with, for the privilege of hearing Martinique sing with the voice of the angels that the Christ Child gave her as a special gift for having been born on His birthday.

When she was twelve, Maman took her to Port-au-Prince to sing for Baby Doc Duvalier. He gave her a beautiful gold crucifix studded with pearls at Christ's hands and feet instead of nails. Martinique said how proud she would be to wear it always and all her life, but on the way back to their room that night, she tossed it into a hog-pen. Maman was angry with her, but Martinique did not care. Her Maman might forget that Baby Doc caused her husband to disappear twelve years earlier if she wanted, but Martinique never would, and wearing that cross, she felt, would have been the first step to forgetting the father she could not remember.

They remained in Port-au-Prince until she was sixteen, living at first in the slum south of the city proper and along the way to Carrefour, then moving gradually to better and better quarters as her acclaim increased. The type of men Maman brought home also improved. Now their gifts were of money and small jewels, instead of chickens and pillowticking. Maman told her often that one day they would be rich because of the voice of the angels Baby Jesus had given to Martinique.

Maman had lots of men but she never allowed even one boy of Martinique's age to come calling upon her daughter and she never let a boyfriend of hers remain alone with Martinique for more than a few minutes. "Men will only distract you from your destiny," Maman said. "Soon we will go to the United States and you will become very famous and very rich and then there will be time for boys."

Up to her sixteenth year, no one could have said truthfully of Martinique that she was beautiful or guessed that one day she might be: she was short, a little pudgy and her face too full of angles and sharp bones. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she despaired of ever being even merely pretty, then chided herself for her

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greediness. Did not her voice have all the beauty denied her face and body? Yes, that and more, but still it seemed to her often that this was not a tradeoff she would have made, had Baby Jesus consulted her beforehand.

During that sixteenth year, though, she grew eleven inches, in the space, it seemed, of eleven days, and with the height she lost the pudginess and the too sharp angles of her face, as if the fullness of her hips and belly had realigned by magic, a mambo's spell, to her cheeks and lips. Now she was beautiful, but she never recognized herself in the mirror anymore and she never grew accustomed to thinking of herself as beautiful woman. Not until the very last day of her life, did she perhaps even believe that great physical beauty had been joined to the sublime beauty of her talent.

While they lived in Haiti and especially during their stay in Port-au-Prince, Voudon surrounded them; in the veves and depictions of the gods spray painted on shanty walls, in the bleating of tethered goats at the market, in the heat and dust of the streets and, of course, in the sound of the drums, the eternal drums calling eternal gods to join in the dances.

Maman did not go when the people marched by torchlight procession into the hills to the houngfor to made, themselves for a few hours, gods, nor did she allow Martinique to go, but the drums the brittle tapping of the Kata, opening the ceremonies, opening the doorway to the gods; the slower pulsing of the Segond, calling the gods to dance; the staccato tap-tap of the Rada at the moment when silence shimmers between the gods, between the Rada and the Petro drums; and with the deep rhythm of the Petro, the pouring of blood, the sacrifice made the drums, Maman could not stop the drums from coming to Martinique.

The drums, dancing like iridescent serpents of starfire slipped with lithe tongues into her sleep and stirred there dreams of music that waited mute within her blood to be born. Clean music, like the clean, translucent water of the Caribbean, singing to its lover, the shore. Later, when she came to write her own songs, the drums would always be there, winding through the back beat, like heavy, sweetly perfumed volcanic flowers.

She knew there was a dark side to The Religion, an irreducible, and perhaps even unescapable, night side. She heard stories of zombies. Someone always knew someone who was a relative to someone who had known someone whose uncle, brother, sister, wife, cousin, had offended a powerful houngan and been made zombie. She did not know if belief in such things was proper for a Catholic, but she did believe, and then one day she saw a zombie and the terror she felt at the sight of his fate would one day become part of her death in a city she had yet to hear of in America.

"Don't look," Maman cried, but Martinique, enchained by her horror, must look, must see, this zombie, a thin and filthy man, lurching up the street of the quarter where they lived when she was fourteen, dirt in his hair, a screaming emptiness in his eyes, a weeping sore in his neck and his penis flopping through a hole in his pants.

Maman quickly covered Martinique's eyes with her hands and turned her own head away, praying loudly to the Blessed Virgin, there in the dusty street beneath a choking, hot sun, until the zombie hitching sightlessly past them was gone on his way to wherever his master had bid him go, already in hell, already damned. Maman's hands over Martinique's eyes could not shut out that knowledge of his damnation from Martinique's frightened heart.

And yet Voudon continued to be, for her, a religion of light and not darkness, in spite of the zombie, in spite of Baby Doc and the Tontons Macoutes. Voudon seemed a happy religion, one of drums heard in the fragrant summer nights, love spells and envouements to ensorcell a beloved sold by the old women in early spring. She did not know if she *believed*, for she and Maman were good Catholics, after all, but she did feel a fascination for this religion and its gods, who had come to Haiti like her own ancestors, from Mother Africa in the holds of the slave ships.

Cri du Coeur

A month before Martinique's seventeenth birthday, Maman decided the time had arrived to immigrate to Miami in the United States. For the first time Martinique would sing in real clubs and be paid real money to do so. At some undefined, but certain time, they would be rich and famous, Maman said. Martinique would be in the movies and on the television and everyone would know her name. They would live in Beverly Hills then and be driven in a limousine all over Hollywood and famous white men would come to call wanting to marry them. In these fantasies her mother spun for her, the famous men were always Don Johnson and Ken Wahl, Maman's favorite television stars that year. But before all this could happen, they must begin in Miami as they had in Port-au-Prince. At the very bottom.

A man friend of Maman's, a minor official in one of Baby Doc's old government ministries, smuggled Martinique and Maman into the United States on a rotting Scandinavian steamer and with forged papers. They lived in a roach ridden motel on the Calle Ocho and Martinique sang in a nightclub in Little Havana.

Most of the songs she sang were in Spanish and she did not understand the words, but her voice understood the lyrics of music itself, and before too long the owner of the club, a fat, yet not unhandsome Cuban man, Luis Rameriz, told her that people were coming to his club especially to hear her sing and that this made him very happy.

He could not tell her this directly, for she spoke too little English to communicate in that language and no Spanish at all, while Rameriz spoke no French, so he told her through a Haitian man who came in the club once or twice a week named Ariviste Pontreaux.

Ariviste did not speak the pure Parisian French Maman always insisted Martinique use and he was old, over thirty, and he made his living selling cocaine, but Martinique like him very much. She thought his looks pleasing, he wore fine clothes like Don Johnson on the TV and he always brought her presents: a bunch of yellow daisies from a street vendor, sugar cookies or strawberries covered in chocolate, and once a poem he wrote himself about a waterfall in Haiti. In this poem, he compared the color of the water in the pool beneath the waterfall to the color of her eyes and declared that her eyes were deeper and more wonderful than this beautiful pool. He promised that for her eighteenth birthday, he would give her a bottle of expensive champagne and strawberries without chocolate to dip in the champagne and red roses, a dozen red roses, or two dozen, maybe even three dozen, he teased, instead of the yellow daisies.

As summer approached, the gifts Maman's men gave her and the money Rameriz paid Martinique, allowed them to move to a hotel where there were fewer roaches and Martinique had a bedroom of her own with a door that locked, something she was grateful to have, for Maman did not only bring home Haitian men now who at least had manners, or even black American men, who at least looked like Haitian men, she began to bring to the hotel white men, who leered at Martinique and called her 'honey' and who sometimes frightened her. If she was home from the club when Maman brought one of these men to their rooms, Martinique would lock herself in her bedroom and wait silently for the man to leave.

Maman liked these white American men who smelled of whiskey and unwashed armpits because their gifts were always good American money, never food or cheap jewelry or the inexpensive trinkets that black men brought her.

Too, Maman just liked white men and her English was good, if not fluid. Martinique's father, Maman would point out with satisfaction, had been white and he had been French as well. Maman was proud of these attributes of her long gone husband. White men made good husbands, even if they were rarely exciting lovers, she said.

Martinique didn't believe that any of these scary men Maman brought home would make a good husband and from the very short time they spent in Maman's room, she was certain they must be horrible lovers. She had never had a lover, of course, but she always thought that lovemaking, like singing, must be, if done right, an act of

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sensuousness and care. Not five or ten minutes of grunting and thrashing behind a closed door.

One night the sounds coming from Maman's room didn't sound quite the same as they usually did and Martinique grew more and more afraid as the odd sounds in the room next to hers became more frantic. Then there came a silence more frightening than the noises and finally, in that silence, the sound of the man leaving Maman's room and moving drunkenly out into the hotel corridor. As soon as she heard the front door close, Martinique ran to it and locked it.

Then she went to her mother's bedroom.

The door was opened wide and her mother lay on sheets of blood. There was a pillow over her face but Martinique could see, too well, that her throat had been cut. The butcher knife used to cut it, protruded from between Maman's legs like an oakwood penis.

Martinique did not know what to do. Calling the police was not an option open to her because in Haiti it was most often the police who did such things as this. They had only been in America six months and Martinique still spoke very little English. She had never met an American policeman. They might be just like the Haitian police. They might be worse.

She did know she must get out of the hotel and very quickly. The man had seen her when he'd come in with Maman. He might remember she had seen him, too, and come back for her. She must leave.

Having no alternative, she went to the nightclub. She came with only a small paper bag of clothing and a belly filled with fear. She tried to tell Rameriz what had been done to her Maman, but she didn't have the English and the fear had escaped from her belly and was now in her throat, choking her and rendering her speech incoherent. Rameriz summoned Ariviste and through him, she was finally able to tell Rameriz why she had come to him.

"Luis says you must stay here as long as you like," Ariviste translated for her. "He says he will take care of everything, that you will always have a job singing in his club and that he will care for you like a member of his family."

Martinique looked at the fat, sweating Luis Rameriz. He was smiling gently at her. She began to weep again, this time in relief.

"My poor Martinique," Ariviste said and put his arms around her tightly, holding her while she cried and promising to return the next day to check on her. "Everything is all right now, ma pauvre Martinique," he said. "Everything is all right now, my darling."

But after Ariviste left, Rameriz raped her, and later, when she tried to sneak away thinking he was asleep, he caught and beat her.

He beat her more often in the coming weeks than he raped her and Martinique was foolishly grateful to him for this. She was watched constantly, either by Rameriz or by his silent Cuban men. She was never allowed to speak with Ariviste. Ariviste never attempted to speak with her, either, and she thought that Rameriz must have told him terrible lies, because Ariviste only watched her while she sang, his eyes puzzled and angry.

She sang every night. Rameriz called her his meal ticket and a money draw, words whose literal meaning she did not understand, but the sense of which she understood clearly enough. He beat her, but just enough to keep her obedient with fear, not badly enough to damage his money draw or keep her off the stage.

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Martinique came to understand that this would not be happening to her if she had money. Money was power and it was protection. Her lack of money, even more than her lack of English, kept her a prisoner of Rameriz as much as did his fists and the men he paid to guard her. If she had had money, she would not have needed to come to him in the first place.

Someday, she thought, somehow, I will escape from him and I will get so much money no one ever again will be able to enslave me.

But how was she to escape when she could not speak with Ariviste to tell him what had been done to her and enlist his help to get away?

And then, one night in September, she saw Ariviste among the crowd, staring at her with those eyes which were both hurt and angry and she suddenly realized that she did have a way to communicate with him. She had been too paralyzed by her fear to realize it before, but she could sing to him. Sing in French. Rameriz and his men would not understand what she sang and because she always sang a ballad or two in French each set, they would not suspect what she was doing.

When it was time for the ballad, she changed the words, singing just for Ariviste, holding his eyes with her own. She sang to him of the beatings and the rapes and the men paid to watch her. She begged him to believe her, no matter what Rameriz had told him, and to pity her. She asked him to help her. Ariviste's face did not change as she sang, but his eyes did, and she knew he had heard her, and that he did believe.

The next night police came to the club and arrested her, taking her right off the stage and out of the door, while Rameriz watched in silence.

An interpreter told her someone had reported Martinique was an illegal alien with forged papers. There would be an investigation. She would probably be deported unless a family member already resident in the United States came forward to claim her. Did she understand? Did she have any family in America? the interpreter asked her kindly. She nodded. She gave him Ariviste's name and nothing else. She did not know where Ariviste lived, after all, or how he might be found, but she was sure he would come for her quickly anyway.

She was taken to a detention center and locked up for the night. In the morning, Ariviste did come for her, somehow convincing the immigration official with forged papers he'd bought somewhere, that she was his sister and not in the U.S. illegally. By noon she was free to leave with him.

"We will go to New Orleans," Ariviste said when they were in his car and safely away from the detention center. "I have friends there who will aid us. I promise you, ma pauvre petit, no one will hurt you again. You are safe now, my Martinique."

4.

"We drove through to New Orleans over the next two days," Pontreaux said, touching a silver bowl of tulips with a wistful hand. "We were a cliché of the immigrant, Mr. Denker. We had nothing but the clothing we wore, our love for one another, and her voice as our future. Even the car died soon after we arrived, but my friends were loyal and they cared for us. Martinique sang first in this small club and then in that and then Mr. Santini heard her and hired her for his club in the French Quarter and suddenly, we had it all." He gestured at the room we sat in, the house of which it was a part and beyond them, the meaning of everything they symbolized: safety, protection, the shield and cushion of success. "We had it all," he said again, "with more yet to come."

"What about Rameriz?" I asked. "He made no attempt to get her back?"

Cri du Coeur

"Of course not. He was a business man. He cut his losses and let her go and that is all."

Something wasn't ringing nice and pure and true about this happy ending Pontreaux was trying to sell me, something, I mean, besides the fact all this perfection culminated in Martinique's suicide, but I couldn't isolate the sour note. "Why do you think she killed herself?" I asked.

"I do not know," he answered, turning his back to me again, this time to caress a photograph of Martinique, framed in silver, beside the silver bowl and its happy pink tulips. "I suppose she never recovered from the horror she lived through in Miami."

That, in the strictest sense would turn out to be true, but at that moment I didn't know this, didn't know to what Miami, her mother's murder, Rameriz's enslavement, had driven her. I just knew that sour notes were clanging everywhere now in my lie detector, that Pontreaux was lying to me, either through omission or by calculated commission.

The Vietnamese maid tapped lightly at the pocketdoors.

"I must go," Pontreaux said. "Today's viewing begins at noon at Schoen's and the funeral will be at four this afternoon in Jackson Square, if you care to attend either function."

"Thank you," I said.

He sighed. Touched his brow like a tawdry heroine in a French play. "I shall always blame myself for not being able to keep my word to her that nothing should ever hurt her again, for something so obviously did, or she would not have died in such a horrible manner. I would urge you, Mr. Denker, to allow Martinique and, this, her final deed, to rest. We will never know why she shot herself. It is a waste of your time, and very painful for us who survive her, still loving her, for you to pursue this further. It would be her wish, as well, I am sure, that you desist from this 'investigation'."

"Yes," I said, meaning absolutely nothing, certainly not agreement.

He strode over to me, willing to shake my hand now, when he thought I was being disposed of so easily. His almost golden eyes gleamed earnestly at me. "You must love her music very much to have taken this quest on yourself," he said, trying to sound sympathetic and managing only to sound oily. "But I believe it is a quest, and a question, without an answer. At least we have still, and will always have, her voice to comfort us."

Out of all the possible responses to this pompous bullshit, I chose the least suspicious and most diplomatic. "Thank you for your consideration, Mr. Pontreaux," I said.

"My pleasure, sir," he assured me, sounding once again as if his lines were being fed to him by a teleprompter.

The Vietnamese maid gave me an autographed picture of Martinique as a consolation prize before silently shooing me out the door.

5.

When I got back to 300 Hotel Astor shortly before noon, things were in that state of amiable uproar I usually find irritating to almost the same degree that I find it comfortable.

"Comfortable is still winning, but I'm not as young as I used to be," I said to Elanora, surveying the mess for a

possible path I could traverse to my office.

"Not even as young as you were this morning," she agreed. "The crankiness of old age approacheth, forsooth."

"Thanks," I said, "for that dreadful assessment."

"You're welcome," Elanora said. She stuck her pert little bloodhound nose in my direction, inhaled once and fixed me with a severe eye. "Richard, you've been smoking again. You have all the backbone of a louse."

"Louses, or maybe it's lice, have carapaces, I believe, not backbones," Miles observed.

"Exactly my point," Elanora said. "A hard shell, but no backbone. That's Richard."

She was stacking bottles of Liquid–Paper in neat rows in the supply cabinet, Miles handing her the bottles like a chief OR nurse slapping instruments into a neurosurgeon's god–like palm, and I watched them for a minute or so while trying to come up with a really snappy comeback. The kind that would strike them mute with surprise and awe at my brilliance and allow me to have the last word. No go.

"Come on, Elanora," I said weakly. "If you're gonna call me a louse, just come right out and say so. Say, 'Richard, you are a louse'."

"Richard," Elanora said, "I am tres disappointed in you."

"It was Ed Minuti," I said. "I ran into him at the smoking lounge of the Pan American after you threw me out of my own comfortable office yesterday, so really, you see, it's not even Ed's fault, it's yours."

"Really, now?" Elanora said, rolling her eyes at Miles.

"Sounds like a species of attorney double talk slash hogwash to me," Miles agreed.

"So. Does this mean you won't scour the antique stores on Magazine Street for a genuine 1940's ashtray for my office, Ellie?" I asked, all syrup and innocence. "Preferably in pinkish Bakelite?"

Miles piped up cheerily before she could explode from his leisurely sprawl on the floor among the Liquid–Paper and yellow case report forms. "Hey, Dickie," he grinned, "how can you tell a blond homosexual male has been using your computer?"

"There's White–Out all over the screen," I said, finally spotting the path through the mess. "And that's the oldest blond joke on the Internet, Miles."

"As a joke about blond women, maybe so," he said serenely. "But in terms of gay humor, it's brand new. I just made it up myself. Maybe I can get a gig on HBO. I could dress like a cop. Maybe end the act with a tasteful striptease even."

"Shut up, Miles," Elanora gritted. "Now, Richard ..."

But I was already escaping down the path through the debris fields, heading in the direction of, not my office, but Carlos' voice, and I ignored her. Somewhat at my peril, actually, since it wasn't beyond her ideal of proper employer/employee relations to peg a bottle of Liquid–Paper at my head to regain my attention.

Cri du Coeur

Carlos had William trapped in his office and was busy supervising the hanging of his collection of 3D butterfly holograms.

"A little more to the left," he told William, waving his arms like a symphony conductor doing Wagner. "OK. Bring it up just a bit. No, wait. Maybe that one would look better on the south wall between the windows, what'ja think? Oh, hi, Dickie. Listen. You've got to have the whole office repainted and pronto! This color is just so *gloomy*!"

"Next year," I said to Carlos. "How you doing, William?"

He gave me an amused look and said, "I been married before. I'm OK, Mr. Denker."

"Oh, call him Dickie," Carlos said airily. "Everyone does now he's divorced."

"Mr. Denker's fine for now," William said.

"Oooohhhh, he's such an independent one, isn't he?" Carlos squealed, grabbing his heart and fluttering swooner's eyes at me.

"Cut it out, Carlos," I said. "You promised me you wouldn't swish in public, remember?"

"That was years ago and besides, we're not in public now," Carlos said with a perfectly precious pout that transformed him into an eerie spitting image of my sixth grade girlfriend, Betty Ann Prokop.

"I hope you're not homophobic," I sighed to William.

"Long as he ain't a racist, I ain't a homophobe," William answered promptly.

Carlos laughed with delight. "Oh, Willie," he cried, grabbing William's hand in both of his and giving it a sturdy, macho shake, "welcome home! Welcome home, Willie!"

William just stood there, smiling down bemusedly at Carlos, his one big hand dwarfing both of Carlos'. From his other hand dangled a psychedelically colored butterfly hologram and he was dressed in a new pair of jeans, new Air Nikes and a new white shirt with an alligator adorning his left breast. I detected Elanora's taste in the choice of the Izod shirt (she gives me at least one a year, usually on Boss's Day) and William's own preference in the Nikes. He'd had his hair cut, too, and his beard trimmed and he was looking good, if still twenty or thirty pounds light. Good enough, I decided, to send out in public.

"OK, troops," I said. "Front office. Snap, snap. Lots of work left yet to do today."

"But it's Saturday," Carlos protested, following me back through the maze to Elanora's domain. "It can wait till Monday, can't it? Miles and I were going to drive on over to Gulf Breeze and look for UFO's."

"It will have to wait until Monday," Elanora said. She and Miles were stacking Post-It Notes now. "This office has to be unpacked and organized today and tomorrow."

"Au contraire," Carlos said, hands on his hips. "Miles and I are going to Florida this afternoon and we're not coming back till Monday. At the earliest."

"No, you're not," Elanora said, in her 'last word' voice. "William and I won't be able to do everything by Monday alone and do you want our clients to see this office looking like a ton of plastique went off in the middle of it?"

Cri du Coeur

"Oh, don't exaggerate!" Carlos cried, throwing his hands in the air.

"Oh, stop being so melodramatic!" Elanora cried, throwing her hands into the air.

"Children," I said quietly. "This cannot wait for Monday and everything else will. The funeral's this afternoon."

"Her funeral?" Miles asked into the abrupt (and blessed) silence.

"Her funeral," I confirmed. "Everybody pull up a box and sit down. Is this empty?" I picked up a Diet Coke and sloshed it.

"I'm done with it," Miles said quickly.

"Good," I said and lit a cigarette. I sat on the corner of Elanora's desk, balancing the can on my knee for an ashtray, ignoring Elanora's glare, while I gave them an outline of my morning.

"OK," I finished. "Now for your assignments. Carlo, you go to the Jazz Hole tonight and pick up Lulu."

"Come on, Dickie! You know men in dresses don't turn me on," Carlos said, not a mince or a swish or a flutter in his voice.

"You don't have to sleep with her," I said. "Him. Just buy him a few drinks, admire his nail polish or whatever and get him to gossip. I want everything he's seen, heard, suspected or fantasized about Martinique St. Johns. And stay away from Bobby the Wolfman. I don't want him to connect us."

Carlos sighed. "All right. But that's not until tonight. Miles and I could still go out this afternoon. It's his only weekend off for the next three months, Dickie."

"Sorry, but no," I said, lighting another cigarette. It's amazing how easy it is to fall back into a habit that's so godawful hard to break. "I need the two of you on the Internet and the telephone this afternoon. Get me anything you can from Miami on the murder of Martinique's mother and try to track me down some good information on Rameriz. Elanora, you and William go to Schoen's for the viewing. Get there about two o'clock. When you leave, take the guestbook with you."

"You want me to steal the guestbook?" William asked, not shocked, just checking.

"I don't care if you do it or Elanora does it, but yes, I want one of you to steal that guestbook. The funeral's at four, so the viewing should wind down by three. Most everyone who's going to, will have signed the book by then." I dropped the Camel into the Diet Coke can and it fizzed out with an angry sound. "I'll cover the funeral in Jackson Square. We'll meet at Antoine's, six p.m. sharp, for dinner. On me." I grinned at their solemn faces. "To make up for trashing your Saturday plans. Any questions?"

"Only the obvious," Miles said. "What are you looking for?"

"Everything," I said. "Anything."

"In other words," Elanora said crisply, "he doesn't know."

"He'll know when he sees it, though," Carlos said loyally. "Dickie's never in the dark for long."

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"Thank you, Carlo," I said. "Anyone else want to belittle the boss? Endanger his or her next raise? No? OK, then. Let's scatter and make like detectives, gang."

Everyone began the process of scattering. Elanora, William behind her like a kid on a leading rein, came over to me, her face set in its secretarial expression. "Where will you be until the funeral, if I need you? Like to bail us out of lockup if we get caught snatching the guestbook, for instance?"

"At home," I said. "Taking a nap. I'm the boss. I'm allowed to snooze while you peasants work. Besides, I'm paying for dinner. And besides that, Elanora, you've never needed me in all of our professional lives. If you ever did need me, I believe I'd have a heart attack and die."

"Besides, you do your best thinking when you're asleep," Elanora said.

"My most creative thinking," I agreed, absolutely deadpan.

"Well, think about cellular phones while you're napping," Elanora said.

"Why?"

"Like you, Richard, I don't know. I've just got a feeling that it's time to upgrade," she answered, absolutely serious. "I'd feel better if we, all of us, had a quicker way to communicate when we're scattered."

Upgrade. I hate that word. Upgrade, translated into plain English means 'to spend a shipload of money'. My money. "I'll think about it," I said blandly.

Sure, I would. Like someday I would wear those Izod shirts she insisted on buying me.

6.

The jazz community gave Martinique St. Johns a royal New Orleans funeral. All the Neville brothers were there and Al Hirt, who was in town appearing at Chris Owens' club, and Michael Bolton. I recognized a lot of the faces behind the saxophones, trumpets and clarinets that comprised her Dixieland Band, some famous, some local celebs like Martinique, and some those of the street musicians who make their living scrounging cash from the tourists.

She was a suicide and she'd killed herself right there in the St. Louis Cathedral, but the Church did its best for her anyway. The funeral Mass was in French, but the sermon was in English and the priest spoke of forgiveness. The Church, he said, was, like God, more forgiving of Martinique than she had been with herself. She was surely in the Lord's choir now, her desperation and pain burnt away by the fire of His love.

I hoped he was right. I hoped the angels were learning Caribbean Pop from her up there in the clouds of heaven.

I was sitting toward the middle, in pews reserved for the media. Don't ask how I managed to get there, because it's a mystery to me. Maybe I just looked like a reporter. At the front of the church, hidden from me by the crowds, Martinique's mourners sat in the pews and supposedly mourned her, but not a sob or a wail did I hear throughout the service. Standing at the back of the church, packed together like little Norwegian sardines, the merely curious who had never known her, shuffled their feet and waited for the real show to begin the legendary and now rarely seen, Dixieland Funeral.

At the conclusion of the Mass, the rear doors of the Cathedral were unlocked and Martinique's coffin, borne by

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four pallbearers, Ariviste Pontreaux among them, and preceded by the French priest swinging an incense censor, was carried, on foot, all the way through the lower Quarter, across Basin Street, to the old yellow fever cemetery on Rampart.

This was a bonafide jazz funeral and it was a joyous one. Rather like a Mardi Gras parade. The sun struck gold off the instruments of the band following behind the coffin and from the spangles and fringe of the umbrellas of the highsteppers dancing along behind the band. The music itself was pure gold, coaxed by the musicians from metal into miracle. There was laughter and singing and strangers tourists, gutterpunks, mimes and clowns and just plain New Orleans folks joined the procession following Martinique's body to its internment. At the graveside Harry Connick, Jr. sang 'Amazing Grace' and the Fisher King laid a spray of silver, white and apricot orchids on the casket.

I patiently worked my way through the spectators up to the front so I could take mental notes on those who were her actual mourners. The Fisher King, of course, and a couple of guys in business suits and Regis haircuts I figured for executives from Big Easy Records. The bartender from the Jazz Hole and little, moon faced Beanie. No sign of Johnnie Santini, but, yes, there was Bobby Boudreaux and on one side of him, Lulu, wiping his eyes with a little lace hanky.

On Bobby's other side, stood a very tall, dignified black man wearing a genuine African dashiki and prominent ceremonial facial scars. Everyone else stood a little apart from him as if he were royalty or someone very dangerous. There, amid the brightness of the late afternoon sun, the golden music, the profusion of flowers, this man was a dark star radiating a cold heat that I could actually feel prickling on my skin. Looking at him, I remembered Lulu saying, "Fucking voodoo magic."

Maybe there was more voodoo involved in Martinique's life than just the backbeat drums in her music, I thought. I didn't make the next logical deduction that voodoo was the key to her suicide and maybe I should have, and I almost certainly would have, in the next few moments, if my attention had not been diverted from the man in the facial scars to another face at the edge of the group closest to the coffin.

This face belonged to an older white man, perhaps in his mid-fifties or perhaps in his late seventies. He, too, had facial scars, horrific scars, but his were the remainders of an unimaginable torture and not the symmetrical brands of an African ceremonial rite of passage. He stood hunched forward from the waist, leaning his entire weight upon two rather battered and old-fashioned canes. Fingers were missing on both of the hands that clenched so firmly the rounded heads of the canes and the immobility of his posture and the strength of those mutilated hands spoke eloquently of the years he had substituted the canes for the shriveled legs between them.

In that great crowd, only his face had tears on it and watching those tears on that face was like watching rain slip ineffectually down a sheet of milky and ruined glass.

I knew immediately who he was. I didn't have to be Mike Hammer or Sherlock Holmes to figure out this gentleman's identity. I began to push my way through the mass of people separating me from Martinique's father.

The band had just finished playing 'When The Saints Go Marching In', signalling the end of the funeral festivities and the crowd was starting to mill a bit, but I was still close enough to have reached out and grabbed the back of his out-of-fashion suit when Bobby Boudreaux popped into my path, grinning that huge, white predator's grin at me like some malign jack-in-the-box done up in dreadlocks and a brightly colored Bob Marley T-shirt.

"Hey, mothafucka," he greeted me cheerfully. "Enjoy the show?"

I was suddenly angry. No, not just angry. Enraged. So fucking enraged that I was eager, to be even more indelicate, to tear him a new asshole. I was filled by that rage, by that same eager desire I'd felt so often in

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Vietnam, to destroy the enemy before me, and he could see it in my face. His grin became sharper, happier. That grin said he'd have no objection to my trying, right now, tomorrow, or even sometime in the next decade. No objection at all. Just name your time and place, baby. I could almost see the hair sprouting on his palms, the wolf rising to the undersurface of his skin. I didn't care. He could have metamorphosed into Godzilla and I wouldn't have cared. I was gonna wade in and tear him that new orifice when, just like that, the werewolf transmuted into a grinning puppy.

"Bobby," the African said. If he'd yelled Heel! the result would have been identical. Bobby heeled, as obedient as any well-disciplined pup who's been beaten into submission.

The African stood a foot or so to my left and front, his hands clasped at waist level, face as benign as it was capable of being with those fierce scars. Bobby had scampered over to stand respectfully behind his handler and now looked no more threatening than Beanie.

I realized then, with a chill of discomfort, that the three of us were standing at a nearly deserted gravesite. Where hundreds of people had been milling not five minutes past, only a bare baker's dozen remained and all of them were tourists, too insulated by their clicking cameras and vapid chattering in the cooling sunlight of early evening to feel the dark and frozen cold originating within the man in the dashiki. It crossed my mind that shooting him, right there in front of all those witnesses, would probably save me just oodles of trouble down the line and for about fifteen seconds in real time I seriously considered it, so imperative and real was the danger I felt emanating from him, but then, just at that moment, I looked into his eyes.

Opalescent eyes, the colors running and blending like the skin of a child's soap bubble or a slick of oil on a rain puddle. All those colors, slipping and sliding, shifting and merging.

I wasn't angry anymore, but I was dizzy. It was suddenly very hot. A taste of August noon on a cooling March evening. Like a man locked into position by a rattlesnake at his feet, I wanted to move, but couldn't. I wanted to say something, but caught in the African's opaline gaze, I couldn't remember what it was I meant to say. He nodded, though, as if I had spoken and said, in a voice like deep, fecund alluvial mud at the mouth of the Nile, "Thank you for coming. Good day, sir."

I turned away from him

(what the hell just happened?)

then toward the street and saw Ariviste Pontreaux watching us. He was standing beside a taxi and I could just see, through the back passenger window, the white hair and bent head of Martinique's father.

7.

I arrived at Antoine's by six fifteen and the maitre d', an old guy in blue glasses and a walrus mustache informed me in a whisper, as if imparting a wartime secret, that my party had removed to Brennen's and would await my presence until six fifteen before ordering.

Typical. I'm springing for an expensive meal for five in one of New Orleans' legendary dining establishments and the recipients of this rare generosity on my part, decide to move the party to another, more expensive, if not as legendary restaurant, because, I knew, Carlos coveted the indoor courtyard at Brennen's and Elanora craved mightily their excellent Bananas Foster.

Not too upset, I walked the several blocks from Antoine's to Brennen's and was shown, at six thirty, by another

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maitre d', this one young and very sleek, to the courtyard where I found my employees and Miles already three drinks ahead of me. At least they hadn't ordered dinner yet. They'd had enough respect for the holder of the credit card that was paying for all this elegance to wait for him to arrive before commencing to pig out on Trout Almandine with Pinenuts, Blue Crabs or primerib.

"Dickie!" Carlos called, happily waving his Sex-On-The-Beach at me. Carlos always drank those multicolored concoctions with erotic names when out to dine at Brennen's, Antoine's or Windsor Court, but ordinarily he was a beer, Chianti and Kamikaze man like myself. "Come see what we got for you!"

I sat down between William and Elanora and she shoved an ashtray and Kamikaze in my direction. The ice was long melted, but as Big Ed said, any port in a hurricane. I started to feel really normal for the first time since looking into that African's weird eyes. "So, what you got for me?" I asked, finishing off the Kamikaze with my first sip.

"Oh, baby, this is gonna be one hot-fun case," Carlos crowed. "It's got just everything! Murder, suicide, a beautiful and yummily tragic heroine, a mysterious demise, cash, cash, cash and I'm not even ruling out incest yet, either."

"In other words, it's a soap opera," I said.

"Yeah," Carlos said. "But more like Dark Shadows then The Young and The Restless."

"Kind of spoils you for dingy little divorces and corporate embezzlement cases, doesn't it?" Elanora said, signally for another round of drinks like the efficient secretary she is.

"Did you get the guestbook?" I asked.

"In my briefcase," Elanora confirmed, kicking said briefcase and toppling it over to whack my shin. "William was magnificent. He just picked it up and walked out with it, as grave and dignified as a member of Schoen's staff."

"People always notice a black man acting sneaky," William said. "They never notice one acting dignified."

"Like that joke," Miles said. "'What do you say when you see a black dude out jogging? Stop, thief!'"

"I am constitutionally unable to believe you said that," Elanora said.

"I'm appalled," Carlos said. "And Willie's offended."

"He told it wrong," William said. "That's what offends me."

"It's just cop humor," Miles protested. "It's supposed to be crass, rude, crude and socially indefensible."

"He's right," William said.

"Hello," I said. "What did you find out from Miami, kids?"

"Good stuff, Dickie," Carlos assured me. "Real good stuff."

He poked Miles, who pulled a wad of computer printouts and FAX paper from his jacket.

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"Carlos got a lot of information from the Miami Herald's website on Martinique's mother and Rameriz, but I really hit the juicy stuff when I called Miami PD and indulged in a little cop to cop banter with a very sweet sergeant in Homicide. She was just tickled to FAX me everything they had on the two deaths."

"Two?" I reached over the arm of the waiter attempting to place a fresh Kamikaze in front of me and grabbed the FAX sheets.

"Pontreaux told you he and Martinique drove out of Miami the second week of September the year she was seventeen, so that would have been September, 1993. Well, on October 3rd, 1993, Luis Rameriz, unlamented asshole that he was, died in Jackson Memorial Hospital from some kind of snake or spider bite. Probably spider."

"What was Homicide doing on it?"

"See, Senor Rameriz didn't go easy. He spent a few days dying and was actually fairly coherent the first couple of those days. Before his flesh starting rotting off the bone."

"Miles," Elanora warned. "I haven't eaten yet and you're spoiling my appetite for Bananas Foster. If you ever want to be a partner in this firm, boy, you do not want to spoil my appetite for Bananas Foster."

"Is it politically correct to call a white man 'boy'?" William asked Carlos politely.

"Elanora is never politically correct," I said. "She only adheres to the rules of ethical correctness."

"Gruesome, huh?" Carlos said brightly. "Rameriz, I mean, not Ellie's ethics."

"Oh, yeah," Miles said. "Sgt. Hernandez said she saw him on the third day but he wasn't coherent anymore and she said he looked like a corpse that had been laying out in the Everglades for a week besides. Surprised the hell outta her that he was still alive. Said it was one of the most fascinating things she'd ever seen, even if it did make her puke. All that screaming and the stench and his flesh literally decomposing."

"Miles," Elanora said.

"OK," Miles said. "Anyway, when he was brought to the ER, he told everyone he saw that he was being murdered. By a Santaro, he said."

"Santaro?" I said.

"A Cuban voodoo priest," Carlos, that purebred Mexican, said authoritatively.

"Oh," I said.

"Of course," Miles said. "So Homicide, like ninety percent of Miami PD, being made up of Cubans who half-believe in this nonsense, went up to check it out. The doctor said he was definitely bit by something and no investigation was ever initiated, mostly because no one gave two shits on a morgue slab about his death. He didn't have any loved ones and all his family members cared about was getting his will probated as quickly as possible so the lucky one who'd inherited the nightclub could start hauling in the profits from his or her inheritance."

"That's kind of sad," Carlos said.

"It's not like he didn't deserve it," Miles said. "Honestly, Carlos, you're such a sentimental wuss."

Cri du Coeur

"Are you folks ready to order?" the waiter asked, sticking his head around the courtyard doors.

"No," said Elanora.

"Yes," William said.

"Might as well," I sighed. Sometimes I felt just like a kindergarten teacher must feel all the time.

We ordered, including another round of drinks and I filled them in on the funeral while we waited for the waiter to stop hovering about with his various deliveries to our table. I finished just about the same time that the entrees arrived.

"Wow," said Carlos, suitably enthralled with my recital. "Who needs incest when you've got a seven foot tall Watusi voodoo priest?"

"And a werewolf," William added.

The waiter's face didn't change as he set my Blue Crabs before me. He was a professional. He heard stranger conversations, without doubt, from judges and PI lawyers every noon. "Will there be anything else?" he asked.

"Bananas Foster is all I need," Elanora said. "Don't disappear. I'll be wanting a double order in one half hour. Promptly, please."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said and faded, as all truly professional waiters do, back into the woodwork.

"What about Martinique's mother?" I asked, digging into my Blue Crabs with exhausted lust.

"That was easier than I thought it would be," Miles said, "considering you couldn't even give me a name to work from." He broke a roll in half, slapped a couple of Caramari rings on it and handed it to Carlos, who reciprocated by placing half of his filet on Miles' bread and butter plate. William and Elanora ignored the rest of us, eating steadily on like a couple of dedicated gourmands at Uncle Frank's Bar-B-Que & Cantonese Soulfood House.

"So?" I prompted.

"Miami had a serial killer loose down there from about 1989 to 1994. They never caught him, officially, but they did, if you know what I mean."

"What do you mean?" Carlos asked.

"Think Boston Strangler," I said.

"Anyway," Miles said, offended at the digression. "This guy killed black prostitutes. Slit their throats. Martinique's mother, whose name was Marguerite DuBois, was his sixteenth victim."

"How do you know Marguerite was Martinique's mother?" I asked.

"First off, mode of death, and she was the only Haitian victim and second, according to my talkative little Sgt., the day after Marguerite's murder, a Catholic priest claiming to be a Father Jacques of the Our Lady of Haiti Church, showed up at the morgue to ID the body with a story about being empowered to make all the arrangements on behalf of her family, who, he said, had already left to return to Haiti, with Ms. DuBois' minor daughter, Martinique."

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"That don't sound right," William said, pushing his empty plates aside.

"He apparently had some kind of documentation and it satisfied Metro–Dade that he was kosher. At least, they never bothered to track Martinique down for questioning."

"I'll bet that documentation was plenty of green paper with pictures of deceased presidents on them," Carlos said. "When do you think the government'll put out a bill with Kennedy on it?"

"Never," I said. "They'd have to invent a new denomination."

"I'm stuffed," Miles said, burping discretely.

"I'm not," Elanora said, twisting in her chair to look for the waiter.

"Probably an employee of Rameriz," I said. "He probably wanted to be sure no cops went looking for his new slave."

"Who?" Elanora asked, still twisting in her chair. She goes braindead at the very mention of Paris or Bananas Foster.

"Father Jacques," William said.

"Father Jacques," I agreed, lighting a cigarette.

"Can I try one of those?" William asked, tapping the Camel box.

"Absolutely," I said. "Delighted." And I was. I feel less like a leper with AIDS when someone else is smoking, too.

"You're corrupting William," Elanora said, still craning her neck in search of a waiter. Any waiter capable of handling the rum, the bananas and the chafing pan would be OK with Elanora. She would have welcomed a serial killer or the mayor of New Orleans at our table as long as he could whip together Bananas Foster to her finicky specifications. Talk about easily corrupted!

William lit the Camel and inhaled happily. "Miz Ellie," he said solemnly, "I came up in Desire project. I don't believe a cigarette can corrupt me any worse than I already been just by living past the age of five."

"That's right," Carlos said. "I grew up in the Barrio. East LA, you know, and I ..."

"Shush," Elanora said. "If you tell another of your growing up poor and Mexican sagas, I'll be forced to counter with a childhood story of my own."

"What? Growing up impoverished in Brahmin Boston?" Carlos asked haughtily. "I hardly think being unable to afford a proper coming out ball compares with what I went through."

"Children," I said. "Enough. Or you'll both be sent to bed without dessert."

"Where is that damn waiter anyway?" Elanora said, beginning to crane again.

"So you think he's worth tracking down?" Miles asked, raising his right hand over his head and snapping his fingers loudly. Our waiter instantly appeared, order pad cocked and ready.

Cri du Coeur

"I didn't know you could do magic tricks," Elanora said.

"You like?" Miles grinned. "I learned that magic trick in Paris. It's essential for cafe survival in Montmartre."

"Paris," Elanora sighed. "I'd die to see Paris."

"They don't serve Bananas Foster there," I pointed out.

That brought Elanora back to reality. She rounded on the waiter as if he were solely and proximately responsible for this fatal defect of Paris cafe life and rapped out an order for double Bananas Foster.

"Is who worth tracking down?" Carlos asked, flipping open the dessert menu.

"Father Jacques," William said. "I'll try some of those Bananas whatzits."

"That's right. Father Jacques," I said. "Just coffee and a clean ashtray for me."

"Me, too," Miles said. "But the hold the ashtray for me."

"You got any Death-By-Chocolate cake?" Carlos asked. The waiter nodded and vanished.

"I don't think Father Jacques is a primary player," I said, trying to bump the conversation back to business. "I want to concentrate on locating Martinique's father and identifying that African."

"If he's big in the voodoo underground here, I should be able to ID him through our cults and crazies division," Miles said.

"Do it," I said.

The waiter reappeared, pushing his portable chafing cart. Elanora watched him flambeau her beloved dessert with an avid and critical eye. "More rum," she instructed him several times, the business of Bananas Foster pushing aside the business of Martinique St. Johns. Again.

When the desserts and coffee were finally distributed, the waiter handed me our check and said in that smarmy voice particular to waiters and politicians, "I'm going off duty now, sir. I've added a twenty-five percent gratuity to your total."

Another do-it-yourself tipper, I thought, but it reminded me that Carlos still had to go down to the Jazz Hole and it was getting very late. "Fine," I said. I pulled out my American Express card and waved the waiter away.

"Hold it," Elanora said. The guy froze. She took a careful bite of her Bananas F, lingered over it as if it were a mouthful of Chateaux Mouton-Rothschild, vintage year 1864, then said, "OK. Your tip stands." This time she waved him away.

He was back in a millisecond with the charge slip.

"Good service is nothing," Elanora explained to William while I checked the figures, signed and traded the slip for my AmEx card. "You can get good service at Burger King. But good Bananas Foster. You can't get good Bananas Foster just anywhere. Why, right here at Brennen's once ... "

"OK," I said, as the waiter did his final fade-out. "Let's see the guestbook."

Cri du Coeur

"Ah, the pinnacle of the evening," Elanora said, retrieving the book from her briefcase.

Martinique's guestbook was identical to the one Jay's Final Rest Home in Holy Shelter had provided for my mother's funeral fifteen years before white leather, a satin place marker and gold edged pages with lines for ten signatures, including addresses, so the bereaved can send grateful acknowledgments to those who attended the loved one's last appearance above ground. There were a lot of signatures in Martinique's book. Hundreds of signatures. How many of these people had actually known her, I wondered, and how many were just the curious, drawn to the viewing as they had been drawn to the funeral by the notorious death she'd died. Ninety per cent, I guessed, turning the pages and scanning the names. Ninety per cent ghouls.

The others were talking quietly as I read over the names. Elanora was extolling Copeland's Bananas Foster to William, and Miles was offering his services to Carlos as backup at the Jazz Hole. "No," I said to Miles, and right then, toward the bottom of page about halfway through the book, I saw it. "Bingo," I said.

"Find your witch doctor?" Elanora asked.

"No," I said. "I found Martinique's daddy."

They all leaned over the table to get a look and I pointed triumphantly to the shaky scrawl of one Martin St. Johns, temporary address, the St. Charles Guest House.

"Excellent," Carlos said. "Now I'll just hustle ol' Lulu, see if he knows who the cool cat in the dashiki is, huh?"

I was instantly engulfed in that tide of free-floating hinkiness again. "Negative," I said, too sharply maybe, because Miles stared at me. "Do not mention that freaky fuck to Lulu and do not speak to Bobby. If either of them is there, if either of them starts to eyeball you, tell Lulu hasta ma ana and get out of there."

"OK, OK," Carlos said. He stood up and laid a hand on Miles' shoulder. "See you in the morning, Copper."

"Are you sure I shouldn't tag along?" Miles asked me.

I almost said yes, go, but I didn't. "I'm sure," I said.

After all, sending Miles with Carlos was a little like taking your wife with you to pick up a strange girl in a bar. Not a really good idea. Kinky, maybe. But definitely not good business. And, what, after all, was I so nervous about? Carlos, flighty little butterfly that he usually pretended to be, was a streetwise kid from the barrio of East Los Angeles, well able to take care of himself when it came to bar brawls and gay-bashing skinheads. "Carlos doesn't need backup," I said. "And you're a cop, Miles. Your beat is in the Quarter. Chances are very good that you'd be recognized by someone in the bar. I don't want any suspicions taking root over there in voodoo land."

"I'll be fine," Carlos said. "You're not going to lose me to a dude in a sequined gown, Miles, no matter how hairy and masculine his decolletage."

What a pair, I thought. "Come on guys and gal," I said. "I'll spring for a taxi."

"My hero," Elanora said.

"Me, too," William agreed solemnly.

8.

The cab dropped me at my apartment just as midnight passed away and pulled off with Elanora still shouting out the back window at me, "Don't you dare show that face in my office tomorrow, Richard! Stay home and out of my natural blond hair! You hear me, Richard?"

I waved yeah, yeah knowing she'd beat me severely with her tongue if I didn't show my face in the morning and at least make a half-sincere offer of assistance.

I went up the stairs to my apartment, poured myself some Chianti and opened the balcony doors to the night. There's always jazz being played somewhere in the French Quarter and strains of 'Stormy Weather' entwined not unsuccessfully with 'Strange Fruit' drifted into my darkened rooms riding the river breeze and a shiver of moonlight.

After a few minutes, I put one of Martinique's cassettes on the stereo. I thumbtacked up her poster on the wall. I sat in the jazz soaked moonlight and looked at the poster and felt her voice fill even the marrow of my bones, the ventricles of my heart, and I thought of her.

I saw her in her white dress and bare feet in that tarpaper church in Haiti, a tiny three year old with a voice as huge and beautiful as heaven. I saw her at sixteen, beginning to bloom like fragile Caribbean orchid under the white Haitian sun. I saw her at seventeen, a prisoner of that cocksucking pig, Rameriz.

I wondered if I might not be becoming enmeshed in a found obsession that was the twin to her lost dream.

I realized I was crying and I didn't know why, so I poured out the rest of my wine, turned off the stereo and went to bed.

I fell asleep to a soft swing version of 'You Go To My Head' wafting in from Bourbon Street.

SUNDAY, MARCH 2ND

1.

I woke up Sunday morning feeling like the ass-end of a fool.

Since Friday I'd thought of nothing but a dead Haitian singer nobody was paying me to think about just because she'd had a voice that triggered my imagination and a face that triggered my libido. I'd done nothing about the Neimeyer account, the Boggs assignment or the Malety case, all big money clients, and I hadn't even considered working the dozen or so little divorces that were the bedrock of my business. I couldn't even use the confusion of moving office as my excuse (although I'd try, of course, if anyone did complain), because if I had time to pursue a pro bono, I surely had time to work my paying investigations.

Playtime's over, I told myself in Elanora's voice. I rolled out of bed making the firm, reasonable, unshakable, and adult decision to relegate the St. Johns suicide to my spare time and stepped out of my bedroom. And locked eyes with the poster.

Why do lovely faces haunt us so? Do extraordinary flowers have evil roots? Henry Miller asked that.

Cri du Coeur

Martinique had not sprung from evil roots, though her life had definitely been fertilized with the poisons of an evil fate –Papa Doc Duvalier and his temptations, the murder of her mother, Rameriz. How had she survived all these, only to kill herself when it seemed that she had finally left the evil times behind her? What had happened after her arrival in New Orleans?

More to the point, what was happening to me?

Pontreaux had characterized my investigation as a quest, and somehow even that extravagantly medieval phrase didn't seem so extravagant now looking at that extraordinary face, that lovely face of hers, so flawless: the work of a Michelangelo mated to whoever had sculpted the Nike of Samothrace. And from her body, so magnificently without sculptural error, had issued a voice, even more beautiful and less describable than her physical beauty.

Standing there, I remembered a movie from the late night TV when I was a kid, *Laura*. The cop had been obsessed with *Laura*, an obsession touched off by her portrait. The difference here was that in the end I would not find my *Laura* alive. *Martinique* was dead. No one had written a happy ending into her script.

Or into mine, either.

I took care of the morning business three cups of freshly ground Kona dressed, shaved and set off for the Astor. It's a long walk from my apartment to the office, blocks and blocks of time to think in, and by the time I arrived at Royal Street, I had decided that my paying customers could wait another day. *Martinique* deserved at least that and it was, after all, Sunday.

2.

Any homicide cop will tell you that if a murder isn't solved in the first forty–eight hours, the chances that it will be, are as about as good as the chance that I'll someday remarry, and if someone's not behind bars charged in the murder by the end of a week, you might as well back–burner the whole thing in a crockpot, unless there's a political reason to keep the investigation at a rapid boil.

Suicide, like murder, I told myself, was an unnatural death and by the time I had walked up Royal to the Hotel Astor, I'd convinced myself that my living clients would either have to wait, or content themselves with *Elanora* and *Carlos* working their accounts, until I had finished obsessing with *Martinique St. Johns*.

Elanora was perched on a stack of boxes containing various shades of neon copypaper, pounding nails into the long wall of the reception room when I sauntered in, feeling proud of my logic based argument which was going to allow me to do what I wanted to do without any guilt.

"Good morning, Mr. Denker," William said formally. He handed another nail to *Elanora*. Disquiet replaced self–complacency.

Elanora wouldn't hang a 3D hologram of a butterfly where she'd be forced to eyeball it every day until her retirement if it was the last piece of art in the northern hemisphere. Nails in the walls equal art on the walls and since the only art we'd ever had in the office were *Carlos'* butterflies and my Lyndon Johnson dartboard, ergo, ipso factor and rex talionis, *Elanora* must have gone out, my corporate Mastercard in hand, and bought "Art". Hence my disquiet. I fervently hoped she hadn't bought a dozen of those awful, overpriced Blue Dog paintings on the basis of 'our' duty to support local artists, a favorite theme of hers and one she was expounding to William as she pounded nails with the nonchalance of a professional carpenter.

"*Elanora*," I said, trying not to sound too aghast.

Cri du Coeur

"Oh, good morning, Richard," she said in Siberian tones. "I believe I asked you not to grace my presence today, didn't I?"

"I only stopped in to check my messages and pick up the St. Johns file," I said.

"Well, I forgive you, then," she said, her tone not noticeably thawed. "Gloria Puglia called the service six times since Friday. She thinks her latest soon to be ex-creep is stalking her and she wants a twenty-four hour bodyguard. She specifically wants a heavily muscled, dark, intense type between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age."

William rolled his eyes.

"Refer her to Legaux's agency," I said. "Anyone else?"

"A Tim Winston called twice yesterday." She thwacked another nail.

"Who's he?" I asked, fascinated by how close she was grouping the nails. What was she planning to hang? Framed postcards?

"Clueless," she said. "He told the service he was a bartender of your acquaintance and he needs to speak to you ASAP as long as it's between noon and two p.m., no earlier, no later. The message's on your desk."

The bartender at the Jazz Hole. Had to be. I haven't had a bartender as an acquaintance since the old drinking days at Napoleon's. I turned to go to my office.

"And!" Elanora said. I stopped. "Brenda Leggio called." You could hear the ice cubes tinkling in Elanora's throat.

"Who?" I asked.

"Clueless," Elanora said and whacked her latest nail so hard, she chipped the paint on the wall.

"Maybe not entirely clueless," I ventured. I can't read minds, but I'm not bad at translating body language.

"Maybe not," she agreed. Whack! Whack! "Message said she met you at the Endymion parade, remember me? and your night together was so delicious, how about a repeat? Her place this time." Whack!

"Oh. Her," I said.

"Oh, boy," William said.

Elanora finally looked at me, or rather she glanced at me over her shoulder, for an icy second. "So. What are you hanging around for? Get your file and get lost."

"What's wrong with you, Elanora?" I asked. "You're acting like you did when you had the flu last winter. All prickly, kind of."

She turned her back on me again.

"OK," I sighed. "Any other calls?"

"Like who? The president, wanting your enlightened views on welfare reform?"

This time William snickered.

"I'll translate that as a 'no'," I said. "What's your vote, William?"

"Scram, Richard," Elanora said. "William and I are working." She began nail grouping again. Maybe the nails, all alone in their neat, geometrical arrangements were themselves going to be the artwork. Oh, well. Maybe all this arctic behavior was PMS affiliated or something. Women, especially Elanora, mystify me.

I made it to the (only relative) safety of my office without Elanora chucking the hammer at me and felt lucky. I pulled the file and got the messages off the desk, but I didn't scam. Instead, I called Carlos.

"How'd it go with Lulu?" I asked.

"Not now, Babydoll," Carlos trilled.

"What?" I asked.

"It's my sister," Carlos simpered to someone and that someone, I thought, had to be Lulu. "Ah, you are a sweetie!" Carlos gushed into the phone. "You know I love, positively adore, champagne brunch. Commander's Palace or The Columns?"

"The Columns," I said, wondering what this was all about and if everyone but me had been rendered irrational overnight while I slept peacefully oblivious to the passing of a weird-meteor.

"At eleven, then. Bye-bye, Sissie. Yes, I love you, too. Kiss, kiss." He hung up.

I stared at the telephone for at least ninety seconds. I couldn't define the emotion tugging at my gut for that long, but I finally recognized it. Dismay. Was Carlos cheating on poor, plain, but likable Miles after all with that wannabe woman? With Lulu, in his sequins and five o'clock shadow? It wasn't unthinkable. Carlos told me once in our Napoleon days that homosexual was a synonym for promiscuous, at least in his circle of acquaintances, friends and bedmates.

I hit redial.

"Oh, hello, Mama," Carlos cried gaily. "What a busy Sunday I'm having!"

"Is Lulu with you?" I asked.

"Si, si, Mamacita," Carlos laughed. He'd just used all the Spanish I knew, other than the usual expletives, but he continued to rattle on in words that sounded like tropical birds singing. The only thing I could understand through all the twittering was 'The Columns'.

"Carlo," I said. And then couldn't decide what to say. There was a short silence.

"OK, Mama. Si, si. Ok," Carlos said and hung up.

I looked at the phone again and decided it was useless to worry about it until I saw Carlos. I looked at my watch. It was just nine thirty and what was I to do between now and eleven? Call the bartender, of course. It wasn't between noon and two and he'd be asleep, but oh, well. Carlos was having a busy Sunday and I was having a 'what the hell' Sunday.

Cri du Coeur

The phone rang endlessly. Poor fool apparently didn't make enough down at the Jazz Hole to afford an answering machine, I thought. I hung up and redialed.

A faint "What?" was finally mumbled in my ear.

"Tim Winston? This is Richard Denker, returning your calls. I apologize for the delay in getting back with you, but we're moving the office this weekend and things are slightly disorganized," I proffered.

He bit. "I fucking guess so," he said. "I told that bimbo to tell you not to call before noon."

"I apologize again," I said. "This time for waking you." It's the not-yet-fully-dead lawyer in me that lies with such suaveness.

"Well, I fucking guess so," he said again, punctuating it with a loud yawn. "Say, I wanna see you. I gotta talk to you about Martinique."

"Anytime," I said.

"How about three? But not in the Quarter."

"I understand your concerns," I said, because I was beginning to understand that there might be something to be concerned about, thanks to Carlos and his telephonic swishing. "How about Children's Wear at the Poydras Plaza Macy's?"

"That's fucking great," he said. "I never woulda thought of that."

"You should watch more TV," I said.

"I don't have no fucking TV," he said and hung up in the middle of another yawn.

"I guessed that," I said to the dial tone. "No answering machine, no TV. Makes sense to me. No microwave either, huh? No microwave popcorn and no X-Files. You poor sucker."

The hammering in the outer office had stopped, I noted as I put the phone down. Ah, ha! I thought. Time to see what Elanora was hanging on all those nails. My life just one thrilling mystery after another. No wonder I was addicted to The X-Files.

I was almost afraid to go out there again. Her behavior earlier had been so eccentric I was concerned I might contract hypothermia if I lingered in her vicinity too long, but curiosity won over prudence. Besides, the only exit was through the front door.

I grabbed the St. Johns file and my .38, spun the butterfly for protection, and re-entered the polar regions of the office.

Elanora and William were busy as worker ants hanging artfully clustered, believe it or not and I didn't (couldn't), framed postcards. They'd finished about one-third of a wall each, with perhaps fifty postcards already in place. These weren't 'Having A Great Time In Miami Beach' type cards. These were those fancy, not cheap, ones they sell in the Quarter and Uptown boutiques featuring photographs of old jazz greats. I recognized several legends from the 1940's Mahlia Jackson, Cab Calloway, Woody Herman, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn.

Cri du Coeur

The largest and most striking of the groupings was the one Elanora was working on, a glorious montage of Billie Holiday. Billie with Duke Ellington. Billie and Satchmo. Billie in gardenias and feather boas. Billie Holiday.

I remembered Miles describing Martinique as a combination of Billie Holiday and Sade. Torch singers, I thought. She was a torch singer, like Holiday. She was not like Sade, except superficially. Billie Holiday and Martinique St. Johns were sisters, both torch singers and both doomed, and both had known it. That knowledge was in their eyes and in their music. Maybe only someone with that awareness of personal doom can put such gut-glutching, heart-hurting, magic into a song.

"Mr. Denker?" William said. "You alright?"

I looked at him. He was looking at me with a small frown between his eyes.

He was also holding a picture of Bing Crosby.

"Bing Crosby?" I said weakly.

"He did a lot of sides. Did some real fine tunes with Satchmo," William said.

"Oh, hello, Richard," Elanora said, her back to me. "When are you leaving?"

"Elanora," I said, "where's Elvis?"

"Elvis," Elanora said, "did not do jazz and even if he had, he's not in period."

"Not in period," I said.

"Not in period," she said. "Neither are lava lamps."

"Elanora," I said. "Are you having *your* period? A touch of dementia praecox, perhaps? I am not Mickey Spillane, this is not 1940—something and we don't even live in L.A.. What the hell are you doing, reverting to your grandmother's childhood?"

"Oh, Richard," she said carelessly and I groaned. "Have you forgotten already? We just talked about this last month." She smugly straightened a photo of Billie Holiday fooling around with a saxophone while a man behind her plugged his ears and grinned.

"I knew it!" I screamed, throwing my hands up in an excellent imitation of Carlos. "I knew it! What have you done now, Elanora Barker Maculay? What are you hiding from me this time?" I pretended to tear my hair, but not very hard. At my age, you can't afford to lose any more than hair than absolutely necessary.

She spun around so fast, she half fell off the boxes of copypaper.

"Now, Richard. Now, Richard," she said, hurrying to me. "Let's go in your office and discuss this calmly. You shouldn't act like this in front of William. He hasn't been with us long enough to understand your peculiarities and you're frightening him, I'm sure."

"I ain't frightened," William offered. He began to pick up the St. Johns file, which had gone flying into the air along with my hands.

"Oh, he understands," I said, still screaming. "He understands perfectly that I'm not the bizarre one here, Elanora."

Cri du Coeur

She tried to put her hand on my arm.

"Don't touch me," I hollered. "I might get frostbite."

I was starting to really enjoy this. Elanora looked flustered. Elanora never looks flustered. I almost laughed, but managed not to by biting my tongue.

"Richard?" she ventured.

"So what is it this time?" I screeched. My throat was beginning to hurt from all this yelling. I'd have to let her calm me down pretty soon.

"Richard, we talked ..."

"No, we didn't, Elanora," I said. "We never did. We never do. You and I talk about as much as a married couple does. What have you done and how much is it going to cost me? In money, Elanora. We'll discuss mental anguish and possible psychiatric fees later."

"If you'll recall ... "

"I don't recall. Maybe I have Alzheimer's, who knows? Refresh my recall, go ahead!" I was screaming again. "Go ahead!" I was having a great time.

"You're making money," Elanora shouted over my shouting.

"Huh?" I grunted, a truly horrible suspicion dawning on me. I sat down on a box of lemon yellow copypaper.

"A thousand a day, unless they fall behind schedule, in which case the fee increases to fifteen hundred per day, for each day over ten, but under thirty. After thirty, the per diem doubles and ... "

"Not a movie," I whispered. "Please, Elanora. Not a movie. Tell me there isn't going to be a film crew underfoot shooting a movie in my office. Don't you remember how fucked up traffic and everything was when they shot *JFK*?"

"This is different," Elanora said. "This time we're being paid for the inconvenience involved."

"It's a remake of *The Maltese Falcon*, right?" I said. Moaned.

"No, sir, Mr. Denker," William said helpfully. "It's about jazz entertainers. They'll use your office for the set of the sleazy talent agent's office."

"That's appropriate, some people might say," Elanora said. "Those who knew you when you were a lawyer."

"It would only be appropriate if I'd been an entertainment counsel," I said.

"Richard, think," Elanora said. "I've got the initial ten thousand already in the account bearing interest and we'll be getting some wonderful, free PR out of this, too. I've already contacted the Times-Picayune and City Business and they're both going to run very favorable stories. 'Local Businessman Aiding New Orleans Economy' type stories. It's a marvelous opportunity."

"Profitable, you mean," I said.

"Of course," she said.

"How long have you been negotiating this deal? I take it you choose to relocate here and not, say, to the Energy Centre, because of this 'opportunity'."

"Well," Elanora said.

"OK," I said, giving in because I had no other choices with Elanora. She'd outflanked me again. "Fine. Give me the file, William. I'm outta here."

Elanora's eyes gleamed happily at me like Long John Silver's after he'd plundered an unarmed treasure galleon.

"And speaking of the President," I said, standing up. "He should appoint you head of the budget committee."

"There'd be none of this national deficit bullcrap, if I were," she agreed comfortably.

William opened the office door for me and winked.

"Don't come back today, Richard," Elanora said. "I mean this. William and I've got a lot to do to finish up by tomorrow."

"I won't be back," I said grimly. "Not while Tinseltown's camping out here. You can always reach me at home or Napoleon's."

"I always could," Elanora said.

And she always, by God, gets the last word.

3.

Carlos was already seated on the veranda of The Columns, noshing champagne brunch goodies and surrounded by gorgeous spring flowerbeds rioting with color in carefully controlled order, when I stepped off the streetcar a full fourteen minutes early for our meeting. He saw me and waved a croissant.

"Sorry about the swishing this morning, Dickie," he said. "Lulu is one maximumly paranoid chick."

"Lulu," I said, sitting down, "is a man in a dress. He just looks like a chick." I thought briefly of bringing up Miles, but decided to wait until we'd had a few glasses of bubbly.

"Wrong," Carlos said. "You're a man. I'm a man. Miles is a man. Even that fat fart over there is man. Men have balls and real men, like us, Dickie, have balls of Toledo steel."

"Lulu had his cut off?" I asked, fascinated.

"Only figuratively," Carlos said. "Anatomically, he's all there, but in his mind he's castrated, and don't looked at me like that. I didn't fuck him."

"How do you know then? That's he's anatomically correct?"

"Because, my ignorant heterosexual friend, after mucho wine coolers he got very sloppy. Forgot he was man

Cri du Coeur

acting the way he thinks women do. He burped and farted and ..."

"He scratched his balls," I laughed.

"Indeed," Carlos said.

"But why take him to your house, for God's sake?"

"Because he would not talk about Martinique at the Jazz Hole or anywhere else public and he stayed all night because once he got talking, I couldn't shut him up short of fucking him, and I don't make enough denero to do that even on the cases I'm being paid to work."

"Besides," I ventured, "there's Miles."

He looked at me. For a full minute, maybe more, he said nothing and his face was sad and thoughtful and questioning and mischievous, but patient, too, and then he said gently, "Dickie, if there is one thing in the huge world of our friendship you are incapable of advising me about, it's my love life."

"Or anyone else's," I agreed.

"Dickie, remember the old days down at Napoleon's?"

"That wasn't very long ago, Carlos. There's nothing wrong with my short term memory, no matter what Elanora's told you to the contrary," I said. "You gave me advice on my love life, I believe."

"I never did," Carlos said, "but I'm going to this morning as soon as you've had a couple more glasses of this atrocious champagne." He poured my water out into the nearest flowerbed and refilled the tumbler with bubbly.

"Oh, yeah?" I said. "And why should I listen to your advice if you won't give ear to mine?"

"Because I've been married to a woman, dated several, and all my closest friends are women. You can't claim the same about your experience with men. Drink up, Dickie, and try one of these caviar stuffed croissants. They're so good, they almost make up for the cheap champagne. Have a melon ball, too."

"Alright," I laughed. "So, tell me about your night with Lulu."

"Well," Carlos said, popping a melon ball in his mouth and talking around it, "like I said before you changed the subject, he was too nervous to talk at the bar and I understood that completely, Dickie. Homo lupus and Scarface were hanging out here, there and everywhere. They made *me* nervous." He swallowed the melon ball without bothering to chew it. "That retarded kid was all over the place, serving drinks, the wolf was on the prowl, and once I caught him staring at us, so I finally suggested we move our conversation elsewhere. Pass me the Caramari, please. Thanks."

"What'd he say about Martinique?"

"I told him I was a journalist interested in her Haitian background and he said you mean the voodoo and I said sort of, but at first all he'd talk about, even at my place, was how beautiful she was and how sweet she treated him and natter, natter, natter."

"He knew her well, then?" I said, pouring us both more champagne.

Cri du Coeur

"Well enough for them to go shopping together every couple of weeks and to trade makeup tips. They weren't intimate, though, until about two months ago when she took him to a voodoo ceremony in Holy Shelter."

"I grew up in Holy Shelter," I said.

"I know," Carlos grinned. "Good lead, huh?"

"She took him out there?" I could maybe picture Martinique going to Maison Blanc or Victoria's Secret with a transvestite in tow, but a voodoo gathering out in the swamps? That put even my admittedly hyper imagination into overload. I couldn't see that at all and I couldn't see any serious practitioner of voodoo allowing Lulu to join the mysteries. "Why would she do that?"

"Andre, which is dear Lulu's real name, is Cajun, first off. He's an aspiring entertainer, second off, and, finally, he and Martinique met her first night at the Jazz Hole and just clicked together like a pair of castanets, so they'd been girl-talking almost a year by the time she took him to Holy Shelter with her."

"I'm not tracking," I said.

"Martinique told Lulu that voodoo was the ticket that moved her career so fast and maybe it could help move his, see?" Carlos dropped a melon ball into his champagne and watched it fizz.

"Yeah," I said. "I do see."

"It makes a weird kind of sense, too, Dickie. She comes to New Orleans, she's only seventeen, speaks no English, has nothing but the clothes she's wearing, knows no one but Ariviste Pontreaux, and what? five, five and half years later, she's got a house on Coliseum Circle with seasonal neighbors who include Francis Ford Coppola and Madonna. And she has a killer recording contract, fifty grand in her purse and her future's unlimited when she pulls the plug on herself. Something sure as shit jumpstarted her career."

I nodded.

Voodoo doesn't seem as silly to me as it probably does to other logical people because I came up in the Louisiana Bayou country. My nanny, Tante Belle, was a believer. Most of the blacks I knew out there in the Parish of my childhood were believers and most the whites, particularly the old Cajun families, were, if not true believers, at least, very respectful of The Religion.

When I was about fourteen and pestering Tante Belle for a love potion, my father told me that the magic spells and mojo bags she was always doing on behalf of my well-being were bullshit, but that didn't mean voodoo was bullshit. Voodoo, like the Catholics, he said, had a social structure, a good ol' boy network, and that's where its strength was and that's what made it dangerous, too. Nothing to fool with, he said and ended his lecture by comparing the true believers to the Mafia.

For favors done, favors must be done in return, he said.

Martinique had taken favors. What had they demanded of her in return? And had she given it to them?

Pontreaux said she wasn't a believer, that she was a good Catholic. Tante Belle was a good Catholic, too. She did the First Saturdays every year and sometimes the First Fridays, too. She always had a novena going to one of the saints, sometimes just to honor the saint, sometimes to request special favors, like that the lump in my mother's breast turn out benign (it didn't) and that I wouldn't be killed in Vietnam (I wasn't. Obviously.). Being a good Catholic did not preclude being a true believer. Offering novenas to St. Jude and St. Therese of Liseaux did not

preclude offering a chicken or a goat to the loa.

"Martinique," I said. "What did you do?"

"What?" Carlos said, waving at the waiter for our check.

"Nothing. Yet. What else did Lulu tell you?"

"A few sad love stories. But I'm seeing him later tonight. Give me that check, Dickie. I tricked you into brunch, remember? Oh, and he said the African is called Papa Samhadl, but the only things he knows for sure about the man are that he's not Haitian, although he tells people he is, and that he is one scary motherfucker." Carlos finished signing the charge slip and handed it to the waiter with a brilliant, but not flirtatious, smile. "Ok, Dickie," he said, folding his hands and leaning across the table like a television therapist, "down to business."

"My love life," I remembered. "That's definitely a sad story at the moment. In fact, it's practically a non-existent story at the moment, so there's nothing to talk about. Really, Carlo." I lit a cigarette. "Really."

"Hush," Carlos said. "Pretend you're drunk. Pretend we're at Napoleon's, it's coming up dawn, and you're smashed."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to listen to me and the only time you've ever listened to me seriously was back there at Napoleon's over Kamikazes."

"That's not true," I protested. "I take you seriously all the time."

"On business stuff, sure, but not personal stuff. Not any more."

"Well, I don't have personal problems anymore," I said. I didn't. At least, I was pretty sure I didn't. "I've recovered from the divorce. I make scads of money. I am well adjusted."

"Bull pucky," Carlos said. "Now, don't interrupt. Just pretend you're too drunk to speak, but not too drunk to listen, and speak to me only when I address you in an interrogative mode, got that? OK. Here it comes. You have been bedhopping ever since your divorce. You're forty-four years old."

"Forty-two," I mumbled.

"Forty-two, fine. Don't interrupt. You're too old for bedhopping. You need a woman and a home."

"I get it," I said. "You want me to marry your sister."

"Absolutely not. I'd never even suggest Meranda. She's got fat legs." Carlos grinned. He knows I'm a leg man.

"So who would you suggest, Doctor Jung?"

"Elanora."

"Elanora?" I stared at him. He wasn't grinning now. "Carlos, you're cracked. Elanora's been my secretary forever."

"Why do you think she's been your secretary forever?"

Cri du Coeur

"Because she can boss me around, walk all over me, give herself yearly raises and always have the last word, no matter what we're 'discussing'. Oh, and she gives herself bonuses, too."

"Because she loves you." He said this with such positivity that I believed him instantly.

"Brenda Leggio," I laughed.

"And why do you suppose you let her treat you like she does?"

"Because she's the best secretary east of the Mississippi River."

"Because you love her." He said this with such positivity that I almost believed him.

"I'm not in love with Elanora," I said. Firmly.

"No, you're not," Carlos agreed. "And she's not in love with you. There's a difference between being in love and loving someone. You and Elanora love each other. Being in love, that's Miles and me."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is, one wears off, the other doesn't. Being in love fades away like a good memory. If you're lucky, the morning you wake up and realize you're no longer in love with the person beside you, you'll realize, too, that you still love that person anyway."

"Carlo, you're nuts. I don't love Elanora. I don't even know what size boobs she's got or the color of her eyes. I know she can type 120 words a minute, never misplaces files and keeps even my frigged up taxes straight, but I don't know the color of her hair. I don't even know if she has legs."

"That's all superficial shit," Carlos said and his face was so serious it frightened me. "Those are all 'in love' things. When she's seventy or eighty, her boobs will be sagging no matter what size they are now and her hair will be gray, but you'll still love her. You'll have sagging boobs of your own, probably be bald on top and unable to find your dick with a magnifying mirror, but she'll still love you."

"Nice picture, Carlos," I said. "I can hardly wait for old age. Maybe suicide is a viable option after fifty after all."

"Truth," Carlos said. "Time to wake up, Dickie, and smell the perfume before she gets tired of waiting for you to get tired of jungle fucking."

"You're as bad as Elanora. Always have to have the last word, don'tja?" I said, gathering my cigarettes and the file. "I'm getting out of here before you have me planning the guest list for the wedding."

"Where are you going?" Carlos asked, getting up, too.

"Over to the inn to try and talk to Martinique's father."

We crossed St. Charles Avenue and walked up half a block to the streetcar stop. Carlos stood beside me, hands stuffed in the pockets of his no-name weekend jeans, rocking on his heels. He looked very young and vulnerable to me suddenly. As young and vulnerable as Martinique in her morgue photos, in fact, and I felt that hinky sensation again.

"Carlos," I said.

He looked at me, smiling.

"Be damn careful," I said. "Voodoo magic is purest bullshit, but cult murder isn't."

"Why, I know that, Dickie," he said, still smiling. "But, hell, I'm just your junior partner. Who'd want to kill me when they could kill the top taco?"

Right.

4.

At the St. Charles Guest House a terrifyingly cheerful young lady informed me that Mr. St. Johns checked out the evening before leaving no forwarding address and a room so immaculate he might never have been in it at all.

In exchange for a ten dollar bill and my sexiest smile, she also told me St. Johns checked in on Friday without a previous reservation, paid cash for three days, spoke foreigner English but displayed very genteel Southern manners and left around dinner time on Saturday, a black man carrying his luggage 'just like the old days'. Finally this Stars–N–Bars groupie who probably only knew about the 'old days' from watching *Gone With The Wind* on TNT, denied the black man had either dreadlocks or facial scars, ergo, he had to have been Ariviste Pontreaux and that was perfectly logical.

One man was her fiance, one her father. Together, they could camp out in her cool, tropical parlor, touching things she had touched, surrounded by the scent of her flowers and telling each other all the secrets I coveted. I wanted to head over to Coliseum Circle pronto, but there wasn't enough time before my meeting with the bartender to allow for a really meaningful discussion with St. Johns and, of course, Pontreaux. I knew he'd insist on being present while I talked with Martinique's father, just to keep an eye on the old man's mouth and what came out of it.

If he even let me in the door this time.

My reasons for seeing Martin St. Johns were personal. If Ariviste's version of Martinique's life was accurate, and I thought that most of it was, Martinique had never seen her father and believed him dead. There wouldn't be much he could tell me other than why he'd chosen her funeral for his resurrection, but that was OK. That was alright. I wanted to talk to him because he was her father.

And because Papa Samhadl didn't want me to talk to him.

By the time I strolled into Macy's, I'd decided to visit Coliseum Circle right after dinner. That's always a nice, relaxed time for receiving guests and Pontreaux would receive me because Martinique was right. He was weak. As a man, and as in the weakest link in the human chain of voodoo freaks encircling her last days.

With that thought, something clicked so loudly, I almost heard it with my ears. What I'd almost understood at the funeral before seeing Martinique's father distracted me.

Voodoo. Not as a contributing factor to her suicide, but as primal cause. Origin. The hub of the wheel and its rim.

And something else clicked then, too.

Martinique's bizarre suicide note. Murdered children. Whose murdered children? Her own? Had she ever had a child? The autopsy report I hadn't bothered to read could tell me.

Cri du Coeur

Did Martinique take favors from Papa Samhadl, whoever he really was, favors that jumpstarted her career? Did she give him her child in return, then kill herself out of grief and guilt? Was that what this was all about?

It seemed too simple an explanation, but maybe I just didn't want it to be so horrifyingly simple, so sordid, so, yes damn it! so stupid. Maybe I didn't want to believe Martinique, my Martinique, was capable of such evil, moronic stupidity.

I had to read the autopsy report. I had to find somewhere private and read it right now, even if it was only in the Macy's men's room. I turned around and smacked into Tim Winston, which reminded me why I was here in Macy's munchkin Land, standing in front of a rack of three piece Easter suits complete with tiny ties and cufflinks.

"Fucking kid's clothes cost more than mine do," he said as a greeting. "I never paid twenty bucks for a tie in my life."

No shit, I thought. You probably never wore a tie in your life. "Makes you glad not to have rugrats of your own, doesn't it?" I said.

"Oh, I got 'em. They don't live with me, is all. They live with their mothers."

"Mothers? How plural are talking here?"

"Too plural," he said, grinning the grin of man drowning in alimony and support payments. "I ain't always looked like this."

I looked at him. He looked a lot worse today than he had at the bar. Bloodshot eyes, pale but fevered looking skin and even his sausage belly seemed flabbier and deflated. He looked like man fighting a long war of attrition with a deadly illness. A war he was in the final process of losing.

"What's wrong?" I asked without thinking.

"They took her body," he said.

"What?" I said.

"They murdered her and now they stole her fucking body," he said.

"How do you know?" I asked. I still wasn't thinking. I was responding from automatic pilot mood, which tends to mundanize my interrogation technique.

"Beanie told me."

"Come on, Winston," I said. "Beanie's not a reliable source. Besides, she was only buried yesterday." As if grave robbers were reasonable persons who observe a decent interval before making off with the corpse.

"Beanie's an imbecile, I know that," he said. "But I've also known him since he was born and that's sixteen years now. I knew his mama when she was maid to Mr. Santini and that fuck Bobby was still in diapers himself."

"Wait," I said. "Bobby Boudreaux is Beanie's brother?"

Cri du Coeur

"Only on his mother's side," Winston said. "Beanie's father is Johnnie Santini. It's supposed to be some huge fucking secret, but everyone who worked for old Mr. Marcello knows. Young Mr. Marcello thought it was funny as hell. 'Santini,' he'd say, 'you couldn't get a son with your good Italian wife and you couldn't get one outta your Swedish mistress, but ya finally got one offen your nigger maid. Too bad it's a fucking retard!' 'Course, he don't dare say that shit now."

"You worked for Carlos Marcello?" I asked, dumbfounded. "Doing what?"

"I was his personal plumber, right? But we're off the point here, Denker, which is that I know Beanie. He ain't got the imagination to make this up and he ain't got the fucking intelligence to lie, but he's always listenin' and people are always talking around him because they got the mistaken fuckin' notion that because he's mongoloid he's deaf, too."

I was only half-listening. A plumber, I marvelled, revising all my previous preconceptions of the man. Plumber used to be a whitecollar euphemism for assassin. This graying, sausage bellied jerk with rotting teeth and a vocabulary that consisted primarily of permutations on the word 'fuck' had, in his youth, been a buttonman for the old Don of New Orleans. Hard to believe, but far from impossible. And what a fucking mass of snakes this investigation was threatening to become, as Winston would have phrased it.

"Why steal her body?" I asked, coming back to the point.

"Fuck if I know," he growled. "But I know they killed her. I don't know how they made her do it or why, but they did, and now they've done this, this evil thing, taking her body outta the vault, not even letting her rest in peace. I want you should bring 'em in for it, Denker. I got plenty of cash. I'll pay you to do this for me."

"Who are we talking about here, Winston?" I asked, really confused now, because if my suspects were the same as his, why didn't he go after them himself? He certainly had the skills, rusted through they probably were, and he was already in with the group while I wasn't even close to the fringes.

"Emile St. Pe. Bobby fucking Boudreaux. Who'd you fucking think?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe Santini." He stared at me. "Who's St. Pe?"

"Big nigger. Scares on his face. Spooky eyes."

"Papa Samhadl."

"Yeah. Fucking Papa Samhadl. Beanie thinks he's the boogie man."

"I can understand that," I said. "Tell me something I don't understand. How's Santini fit in?"

"He don't. Forget Santini."

"He's your boss," I pointed out. "Is he St. Pe's boss?"

"Yeah, but that's not germaine, Denker. Forget Mr. Santini."

"Germaine?" I said. "Watch your mouth, Winston. Your education's showing."

"Fuck you," he said, but he said it amicably.

Cri du Coeur

"Look, what do you want me to do? Exactly. Spell it out and one of the words you spell better not be murder, or I'm outta here."

"Don't be an asshole, Denker," Winston said, obviously disappointed in me. "You think I'd send an amateur to do my job?"

Well, at least he didn't say, 'a child to do a man's job'. "OK, what then?"

"First, find Martinique and bring her back for a proper reburial. Then get me the proof they killed her and why."

I thought about it, staring at all those little wingtips and baby briefcases. He let me think about it, standing still and silent beside me. He was ugly, but not undiplomatic. Finally I admitted to myself that I was gonna do it anyway, so I might as well let him pay me to do it. Only his motives worried me. The possibility of a setup was not impossible, with the particular individuals involved here.

"I need a why from you," I said. "You want me to squaredance with the Mafia and a killer cult, you're gonna have to give me a good reason and a huge fee."

"I ain't got a good reason," he said.

"I can't believe you said that," I said.

"What I mean is, my reason is personal."

"All reasons, stripped of their gaudy rationalizations, are personal. What's yours?"

"Martinique," he said fiercely. "I loved her. I'd done everything for her, died for her even, but I couldn't do a damn thing to help her when she needed it."

"You couldn't help her because she didn't let you know she needed help," I said. "She didn't let anyone know. No one knew what was happening to her. No one could have saved her."

"No one knew. Well, I wanna know now. You gonna help me find out or you just gonna keep fooling with this thing as a hobby?"

"I'll do it," I said. "But I'll need some help from you."

"You got whatever you need," he said.

"I want a cashier's check at my office by noon tomorrow for \$20,000.00 to demonstrate your commitment."

"My sincerity, you mean," he grunted.

"That, too. I'll hold it in an interest bearing account until this is finished and then we'll sit down and discuss my final fee and costs."

"That's fair," he said. "What else can I do?"

"Have you ever been out to Holy Shelter with Martinique?"

"You know about them things already?"

Cri du Coeur

"I know they happen, but not what goes on."

"Dancing and goat killin's all I ever seen."

"I think something a lot more vicious is going on," I said. "What I'm asking is, can you get Lulu and an operative of mine invited out there? St. Pe knows me and he knows you. We need to set up an information conduit. Without Martinique to sponsor you, can you do it?"

He thought about it and I let him. I'm not ugly and I'm a great diplomat. It's part of being a successful lawyer.

"Yes," he said.

"OK," I said. "Lulu to Carlos, Carlos to me and me to you. Easy."

"Easy, maybe," he said, "but fucking dangerous."

"I know that," I said and realized that I had always known it. That was the source of my hinky attacks danger signals, not much different than those felt by early man at the roaring of a predator outside his cave and no different at all from those I felt in the Vietnam, knowing Charlie was waiting in the bush, somewhere alongside the trail.

"You got a plan?" he asked.

"Only the rudiments of one," I said. "I think."

"They forced her to it," he said earnestly. "Somehow. It was murder. I swear it fucking was, Denker."

"I believe it," I said. "She wasn't a woman to just lay down and die. She had no history of giving up."

"Alright," he said and put out his hand so we could shake on it.

"I've got one more question," I said.

"You're a great one for just one more question. Like fucking Colombo, you are," he said, but he was smiling.

"What's your real name? Nobody with a WASP name like Tim Winston ever got to be a top anything for Carlos Marcello."

He laughed. "I did. But you're sharp, Denker. See, old Mr. Marcello pirated me from my original employer in the early '60's. He liked my style, he paid better, and the work load was a lot lighter." He laughed again.

"So who was your previous employer?" I asked, pretty sure I could guess.

"Uncle Sam," Winston said.

"Uncle Sam," I sighed. "How did I know that?"

"You're one of them psychics, I guess." He smiled a friendly son-of-a-bitch smile, winked and turned to go.

"Wait," I said. "One more question."

Cri du Coeur

"Only one, Lt. Colombo?"

"For now," I agreed. "Is it true Marcello set up the hit on JFK?"

He studied me for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah," he said. "RFK, too. But you don't need to ask who shopped that contract, do you?"

Maybe he was telling me the truth. Maybe he was telling me the truth he thought I already believed. I couldn't tell from my poor, overworked internal lie detector. "Who were the shooters?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he said. "Knowing that answer's a death warrant. That's the most dangerous answer in the world."

"But it happened thirty years ago," I protested.

"Sure and it's still dangerous," he said. "Like a stick of dynamite sweating. You really think Perry Russo died of a heart attack last year? Right when the new commission to investigate the assassination was in town looking into the Shaw/Ferrie/Oswald story he told? Don't be a doofus, Denker."

"You know, don't you?" I said. "You really know."

"Of course not. You might as well ask me what really landed at Roswell." He gave a little wave and started to amble away through the aisles of munchkin sized executive wear.

"Hey, Tim," I called after him. He stopped and turned around. "What did land at Roswell?"

He laughed, gave me a good natured finger and disappeared behind a rack of Izod for four year olds.

What would my hero, Fox Mulder, do now? I wondered. "The truth is probably out there," I said aloud, "but no one is paying you to indulge your fascination with JFK, so go home, Denker. Concentrate on Martinique."

I did. I caught a cab back to the apartment, cooked a ribeye, poured a beer and settled down to read the autopsy report while I ate.

Evidence of an abortion. Caesarian scars, indicating at least one live birth.

And she was pregnant. Approximately sixteen weeks pregnant. Four months pregnant.

Maybe she hadn't killed herself from guilt. Maybe she had killed herself to cheat St. Pe of her unborn child. But that made less sense than my first theory. There were plenty of other options open for her to save the child, like going away, going public, killing or having someone else kill St. Pe. Tim Winston would have done it for her without questions, qualms, hesitation or charge. Tim Winston would have done anything for her. He loved her and killing was his trade before he'd retired to the peaceful life of a French Quarter bartender and Martinique must have known both of these things about him. Women always know when a man is nuts about them and his prior occupation was apparently no secret because he'd told me and I was a stranger, so she had to have known that he would help her.

"You're missing something," I told myself through a mouthful of steak.

Maybe Pontreaux or Martin St. Johns could provide a hint or two as to what it was I was missing.

5.

The maid let me in and put me in the same parlor to wait. A cold front was moving in from Texas and the temperature had been dropped radically over the past few hours, so a nice fire was rippling in the fireplace and the smell of woodsmoke blended subtly with the fragrance of roses and night-blooming jasmine drifting in from outside.

That room was so incredibly lovely, and how unbelievable it made Martinique's being dead. If I closed my eyes and sank into the warmth, the scents, the delicate colors of this parlor, would I fade into the walls, become part of this house, find Martinique still living on the reverse side of the mirrors hanging silent and blank as windows all around me?

I looked at her picture on the mantle and whispered, "Help me out here, Martinique."

The maid decorously opened the pocketdoors and said, "Mr. Ariviste say he not at home. He say, you go away. Come back maybe next week."

I turned over a few moldy pages of memory, dredged up the most formal Vietnamese phrasing I could remember from my two tours there, and said, "Tell Mr. Ariviste I cannot go until I have seen both him and his guest. I am here for Martinique's sake. Please understand this. I will not go."

She nodded, eyes on the floor and slipped away, leaving the pocketdoors open.

I waited, thinking of Vietnam, which I seemed to be doing a lot of lately. How I hated that place! And loved it. It was both the worst and somehow the best period in my life. Karyn claimed it was also the ruin of our marriage but I always thought she was indulging in a bit of scapegoating there. Miss Hibernia ruined our marriage.

Didn't she?

Suddenly I wondered if Miss Hibernia might not be my scapegoat. This was a new thought and it made me so uncomfortable, I immediately quit thinking it.

Fortunately, the maid reappeared and saved me from further introspection. "I have arranged it," she said in Vietnamese, then in loud English, she said, "Mr. Ariviste say Mr. Martin no want see you. You leave now."

Somewhere upstairs a door was just closing. Crutches clumped on the stairs.

"Mr. Ariviste say Mr. Martin mourning. Not see you. Not see no one," she said. The crutches rushed down the stairs.

"Kimah, who wants to see me?" Martin St. Johns appeared at the pocketdoors. He looked straight at me with eyes that were hard from old suffering and soft with fresh grief. "Who are you?" he asked.

As I'd known he would, Ariviste popped out of the room across the hall. "He is just a private detective who has taken it upon himself to investigate Martinique's suicide, Martin," he said quickly. "There is no need for him to bother you now when you are so upset from the funeral."

"The funeral did not upset me," St. Johns said. "The death of my daughter has upset me. I want to speak with this man. He is apparently the only one interested in finding out what happened to Martinique."

Cri du Coeur

"He cannot know anything," Pontreaux said, trying to sound scornful instead of scared.

"What interesting phrasing, Ariviste," I said, sitting down without an invitation. I even lit a cigarette. If this had been Pontreaux's home instead of Martinique's, I'd probably have spit on the floor, as well. "What is it you're so certain I can't know? That she was pregnant when she pulled that trigger?"

St. Johns sat down heavily. On his face was a wild and terrible bereavement. I felt bad for him, but I wasn't stopping now.

"That she already had a child? What happened to that child, Ariviste?"

Pontreaux turned that ashy shade of purple which passes for pale with very dark skinned blacks.

"Or maybe you think I 'can't' know your fucking voodoo buddies stole her body from the mausoleum last night."

Whatever I thought would happen at that point fireworks, perhaps, or a silence so malignant it would kill a man to hear didn't.

Instead Pontreaux quietly fainted, catching his head a hell of a fine whack on the hardwood floor.

Kimah ordered me out of the house and I went.

6.

Home again. Staring at her poster, rocking a glass of Chianti back and forth on my knee, listening to her music.

She sang of love given and given until her heart died from lack of oxygen, of unfaithful lovers and selfish lovers, and secret lovers. Her voice was full of tropical colors, like her parlor, smoky drums like fading heartbeats, and a hoarse, helpless, sadness like the loss suffered in dreams. I could either cry or go to sleep, so I went to bed.

Carlos called sometime after midnight, waking me from a dream in which I was wandering, quite lost, but not yet frightened, in a cemetery where every whitewashed mausoleum showed vivid veves drawn in brutally fresh blood. They could never be washed away and worse, their warnings would never be deciphered. Somewhere among the tombs, a panther waited, but not for me. Not yet. A church bell began ringing and it sounded so much like my telephone, I reached out and picked it up.

"I'm home, Dickie," Carlos tinkled in my sleep clogged ear. "Safe and sound and unviolated by any men in dresses."

I mumbled something.

"Are you asleep? You are. You didn't wait up for me to check in. I am crushed. Simply crushed."

"I'm not asleep," I said. Thought I said.

"Did you say watch out for the panther or the dancer?" Carlos laughed. "I'll see you tomorrow. Go back to sleep now."

"Sure," I said and did.

5.

MONDAY, MARCH 3RD

1.

Two huge recreational vehicles were parked out front of the Hotel Astor when I got there on Monday morning. I stepped over cables and dodged scurrying gofer types with styrofoam cups and fat clipboards all the way from the street to my office. I was not happy when I did reach the door of number 300. There was gold lettering on the pebbled glass, all right, but it did not say 'Denker–Santiago Investigations'. It said 'Hymie Studdleman Talent Representative'. I opened the door anyway.

"Cut!" someone screamed. "Who is this fucking idiot?"

"That's my boss," Elanora said and Gregory Hines (Gregory Hines!) laughed.

"Well, kindly remove him from my scene," the famous jerk in the canvas director's chair and wearing a 'Director' baseball cap, said with surly politeness.

Elanora dragged me to Carlos' office where she's already imprisoned William and Carlos. Both were gaping at James Earl Jones while a make–up girl worked over him.

"What are you doing here, Richard?" Elanora asked, steaming.

"It's Monday," I said. "I always come into my office. It's

the first day of the traditional work week, remember?"

James Earl Jones rumbled laughter. "Hold still," the make–up girl said absently.

"You said you wouldn't come in during filming," Elanora said.

"Good day, Mr. Jones," I said. "It's an honor to have an artist of your distinction working in my office."

"This film is hardly art," he laughed.

"God! That voice!" Carlos half–whispered to William. He was definitely in the last stages of awe.

"Richard!" Elanora snapped.

"I didn't know shooting was starting this exact morning," I said. "You left that wee tad of info out of your tirade yesterday."

"I did not."

"Yes, you did," I insisted. "Didn't she, William?"

"You only kinda hinted at it, Miz Ellie," William said apologetically. "You never did actually say it out loud."

James Earl Jones rumbled more laughter. "Forgot your line, did you?" he twinkled.

Elanora giggled.

Cri du Coeur

I stared at her, my mouth open. Elanora? Giggling?

A gofer, light as Carlos, danced in. "Ready for you, Mr. Jones," he said in classic valley girl accents.

The make-up girl whisked a final bit of distinguished gray to his temples and he stood up. "Is Denzel here yet?" he asked.

"Denzel," Carlos moaned. I thought he might swoon.

"Calm down, pipsqueak," William said. "You're just starstruck."

"Yeah," I said. "It's like being seasick. It'll pass."

"Will you please get out of here?" Elanora wailed, all her giggling finished for this century.

"Give me any messages you're holding hostage and I'll disappear," I said.

"Kimah Vo called. She wants you to meet her at the Bluebird Cafe on Prytania. Around ten, she said, but wait if she's late. You know why."

I did. "Ah, ha," I said.

"Elias Neimeyer wants an interim report."

"Opps," I said. "Make something up and send it over. No, wait. I'll take care of it."

"You certainly will," Elanora said. "I've got plenty to do right now."

"Stargazing is a full-time job," I commiserated. "Anyone else?"

Elanora sighed. "Brenda Leggio."

"Tell her I died," I said, and because Carlos had clued me in, I didn't miss the subtle brightening of her eyes. In fact, I noticed, her eyes were a nice shade of blue. Not the glacial blue I prefer, but still, blue. "Anything else?"

"Someone in a gangster suit hand-delivered an envelope for you from Tim Winston. It was marked 'confidential' in big red letters, so I put it on your desk."

"Oh, that," I said, waving an airy hand. "It's just a \$20,000.00 check. Deposit it when you get a moment."

Finally! For once, for the very first time, I'd gotten the last word. Of sorts. Elanora was speechless. She wouldn't stay that way long, but while she did, I could savor my victory. I winked at Carlos and then delivered part two of my one-two-three verbal punch.

"We have been officially retained to investigate Martinique St. Johns' death."

"Say what?" Carlos said. "Why?"

Part three. Whoosh! "Her body was stolen from the vault Saturday night."

"No shit?" Carlos said.

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"My God," Elanora said.

"Cool," said some yahoo with one of those fifty pound clipboards, wandering in and plunking himself down on the edge of Carlos' desk. "Sounds like a decent idea for a movie. Kind of film-noir. American Gothic."

"What's a second associate producer?" I asked, reading his rank off his baseball cap.

"Less than nothing," he grinned. "In a way. Mostly. So, who's body was snatched?"

"That's privileged," Elanora said.

"OK," the second associate producer shrugged cheerfully. "Who's the butterfly lover?"

"I am," Carlos said. He jumped up and began showing off his collection and his grasp of Lepidopteran latin. So much for his interest in the St. Johns case, I thought. And were they making eyes at each other between the holograms?

There was a sudden scurrying in the hall.

"Our other star must have arrived. You ready for him, honey?" the producer asked the make-up girl. I'd forgotten she was in the room. She nodded.

"Denzel?" I asked.

"Denzel Washington?" the second associate producer said. "Denzel's not in this picture. Too bad, too. He had other commitments. We couldn't afford him, anyway."

"Aw, shucks," I said. "I wanted to meet him. I'd like him to play me in the movie about my life."

"Mr. Denker," William said, "he can't play you. You're white."

"So?" I said. "White people have been playing Native Americans in movies forever. Gentiles play Jews and vice versa. Chinese play Thais and Thais always play Vietnamese. It's ability that counts, William," I finished sonorously.

"Richard, you are a complete embarrassment to me," Elanora said. "You're hopeless."

"I'm helpless," I corrected. "A product of my environment."

"I can give you Denzel's number in Paris," the producer offered uncertainly.

"Paris," Elanora sighed.

"Joe Pesci!" Carlos blurted. So much for butterflies and second associate producers.

"Hi, Harry," Pesci said. He looked manic, just like he did in JFK.

"Hey, Joe. Listen, Mr. Denker. Instead of Denzel Washington, how about Joe?"

"He's too alive," I deadpanned. "I don't think he can do boring."

Cri du Coeur

"I can do boring," Pesci said, sitting in the make-up chair. "I'm an actor. For really big bucks, I can do anything."

"What the fuck's going on here?" The jerk in the director's cap was back. "You people are gonna have to get out. Amscray. Now."

"This is my office," I said. "My place of business."

"I paid to film here, bozo, and you're in my way. Chitchatting with my stars, holding up my film," he sniffed at me.

"Listen, dickhead," I said, "money can be refunded. Your fucking ass can be out in the street looking for a new place to film quicker than you can edit today's dailies."

"Richard," Elanora said. "Aren't you late for your meeting with the Mayor?" Elanora would allow herself to be skinned alive and drawn and quartered before she'd refund anyone any amount of money, so matter how minuscule.

"Yeah," I said. "OK. Come on, Carlos. Nice meeting you, Mr. Pesci, even if we didn't make it to formal introductions before being interrupted."

"Likewise," Pesci said.

"Let's have dinner. Tonight. After shooting," Harry said. "I'll formally introduce you to our stars and express the gratitude of the cast and crew of 'Basin Street Blues' for allowing us to disrupt your business."

The director looked like he was going to choke on his tongue, but he kept his mouth shut. Second associate producers may be less than nothing mostly, I noted, but they're apparently not without heavy clout the rest of the time.

"That would be splendid," I said. "Elanora, if no one objects to Windsor Court, call and reserve a private dining suite on my account. We don't want a bunch of gawking natives disturbing our guests."

"Yes, sir," Elanora, who never calls me 'sir', said.

"We'll see you around ten tonight, then," Harry said, putting out his hand.

I shook his hand and said, "Excellent. OK, Carlos. Let's go see what advice the Mayor needs this time."

It was a perfect exit line. Carlos laughed down all three flights of stairs to Royal Street.

"What are you going to do if they all show up at Windsor Court tonight?" he asked as we headed to my apartment to get my car. "There'll be maybe ten, twelve, people there if everyone comes. That's gonna cost you about fifty-five hundred."

"Show them the \$65,000.00 Lalique crystal table in the bar, seat James Earl Jones beneath the million dollar painting of the Infanta of Spain during dinner and hang myself from my office window when the AmEx bill comes in next month, of course," I said.

"No one but Harry will probably show," Carlos said comfortingly. "Why would famous stars like those guys want to have dinner with us?"

Cri du Coeur

"Famous stars are like politicians. They love to be seen in public and they love a free meal," I said, not comforted.

"I guess," Carlos agreed. "Harry'll show up for sure, though."

"Carlo," I said. "What's going on with you and Miles?"

He stopped walking. "Dickie," he said, "is that any business of yours?"

"Actually?" I said. "Yes. You want me to bring him into the firm, so if anything's changing between you, it is my business to know."

"Pure business, eh? Just the facts, ma'am?"

"No. I'm also asking from concern and friendship. And love, Carlo. You're my best friend."

"Love," Carlos said. "Does love really exist, Dickie?"

"Sure it does. Love, being in love, you just explained the difference to me yesterday, remember?"

"Yeah," Carlos sighed. "I did, didn't I?" He looked away from me and when he turned back, he was crying. "I've got the theory down great, but theory ain't practice."

"Oh, Carlo. What happened, bud?"

"He left me," Carlos said. "He threw a jealous snit over Lulu being at my place Saturday night. He didn't believe me when I swore I didn't fuck him."

"Ah, Jesus," I said. "This is my fault. I'll talk to him."

"It won't do any good, Dickie. He's not going to believe you either. Besides, I fail to see how it's your fault I fell in love with an asshole."

We stood there in the center of the sidewalk, tourists eddying around us as if we were boulders in the middle of a stream, Carlos with his hands in the pockets of his designer jeans, tears dripping off his chin and me, not having a clue what to say or do.

"Maybe he'll come back," I said out of the excess of my inadequacy. People said that to me all the time in the weeks after Karyn left me. It's about as comforting, and only a little less inane, than the second thing they said so often, 'And if she doesn't, Richard, there's plenty of other fish in the sea'.

"Fuck that, Dickie," Carlos said. "There's no love where there's no trust."

I almost said 'there's other fish in the sea'. Instead I bit my tongue. Literally. Carlos was right. I couldn't advise him on his love life.

"Come on," he smiled. "It's not like he left me at the altar, right?"

We started walking again. After a block or so, I sneaked a look at him and was relieved to see he'd quit crying. At the next corner, a hugely fat black woman in neon pink spandex showing every ripple of her cellulite pushed past us, forcing me off the sidewalk.

Cri du Coeur

"I didn't know Spandex came in size fifty-six," I said, regaining the sidewalk.

"Let me ask you something, Dickie," Carlos said. "Serious."

"Serious," I agreed.

"You're a lawyer. Isn't it some kind of fashion tort for a woman larger than size ten to be on a public street, before sundown, wearing Spandex?"

"Serious," I said, putting on my lawyer face. "Yes, it is. But only in the case of lime-green and electric blue Spandex. The statute failed to legislate neon pink."

Carlos smiled. He patted my arm. "You're a good friend, Dickie."

"Cut it out, Carlo," I said, relieved things were back to normal. "What'd you find out from Lulu last night?"

"More of the same and nothing at all. How about you and Martinique's dad? Is he the one who hired us to find her body?"

"No," I said. "I did all the talking, he did all the listening, and Ariviste did all the fainting. The bartender at the Jazz Hole put up the twenty grand."

"Bartenders make that kind of money? Jesus, Dickie. Let's sell the agency and buy a bar." He was grinning, but only half-joking.

"Naw," I said. "Buttonmen make that kind of money."

"Wow," Carlos said. "The Mafia's part of this, too? Johnnie Santini and his nifty crew or the remaining dregs of the Marcello family?"

"Only peripherally, I think. Kimah Vo was Martinique's maid. I hope she'll have more pieces of the puzzle for me when I meet her this morning."

"I'm coming with you, right? Good. Bluebird serves the best breakfast in New Orleans. The old-fashioned cholesterol and calorie kind." Carlos sighed happily.

"Wrong," I said. We'd reached my apartment (its only distinction in a city top heavy with distinctive buildings, being that it was once the home of Clay Shaw) and my car. I disabled the alarm and got in.

"Wrong? Then why'd you make me walk all the way over here?" Carlos grumbled.

I stuck my head out the window and laid my hand on his wrist. "Listen to me. This woman is a Vietnamese mamasan. She's spooked already. I can't take you. Besides, you're got another job to take care of this morning."

"I do, huh?"

"Sure. Get in," I said, giving him my bad-boy grin. "I'm dropping you off at Neimeyer & Son, remember?"

"Gee, that's right, Elanora," he said, giving me his bad-girl grin. "Now remind me what I'll be doing when I get there."

"Hacking through the Neimeyer network."

"Of course," he agreed.

Driving over to Algiers, I filled him in on what I wanted him to do.

"Just to be really thorough, run through everything," I said, pulling up in front of Neimeyer's new office complex. "Run the company's whole file system, encrypted and open."

"I woulda done all that anyway," Carlos said. He reached for the door handle, then settled back in his seat. "Dickie, I have to ask you something. Something truly serious this time."

"All right," I said, turning off the car.

"Were you just giving me strokes or did you mean it when you said you love me?"

"I meant it," I said. Without hesitation. "You're the best friend I've ever had. Maybe the only real friend I've had since Vietnam. All of them got blown up or fucked up, so I guess I gave up on friendship after Nam."

Carlos didn't answer. He stared out the windshield. I twisted in my seat to look directly at him and saw one tear chasing another down the side of his face.

"Oh God, Carlos," I said. "We don't have a problem, do we?"

He brushed his tears away with the back of one hand. "I don't think so," he said in a Miss Thang voice. "Only a real woman would ever want *you*."

Because friendship means a lot of things to me and trust is one of those things, I hesitated, but only for a moment. If he said he wasn't in love with me, then he wasn't. I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Tell me what's wrong," I said. "Let me return the favor you did me back there at Napoleon's."

"This isn't about Miles," he said.

"So tell me what it is about. I've got broad shoulders, as those awful romance novels Karyn devoured always said of the hero. I can take it." I was trying for a smile. I only got the ghost of a half-smile.

"Dickie, you really see me as a ... a person, don't you? As a friend? Not just as a silly faggot?"

"Sure I do," I said, surprised. "You know I do, Carlo."

"No," Carlos said. He shook his head. "I don't think I did know till just now."

"Christ, Carlos," I said. "What are you telling me? All this time you thought I've been, what? patronizing you? Showing you off as my token gay friend and business partner?"

"I guess so," he sighed. "In a way."

If I hadn't been feeling so much pity for him, I'd have been plenty pissed off. I thought of saying so. Instead, like the superior detective I am, I read between the lines of our conversation and blurted, "Are you saying that not one single straight man has been your friend since you came out of the closet?" Shit. Where the hell did that archaic

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expression come from? I couldn't have found more diplomatic phrasing? I felt as helpless and confused as I had talking with Karyn in the days before she moved out for good.

But, I suddenly realized, there was a difference, here, with Carlos. Instead of anger, defensiveness, even guilt, I felt compassion and the desire to understand his pain, to help him, if I could.

Carlos was wrong. I had failed Karyn. Maybe not as a husband, but for damn sure as a human being and I wasn't going to repeat that mistake with him. I tightened my hand on his shoulder. "Carlo?"

"Nope, not a one. Not since I swished my first swish. Even my family deserted me. Except for Meranda. I told you that before though."

"Sure," I said. "Over Kamikazes."

He tried a smile. When that worked fairly well, he turned to look at me. "I'm pathetic," he said, "crying like a little girl. I'm embarrassed."

"You're not pathetic," I said. "Just ... wounded."

"Dickie," he said, and smiled a genuine smile this time, "you're too damn sensitive for a heterosexual male."

"Right," I said. "Just ask Karyn how sensitive I am." Or Elanora.

"You remember about love and being in love?"

"Absolutely. The Gospel of Carlos. Two types of love, one permanent, one temporary. Etc."

"Add a third to those, Dickie. The one you just taught me. Real friendship. I love you, too, friend, and it has nothing to do with gender or genitals, just respect and caring."

Now I was embarrassed. Before I could think of what to say, Carlos laughed and jumped out of the car. He slammed the door and leaned in the window. "Thanks, Dickie."

"Not a problem," I said. "See you tonight at Windsor Court."

"I'm going to order double portions of the most expensive stuff they've got," he grinned.

"You do and I'll fire you," I said.

"Elanora won't let you! Nah--nah."

I watched him walk to the Neimeyer building. He had that extra bit of bounce and wiggle in his step he gets when he's happy.

I thought of Karyn. Was she happy? I wondered, and for the first time since she'd told me she wanted a divorce so she could live with another woman, that question mattered to me.

2.

Kimah Vo was not at the Bluebird when I arrived.

There was a payphone in the back, across from the kitchen to discourage long conversations. That was fine with me. This conversation wasn't going to be a long one, just, I hoped, a meaningful one. The one I should have had with Karyn years ago.

I plugged one ear with a finger and dialed Karyn's work number. I had no idea if she was still working at the Democratic committee's headquarters, but if she wasn't I'd have Elanora get a number from Karyn's mother. I would track her down if necessary. I owed her something. Something I could neither define or articulate and maybe an apology was all I'd come up with, but I was going to give her that, at least, and as soon as possible.

She answered on the third ring. "Karyn Lecreaux," she said. I was hurt and shocked (silly me!) that she'd dropped my last name.

"Karyn," I said, "it's me."

"Richard," she said and sounded so delighted, I was shocked again. "How've you been? Have you married Elanora yet?"

"What?" I said, super shocked now.

"Have you married Ellie yet?"

"No," I stammered. "Not yet. I mean ... Why'd you ask me that?"

"Oh, I run into Carlos now and then, at gay functions, you know, and I assumed from things he'd said, that you were going to marry her."

"He's dreaming," I said crossly. "And scheming. There's more than a little Jewish matchmaker in his Chicano soul."

"Well, I'd consider it, Richard," Karyn said seriously. "Ellie's good for you and she adores you."

"Look, Karyn," I said, seeing Kimah enter the restaurant, "I didn't call to talk about me. At least, not directly. I called to talk about me in relation to you."

She was silent a long moment. The eternal moment. The same one every man inhabits between the time he pops the question and the woman answers it. During her silence I caught Kimah's eye and waved her to grab us a table. I even had time to wonder if there was a Mr. Vo.

"After almost six years, Richard?" Karyn said finally. "I don't see that there is any you in relation to me anymore."

"This is about our mutual past relationship or the way it ended anyway. I was stupid, OK? It's taken me six years to figure it out, I'm that slow, Karyn. I'm calling to say I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked, sounding very uncomfortable.

"For not understanding," I said. "No, for not trying to understand."

"This isn't necessary," she said.

"Hush up," I said. "I'm not finished. Worse yet, I didn't want to understand. I was too busy feeling sorry for me. I was just as selfish, superficial and insensitive as you said, and I am sorry, Karyn."

She didn't say anything.

"Karyn? I'm finished now. And if you're sitting over there gloating, I don't blame you. You can even scream 'I told you so!' and hang up on me if you want to. I deserve that."

"All the selfishness and insensitivity weren't on your side of the divorce, Richard. I've wanted to say that to you for a long time, but I was afraid to call. Afraid, I suppose, of hurting you more by probing those old wounds."

"What about the superficiality?" I asked.

She laughed. "I love you, Richard," she said.

I didn't know what to feel, what to answer, so I fell back on business. "Karyn, I've got to go. I have a client waiting."

"I hope she's ugly, for Ellie's sake," Karyn said.

"She's old," I said. "Look, I wanted to tell you I'm sorry and to wish you happiness."

"I'll accept that, if you accept the same from me," she said.

"Unconditionally," I said. "We now have a binding oral contract. If you ever need me for anything, please call. OK?"

She laughed again. "Now, what would I ever need a private investigator for?"

"Well, call if you need a friend then," I said.

"I will. Goodbye, Richard."

I took a deep breath and examined how I felt. Kind of sad, kind of relieved and oddly free, as if I'd paid out a longstanding debt or been eased of a chronic pain. I patted the phone, then went to join Kimah.

"I am very happy you called," I said, sitting down.

"I do for Martinique," she said. "Her spirit not gone on to new life. Her spirit still in house. You help her, oui?"

"Yes," I said. "How long did you know Martinique?"

"All time she here. I work for Mr. Ariviste's friend. They stay where they first come from Miami. After I work for her in her houses." Her English was torturous.

"Would you be more comfortable speaking in Vietnamese?" I asked. "I have to know everything you can tell me about her if I am going to help her and I want you to be comfortable."

"My English not good. Your Vietnamese not good." She twinkled a little smile in my direction. "Maybe French?"

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"I don't speak French," I apologized. "A little Cajun, but no real French."

"Vietnamese best, I think," she said, sighing.

The waitress came and took our orders. While we waited for the food Kimah asked me about my time in Vietnam, feeling out my knowledge of her language, her people and culture and my attitudes about them. I was as honest with her as I needed her to be with me.

Once our breakfast arrived she began to tell me Martinique's story, beginning, as Pontreaux had, with the barefoot child singing in a tarpaper church. She spoke slowly and clearly and I understood every word of the story. She told it as Pontreaux had, with no significant differences, until she reached the arrival in New Orleans.

Ariviste Pontreaux ended his recital with a nice fairytale conclusion of escape from Rameriz and a life lived happily ever after until Martinique's unexpected and inexplicable suicide.

Kimah Vo told me the truth.

MARTINIQUE

"We will go to New Orleans," Ariviste said, when they were in his car and safely away from the detention center. "I have friends there who will aid us."

"What about Rameriz?" she asked and her body trembled fiercely. "He will come for me."

"I have friends," Ariviste repeated. "They will tell us who to see and we will purchase a pouin chard to kill him. You will be safe, ma pauve Martinique, I swear." He touched her cheek and she grabbed his hand, covering fingers and palms with violent kisses of gratitude.

The day after arriving in New Orleans, they went to the home of a Haitian voyante in Algiers and laid before her Martinique's trouble. The old woman assured them she knew someone, someone very powerful, who would end Martinique's terrors, but such a thing, an expedition de morte, cost a great deal and could they pay? Ariviste said they could.

The death spell was very expensive, but Ariviste's friends lent him the money. When word came from other friends in Miami that Rameriz had died from the bite of a loa, and in satisfying agony, Martinique felt glad. She felt relieved of the hundreds of pounds of stones that had been crushing her heart with fear. Now she could begin making money, much money, more and more money, until she was safe. So much money, no one could ever enslave her again. She might be used, and she would certainly use, but no one would ever keep her as a slave. She would lie, steal, murder, cheat all the gods and all men, to ensure her security, but no one would cheat her of her life. Not now. Not ever again.

The first step was to learn English.

They were living at the home of Michelet Duvoue, the friend who had sent them to the voyante in Algiers. Ariviste and Michelet had been boys together in Cap Haitian, then business partners in Miami. When the Colombians took control of the more lucrative areas of the illegal pharmaceutical trade in Miami, Michelet moved on to New Orleans and made a splendid living selling crack cocaine and heroin to American blacks. He bought his cocaine from Colombians in Miami and the heroin from Johnnie Santini's organization and everyone was very happy with this arrangement. Everyone was getting very rich. Ariviste went to work for Michelet.

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Martinique was alone in the beautiful mansion on St. Charles Avenue every night and almost every day. Alone except for the Vietnamese maid, Kimah Vo.

Kimah's English was ungrammatical and her vocabulary small, but her French was lovely. She was Martinique's friend, the first Martinique had had, and the last. Together they spent hours and hours watching television, movie channels on the cable and even pornographic videos from Michelet's collection, in quest of Martinique's English. She learned quickly, spurred by her terrors. Eventually Michelet discovered what she was trying to do and generously hired a tutor for her.

Kimah didn't care much about improving her English. Once the tutor replaced the television and those funny sex movies, she stopped working on her English, but not her work of helping Martinique heal. She, too, had been raped, beaten, threatened with death and, once, shot in chest and left to die by American soldiers in Vietnam. She understood hatred and fear and how these horrible things might devour one from within if they were not somehow healed. If they could not be healed, then they must be sealed away in a secret place in one's heart and the path to that place erased from memory.

Martinique did not sleep with Ariviste. Sex was one of her terrors. She tried, but could not love him. Her gratitude and loyalty to him were vast and unshakable; her guilt at not being able to bear his touch or return his love, even vaster and more immobile.

Kimah did what she could to help Martinique out of the pain of her own long ago experiences. She came to love the teenaged Haitian girl as she would have loved a daughter or a sister and Martinique loved the middle-aged Vietnamese woman as she had once loved her mother. She went to Kimah when she missed two moonstorms and knew she was pregnant by Rameriz.

"It must be destroyed," Kimah said. "To live with the child of your rapist in your belly is to feed your hatred and horrible fear until they grow too strong for you ever to escape them. He will have enslaved you to him forever then."

"How?" Martinique asked. "The voyante?"

"No. You must go to the hospital and have it cut out of you, just as if it is a cancer. Maybe when it is gone, your fear and hatred will go, too."

Kimah took her to a Vietnamese doctor and it did seem that in aborting the child, some of the terror was also aborted. She allowed Ariviste to make love to her, but she never came to love him.

Six months after coming to New Orleans, Martinique and Ariviste moved to their own house, a Creole cottage in Uptown. They did not need a maid, but Martinique needed Kimah, so she moved from Michelet's home and employ into Martinique's.

Six more months passed. They had been in New Orleans for a year. Martinique's English was grave and beautiful, but lightless. There was no longer much light in her music either, but that didn't bother her or the audiences in the clubs where she now appeared. She sought and found her own bookings. She could not trust Ariviste with her career because he was, like Maman had been, weak inside. Maman's weakness was men and one of her men killed her. Ariviste's was heroin and it would someday kill him, she was sure. She believed also that Ariviste would do anything for the heroin, even exploit her, if she let him, but she did not condemn him for it.

Wasn't she ready to do anything to be protected by money and fame from being preyed upon by another Rameriz?

She was.

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Bon Dieu, help her, she was.

She grew more ready as spring approached, her climb to safety moving too slowly, too slowly, and Ariviste's habit growing too quickly. She found herself finally and completely ready the day the Vietnamese doctor told her she was carrying Ariviste's child.

"I will go to the voyante," she told Kimah. "I will purchase, at any price, a working to make me famous quickly."

"You shouldn't," Kimah said. "People who act in desperation, act blindly."

"I will not act blindly," Martinique said. "I will have my eyes opened very wide. No one will take me. I will not be cheated."

3.

"What happened? When she went to the voyante?"

Traditional Vietnamese women like Kimah Vo do not make direct eye contact. It isn't considered proper or perhaps it's considered too intimate, yet she looked right into my two-tone eyes and said, "She was not cheated."

"At what price," I said. It was not a question, because I already knew the answer.

"Her child," Kimah confirmed. Her eyes, as black and brilliant as paddy water at midnight, dropped away from mine. "She gave it to the voyante, I think. What happened to it after that, I do not know."

"And Martinique?"

Kimah sighed. "She was not cheated, but the secret of her child, her Christian, I think, it keeps her ma, her ghost, from rest. Perhaps not. Perhaps other secrets weigh her soul more. I wish you to find her secrets and relieve her spirit."

"I will," I promised. "Can you tell me the name of the voyante?"

She shook her head. "An old woman, Haitian, too, but I think born here. Martinique said she was hounsi in her youth, hounsi to one who learned from Marie Leveau. She lives in Algiers. I do not know where. It is a house with a porch where flowers bloom in the night and ivy grows in the door. Martinique gave her a small herb store by the Jazz Hole. That is all I know. I do not know her name."

"Mama Evangeline," I said.

4.

Miles O'Brian wanted me to find the reason for her suicide. Tim Winston wanted me to find her body and lay it to rest, and he wanted me to find her murderers so he could lay them to rest. Kimah wanted me to find Martinique's secrets and lay her ma to rest.

Each of these people had personal agendas that only peripherally had much to do with Martinique.

Miles wanted a partnership in his lover's firm and this case should have been his opportunity to demonstrate his potential value to us. Well, he'd blown that one right up, hadn't he? I might just break his cute little Irish nose for

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him the next time I saw him. In uniform or out.

Winston wanted the proof he needed for a quiet revenge on St. Pe and he wanted me to get it so no embarrassment would splash on his boss, Johnnie Santini. I understood Santini's desire to remain in the shadows. The media's a hell of a lot more frightening to modern mobsters than any law enforcement agency.

The media could take this entire horrendous mess of voodoo, assisted suicide, a missing and probably murdered child, a stolen body, tales of zombies, an African bogeyman, white heroin distribution and a black mongoloid bastard son and whip up a real nice publicity gaff for Johnnie Santini. A gaff that might lead to federal investigations (although probably no indictments) and would certainly lead to a lot of laughter among Santini's confreres across the country and a, perhaps fatal, loss of respect.

Kimah's alternative agenda was purest. Least selfish. All she wanted was release from possible personal guilt. She wanted assurance that nothing she'd done had contributed to Martinique's suicide and that nothing she failed to do could have prevented it. I could have told her she was not to blame, by commission or omission, but she would not have believed me. I could have told her that the only ghost stalking the halls and landings of the Greek Revival mansion on Coliseum Circle was the ma of her own unfounded guilt, but until I brought her Martinique's secrets, she could not believe me.

And speaking of me, what personal need was I feeding? What was I hoping to gain besides Winston's twenty grand and momentary relief from the boredom of shifty little divorce cases and all the rest of the dreck that normally filled my dance card? Was I hoping to lay some of my own ghostly guilts from Vietnam to rest by helping to free Kimah of hers?

Fortunately, I reached my apartment just as I reached that uncomfortable spot in my introspection so I could quit examining my motives. I dropped my jacket on the loveseat, the .38 on the kitchen counter and dialled the service for my messages. I didn't bother checking my answering machine. No one has my home number but Elanora and Carlos and they prefer the leave their messages with the service. The number is easier to remember and the service is more reliable than my answering machine.

The girl at the message center advised me to get a beer and sit down because this was going to be a long session. I told her I was in the kitchen where there were no chairs and it was too early for a beer. She told me to grab a Coke and sit on the counter. I told her to please quit torturing me and give me my freaking messages.

Elanora left word that dinner at Windsor Court was moved forward to Friday night and be sure to bring my platinum AmEx and why didn't I break down and get a cellular phone for God's sake, or at least a beeper? She called me a Luddite and I had to explain to the girl at the service what a Luddite was.

Carlos left a long message that boiled down to its bones said, "I'll be over around midnight. I've got a date with Harry, the second associate producer, so the report on Neimeyer, Junior will just have to wait."

Tim Winston and Brenda Leggio called, leaving messages that were spartan Winston wanted a call back ASAP, damn the time, and Brenda wanted information on when and where my funeral was being held. The service girl said Ms. Leggio left this message for Elanora, but Elanora said to pass it on to the deceased for handling.

That's my Ellie. A wannabe standup comedienne.

I called Winston.

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen rings. Finally a mumbled, "Who the fuck is it?"

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"Johnnie Santini," I said. "Is this how you greet your Don?"

"Denker, you frog fuck," Winston said amicably. "What time is it?"

I checked my watch. "Two fifteen and thirty-one seconds."

"Fuck." Silence. A cough, another curse, more silence.

"Winston," I said. "You still awake?"

"Yeah, yeah. Listen, what I wanted to tell you, it's all set." He didn't sound very awake to me.

"What's set?" I asked.

"Saturday night. Out to Holy Shelter." More silence. The kind of silence in which second thoughts are sometimes born, given sufficient time. Unfortunately, he didn't give me sufficient time. "I'd like to go myself," he yawned. "Seein's how Martinique will be there."

"What the fuck are you talking about? Wake up, Winston. Light a cigarette. Make some sense. Martinique's dead."

"I know that, Denker. Geez. You don't need to fucking yell." He took my advice and lit a cigarette. "Her body will be there. Ariviste says they're gonna bury her in the Religion."

"And you're cool with that?" I asked.

"I'm not in love with it, but I'm cool with it, yeah. Now you get that information for the second half of the program and we're all finished."

"The second half being Papa Samhadl."

"Right." He coughed again, a loud, obnoxious cough that apparently also involved some spitting.

"Right," I said, not just a little sarcastically.

"You're goddamn right that's right," he said, a lot peevishly. "That's what I'm fucking paying you to do, Denker. Look. I know you got your own reasons for doing this and I ain't paying you for your reasons, I'm strictly paying for mine, which is reasonable, right? but believe me, we got the same reason in the end. Martinique. Right?"

"Yeah, right," I sighed. "You and me. Parallel lines coming together at a common point."

"That's exactly fucking it," he said happily.

Parallel lines never meet, you asshole, I thought, at least not in this world. Then I had a really bad thought. The kind that makes your testicles cringe right up into your groin. I remembered Tim Winston wasn't as stupid as he played.

"You're not setting me up to cover a hit on Santini, are you, Winston?"

"Fuck no," he laughed. "I'm retired, Denker, not fucking braindead. Besides, he ain't Old Man Marcello, but like you say, he is my Don."

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"Maybe your loyalties are still with Marcello's sons," I said carefully. "Santini did shove them out."

"He left them the videopoker revenues, which is more than they know how to run without getting indicted, you'll notice," Winston said harshly. He coughed, lighting another cigarette. I wished I hadn't left mine in my jacket pocket. "Let me tell you about that pussy heir of Mr. Marcello. Santini's an interloper, OK, but he's a Don, like Momo Giancana or Carlos Gambino or Old Mr. Marcello, rest in fucking peace, all of them, amen. But little boy Marcello. The most part of his brains ran down his mama's legs, you unnerstand? Listen. He gets evicted for non-payment of rent and he gets a lawyer to fight it in court."

"Not very donnish behavior," I agreed.

"Fucking common, that's what," he said, with genuine disgust.

In another minute he'd start telling me long, convoluted and nostalgic tales of the old days when even a worthless son of a great Don like Carlos Marcello would never have been treated in as a mere tenant, assuming he was stupid enough to rent in the first place instead of staying in the family compound. Time to end this, bring the conversation back to essentials.

"You know Mama Evangeline?" I asked.

"Sure. Old voodoo bitch. Santini's personal psychic and blah-blah-blah. Johnnie's got brass in his balls and rocks in his head, you know?"

"I think she brought Martinique and Papa together," I said. "I heard she was a hounsi to a disciple of Marie Leveau."

"A what?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I'm going over to her shop now. See what she can tell me about St. Pe."

"Good," Winston said. "Full charge, straight ahead. We're gonna get that fucker's balls, Denker. Wear 'em for earrings, right?"

"You wear 'em," I said. "I gave up earrings about the time I came back from Nam."

He hung up with a laugh that sounded a lot like his cough.

I wasn't laughing. I hoped we were gonna get that fucker. I remembered St. Pe's opalescent eyes and their odd, paralyzing power. Maybe like the Gorgon, he could only be defeated obliquely. I wasn't at all sure a frontal assault was the way to handle him but at the moment I couldn't think of any better way to proceed.

5.

Mama Evangeline wasn't in and wouldn't be in until Tuesday, her granddaughter told me. She was running the store while Mama was down to Charity Hospital having her high blood pressure worked on and she'd be happy to make me an appointment. Could I come back at six tomorrow evening? And since I was here now, she would be very happy to reassure me, as a potential client, of her grandmother's authenticity.

She trotted out herbal tea, homemade pecan pralines and bundles of letters containing the grateful testimony of satisfied clients: some nearly illiterate, but profuse with ill-spelt thanks, some from ordinary folks like me, a

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couple from tourists as far away as Senegal and New Zealand, a handful from movie stars and celebrities of various kinds, one from an ex-president, a shoebox full from law enforcement agencies scattered throughout southeast Louisiana.

After the letters came the scrapbooks. Articles from old True magazines and recent issues of the National Enquirer. Straight news copy from the Times-Picayune and AP wire services clips. Missing children found, lost loves regained. Murders solved and bodies located. Lovers united or reunited. All due to Mama Evangeline and her psychic link to the gods.

Impressive, yes. And more than a little unsettling. All of this was happening not ten minutes from my own home where I slept safe in the arms of rationality every night. It all happened within the secret chambers of hearts in need.

The letters, the scrapbooks, the happy chatter of the granddaughter, painted the portrait of a benign, modern witch divining the sex of unborn babies for anxious parents as unerringly as high tech medical procedures, mixing love potions under the new moon, conjuring the future in a handful of cowrie shells, supplying amulets, advice, herbal prescriptions, High John roots and Magnetic Healing Oil to her customers and a helping psychic hand to the police when asked to do so because that was her civic duty. But beneath that portrait was another, hidden face of Mama Evangeline.

The face Martinique had sought in her need. Not a face of noontime magic, smiling and scented with open air and sunlight, but the face of the dark side of the moon, reeking of closed rooms, blood and pain and loss, moral corruption and the rot of unburied souls.

The granddaughter wouldn't talk about that other face.

When I asked about hounsi and Marie Leveau, she laughed. When I brought up Papa Samhadl, she said she'd heard of him everyone in the vodouiste had heard of him but she'd never met him and did not think her grandmother would have had any cause to either. When I mentioned an interest in Holy Shelter and used Tante Belle as my reference, she moved my appointment with Mama Evangeline to early Tuesday afternoon.

The tea, the pralines, and the granddaughter's patience with me all ran out just then, so I bought, for Elanora, a pamphlet, self-published by Mama Evangeline herself, about how to turn numbers seen in your dreams into winning Lotto combinations and left.

Outside the store, sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk next to the tombstone with its lurid chalk veves, face lifted to the sun, was Beanie, tears running from his eyes and pooling in his ears.

"Beanie," I said gently, crouching beside him, "were you waiting for me?"

No answer. Just that blind stare into the sun.

"Beanie, you shouldn't look into the sun like that. You'll hurt your eyes."

"I'm gonna fill up my whole self," he said, not taking his eyes from the sun. "So's the darkness can't come in."

I didn't need to ask what darkness he meant. I'd seen it too often in too many of its disguises the absolute blackness spilling from the partially open closet door of childhood, the bloody, screaming darkness of combat, the bleak, dark forms of adult fears, impotence, failure, lovelessness, going bald, being fucked over by your friends, living lonely and dying alone and I had seen it bold, plain as daylight reflecting off whitewashed tombs, unmasked, in the opaline eyes of a man with ritual scars on his face and a pet werewolf panting at his feet.

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"Bobby says I'm stupid," Beanie said. "I ain't though. I know lottsa things. Important things, even. Things he don't know. I'll bet they're things you don't know, Mister."

He turned to me and smiled that moony grin that was somehow really beautiful. His innocence made my heart ache and I suddenly wanted to grab the kid, steal him away from Santini, Bobby Boudreaux and Papa Samhadl before they could steal that innocence from him or perhaps even his life. My hands itched to grab him. No lie.

"Sure," I said. "What's the bet?"

"A snocone, OK? You buy me a snocone? Any flavor I want?"

"Deal," I said. "Any flavor."

We spit in our palms and sealed the deal. Beanie bounced to his feet and took my hand, tugging to get me up and moving. I wasn't surprised that he didn't let go of my hand after we were underway and I didn't mind. My mother said God created no more loving, trusting, clean souls than these sweet, Down's Syndrome children with their sunny faces and simple hearts. Knowing Beanie was teaching me that she had been so right.

"So, tell me, Beanie," I said cheerfully, feeling kind of clean and simple myself, "tell me something important."

"I know my name," he said. "My name is Joseph Conrad Santini, but I'm a secret, so you can't tell."

"I won't," I promised gravely. "And you're correct. A man's true name is an important thing. Almost the most important thing a friend can know about him."

"I know something else and it's really, awfully important. I thought it all by myself. Wanna hear it?" He stopped walking and looked at me with eyes as mild and earnest as a kitten.

"I would be honored to hear it," I said.

"My mama got hit by lightening and she died. You know what I think, mister? I think when you get hit by lightening and you die, you die in light, 'cause lightening's slivers off the sun, ain't it?"

My God, I thought. A frisson tingled along my nerve endings and goosebumps sprang out all over my body. My dear God. And they labeled this kid stupid?

"Can I have a cherry snocone? And a lemon one, too?" Beanie asked.

"You bet," I said, letting him tug me down another block and over two to the only snocone place open this early in the year.

There were benches along the wall at Sno-Cone Fantasia, so you could sit in the relative shade of the building's overhang, but Beanie ordered a raspberry, extra syrup, and plopped down on the street curb, giving barely a glance to the sun before devoting himself to the demolishing of his snocone. I sat beside him, smoking a cigarette and thought about dying in light.

After a few minutes, he tilted his eyes up to mine, smiled shyly through the raspberry syrup on his face and said, "You're nice."

"So are you," I said. "Beanie, were you waiting for me back at Mama Evangeline's store?"

He nodded.

"Did you want to tell me something about Martinique?"

"Yes," he said and went back to work on the snocone.

I lit another cigarette and waited for him to find what he wanted to say. I began to relax in the sun, in no hurry to go anywhere, see anyone, or hear what poor, bewildered Joseph Conrad Santini had to say, because I knew it wasn't going to be anything nice, it might even be something fucking terrible and what was I going to have to do about it then?

Beanie looked at the sun. "Bobby says I'm a retard and that means real stupid. Papa says I'm a retard, too, and that's why my Daddy don't like me."

"What did Martinique say?" I said quietly.

"She say I'm special and God holds me in his bosom." He smiled into the sun. I could almost see the light streaming into him, making his heart transparent as rain cleansed crystal.

"That was a nice thing to say," I said. "Why do you think she's evil when she said such nice things to you?"

"Nice folks can be evil, too," Beanie said, turning to me earnestly. "And evil folks can be real nice, too. Like Timmy. He's evil, he kills folks and don't even go to confession afterwards, but he never calls me no names or hollers at me like Bobby and Papa and Daddy do."

Timmy. The bartender. The retired hit man. I remembered him calling Beanie an idiot, but looking aside when he did, as if embarrassed or ashamed. Well, well.

"Beanie, tell me about Martinique," I said. "I know about Timmy's evil, but why do you think Martinique is evil?"

"She told me so." He handed me his almost finished snocone. "I don't want this no more," he said sadly.

"OK," I said, "but you have to tell me exactly what Martinique told you because it's really important, Beanie. It's important because you want me to help you, don't you? I need to know so I can help you. Alright?"

He nodded.

"Try to remember exactly what she said to you. Everything. OK?"

"She say I'm a good boy and she loved me and not to get evil like she did," he said.

"Did she tell you how she got evil? Do you remember?"

"She say she was going to church to die. I didn't want her to die but she said it was the only ... only ..." he struggled for the word. "Her salvation!" he yelped. Saying it unlocked his memory. "She was crying. She said she was evil now, corrupted, maybe forever and ever, but maybe not too much for salvation, if she died in the church."

"Why was she corrupted, Beanie? Did she say what she'd done to be so evil?"

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"She say she sold her soul to Papa for money. She said she gave her baby boy to fear. She say I shouldn't love her anymore because she was wicked and people become what they love. That's what she said, mister, but I don't understand it all, because I don't think as good as other folks." He sighed, a deep, sorrowing sigh that came all the way from his toes.

"You think just fine," I said, thinking of some of the retarded politicians running the city and the state, not to mention the country. "But Martinique's dead now. Why are you still afraid of her?"

He twisted his hands in his lap. "Papa says evil folks come back and I'm scared she might of come back to eat my heart, like the witch in my storybook. I smelled her, mister, I promise I did! In the back room. Last night. At the bar. Bobby says I didn't. Bobby says I'm just too stupid to live."

Beanie stared at his twisting hands and sighed heavily again. I stared at his hands, too, while I pushed my rage down to where I could store it until I saw that shitass Bobby Boudreaux again.

"Do you want me to go and look in the back room with you, Beanie?" I asked when I could speak calmly.

"Timmy says you're looking for the truth," he said, looking at me with complete, heart-tearing trust. "He say you'll find it, too. 'Cause you a good man and God don't never stand in the way of good men."

"He told you that?" Amazing guy, our Timmy, I thought.

"No, he tol' Ariviste, but I was sweepin' and I heard. So I thought if you was to find her, in the back room, you'd tell her to leave me alone and she'd have to go away."

"Why would Martinique hurt you?" I asked, taking his hands to still their agitated twisting and turning. "She loved you."

"That don't matter now," he said, throwing his arms around me and bursting into tears that smeared raspberry syrup and salt water on my jacket. "Martinique tol' me evil eats good and she never tol' me nothin' that wasn't true!"

"Come on," I said, patting him on the back like the awkward, childless jerk that I am. "Come on, now. Don't cry. We'll go check out the back room, but I promise you, Beanie, are you listening to me, Joseph? I promise you, not even the very evilest of the dead can eat the heart of someone held in God's bosom."

He snuffled against my chest. "For true?"

"For true," I swore.

6.

The storage room of the Jazz Hole opened out onto a back alley. We entered through a door marked 'Delivery Entrance' in peeling paint. I slimjimmied the lock. I'd have made a good B&E man.

The room was large, stacked to the ceiling with cases of liquor, olives, cherries, beer and cocktail napkins. There wasn't a hell of a lot of light but it was sufficient to see that Martinique's corpse wasn't being stored there along with the bar supplies.

Still, there was an odd smell in that room. Something vague but familiar, and not even vaguely pleasant. An image tried to surface from my memory, but didn't make it.

5.

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"She ain't here," Beanie whispered. "I can't hardly smell her now."

"No, she's not here," I agreed, hustling him back out and up the alley. The Jazz Hole would be opening its doors to the night crawling tourists pretty soon and I didn't want either of us caught snooping in the storage room. Not even by Timmy. We came out of the alley onto Bourbon Street about halfway between Mama Evangeline's and the bar. The sun was setting. The tourists were starting to mill.

"Can I come live with you?" Beanie asked.

"I don't think your daddy would like that," I said.

"He don't care. All's he ever says to me is to stay outta his line of fire." Another of those toe-deep sighs, but no self-pity in his voice.

Great father, old Johnnie Santini. "Maybe I can talk to him," I said.

"OK," Beanie said with a sudden return to cheerfulness and a burst of that innocent smile that tore my heart apart.

"Don't tell anyone, not even Timmy, about us going in the back room," I said. "If you tell, Papa might find out and that would be bad."

"I won't tell."

"Good man," I said.

"Papa made Martinique evil," he said.

"Do you any important stuff about Papa?" I asked carefully.

"Secrets?" Beanie whispered.

"Yeah. Secrets."

"Like the voodoo?"

"Like that."

Beanie opened his mouth. I tensed. And Ed Minuti, out-of-town insurance execs in tow, choose that moment to descend on me like a mistimed deus ex machina.

"Denker," he said. Shouted.

"Hi, Ed," I said.

"This guy's New Orleans' best PI," Ed said to his guests. They stared at me, polite but bored. "Sorry," Ed said. "Looks like we scared your snitch off."

I turned and saw Beanie loping awkwardly toward the Jazz Hole.

"Thanks, Ed," I said. Sighed.

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"You still working on that actress' suicide?" Ed asked.

"Singer," I said. "And, yes, I am."

"Isn't that interesting?" said one of the executives, complacently uninterested.

"It really is," Ed insisted. "She killed herself right over there, in the church. Shot herself in the head. Brains all over the altar."

"No," said the executive, looking less bored.

"Yeah," said Ed, with relish.

"No," I said. All those balding heads swiveled to look at me. "She was nowhere near the altar and she shot herself in the heart, not the head."

"Head, heart. Doesn't matter," said another exec. "Suicide's suicide. No pay on a suicide."

Everyone laughed, except me and Ed.

"Unless she had a rider," Ed said. "I wonder who insured her?"

"Probably no one," I said. "No one expects to die at twenty-two. Nice seeing you, Ed. I gotta go."

"Join us for a drink," Ed said, as jovial as a used car dealer. "Tell some exciting PI stories to us deskbound insurance types."

"Thanks, but I can't. Got an appointment."

"Anyone famous?" the first executive asked.

"Or sexy?" Ed winked.

"Both," I said. "Sharon Stone."

"Geez, Denker, you're a lucky fucker," Ed said wistfully.

"I sure am," I agreed. "But don't mention this to Elanora or I'll also be a dead fucker."

Polite chuckles all around and I set off for my apartment. I was awfully tired suddenly. I wanted a hot shower, a fat steak, some dry wine and a few hours alone to think before Carlos showed up with his account of Neimeyer, Junior's perfidious doings.

Or maybe I'd just take a nap.

My answering machine was blinking when I got home. For the first time in a year. Must be very private stuff, not fit for the gossips over at the service. Curious, but a little uneasy, I pushed the playback button.

"Stay away from the office until Friday," Elanora ordered. "If you need me, call William and leave a message." Click. OK. Fine. Typical Elanora. Nothing scary there. I relaxed.

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Click. Carlos. "I've decided to use you as an excuse to remain chaste tonight. Harry and I are still going to dinner, but I'm making it an early evening. I told him I have to spell you on a divorce stakeout by ten. You'll CMA on this, won't you? Thanks, Dickie." Cover your ass, indeed, I thought. Not typical Carlos. Hmmmmm.

Click. Elanora again, telling me not to bother calling William tonight, even if I did need her. She and Joe Pesci were going to the movies. She would not pick up any messages and she didn't want to have to worry about it, either, Richard! Well, well. So even movie stars go to movies. You learn something new and totally worthless every day. And wasn't Pesci married? I had zero idea. I wondered why I even wondered about it.

Click. Carlos. Again. "I'll be there about nine o'clock. We'll order pizza. Drink beer. Male bond. Order whatever you want on the pizza, but no pepperoni. Pepperoni gives me gas." Curiouser and curiouser, I thought.

Click. "Mr. Denker," a unknown voice said. "Mr. Santini requests, with respect, you to meet him at Mona's for breakfast tomorrow morning. Eight forty-five. Please be prompt."

"Well, fuck me," I said. "What d'ya know."

7.

Carlos sauntered in right at nine bearing a sixpack of Samuel Adam's Cream Stout, a buy one/get one free coupon for pan pizza and a gold star riding his cheekbone just below his left eye.

"I see you've been to K-Paul's," I said, nodding at the star.

"Just for appetizers," Carlos said. He went in the kitchen, put the beer in the fridge and returned to the living room to hand me the coupon. "Beware of faggots bearing gifts," he grinned.

I handed the coupon back. "I hate calling those idiots over there," I objected. "You do it while I see if there's any beer in the refrigerator to go with the pizza."

"Good idea," Carlos said and went to the mantel phone. "I see you got my messages," he said gaily, thumping the answering machine.

"Quite," I said, bringing in two beers. "Hurry up and call, but first get out of my chair."

I settled into my favorite slouch. Carlos ordered the pizza and then settled into his usual place on the loveseat.

"I am a private eye," I said. "Big Ed Minuti says I'm the best in the city, I am the heir of Sherlock Holmes and I deduce that you are hiding out here tonight."

"Well, it isn't a three pipe problem," Carlos said, laughing.

"You going to tell me about it?"

"I probably will."

"You're not here because of any alternative motive, are you Carlos?" I asked, maybe too lightly. He stared at me. "You wouldn't be here to comfort me because, at this very minute, Elanora is sitting in a dark theater with that maniac Joe Pesci, probably holding hands or even, oh, my betrayed heart! kissing him, would you?"

"Christ, Dickie! Is she?"

"I rather suspect you know she is, Carlo, but if you're here to assuage my bereaved heart, forget it. I am neither bereaved nor jealous."

"You should be," Carlos said, "and deep inside, I'll bet you are. Gosh. What a coup for Ellie! *I'm* jealous." He did look jealous. And too innocent.

"Tell me why you cut short your date with the second associate producer. What's the problem?"

"No problem," Carlos said. "It's just that he'll be back in Hollywood by the end of the month. There's no chance to develop a lasting relationship." He shrugged.

"Are you looking for a lasting relationship?" I asked, surprised and at last believing that he was not here because of Elanora's defection to the glittering of a famous movie star.

"Hell, yes, Dickie. Christ, I'm thirty years old. Youth is the currency of the gay world and I'm just about broke. If I don't find someone to love, settle down with, I'll end up another nasty, old chickenhawk, cruising the bars, hoping for a pity fuck or a kid who needs a daddy."

"Lighten up, bud," I said. "If worse comes to worser, you can always marry another woman."

"It's not the same," Carlos said, but he was laughing.

"Oh, I know. Women have no color sense for interior decorating."

"That's right," Carlos whooped. "And they don't really appreciate the ballet or opera."

The door chimes clanged instead of chiming. "And they don't know a Matisse from a Cezanne," I said, going to collect our pizza.

When I came back, juggling two pizzas, four orders of garlic bread and a quart of free Dr. Pepper neither of us would drink, Carlos was standing in front of Martinique's poster.

"I'll bet she knew the difference between a Matisse and a Cezanne," he said. "I'll bet she could spot a forged Van Gogh at one hundred paces. Beauty always recognizes beauty." He peeled the gold star off his cheek and stuck it on hers. "Where's the food?"

While we ate, Carlos explained what he'd done and what he'd found in Neimeyer, Inc.'s encrypted files, keeping it as simple as possible since I am so hopelessly computer illiterate.

"So, what he's doing is funneling money out of the main business and transferring it into a subsidiary arm?" I asked, picking green peppers off my pizza. Green peppers give me gas.

"That's it," Carlos said.

"And the subsidiary arm is a legit and profitable appendage of Neimeyer & Son, Inc., owned fully by Neimeyer, Senior?"

"Yep. Sure is."

"But that's not embezzlement."

"Nope. Sure ain't," Carlos agreed.

"I'm lost," I said. "It took you one afternoon to track this out. Why couldn't Neimeyer's accounting office do it?"

"Ah, now, there's the question, isn't it?" Carlos said, waving a breadstick at me.

"And you've got a theory."

"I've got the answer. I think."

"Hit me," I said. "And pass me another beer."

"It's a setup," Carlos said. "I don't think the kid's the one shuffling the funds. Someone wants to displace Junior on the bannerhead, but this someone doesn't want to hurt the business in the process."

"And your someone has the senior comptroller in his pocket?"

"Right. Sort of. See, this very ambitious someone maybe thinks the old man should have retired a long time ago. And maybe she thinks he's getting senile. She damn sure resents Junior's position in the company."

"She," I said.

"Neimeyer's daughter, of course."

"Of course."

"Her title is vice president, but her job is assistant to her brother."

"Ah, ha. So she sets up Junior. Has the comptroller tell Papa there are irregularities in the books. She whispers it might be Sonny embezzling."

"And Papa won't call the cops on his only son, but he will get rid of him, maybe even retire with his broken heart, leaving the CEO spot wide open for daughter dearest to scheme her way into. If she hasn't already locked it down, which, I suspect, she has. What she didn't figure on was Neimeyer hiring us to check things out instead of just accepting their story and booting brother."

"Can we prove it is her?" I asked.

"Not to the satisfaction of a jury, no, but I think Neimeyer'll accept my slant on events when we show him the printouts I pirated."

"I guess we'll have to see him tomorrow," I sighed, "but I don't know when. I've already got two appointments. This St. Johns thing just keeps spinning off more oddities."

"Not as simple as computer hide-n-stash in Corporateland, huh?" Carlos said, gathering up plates, pizza boxes, beer bottles and all the other trash from dinner.

"I wish," I said.

"No you don't."

"You're right," I said. "I don't."

"So, I'll take care of seeing Neimeyer for you tomorrow," Carlos called from the kitchen.

"Thanks," I said, but I don't think he heard me. He was washing the dishes.

I went to the stereo and released Martinique's voice. I lowered the lights and opened the patio doors so we could see the stars, few as they are in a city night, because Carlos loved to starwatch. I pushed the loveseat and my chair around to face the patio.

Carlos came out of the kitchen and handed me a glass of cold Chianti. "Such a lovely voice," he said. "Such a terrible waste."

"You make a good house bitch, Carlo," I said, leaning back in the chair and popping out the footrest.

"I know," he said comfortably.

We sat in silence and Martinique's voice drifted around the living room and out through the balcony doors into the night.

"I'd like to go to Russia," Carlos said. "See the White Nights."

"So would I," I said.

"I hear the sky is silver and pearl, even at midnight."

"Maybe if Elanora doesn't elope with Joe Pesci, we can all go this summer."

"You are jealous," Carlos said and I could tell from his voice that he was smiling.

"I'm afraid of losing my secretary," I said.

"Sure you are," Carlos said.

"Change the subject, Carlo," I said, laughing.

"Alright, bring me up to date on the St. Johns case," he said cheerfully.

I did.

"You're right. It is getting odder. And everything is moving awfully quick, but are we actually getting anywhere? Maybe we're just running faster and faster in one place."

"I don't know," I admitted. "Tell me what you think about this voodoo angle. Sometimes I think it's all nacht and nebel obscuring what's really going on and sometimes I think it is what's really going on. The heart of the matter, as Graham Greene termed it."

Carlos got up, refilled our wine, sat down again. He thinks best in motion.

Cri du Coeur

"I've never been interested in the light of reason and logic," he said, staring up at the faint stars glittering above my patio. "But I'm not fascinated by evil and darkness, either. I think voodoo, whether as a good-ol'-boy network or magic, is the heart of this matter. Money bought a death spell to free her from Rameriz and as an end result, it really doesn't matter if magic killed him or an exotic spider someone slipped into his shoe. He's still dead and she bought his death by voodoo. Same thing with her career. She bought it a rapid advancement and she paid for it, first with her son, and then with her life."

I leaned back in my chair, closing my eyes. I saw Martinique moving toward me, enthroned on sunlight shot through with black lightning. She called to me and her voice was like the crying of gulls at the sea's edge.

"Did she believe in voodoo magic or did she buy into it for the connections, the network? That's your real question. And we'll never know, Dickie. But I'll tell you what you do know and can't see."

"What?" I said. Martinique faded behind my closed eyes.

"We know as much as we're going to about why she killed herself. Sending me out to dance under the full moon with chicken blood all over my clothes isn't going to add anything but detail. If that."

"Winston's paying us for those details," I said.

"Your good luck," Carlos said. "You want those details for yourself. If you didn't, you'd refund his money and tell him to dig his own dirt. Go back to normal business."

"What about the trip to Russia?"

"Neimeyer will pay for it," Carlos said. In the semi-darkness, I saw he was grinning like an elf.

"Elanora will crush my balls if I returned that twenty grand."

"You're good at making excuses anyway," Carlos said.

"Elanora's not an excuse. Her greed is legendary. Besides, excuses for what?"

"Your obsession with Martinique St. Johns."

"You're right," I said. I got up to change the tape. "You're right. This is my personal obsession. You don't have to go out to Holy Shelter Saturday night. I'll get Winston to take me. I have to know. What happened to Martinique and what happened to her child, I have to know."

"Uh-uh. No way. Nope. I'm going. I want to. I have a personal obsession of my own."

"You are seriously cracked, Carlo," I said, sitting back down. "Weren't you just trying to talk me out of pursuing this any further?"

"Yeah. But if you're not going to listen, then I've still got first dibs on Holy Shelter."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not interested in darkness or light, but I am interested in the edge-places between them."

"Edge-places?"

Cri du Coeur

"Edge-places," Carlos said. "I'm interested in delineating the geographies of those psychic edge-places we skirt and avoid all our lives. Evil, madness, death and the shadow borders between these worlds of otherness and our own world of everyday living. People do sometimes cross the barrier, slip from our consensual reality, and when they do, they first travel across an edge-place."

I closed my eyes again and listened to Carlos' voice dancing in and out, around and behind, Martinique's. A minuet of the dead, I thought faintly.

Edge-places. Stare into the abyss and it stares right back at you. Nietzsche. I'd never understood that phrase. Perhaps the meaning was too simple for the mind to grasp. Like the sound of one hand clapping. Perhaps only the heart can understand.

"There are mysteries everywhere," Carlos said. "Haunted houses, haunted lives, haunted cities, minds, hearts. Nothing is soulless."

Behind my closed eyes, I saw deserted night streets, closed, mute doors, shadowed entryways. Women had wept here once, men had died. Blood had run in these streets plentiful as rain coursing down a gutter. I was walking in a city of the dead, listening as a dead woman sang and a living man spoke.

"There are the haunted and those who haunt," Carlos said and I thought of Henry Miller and his lovely, haunting faces.

"What are the textures, the limits, of edge-places?" Carlos asked. "Where are their boundaries and once passed, is any return possible?"

"No," whispered Martinique, walking beside me in the city of the dead.

"Might not even the most tentatively extended finger ripple the barrier, upsetting the balance between our world and whatever lies on the other side of those so alluring, but feared, borders?" Carlos mused.

"Yes," whispered Martinique.

"What in evil is attractive, seductive?" Carlos asked. "What in madness so inviting?"

"I don't want to know," I said to Martinique.

"Of course you do," Carlos said. "Everyone does, unless they've already been swallowed up by these things. You do, I do. And that's why I'm going to Holy Shelter. The Dance may be an edge-place. Maybe I'll catch a glimpse of an answer for my questions."

Martinique smiled, a smile beyond mere sorrow, a smile of blight and torture. My eyes snapped open and jogged by the panic of half-sleep, I said, "Carlos, I don't think this such a good idea, after all."

He laughed. "Would Fox Mulder turn down a chance to meet an alien? Would Frank Black let the Millennium Group down? Would Captain Kirk, or even Picard, refuse to go where no white man has gone before?"

"What?" I asked, fully awake now and unable to remember why I'd panicked.

"Voudon, the real thing, that's a secret world. They say no white has ever been allowed to see the true mysteries."

"Why go out there Saturday then? If you don't think they'll let you see the true mysteries, why go?"

Cri du Coeur

"I don't really expect they will," Carlos said wistfully, "but, in time, they might. I'm not black, but I'm ain't quite white either. I'm a brown Chicano man, honey." He fluttered his eyelashes at me.

"I guess that makes us Cheech and Chong," I said sourly. "You're crazy, bud."

"That, too," he agreed. "Bet you never knew I had such a mystical side to my fantastically multifaceted personality, eh, Dickie?"

"No, I didn't. But I've always thought you had a touch of philosopher in you," I said. "Or maybe it's failed Jesuit. Probably the latter."

"Oh, absolutely," Carlos said. "Jesuits don't believe in mysticism. They're all Skinner men."

The tape clicked to a stop. The apartment filled with silence, except for the eternal Bourbon Street jazz. "You want some more wine?" I asked.

"Naw," Carlos said, standing and stretching. "The midnight hour has come upon us, Dickie. I'm going home and to bed."

"Take my car," I said, tossing him the keys. "You'll need it to drive over to Neimeyer's tomorrow anyway."

"Right-o," Carlos said.

I walked with him down to the street. We stood by my car a moment listening to the sound of New Orleans. Night and Jazz.

"Drive carefully," I instructed. "This heap's a bonafide antique next year."

"Dickie, do you mind if I give you a hug?" Carlos asked. "It's not gay thing," he added. "Latin males have been hugging each other for centuries. It's cultural."

"Why not?" I said. I'm ashamed to admit that I darted a quick look up and down the street first to see if anyone was around to see us. I didn't see a soul, but I felt awkward and uncomfortable hugging him all the same. If Carlos felt my discomfort, he was kind enough not to show it, and I've always been glad since to have sealed our friendship with that innocent embrace.

He got in my car, waved merrily and drove off, squealing the tires just to rattle my chain.

I listened to the clean, sharp jazz notes and the sound of fading footsteps further up the block, then went inside, locked up and turned in myself.

I slept deeply and without any dreams and didn't wake until the phone roused me next morning.

TUESDAY, MARCH 4TH

1.

"You are late for your appointment with Mr. Santini," the unknown voice said smoothly.

Cri du Coeur

"And? What are you going to do? Break both my legs or only one?" I said before I was awake enough to comprehend that cowardice is probably the better part of valor when you're dealing with Johnnie Santini and his minions. The Mafia may not exist, but the Mob is alive and kicking and what it's usually kicking is smartass butt like mine.

There was a patient silence at the other end of the line.

"Look, I apologize," I said. "I overslept. I can be there in thirty minutes."

"That is unacceptable. Mr. Santini has other appointments within the hour."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. This guy was irritating the shit out of me. "If Santini wants to see me so bad, tell him to fuck breakfast and stop by on his way to his other commitments. You managed to get my private telephone number, I'm sure you know how to find my apartment, huh?" I hung up before I could get scared by my own stupidity again.

I barely had time to piss, light a cigarette and pull on a pair of jeans before the doorchimes set to racheting and coughing. I went down and opened the door barefoot, barechested, a cigarette in my mouth and my cowlick corkscrewing up from the back of my head like a Slinky toy.

Santini and his appointment secretary stood waiting outside the gate. The Don looked Miami Beach spiffy in an Armani suit, straw boater, and Havana cigar. He smiled at me, a big politician's smile, and said, "Good morning, Mr. Denker."

I grunted.

"Reggie, run get us breakfast. Fresh melon, a nice cheese, some strong coffee. But none of that Chicory shit." He beamed at me again.

Reggie scampered off, reminding me a little of Bobby Boudreaux in his eagerness to obey. I also decided to remember my manners.

"Please come in, Mr. Santini," I said. I let him proceed me up the stairs and he let me. I was being polite. He was being trusting.

He immediately sat in my favorite chair, which did not endear him to me, and gazed with facile sadness at the poster of Martinique.

I did not sit. I could feel myself getting angry.

"Do I call you Mr. Santini or is Don Santini the proper form of address?" I asked, lighting another cigarette.

"Only if I am your Don," he responded smiling with just his mouth. "I don't recall you ever kissing my ring, though, Mr. Denker."

"The only ring I've ever kissed was the Pope's, but I was a child then."

"The Pope is a great Don," Santini said. "And far richer than I am."

"Why are you here?" I asked, trying to sound polite.

Cri du Coeur

I don't know what I expected him to say. Maybe 'Leave my idiot son alone'. Maybe 'Find what you wanted in my storeroom yesterday?'. Maybe 'I know Winston is paying you to set me up for a hit'. Or maybe I expected him to say just what he did. Maybe that's why I was already so pissed off and we hadn't even finished with the social amenities yet.

He gestured at the poster. "I'm wondering what you're after, Denker. I'm wondering if you can be bought."

"Sure, I can. You can buy me with the truth."

"The truth. And for whose consumption is this truth?"

"Strictly my own," I said. "And yours, too, I suspect."

He made a little business out of relighting his cigar. "I rarely have occasion to deal with honest men," he said. "Men who have the luxury of honesty. I'm not sure if it's refreshing or not, Mr. Denker."

"If you're wondering if you can trust me not to fuck you, I think you determined that before you came here sans bodyguard. You fronted Tim Winston to check me out, didn't you?"

"I did."

"And the 20K Winston paid me didn't come from his personal checking account, did it?"

"It did not."

"His loyalty is to you."

"It is. And his loyalty is firm and unblemished, just as it was to Carlos Marcello before me."

"Then I know he's told you I'm a simple man. No great ambitions, no need for double dealing or a forked tongue."

"A man, like the truth, is never simple." He smiled. "As an attorney, you frequently spoke with forked tongue."

"I was a lawyer then," I shrugged. "I still had ambition."

The doorbell squealed, making Santini jump a bit. I pushed the buzzer by the front door to release the gate and turned back to the Don. "I don't like being felt up, so get down to your business, alright?"

Reggie, who didn't look as dapper in his Armani as his boss did in his, clumped in and began laying out breakfast on my monk's table. When he'd finished, Santini told him curtly to go wait downstairs.

"My business," he mused as he dished himself up some melon, some strawberries, a bit of cheese and a cup of coffee. He sat back down in my chair. "Have some food, Denker. A full belly contributes to civilization."

"I'm afraid I subscribe to the belief that civilization is the death of culture," I said, not moving from my position leaning against the kitchen doorjamb. It was childish, but I did not want to eat with this man. I don't know where I got the idea from, maybe it was one of my father's, but it suddenly came to me that a man can drink with an enemy, but you should only break bread with your friends. I stood there smoking, figuratively and literally, while he ate his breakfast and made me wait. A full ten minutes he made me wait before he spoke.

Cri du Coeur

"I have a lot of business concerns, Mr. Denker, but today, you are my most pressing concern." He wiped his mouth and fingers, picked up his cigar and pointed it at me. "You know who I am and what I am. You treat me with no respect, but I am not offended. I see that with you, respect must be earned. It is never a mere honorarium. You are an honest man. I am a reasonable man."

"But," I said.

"But this matter of Martinique. I cannot have you snooping into my concerns without an agreement between us."

"I am only interested in why she killed herself and what happened to her son," I said. "I could give two tears in a bucket about your personal business."

"What if something in my business contributed to her death?" he asked.

"You mean St. Pe," I said.

"St. Pe," he said and what was that expression in his eyes when he said the name? I saw it, but couldn't define it.

"I've already made a deal with Winston about him. As you know. So what do you want?"

"What I want is your word, to abide by your agreement with Tim, no matter what you uncover in my hidden corners. No cops, no press. Ever."

"I already agreed to that," I said.

"I am asking for your formal word of honor. Your word as a Marine. As a favor."

"And you'll owe me," I said.

"That's how it works," he smiled.

"Before I give you my death before dishonor word," I said, "I want to spell everything out. Just so I'm sure I understand all the ramifications of this deal."

"Go ahead," he said. Right then he reminded me of a judge over at Civil District Court blessing a settlement conference with his judicious ear, one of those reasonable, but reasonably corrupt ones.

I lit a cigarette. I got coffee. I wasn't making him wait on purpose as he'd done to me, the difference between us being that I already knew I couldn't intimidate him. I was arranging what I wanted to say into polite a form as possible. I sat on the loveseat facing him.

"You think Martinique killed herself because of St. Pe and his voodoo shit," I said, speaking slow and very clear. I wanted no misunderstandings, no misconceptions, no loopholes through which our agreement might later be negated. I knew the brute days of the Mafioso were supposed to be over, but I also knew Santini's reputation for killing when threatened. "You're just not sure that's all that's involved."

He nodded briefly.

"And the reason you're not sure is because you're a devotee yourself and because you are, you made a mistake and let St. Pe into some arm of your business. From Martinique's suicide note, I'm assuming that arm was the white slavery division, only you guys aren't selling big breasted blond women to Arab moguls, you're selling children to

Cri du Coeur

whoever for whatever and some of those kids have ended up dead."

He didn't nod this time. What I'd just accused him of was too heinous to admit. Even his silence did not imply consent. An anger that must have been as terrible as mine swelled a vein in his forehead, twitched a small muscle in his neck.

I kept my voice slow, even, expressionless.

"On the other side, you're not too worried, because St. Pe is a nigger and his real knowledge of your business is strictly entry level outsider status, so even if Martinique found out something from him, something concrete, something she couldn't live with, something like she'd traded her child to St. Pe for a voodoo network nudge to her career and the boy was sold down the conduit to a kiddie porn ring specializing in snuff films and even if I find out the same things she did, you're still safe. You're buffered. You've got that ol' plausible denial to fall back on in comfort, just like any politico. Am I lukewarm so far, Mr. Santini?"

"Scalding, except for your speculation that I would be involved in the molestation and murder of children."

"Let me speculate a bit further, then we'll iron out any inaccuracies. I hear you're a don of the old type, a 'Moustache Pete', and an old school don might fuck his nigger maid, if her skin was light enough and if she were a rare beauty, and old style dons, well buffered, might use niggers to sell dope or whatever to other niggers, but they'd never allow one membership in the organization. So St. Pe, no matter what he thinks his position is with you, he's really nothing but a cockroach running around in your backyard. He's outside, and you'll let him scurry around all he wants as long as he doesn't attract any notice."

"A very nice analogy," Santini said.

"And one that applies to me as well."

"You are not Sicilian. You are not even Italian. But you are not a nigger."

"Then the analogy does not apply to me."

"It does not."

"OK. I'm speculating, as I said before, that St. Pe's only gotten as close to you as he has because you're a believer. Maybe you're just a dilettante in the magic end, but you're a true believer in the network and St. Pe is your contact to the network. He's been an asset to you, but now you're worried he might have become a liability. Strictly an embarrassing liability, not a really dangerous one because of your buffers."

"And?"

"And now we come to the favor you want. I'm going to enumerate it in its entirety just to be certain I'm not assuming anything. You will correct any of the finer points I may get wrong?"

"It is to my advantage to do so, isn't it, Mr. Denker?" he smiled, but it was a smile thinned by anger. "You may think my honor a perverted thing, but you do not doubt my desire to protect myself, I am sure."

"Not for a minute," I said. "So. It's fine for me to continue my investigation as long as I come to you not to the authorities and definitely not to the media with any link I dig out between Martinique's suicide and St. Pe's involvement in your concerns. It's just a small favor, because the most a revelation of such a link might result in is a few grand in legal fees and lot of lost face."

He nodded.

"It's such a small favor, in fact, it makes me wonder why you've come to me in person. You began these negotiations through Winston. Why not continue it through him? Why give up your buffer?"

"Two reasons," he said. "Both equally important." He leaned forward, laying a hand on my knee, as if physical intimacy between us would preclude lying or engender truth. "One has to do with personal honor. The other with my personal deniability."

My turn to nod.

He leaned back again. "I came up under Momo Giancana," he said. "Momo taught me what a don should be and one of the most important things he taught me was that when you want a favor from a man, no matter how insignificant and small it seems, you go to that man and make your request in person. This is a mark of respect between reasonable men."

"And the second?"

"The second," he said. "Tim Winston is a loyal soldier, but he's only a soldier and he retired to his living as the co-owner of the Jazz Hole some years ago. He had an amazing talent as a young man. It made him a great deal of money and earned him greater respect."

"But his kazoo has only one note."

"He played that one note like a master, like Mozart, but he did not rise in the company, no."

"Winston's not aware of the full extent of St. Pe's mandate," I said.

"If St. Pe is selling children, then he has exceeded his 'mandate', but beyond that, he is committing an infamia, you understand?"

"I understand," I said.

"An infamia," Santini said, that vein in his forehead swelling again. "Not something bad for business. Not something regrettable or even terrible, but something so far beyond the bounds of human conduct it cannot be permitted. I am insulted that you could believe I am involved in such an evil."

"Well, your PR ain't great," I said. "If you suspected St. Pe of this infamia, why didn't you confirm or deny before things got so far?"

"I did not suspect," Santini said. "Until I, too, saw Martinique's note. I will tell you frankly, I have no way of getting close enough to St. Pe to prove our mutual suspicion. If I move against him without proof, others in his circle may seek personal reprisal against my family. That is their way. They strike obliquely, instead of having the honor to face a man directly. They strike until he is so broken with grief, he is no longer a danger or a power."

"What family?" I asked. "Your wife died a long time ago and everyone, including Beanie, knows you don't give a shit about him."

"Everyone, including Beanie, who thinks that is wrong," Santini said, a hearty and authentic irritation in his voice. "I loved his mother, my nigger maid, as you called her so easily awhile ago, and in her memory, I love her son. If I didn't, I'd have drowned him like a puppy when she died."

Cri du Coeur

"Maybe you could tell him that, the next time he steps into your line of fire," I said.

"This is one of the realms of my personal business where you have no right to encroach, Denker. I will not discuss my son with you. We are talking another type of business here. Stick to that."

Real anger was in his voice now and my interior lie detector caught the pure accents of truth in what he did not say, which was that he did love Beanie. Very much. He had just forgotten to let the kid know.

"I apologize," I said quietly. "But I must continue with this because Joseph has asked me to bring him to live here with me. He's a delightful kid and a lonely one and a very scared one. He doesn't know he has your love to protect him from St. Pe. He's afraid of becoming 'darkness', like his brother. With all respect, I'm forced to tell you, sir, that your son needs a father. Needs one so badly, he's willing to run off with a stranger just because I listen when he talks and I bought him a fucking snocone."

Santini laughed. A real belly laugh, like I was Henny Youngman and he was my biggest fan. "With respect, eh? 'With respect, Don Santini!' Denker, I'd like to bring you into the organization. I really would. I envy your friends. Are you positive there isn't a Sicilian in your woodpile?"

I smiled. "One of my great grandmothers came from Milan," I said, which was true.

"I envy you your friends," he said again. "Friends are a man's true family. I believe that. But now, let's finish. Maybe some other day we will discuss this. Now we have this other business to conclude."

"OK, I assume the reason you can't get close enough to St. Pe to prove anything is because you're convinced it is tied into the voodoo and no white has ever been allowed into the inner circle. Like no non-Italian was ever let into the inner circle of the Mafia in the old days."

"Nice analogy," Santini smiled.

"Yeah, I'm great with analogies. Won a gold medal at the last Olympics. The point is, I'm not black."

"No. The point is, you have no known connection with me or my business. You could place a black operative. Tim tells me you've already got your partner going out to Holy Shelter Saturday night. Perhaps he might bring a black friend along with him."

"This is going to take time," I said. "Unless a loa jumps my operative the first time out, it's going to take maybe a long time for him to gain St. Pe's trust."

"He doesn't need St. Pe's trust necessarily. He just needs to keep his eyes and ears open to every nuance of every word of everyone there. A month, maybe two." He shrugged. "And if St. Pe is guilty of what we suspect" Another shrug.

"You'll kill him," I said.

He didn't answer, but I didn't expect him to and this time his silence did imply consent.

"Make sure you send an unmistakable message," I said.

"If he's guilty," Santini said, "you can rest assured and Martinique can rest in final peace."

I smiled at him. I was faintly surprised to find that I liked this man, after all.

2.

Having Johnnie Santini owe me a favor was not a bad thing, considering the business I'm in and the way the political machine in Louisiana runs, and having a hand in eliminating St. Pe, who I believed really was selling children to kiddie snuff film producers, didn't bother me either. What did bother me after Santini left and I was back in my chair, bare feet up, cigarette in hand and eyes focusing on nothing, was that the hinkiness was back.

I felt like everything was hovering on the edge of slipping completely out of my control. It was a feeling I was real familiar with from Nam.

Vietnam. I never talk about Vietnam. I try never to think about Vietnam and as the years build a bigger barrier of new memories between me and the war, it becomes easier to do, but I do dream about it and I'll never be able to control those memories that come in dreams or the ones that come as gut feelings, like they did now.

I sat in my chair and tried to hear what my gut wanted to tell me. I strained to hear, but all I got was a lot of white noise. Garbled transmissions. The ambush where I'd won my first Purple Heart. A tiger screaming in the blazing jungle after a napalm strike. An abandoned Buddhist temple, deep in the bush, over the border and into Cambodia, overrun and invaded by lush runners of vine, insects whirring as loud as lawnmowers and the ghost I thought I saw there. It scared me silly, that ghost. Remembering it, I realized I was just as scared now.

The phone rang then and I wasn't surprised to hear Tim Winston's voice. Like Don, like soldier. Probably every made guy in America and a few in Sicily had my private number now, or access to it.

"Mr. Santini says you are a reasonable man, Denker," Winston said. "Congratulations."

"What are you doing up?" I asked. "It's still morning. Hell, it's still early morning."

"I'm calling to welcome you to the team. Official, like."

"If I'm on the team," I said, "tell me who killed Kennedy."

"If I knew, do you think I'd still be alive to tell you?" he laughed. "Besides, that ain't the case we're working, Denker."

"Is there anything about the case we're working you'd like to tell me or is this just a welcome wagon call?"

"Like what?"

"Like what the fuck you and Santini are really up to," I said, not as quietly as I'd planned.

"We all want the same thing," Winston said and he did say it quietly. "Mr. Santini just got different personal reasons than you and me do. He's using us for his reasons and we're letting him use us for our reasons. Works out fucking perfect, yeah?"

I didn't say anything. I wanted to believe him. It was imminently logical and it was reasonable, and I could understand mutual use, but that hinky feeling was nagging at me like a bad case of poison ivy of the balls.

"What you're really asking is if everything's kosher between us," Winston said. "And it is. You're not being set up, Denker. There's no percentage in that for us."

Cri du Coeur

That, too, sounded logical. It even sounded like the truth, unadorned and unvarnished. My lie detector didn't ping or bing. But ...

"Something doesn't feel right," I said.

"I know," Winston said, genuine worry gnawing in his voice.

"Gee, thanks for calling, Tim," I said. "You've really reassured me."

"Fuck you," Winston said cheerfully.

"You, too," I said and hung up.

The doorbell grunted. "I gave at the office," I muttered as I went to the gate. It was Carlos, looking good in his 'meeting with the client' suit.

"I already have a blank set of encyclopedias," I said in greeting. "I'm having my period. Go see Neimeyer and come back next full moon."

"I've been to see Neimeyer, Dickie," Carlos grinned. "How 'bout a ride to the office now I have to give your car back?"

"How'd Neimeyer, Senior take it?" I asked as we climbed the stairs up to the apartment. "And Elanora promised she'd do dire things to my body if I come to the office before Friday, none of them of an erotic nature."

"He took it like the swashbuckler Forbes magazine called him," Carlos said. "And if you give Elanora a kiss and a raise, she'll forgive you all. Say, where'd this continental breakfast come from?"

"Don Santini brought it with him," I said.

"And you received him dressed like that?" Carlos tsk–tsked, shook his head and then his booty. "Oh, honey!" he caroled.

"He woke me up," I said. "I wasn't concerned with violations of haute couture. I was cranky. Tell me about Neimeyer."

"He laughed," Carlos said, heading for the fruit and cheese. "Absolutely roared, my dear. He then called both kids to his office and proceeded to roar laughter in their faces for at least five minutes before he managed to get a few words out."

"No shit!" I yelled from the bedroom where I was dressing.

"No shit. Papa Warbucks loved it. Saw the conspiracy as a huge compliment or something. Maybe a tribute to his childrearing skills. This cheese is great, Dickie. What kind is it?"

"Godfather Brei. How the hell should I know?"

"These peaches are a bit spotty. I wouldn't eat these, Dickie."

"I have no intention of eating anything, ever, that comes from the hand of Johnnie Santini," I said, coming out of the bedroom. Carlos was picking over the strawberries. "Neimeyer was pleased then?"

"Very pleased."

"How pleased?"

"Said to send him a bill and make it a big one, a huge one, payable on receipt." Carlos turned around, a strawberry poised at his lips. "Jesus, Dickie! I'm not going out in public with you dressed like that! You look like an MTV boob. Really, you do."

"Hush," I said. "This is my *Miami Vice* look. It's the height of coolness, son."

"A Versace jacket, cowboy boots, suspenders and a T-shirt are cool?"

"You should have seen Santini," I said. "Pastel Armani and a straw boater."

"Oh. My. God."

"Indeed," I said. "Come on, we'll go irritate Elanora. Should I kiss her first or give her the raise first?"

"You have to ask? Raise, first. Definitely."

"I knew that," I said.

"I'll drive," Carlos said. "You talk. Tell me all about breakfast with the Godfather. Would you say he looked more like Marlon Brando or Al Pacino?"

3.

More cable to step over this morning. More gofers rushing about laden with those fifty pound clipboards. There was a lot of yelling and screaming coming from my offices, so I deduced a scene with Pesci was underway and grabbed a gofer who didn't look too harried to go fetch Elanora while Carlos and I waited in the hall.

She came charging toward us several minutes later, looking flushed, flustered and very pretty. I'd never before noticed that Elanora was pretty. "Carlos," I muttered, "I blame you for this."

"She won't yell at us," Carlos soothed. "I'm pretty sure she won't."

"That's not what I meant," I said.

"What did you mean?"

"Richard," Elanora said, approaching at warp speed. "What are you doing here and when are you leaving?"

"I'm here for the Neimeyer file so I can do the billing invoice and how was your date with Joe?"

"You really went out with Joe Pesci?" Carlos asked.

"I'll send William to your apartment this afternoon with the file," Elanora said.

"I need the file now," I said. "The trip to Russia depends on it."

Cri du Coeur

"You're going to Russia? Why are you going to Russia?"

"Temporary exile," I said. "Nothing to worry about. You're coming with us."

"I don't want to go to Russia," Elanora said firmly. "I want to go to Paris."

"What was he like?" Carlos asked. "In real life, I mean."

"Is there any other kind of life?" I asked him.

"Well, sure," Carlos said. "There's love life."

"And fantasy life," I agreed.

"And half-life. If you're radioactive," Carlos pointed out gravely.

"And dream life," I added.

"Don't forget immortal life," Carlos reminded me.

"So true," I sighed, hand on my heart.

We turned to look at Elanora.

"Cute," she said. "If I thought you'd really leave for Russia, I might be tempted to interrupt filming and get you the file now."

"So be tempted," I said.

"I said tempted, not tricked, Richard. I'm not going to disrupt shooting to get you a mere file."

"A mere file?" Carlos gasped.

"Elanora," I said, "someday you'll have to explain how this movie-in-my-office thing originated."

"You'll love it," she gloated.

"I'd better love it," I said. "Right now I'm tempted to refund the unused portion of their retainer and kick all their famous butts outta here."

"Even Harry?" Carlos cried, grabbing his forehead like a diva. "Even Joe?"

"Try me," I said.

"Why don't you both find some speeding traffic to play in?" Elanora said. "I-10's just a few blocks over."

"Oh, that's harsh," Carlos said.

She just stared at us.

Cri du Coeur

"When can I expect William?" I asked, giving in and giving up. We'd tormented her enough for a Tuesday morning.

"Fourish," she said.

"Alright. At four. Now I'm going to have my palm read. I will be incognito for the rest of the day."

"I can see this," Elanora said grimly, eyeing my cowboy boots. "Just as long as you're incognito anywhere but here. You, too, Carlos."

"I'm going home to weep over your verbal cruelty to me," Carlos sniffed.

"You can go eat worms if you want, as long as I don't have to see your face," Elanora said curtly, not realizing, as I didn't, that she would never see his face again, and having said her last word on it, she swept away down the hall Mother Superior in full sail, Queen Elizabeth in full regalia.

"What a woman," Carlos said. "In my next life, I want to be Elanora."

"Me, too," I agreed solemnly.

4.

Mama Evangeline's previous appointment was running over a bit, the granddaughter informed apologetically, so I waited at the front of the store, pricing the ready-made voodoo doll spell kits.

Come-To-Me! love kits were twenty bucks and came with a red doll, four red-headed pins, some pinkish herbs and a red candle (male or female shaped, your choice). Enemy Begone! kits sold for ten ninety-five and came with the same paraphernalia but everything was black instead of red. Health kits were yellow, psychic power enhancement kits were purple and both cost thirty-five dollars. Gambler's Secret Fortune!! kits were green (of course) and cost ninety-nine ninety-five. Love and hate, apparently, came cheap, but good health and good fortune were progressively rarer items. Well, maybe so, I thought. But who would really buy these things?

"Them's for the tourists, honey," Mama Evangeline said from behind me.

"You read my mind," I said lightly.

"Didn't take no effort," she said, smiling. "You got a face clear to read as a child's. Nice, clean heart, too," she said, tapping my chest. "Confused, but still clean and innocent."

"That would be a miracle," I said, thinking of Vietnam.

"Maybe so," she said. "But the light do shine in you, boy. It shine real bright."

"I'll bet you say that to all your paying customers," I said, smiling, but not joking.

"No, child, I doesn't. You come in back now and tell Mama Evangeline what you need. I'll help you today and won't cost nothin', how's that?" She twinkled me a look that said in any battle of wits, she'd win, for sure, and I'd better believe that. She might talk like what my father called a swamp darkie, but I was pretty sure no Spanish moss grew on her old brain.

Cri du Coeur

"Child, your face just like that window there," she laughed, watching me. "Step into my office, as those white folks on the television say, and we'll have us a sitdown."

Her 'office' was the storeroom. It smelled of pralines, incense, damp wood and bitter herbs. A simple altar was set against the back wall. On it were bowls of flour and eggs, bottles of rum, offerings of flowers, fruit, beads, cigars. Brightly colored veves were painted on the walls and a top hat rested on the crowned head of a saint I did not recognize.

Mama Evangeline seated herself on one side of a small round table. I sat opposite her in the only other chair. Between us, on the table, was a crystal ball of faintly lavender glass and a handful of cowrie shells.

"What you want, baby?" she asked. "I know you didn't come for no reading nor working."

"No, ma'am, I didn't. I have questions about your religion and I was told you were once hounsi to a student of Marie Leveau."

"Why you need to know such things?" she asked.

"I think it may have contributed to Martinique St. Johns' death," I answered.

"Oh, that was a terrible sadness to me," Mama Evangeline said, shaking her hands as if shaking liquid from them. "That poor, poor girl. The Religion didn't kill her, but you go ahead and ask your questions. What I can tell you, I'll tell, but what I can't, we'll pass by. Some things is secret, child."

"I know that much about Voudon," I said. She looked pleased that I hadn't said 'voodoo' like a tourist and that encouraged me. "I came up in Holy Shelter Swamp and my nanny, Tante Belle, was a believer."

"Was your Tante Belle being Belle Vilette?" Mama Evangeline asked, delighted.

"Yes, ma'am," I nodded.

"Had to be. Yes, yes. Onlys Belle out to Holy Shelter back when you was small. So you be her Lil' Sunny Pie. Well, well. You bein' Lil' Sunny Pie, there ain't too many questions I won't answer for you, so go ahead and ask 'em."

"Thank you," I said. "First, what is a hounsi?"

"Why, a hounsi just like a novice nun, is all. She be learnin' to be a mambo."

"And you really studied under a mambo who learned from Marie Leveau?"

"I surely did," she said proudly. "Miz Desiree was one hundred ten years old when I apprenticed to her. She be a woman of great power, yes, she was. Died when she was one hundred fourteen, you know, still powerful."

"Was Martinique your hounsi?"

"No, no," she said, shaking her hands in that odd way again. "Martinique just see me for consultations."

"But later she joined your group in Holy Shelter?"

"No," she said, firm as old rock. "Martinique never come to the hounfor with me nor mine."

Cri du Coeur

"She never went to the place of dancing?" I asked, confused.

"Martinique didn't never come to Mama Evangeline's houngfor," she said. "Don't mean she didn't go to another."

"She went with Papa Samhadl," I said.

"She did indeed."

"But you introduced them?"

Mama Evangeline lifted her chin. Her facial muscles hardened. "She needed to have her a Bokor and he be the most powerful I ever seen. You know Bokor, child?"

I knew. A black magician. A priest of darkness and pain. Tante Belle used to scare me into being a good boy by threatening me with the Bokor. I nodded.

"She had to have her a powerful Bokor to right a powerful wrong done her," Mama Evangeline said. "I don't mix in what she had need of."

"What did she need?" I asked.

"She wanted to buy a man's death. I heard her reasons. They was good ones."

"And you introduced her to Papa Samhadl."

"No, not then." She got up, went to the altar and selected a cigar. A fat Havana. The kind Johnnie Santini smoked. When she had lit it and blown smoke on the altar so the gods could enjoy it, too, she sat back down. "I only relayed her need to him. But come a year later, she came to me and begged me to make her an envouement to makes her famous right quick. I's powerful at what I does," she said, puffing that big Havana. "But that kind of powerful, I ain't."

"She was pregnant," I said.

"Yes."

"And the child was his price."

"Yes."

"Did they kill it?" I asked, thinking I already knew the answer to that one.

"Heaven's, child!" Mama Evangeline cried. "Papa took that baby to raise it up in his own image. He say her child born with power to be a great Bokor. He say she get that baby copulating with a loa in Ariviste's form. Legba, I think he tol' her that loa was. And she believe him. She desperate to believe him. That the way such things be done where he from, so he say."

"Where is he from?"

"Upper Congo somewheres." She blew smoke toward the altar. It drifted about the head of the crowned saint.

"Then he is an African, not Haitian."

Cri du Coeur

"We's all African, baby," Mama Evangeline said. "We all be te Guenee, children of Africa, see? When black folks die, their spirits goes home to Africa. To the City of the Loa."

"All blacks?" I asked, thinking of William. "Even Christian blacks, American blacks?"

"All black folks," she said. "The Religion say so and it make sense, too. If you black, you te Guenee. Even if you African–American, ain't you the African part first? and your soul go home to Africa where your ancestors born and die and your gods, too. See, child, every people got their own gods. I ain't speaking of the First Cause, now," she added, sounding like Thomas Aquinas. "First Cause be the same for all, but how It manifest Itself to each people be different, be for them alone. Voudon the oldest religion in the world. You ask one of them anthro–apology teachers at Loyola and if he honest, he tell you man stood up on his hind legs first in Africa and man got religion first in Africa. You can put on a robe and sing in the choir and praise Jesus all you want, but if you black, you African. Your soul goin' home to the City of the Loa when you dies."

"That's why whites aren't allowed into the mysteries," I said.

"Baby," she smiled, "you ever hear a blanc, or a black, either, being let to see the mysteries of them Native American folks?"

"No," I said.

"Did the Jews ever let a gentile pass from the outer courtyard into their Holy of Holies?"

"No," I said, thinking of Pompey. "Not willingly."

"I even heard tell there be two teachings in Christianity, one for the plain folks and one for the initiates, like we got in Voudon."

"Just like any religion I can think of," I said, and it was true.

Outer and inner teachings. Sanctuaries and Holy of Holies where only the High Priest may enter once a year. The Eleusinian mysteries of the Greeks and the Vesta mysteries of the Roman women. Secret societies, secret cults, secrets of the blood.

Most of all, the secrets of blood.

Christ's blood brimming in the Holy Grail. The blood of martyrs staining stones and the blood of saints producing miracles. Countess Batheroy, bathing in the blood of village girls to keep her skin white with youth. 'The Blood is the Life.' Ancient man drinking the blood of his slain enemies. Aztecs eating the hearts of those sacrificed to the gods, wearing their skins until they rotted, drinking their blood. Beanie saying, "Evil eats good." Mama Evangeline saying, "Voudon be the oldest religion in the world." Carlos saying, "Where no white man has gone before." Santini saying, "They strike obliquely."

Christ's blood. Shed for our sins. Not his own.

Carlos' blood shed for my sins?

"Oh, my God," I said. No, you're being foolish, I told myself, panicking anyway. You're overreacting, scaring yourself, I told my unlistening self, for all this telling wasn't doing any good. My gut was singing and puking and rolling because the thought just felt so fucking right and so fucking scary.

Cri du Coeur

"What is it, baby?" Mama Evangeline said. "You look like you want to jump off that chair and run all the way to heaven."

Calm yourself, I said to myself. "Did you know Papa and his group are reburying Martinique out in Holy Shelter Saturday night?" I asked.

"I been invited, but I ain't goin'. Not to no Bokor dance."

"If you did go, could you take me? As a guest?"

"Now what I just tell you? You a blanc. Ain't no way you be allowed at hounqfor Saturday night or any other time less it be for an envouement you bought yourself and even so, it only be tourist dancing you'd see."

"That's what I thought," I said. Overreacting or not, it was better to be safe. "Can I use your store phone?"

"Got one right here," she said, pulling a nice cellular from a pocket of her dress. Modern witchcraft. It's a wonderful thing.

I dialed Carlos hadn't he said he was going home? and got his machine. "Carlos," I said. "Find Lulu and tell him to scrap Holy Shelter Saturday. No fooling around now. I'm serious. Dead fucking serious. I'm at Mama Evangeline's. I'll be home about three thirty. Call me, no, come over and I'll explain."

I called the service and left the same message. Ditto Elanora at the office, in case he went there to see Harry. I couldn't talk to Ms. Barker at the present moment, said a pleasant gofer, but he'd pass the message on to her when her scene was finished. Elanora in a scene? My God and what next? My life was apparently turning surrealistic or Dadaist or something.

I handed the phone back to Mama Evangeline.

"Why you think Martinique give her baby to be killed?" she asked, pocketing the phone. "You mixin' us up with Satanism, must be. Voudon don't sacrifice no innocents like that."

"I apologize," I said. "Martinique's suicide note talked about murdered children. I assumed it had something to do with the Religion."

"Murdered children," Mama Evangeline said. "Not murdered babies."

"Murdered children," I affirmed.

"Let me think on this. Murdered children, she say. Not no murdered babies."

She thought. She closed her eyes and thought so long I began to think maybe she'd fallen asleep like old people often do. I'd just decided she was asleep and that I should leave, when her eyes popped open and she sighed.

"I ain't for sure," she said, "but might be I know what Martinique was sayin'."

"Sure or not," I said. "I need to know. I think it's the key to her suicide."

"You got some pretty eyes," she said.

"Excuse me?"

Cri du Coeur

"Your eyes," she said. "Almost nobody got eyes that's two different colors."

"I'm sorry, but what do my eyes have to do with Martinique?"

"Not Martinique," she said. "Samhadl. And maybe that friend of yours. Carlos. And Samhadl be the link in Martinique's note. See, eyes like yours, they real rare. Where he come from, those eyes a sign of a man of power. Any eyes, light like that such a sign in Africa, see, where all eyes be brown. His be like fire opals. 'Round here we say a man or woman with two different color eyes see both worlds the spirit and this world."

"So Samhadl thinks I'm a ... what? Bokor?"

"He think you a man of power with the dead. He don't like you messin' in his playground. He won't take after you personal until he try to warn you off first. Maybe by hurting your friend, see? 'Cause you didn't warn off at her funeral."

"How do you know that?" I asked. "About the funeral?"

"I a see—er. When I look for him just now, I see. Maybe he see me lookin', too, but I's got nothin' to fear from his nasty self. I be powerful myself."

"Carlo," I whispered.

"Could be, if he think it stop you from finding out what Martinique meant, but I thinks I know and if I tells you, will you be content and quit messin' in it? Let me take care of him in our way?"

I wanted to shout YES! tell me already! but I couldn't. Honesty is almost never the best policy in my business when gathering information, but I still can't stop myself from indulging in it more often than I should. "If what you tell me feels like the answer, I'll have to pass it on to Johnnie Santini for handling," I said.

"Honey, Mist' Santini an old client of mine. I know him twenty years or more. He come to this Banqui two, three times a month, sit on that chair you sittin' in. He and Martinique, they give me this store when my husband pass. The grief just like a sword. I thought that grief kill me. They give me this store to take my mind offen my old man, you see what I'm sayin'? You tell Mist' Santini whatever you got to, but he ain't gonna hear it from you before he hears it from me."

"Good enough," I said. "Tell me what you think."

"I ain't for sure now, but where Papa from, upper Congo, slavery real common, even before the white come. Black on black, buy, sell, trade, which don't excuse what the white man done now, but most black folks don't want to remember that part of our history, that black on black slavery. It practiced all over Africa, but where Samhadl from, slavery still practiced and not so long ago, they used to buy and sell slaves for food."

"Food," I said, every bell on the truth panel of my lie detector ringing so loud, I barely heard her next words.

"Food," she said. "Samhadl tell me this himself. Claim man got a texture like hog, but taste sweeter. Now, it ain't no part of Voudon, but eatin' folks could be part of Samhadl's thing out there in Holy Shelter and you know, veal and lamb, they a lot more tender and tasty then beef and mutton."

"Jesus Christ," I said.

Cri du Coeur

"If that be so," she said, "he disgracing The Religion. Voudon ain't never ate no children and no voudoniste didn't never get no power doin' any such evil thing."

"And Martinique, if she found out that was how he got success for her, couldn't live with it."

"No, baby, she'd have lived with it if she coulda put a stop to it. She was a strong woman, very strong. It was thinkin' she couldn't stop him, killed her. Poor child must not've known she could go to Mist' Santini." She sighed. "Or me. She coulda come to me. Poor, poor child."

"Is his real name Emile St. Pe?" I asked, still mentally gagging at the thought of 'kid stew'.

"Honey," she laughed, "ain't nobody know his real name. Haiti his last address, so he got a Haitian name now, that's all."

"Maybe," I said, only half not meaning it, "maybe his real name is Satan."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Mama Evangeline deadpanned. "If Santi Claus be a black man, ain't no reason why the Devil can't be."

5.

I'd had it all wrong, I thought walking home. Everything. There was no snuff film ring. Martinique had not given her baby for blood sacrifice. The mystery surrounding this case just kept getting more insubstantial, almost dream-like, like a sludgy nightmare where none of the lightswitches work, your feet get mired in mud and the monster in the shadows is a shapeshifter.

I reached the apartment a few minutes after four. William was not waiting for me at the gate, but the answering machine was blinking.

It was Carlos. "Got your message. Be there about five," he said.

I should have felt relief. Instead, I felt hot, itchy, restless. Really bad. I wanted Carlos in front of me, swearing on his honor, the Bible (both King James and Douay versions) and our friendship that he'd never go to Holy Shelter, never go near the Jazz Hole or Lulu again, even on a day when suicide seemed the best option available, and never pursue his edge-places through voodoo forever and ever, amen.

Thinking of the Jazz Hole reminded me of Santini. I called Winston and told him I had to see Santini ASAP. After that I simply sat and stewed and called it thinking.

By five-fifteen, neither Carlos nor William had shown up and Santini hadn't called back. I bounced around the apartment, doing nothing except tie myself up in knots of increasingly complex weirdness. I tried to call Carlos, then William, and got only their respective answering machines. I promised myself that first goddamn thing tomorrow I was going to buy cellular phones and beepers for all four of us. Just so I'd never have another anxiety attack like this one.

I landed in my favorite chair, telling myself to relax. "Today is Tuesday," I said to Martinique's poster. "Not Saturday. Not even Wednesday. This is New Orleans, not Nam. So what am I so fucking nervous about, huh?"

She didn't answer.

4.

Cri du Coeur

The only thing wrong with you, I lectured myself, is that you've forgotten how to sit quietly and be patient. You're pissed because Carlos and William are late and Santini's too busy sucking a fat Havana to call you back. You're bored and you hate being bored.

The doorbell squawked like a dying rooster, starting me so badly my heart jogged sideways in my chest.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered. "You're such a wuss."

I trotted down the stairs, flung open the door and saw Big Ed Minuti, briefcase in one Yul Brenner fist, standing outside the gate.

"Hey, Ed," I said happily. Any port in a hurricane. Big Ed was preferable to solitude. "Come on up. What are you doing down in the Lower Quarter?"

"Lookin' for you, obviously," he said, puffing up the stairs behind me.

"Business? Or is the wife in Delaware visiting her parents again?"

"I don't need your help to pick up strange, Denker," Ed said. He collapsed, still puffing and wuffing, on the loveseat. "Nice place. Didn't that commie homo Clay Shaw used to live here?"

"Yeah," I said. "You want a beer? Coke, Sprite, Chianti?"

"Just a cigarette. Soon's I catch my breath."

I waited for him to catch his breath and seriously considered quitting smoking again.

"OK," he sighed at last. "I'm OK now. Where's that beer you promised me?"

I went to get it, sighing a bit myself. The afternoon had been hellishly long, but with Ed here, it promised to be positively infinite.

"Here's what I got for you," he said, exchanging a paper for the beer.

"What is it?" I asked, settling into my chair. I tried to concentrate on the tiny computerese print, but the jumpiness was back and it was getting worse by the nanosecond. Where the hell was William? And Carlos? I checked my watch. Six-fifteen, for Christ's sake.

"What's it look like?" Ed said. He gulped beer, burped, shook his head at my ignorance.

"Numbers," I said. "And I flunked Chaos Math, so interpret for me."

"She wasn't insured by us. She took out a piece of the rock. A really sizable piece." He came and stood at my elbow, pointing to various symbols, columns, numbers and abbreviations. "She got herself 1.5 million in life insurance over the past three years. Beneficiary was a minor, Christian St. Johns, the funds to be placed in trust and administered by Emile St. Pe until the kid's majority. Now, what's interesting here is that she tried to add a suicide rider last month. She wanted it effective immediately, but of course no insurance salesman who wants to make the Million Dollar Club is gonna let her do that."

"Of course," I agreed. "Where'd you get this, Ed?"

Cri du Coeur

"Don't ask. Anyway, look here. She changed the executor of the trust on the same date she was refused the rider."

The doorchime squalled. Thank God. "Ed, go push that black button by the front door, will ya? Thanks. So who's the new executor?"

"Martin St. Johns, on condition that 'he lives'. St. Pe, if not. Jesus, Denker, ya outta spring for a new doorbell."

"I will," I said. "Open the door, OK?" He did. Whoever was coming up the stairs was slow and heavy. Not Carlos. My momentary relief dissipated. A moment later William appeared, the Neimeyer file under his arm.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Miz Ellie ..."

"I'm pretty sure I don't want to know what she's up to now," I said. "Grab yourself a beer. Ed, I appreciate the trouble you went to stealing this info, but I'm afraid it doesn't have a practical application to the case."

"I didn't steal it," he said. "I blackmailed Ted over at Prudential to borrow it."

"Your brother works for Prudential now? What happened to the vice presidency at EZ Auto & Home?"

"Long story," Ed said, gathering up his papers. "Good blackmail material." He closed and locked the briefcase. "I just thought her policy, if she had one, might be interesting."

"It is interesting," I said. William came back from the kitchen, a glass of Dr. Pepper hidden in one big, but still very thin hand. "It shows she heard something that led her to believe her father wasn't dead after all. I wonder why she didn't stick around long enough to find out?"

"Too bad that idiot kid can't collect on the policy," Ed said.

"What idiot kid?" I asked, my anxiety making me dense. Was Martinique's son retarded, too?

"That one you was with the other night. That was Christian, wasn't it?"

"Beanie? No, he's a friend of mine."

"You got some bizarre lookin' friends," Ed said. "That guy last night was a strange one."

"What guy?" I asked. That sludgy nightmare was back and it was creeping into daytime life and, ah, God, I wasn't going to be able to wake up from it ever. Don't say it, I thought. Please don't say it.

"Well, see, I came by about twelve, twelve-thirty last night, on my way home from making the out-of-towners happy, just to talk to you about this insurance angle, you know? but I seen you hugging on Carlos and I felt kinda funny about that, him being a fruit and all, so I decided not to stop in after all and I guess your other friend felt the same way, 'cause he turned around and left, too."

"What friend?" I asked, so scared my balls were crawling.

"That black guy. The one with the scars on his face. Looked like something outta an old Bela Lugosi flick."

For a moment I could not move. I sat there in my mundane apartment, in my familiar, comfortable chair, in the middle of a vast, white silence, not even breathing, like a man standing against a courtyard wall, frozen in the seconds between the command to 'Fire!' and the explosion of the rifles.

Cri du Coeur

Ed was saying something. William took a step toward me, his lips moving. I remembered how to breathe at the same time I remembered how to get out of the chair and run.

I grabbed my gun and car keys off the mantle and I ran out the door, down the stairs, through the gate, to the street and my car. I was already in it, key turning in the ignition, when William caught up to me.

"Let me in," he hollered, banging on the passenger window.

I popped the lock. He hopped in, the car already rolling.

"What is it?" he asked, turning in the seat to face me. "What's the matter?"

"Carlos," I said, slamming the car to a stop in front of the Jazz Hole.

William didn't ask for an explanation. He just got out of the car and followed.

It was almost seven. Getting dark. The roar of the tourists gearing up for a night of carousing came from the other end of Bourbon Street, but the Jazz Hole wasn't doing much business yet. Maybe now that Martinique was dead, it would never do much business again. It had the dark, seedy feel of a neighborhood bar fallen on hard times and economic woes. A few customers with the empty faces of old regulars, stared at me as I rushed past. A tape of Martinique's voice moved with me, like a ghost, trailing over the tables.

"Where's St. Pe?" I yelled at Winston before I'd even reached the bar. "Where's Bobby?"

"How the motherfuck should I know?" he yelled back. "What's the shit's your problem, Denker?"

I didn't answer. I spun around, heading for the door. Lulu wasn't sitting at his side table and I groaned.

I was moving so fast and so blind that I tripped over Beanie crouching on the outside steps and nearly fell. Beanie gripped my arm, providing the ballast I needed to stay upright.

"Papa gone to Holy Shelter," he said. "Bobby, too. The darkness all in Bobby now."

"Where, Joseph?" I begged. "Tell me where."

"To the Garden," Beanie said.

"Where?"

"He means a cemetery," William said.

"There's three cemeteries in Holy Shelter," I said. "Which one, Joseph? Do you know which one?"

He shook his head. "Ain't never been," he said and began to cry. "Don't you go, too, Mister. The darkness'll get you, too! You won't come back!" He groped at my legs. "Please, please, don't go!"

"I'll come back," I said, holding my patience with both hands. "Will you wait right here for me?"

"I ain't got nowhere else to go," he said, his sadness so deep and painful, it made me want to scream.

"Good boy," I said. "I'll come back for you."

"Promise?" Beanie sniffed, releasing my leg.

"I promise," I promised.

Beanie settled himself on the step, immovable as a barnacle. "I'll wait," he said, but I was already running again, up the block to Mama Evangeline's store, William and his bad back a few limping steps behind me.

The store was closed and locked, but I saw the granddaughter through the window, dusting the displays. I pounded on the door until she reluctantly came over, opening it only the length of the safety chain. I saw she, too, had been crying. "What do you want?" she hissed through the crack in the door.

"Samhadl's gone to his hounqfor in Holy Shelter," I said. "I need to know where that is. Where the Garden is. Which cemetery."

"I don't know anything," she said. "Leave me alone." She was terrified. I could smell her helplessness.

"Where's Mama Evangeline?" I asked as gently as I'd spoken to Beanie. "Please, it's very important. Samhadl has a friend of mine. He's going to kill him. Tonight, at the Garden. He's going to kill him. Please. Help me."

"I can't help you," she said. "Your friend will join my grandmother in the graveyard tomorrow, but I'm not coming along."

"Mama Evangeline's dead?" I said dully.

"She's dead. Died of a stroke this afternoon. After she tried to help you! Go away!" she suddenly screamed, slamming the door.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," William said.

But I wasn't out of options yet.

I bolted into the AIDS clinic next door, flashed my PI credentials at the mousey guy behind the reception desk and commandeered his phone. He twittered a little bit, but didn't try to stop me. I dialed up the Sheriff of Holy Shelter, Tiger Dessault.

Tiger and I came up together, attended school together, fell in love with the same cheerleader (but I married her), served in Nam during the same years, although never at the same place at the same time, except Hue, where our paths never intersected.

We were not friends. His family was too rich for Tiger to be real friends with me, but we had no reason for any animosity between us either. He'd fallen out of love with Karyn before she fell in love with me, for instance, and though I won a Silver Star with oak clusters at Hue, he did, too, plus he got three Purple Hearts and promoted, while I only got the three Purple Hearts, so he agreed to send deputies to all three cemeteries in search of St. Pe for me without asking any questions and despite the inconvenience and expense of overtime for his officers.

I thanked him with profuse promises of free investigative services which he would never need, apologized for my lack of a cellular phone for him to call me back on, and then for disturbing his dinner, told him I'd be in Holy Shelter as quickly as possible, and hung up feeling not one teeny tiny bit better.

"What if Beanie's wrong?" I blurted to William. "What if they're not at a cemetery? Jesus, they could be anywhere in the swamp. Or the Parish."

Cri du Coeur

"Whyn't we go see Ariviste?" William asked. "He knows where this hounfor thing is, right?"

"Worth a try," I agreed. "And if he's not there to ask, Kimah Vo may know. Martinique told her most everything else."

We ran back to the car. I was beginning to feel like a contender for the Olympic track team. It was full dark now. Seven-thirty. I hoped St. Pe, like literary devil worshippers and storybook witches, would wait for midnight to kill Carlos, giving me time to find them.

"You think you could fill me in a little?" William asked as I pretended to be Mario Andretti, barrelling down the narrow French Quarter streets and out onto Canal.

I obliged him with a very abbreviated account of my meeting with Mama Evangeline.

"I read about them Congo people," William said.

"You did?" I asked, turning off St. Charles onto the bricks of Felicity Street. "I thought you told me you're an uneducated man."

"I am," he said. "But I was in the hospital for a long time after I got hurt and I never could abide game shows and soap operas, so I read anything I could get from the nurses or my roommates.

"No shit," I said. "You're something, William."

He laughed. "Some of them books was so awful! War and Peace, now. I used to read it when I couldn't get to sleep for nothing and it always worked. Better than a sleeping pill, Mr. Denker."

"Buy me a copy for Christmas," I said. "I think I'm going to need it." I pulled up before Martinique's mansion and slid to a stop. "Oh, fucking goddamn shit."

"You ain't half right," William said.

We got out of the car. Neither of us wanted to go in that house, but I didn't have a choice anymore. This was the last stop before the darkness of Holy Shelter. It could not be skipped or ignored.

No lights in any of the windows. The front door hanging open, like the entrance to the Chamber of Horrors at the Conti Street Wax Museum. A psychic breath of the hopelessness of all human endeavor, all human desire.

"Stay here," I told William.

"No, I ain't," he said.

We found Kimah Vo in the kitchen, shot once in the back of the neck. While William called the police, I went looking for Ariviste. I didn't find him, but in one of the third floor bedrooms I did find Martin St. Johns. He lay in a welter of blood and canes, a knife in his throat and one in his heart. Both had intricately carved handles of tulipwood, giving them the appearance of being exactly what they undoubtedly were museum quality sacrificial daggers from the Upper Congo.

William and I beat it before NOPD could arrive and detain us.

Cri du Coeur

Holy Shelter was the only destination possible now. Even driving at dangerously high speeds, it would take over an hour to get there. I did not want to get there. We would be too late, I was sure of it. No, I did not want to get there.

"Put on your seatbelt," I said.

"Maybe the Sheriff already found them," William said, trying to be helpful.

"Maybe," I said, "but I don't believe it."

"What we gonna do if he hasn't?"

"I'll try to think of something," I said, and by the time I parked in front of Tiger Dessault's house a little after nine o'clock, I had.

6.

Tiger checked with his deputies on stakeout. They reported nothing doing and I'd expected that. But on the drive down I'd suddenly remembered my Tante Belle walking to the dances, as she called them.

When I was twelve and just starting to notice that even girls who didn't play guns or go fishing and who screamed when they saw a snake or a gator, could still be interesting, Tante Belle would tease me about all the pretty girls at the dances. "Maybe Erzuli ride one," she'd say, packing her basket with honey, flour, a few of my father's cigars and candles filched from my mother's pantry. (Erzuli was apparently the goddess of love, or maybe just plain lust. I didn't know the difference in those days. Didn't know there was a difference.) "Maybe she see you, that Erzuli, take a fancy to you." Then, her basket ready, straw handle over one arm and a white napkin concealing its contents, she'd set off down the driveway, turning left onto the unpaved road and walk into the early evening dark.

Once, a week or so past my fourteenth birthday, I ran after her, not ten minutes after she'd left the kitchen. I wanted to catch up to her, go with her to the dance. I was hoping some Erzuli girl would jump my body as the loa had jumped hers, so I ran after Tante Belle, quick as spit, but she had already disappeared. She must have left the road almost immediately, stepping off into the swamp cedars and live oaks and waving Spanish Moss crowding so close on either side. Something about that ghostly disappearance so frightened me, I didn't ever again try to go after Tante Belle, or with her, on dances night.

I told this bit of childhood trivia to Tiger after he finished instructing his men to stay in position, stay awake and be careful, goddamn it! because people were already dead over there in New Orleans and he didn't want any funerals here in Holy Shelter.

"Is there anything like a cemetery or a garden out by the old homeplace?" I asked.

"Fuck if I'd know," Tiger said. "But Mammy Lafitte will."

"She's still around? God, she must be about one hundred and ten now." Mammy Lafitte had been Tiger's nanny and nanny to his mother before him. "She still have all her marbles clicking in sequence?"

"She just made one—o—five," Tiger said. "She forgets yesterday every new morning, but she remembers clear as a windchime ringing forty, fifty years ago. Come on, she stays by her great—grandson's, just up the road."

We half—ran the block or so to Mammy's place. Tiger wasn't yet infected with my panic, but he was close to it.

Cri du Coeur

William's limp was worse, but he kept up.

"This is it," Tiger said, stopping at a wooden house with a rose trellis on the front wall and a porch inundated with ivy and nightblooming jasmine. It reminded me of the description of Mama Evangeline's porch in Algiers where Martinique had met with St. Pe.

A youngish black man with orange hair and skin the color of burnt honey opened the door. "Evenin', Sheriff," he said.

"Evenin', Jerome," Tiger said. "Mammy still awake?"

Jerome smiled. "You know Mammy don't hardly sleep to nights no more. She sleep all day and worries me and Tina half the night with her insomniacs."

"She always was real contrary," Tiger agreed. "I'd like to speak at her a minute, Jerome. It's real important. I'm sorry 'bout the hour."

"Mammy always happy to see you come in. She don't care what time it be," Jerome said, ushering us in the door.

He took us to a back bedroom. It was small and smelled of yellow age and mummifying flesh. Mammy Lafitte did, indeed, light up at the sight of Tiger.

"Baby!" she cried, lifting her arms to him like a child begging to be picked up. Tiger went to her bed and hugged her. "Baby," she sighed again, contented.

"You my best girl, yet, ain't you?" Tiger asked, kissing her cheek.

"Forever and forever," Mammy said. "Oh, I is happy to see you, too, but you bringin' trouble in the door, I see it clear. What you brought to me, Tiger?"

"Well, Mammy," Tiger drawled, sitting on the side of the bed and folding an old arthritis scarred hand in his, "Dick Denker's come for your help."

"Lil' Sunny Pie? Step outta them shadows there, boy, and let me sees how you growed up."

I stepped to the edge of her bed and took the swollen hand she held out tenderly in mine. "Hello, Ma'am," I said and for the first time in that long, long afternoon become night, I felt the fear, the hinky itch, the just plain panic of a child alone in the dark and lost, slipping away from my heart. It all drained out, straight through our clasped hands, into Mammy. Her face paled, like a black sky cleaved by lightning and she moaned.

"Mammy?" Jerome said.

She shook her head at him, turning her full attention to me. One hundred and five years old, bedridden, terminally ill of age, she was still formidable. And not just a little frightening.

"Quick, chile, tell me what you see'd with your left eye," she commanded.

"Seems some city Bokor got a friend of Dick's somewhere 'round here called the Garden," Tiger said. "You know a place called that out near to the old Denker homeplace?"

Cri du Coeur

"What you seen with that left eye, that blue eye, blue like the sky eye, blue like a vale, eye?" Mammy chanted soft, soft, while I fell into her eyes, black and rusty as old promises broken on a wheel of blood and time. "Show me, baby. Show me now. Oh, yes, yes, I sees. A man with scars, like a tattoo of evil. Yes. But what else? What else?" Her eyes were suddenly blank and white, her grasp on my hand bone grinding in its ferocity.

From a far distance, maybe as far as the next spiral galaxy, I heard Jerome shouting, Tiger cursing, but Mammy and I, joined eye to eye, hand to hand, heartbeat to heartbeat, we were alone in the universe.

"Darkness," she breathed. "Darkness. So very empty, his darkness."

Her body jerked, convulsed. Saliva spilled from her mouth, over a chin speckled with white, old lady hairs. Her white eyes recaptured their blackness and rolled shut. It was over. Whatever it had been, it was finished. I gently removed my hand from hers.

My heart was bucking like a horse trying to throw me out of my body. I was sweating and a big drop fell into my blue eye and burned there like an unshed tear will.

Everyone in the room was motionless. Silent. Waiting, because they knew 'it' had to have an epilogue, one washed in blood and tears and mud.

Mammy opened her eyes.

"You too late, Mist' Richard," she said, sorrowing for me. "That boy, he already killed, son. Lord rest his tortured soul, he already be killed."

I leaned close to her, close enough to kiss. "Please, Mammy," I said, "tell me where the Garden is. It may not be too late. Maybe you saw what is to come, not what has already passed. Maybe I can still find him in time. Please, Mammy."

"The Garden an old slave cemetery," she whispered. Her breath on my lips tasted of cinnamon and dust. "All the old families, Dessaults, Fonteauxs, Charbonnets, Fontenots and Charboneauxs, they buried they slaves there, back when no black folks allowed to lie in the same hallowed ground with white folks. My people, they laid to rest there, but I's too old to tend to 'em now."

"How do I get there?" I asked. "Please, where is the path that will take me there?"

"Jerome know," she said. "Jerome take you. But it too late, baby. Best you don't go. Tiger, he go for you. He sheriff. That his duty, to go." She sighed. "Oh, it be a terrible thing you'll find if you go. The ground he lay on be cursed now."

"I have to go, Mammy," I said. "He was my friend. Love has its duties, too."

"You go then," she said. "You bring him home. But be watchful, Mist' Richard, 'cause the storm ain't passed you yet. This only the eye, like in a hurricane blowing."

She pulled my face down to hers and kissed my forehead as tenderly as my mother would have done if my mother had been tender instead of a Virginia aristocrat.

7.

It was like standing in the eye of a hurricane, surveying the damage and too stunned to remember the damage still to be done when the eye is past.

"Holy Bleeding Christ," Tiger said, crouching beside the stick poking up from the ground festooned with Lulu's head and entrails. "Jesus."

"Mr. Denker?" William said. He put a hand on my arm. "Mr. Denker?"

But I was in the silent eye of the storm and William could not follow me there for all his decent and good desire. I walked a thousand, a million, miles, and in a second, I stood over Carlos, looking down at him.

He lay, naked on his back, arms flung out as if he were to be crucified, but St. Pe had not crucified Carlos. St. Pe had gutted him, like a deer. His untouched face looked with open, innocent eyes at the night sky and his eyes were full of moonlight and the reflections of a universe stars.

My knees suddenly forgot how to lock, how to hold me upright, and I sat down heavily in the bloody dirt beside Carlos.

Gutted like a deer, in this forest of ancient tombs.

"Ah, Carlos," I groaned, reaching out to close those brilliant eyes sparkling with stars.

"Don't touch him, Dick," Tiger said quietly. "I called the coroner and the State homicide boys. Just let him be now. Don't mess with the evidence."

"We know who butchered him," I said, but I drew back my hand.

"Yeah," Tiger said. "And provin' it comes next."

William helped me to my feet.

"I want his body sent to Jay's when the coroner's done with him," I said to Tiger, steadier now. "All my people have been buried out of Jay's."

"What about Mr. Santiago's family?" Tiger said. Very by the book, Tiger's always been. That's why he made officer in the Corp and I never did.

"His family buried him the same day he told them he was gay," I said wearily. God, I was weary, beyond words, weary.

"Mr. Washington, why don't you take your boss back to N'Awlins? Me and my men, we'll handle it now."

William nodded. He steered me back to the car. He put me in the passenger seat. He even fastened the seatbelt around me, the first time in my adult life I'd worn one.

"I'm calling Miz Ellie soon as we get back," William said, firing up the car.

"Whatever," I said.

Cri du Coeur

"Whyn't you close your eyes and rest some? We won't be back to New Orleans till one o'clock."

"The way you drive, we'll be lucky to make it by sunset tomorrow," I observed.

"Yes, sir," William agreed comfortably.

I closed my eyes and saw Carlos, lying innocent and butchered in bloody mud.

I heard Beanie telling me his mother died in light.

I hoped that Carlos, though engulfed in St. Pe's terrible darkness, had died in the light of those twinkling stars reflected in his dead eyes.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5TH 1:30 a.m.

"You want I should come up with you?" William asked, parking my car in front of red gate of my apartment courtyard.

"No," I said. "And I don't want you calling Elanora either."

"You need someone with you," William insisted.

"I do not need anyone with me," I said, staring out the windshield and hearing Bourbon Street jazz the eternal sound of the French Quarter. I hated it. "I do not want anyone with me, either." I hated everything, actually. I hated most of all that Carlos was dead. No, I hated myself more than even that and I hated Santini still more.

During the ride back, behind my closed eyes, the weariness and apathy were gradually incinerated by the rise of a slow, volcanic rage. I had been wrong about everything, yes, maybe so, but Santini knew I was wrong, or should have known, and he'd let me wander on mindlessly and without sufficient information, and now Carlos was splayed out in an abandoned cemetery, so completely gutted he didn't have any internal organs left for the coroner to autopsy. I was going to erupt all over Santini, et al. But first I had to get rid of my well-meaning employee and put together a battle plan.

"William," I said, careful of his feelings, "I appreciate your concern for me, but I need some time alone. You know? Time alone with my grief."

"I know you want me to leave, Mr. Denker, that's what I know," he said. "But I ain't sure that's best, Mr. Denker."

"It is best," I said, trying to keep any grimness from creeping into my voice, the way the cold and darkness of Carlos' murder had crept into my heart.

"What about Miz Ellie? You don't mean for her to hear about this on the morning news, do you?"

"No. No, of course not," I said. "Look, I'll call you a cab when I get upstairs. You go home. Sleep a few hours. I'll pick you up about five and we'll go tell her together, OK?"

"Alright," William said, sounding not convinced and very uncomfortable.

We got out of the car. The smell of the river was on the past-midnight air. My butt hurt from sitting motionless so long.

"Mr. Denker," William said.

"I'll call that cab first thing through the door," I said. "You just wait inside the courtyard. It's safer than the street."

"Why I can't come up and call myself?" William asked. God, but he was a suspicious sort!

"I'd rather you didn't," I said, afraid if he got a foot in the apartment with me, he'd refuse to leave. "You're a good man, Mr. Washington, and tonight you've been a good friend. Thank you. I need to be alone, but I appreciate your friendship."

"You was a friend to me first, Mr. Denker," William said gravely. "The Bible says to love your enemies and that's a hard saying. But loving those who do you good for no reason except their hearts is good, that's easy."

I looked at him and felt tears pricking and threatening behind my eyes. "Richard," I said. "I believe it's time for Richard now."

"Yes, sir," William agreed solemnly, as if we were sealing some pact. "Yes, sir, I believe it is."

I left him waiting under the carriage lamp and crossed the courtyard to my apartment door gate. It was closed, but not locked. I wasn't concerned. Six hours ago I'd streaked out of here so fast, I hadn't given a thought to securing the gate. For all I knew, my apartment door was still hanging open as wide as the door of Martinique's mansion.

I pulled the gate to, locking it behind me. I took a huge breath of night air and tasted roses on my tongue. Over the roof of the building opposite to mine, I saw a scattering of city stars and a moon that, to the layman's eyes, appeared full a sacrificial moon and the anger suddenly took me.

I charged up the stairs and into the apartment. The door wasn't open, but it wasn't locked. If it had been, I'm sure I'd have simply battered my way through it. Unlocking the door would have required a logical thought and hand-eye coordination that I was not capable of anymore. I barrelled into the kitchen, not bothering to close the front door, or turn on the lights. After all, I wasn't staying and I didn't need lights. The dial on the telephone automatically glows goblin green when you lift the receiver.

I lifted the receiver and called the Jazz Hole. Winston answered after a lot of rings.

"You motherfucking asshole!" I screamed. "You fucking manipulated me, fucking set me up! You tell Santini I'm coming and I ain't reasonable anymore!"

I slammed the phone down. My stomach cramped hard and I leaned over the counter, supporting myself with both hands, head down, breathing heavily through my nose.

The apartment smelled funny. The odor pricked a hole in my rage. I lifted my head. I almost knew, almost remembered. The phone rang. I picked it up. Said nothing.

"Denker. What the fuck, you crazy or shitting what?" Despite his choice of vocabulary, Winston sounded reasonable and even concerned.

"You fucking used me, you cocksucker," I said, not raising my voice either this time. (That smell. What is it?) "My associate, my *friend*, Carlos Santiago, is lying fucking ripped open, fucking dead, out at Holy Shelter Swamp, you piece of lying shit. You, Santini, and St. Pe. I'm coming, Winston. Tell Santini I'm coming. Watch your fucking backs because I am coming."

Cri du Coeur

"Denker, I don't know nothin' about this and it ain't Mr. Santini's way ..."

"Fuck you," I said and hung up.

My stomach cramped again. Hard and hard.

Carlos.

I bent over the sink and vomited bile and old beer. It helped the cramping in my belly, but it didn't do much to mask that smell. (And what the fuck is that smell??)

Next stop, the mantle in the living room over which my PI license used to hang. Where it had been was now a print of old New Orleans, circa 1890, and behind that was a mini safe and in the safe was the .45 I'd used in Vietnam. The .38 I carried was a toy, my PI prop. It had never been blooded. It was strictly for intimidation. The .45 was for stalking St. Pe, hunting Santini, just as I'd used it in Nam, hunting and stalking and killing in the jungle.

And that's when I finally clicked on the smell, which was stronger here in the living room than it'd been in the kitchen. It was the smell of the storeroom at the Jazz Hole. It was the smell of VC tunnels abandoned, but for the dead, and the smell of an overgrown Buddhist temple, the decaying bodies of GI's inside and solitary ghost guarding the entrance. It was the smell of Vietnam and Cambodia. The smell of death and rot and a body breathing corruption.

"Martinique," I said.

"Yes. Dear Martinique," St. Pe said.

Light from my bedroom suddenly flowed into the living room. I turned my head and Martinique was sitting directly in front of me, deeply folded in the shadows of my favorite chair. Her head hung, chin on chest, and her hands lay open, palms up on her lap.

Behind her, posing in the light at my bedroom door, stood St. Pe and in front of him, a child, a boy three, maybe four years old, with deep turquoise eyes, blank as the far depths of the Caribbean seas. Martinique's son. St. Pe had one hand on Christian's head.

"Dearest Martinique," he said, lifting his other hand, fingertips level with his eyes. Those opaline eyes and as they had on the day of Martinique's funeral, they caught me, locked me down physically.

He glided across the room, Christian before him, controlled by St. Pe's touch, as I was controlled by his eyes. He stopped beside Martinique, lifting her head by the hair so I could stare into her face.

She was a week dead and no longer beautiful.

"Why are you doing this in front of her child?" I said. So, so slowly. My mouth was full of syrup. My tongue quickly tired of trying to form the words and stopped.

"The boy is learning," St. Pe said, releasing Martinique's head. It fell forward, her face again hidden in angle and shadow. "For instance, looking at his mother as she is becoming, he learns that death not love, not art, not beauty Death, Death is the ruler of this world."

Cri du Coeur

He guided the child to the loveseat and sat him down facing Martinique. Each movement was slow, fluid, precise, so that he kept my eyes locked to his own and his left hand never lost physical contact with Christian. He controlled us completely. If I could just break eye contact, if I could just blink my eyes, the paralysis would be broken, too. I could jump him, I could save myself and Martinique's son, if I could ... just ... fucking ... blink ...

I couldn't.

"You see how little regard Death has for Martinique's perfection. How quickly He has ravaged her beauty, eating it, absorbing it, and He never returns what he has devoured. One day, far in the future, He will eat the universe itself, leaving only a cold sea of expanding radiation, as we leave crumbs on our plates, Mr. Denker, and then, what will have been the use of all your good intentions, even your good works, even your love? What, when even mankind itself is an undigested memory in the metaphysical belly of Death?"

"Your point?" I pushed out through the syrup.

"That Death is a living, intelligent, but greedy Being." St. Pe smiled and the scars on his face rippled like ice on a frozen star. "Greedy in this case and in this time, though, is good, because Death can be bought. He can be bribed. He is amenable to the exchange of favors."

"Not interested," I mumbled.

(Blink! Blink, damn it, Denker, blink!)

"I recognized you in the cemetery, Mr. Denker. You are an honorable man. You are also a man of power and could be of use to me. I do not wish to harp on the obvious, but when you have become meat for Death's stomach, your honor and your power with the spirits of the dead will end with your life."

"Not. Interested."

(Fight. Fight. Blink! For Christ's sake. For Christian's life. For Carlos and his avenging. Fight him!)

"I have power with Death. I send Him and stop Him, as I please. It was not a stroke which took Evangeline down into His gullet, it was I. It was not Santini using you, it was I. And I can offer to you ... "

The doorbell screeched. I was used to the fucking thing, but St. Pe was not.

He jerked, startled, and his eyes skidded away from mine. Just for a second, but it was long enough for me to run right over him, knocking him to the floor.

Christian, no longer controlled by St. Pe's touch, began screaming.

I kept moving, straight to the door, slamming my hand against the gate-release button.

The kid was pealing screams. Footsteps were pounding on the stairs. I started to turn, to take on St. Pe, and he stuck one of those sacrificial daggers in my back. Down low. It felt like a hot icicle going in. It felt worse coming out. I screamed. Not from pain. >From clean, pure, battle rage. I jerked around and fell on, more than jumped St. Pe, and William burst through the front door, dukes up and wildeyed, but ineffectual in his shock.

St. Pe and I rolled around the floor, both of us trying to get that dagger he'd dropped when I fell on him. William circled around us like an impotent referee. "The knife, the knife," I gasped at him, doing my best to smash St. Pe's face into unrecognizable shit, but it's funny and it's true you really can feel your life running out of your body

Cri du Coeur

with the spilling of your blood. I did keep connecting my fists with his face as we rolled over and over, around and around, but each blow had less force, as if St. Pe had stuck a tap in me, instead of a knife, and was draining all the sap from my limbs.

William scrambled for the knife, got it and recommenced his hovering. The kid screamed on and on, great wails like the sound of suns imploding. I had been on this floor forever with St. Pe. We'd been pummeling each other since the universe began and would continue to do so until it finally died, I thought, somewhere in my rapidly dimming brain, and then St. Pe was suddenly ripped off me and flung over the loveseat.

"About fucking time, William," I groaned, trying to get to my feet.

"I didn't do nothin'," William said, helping me to stand. I managed to lift my head and saw Tim Winston.

"Saved your butt, Denker," he grinned, saluting with his big Sig Sauer. "Say thank you, Dickie."

"I'm not admitting thanks are in order yet," I said, peevishly. Unfairly.

William helped me balance against the front door jamb. "You need 911," he said.

"Get Christian out of here first," I said. "Take him down to my car."

William nodded, moving around St. Pe's apparently unconscious body to pluck the kid off the loveseat. Winston, turning to watch his progress, saw, at last, Martinique.

"Go wait outside with the boy," I told William.

"Like I waited for the taxi. No, sir, I'm calling 911 myself."

"Fine, just don't do it here," I said. "Get yourself and the child out! The storm isn't over yet, William. Leave. Please. Now."

He gave me a look like I was the biggest fool he'd ever met, but he squeezed past me out the door, carrying the boy in his arms.

Winston was on his knees beside Martinique. He brushed her hair back and his face was gentle and soft, looking at her. He spoke low to her, words I could not hear, but I did see the rage and hardness of hate flush his cheeks. St. Pe, counting too much on his alleged friendship with Death, decided this was his opportunity to quit the possum act and get the fuck out.

He came right for me, planning to plow through me like I'd done to him. "Winston!" I cried, and, without turning to look, Winston swung his arm back and fired off three shots.

The first two took St. Pe in the back, throwing him forward into my arms. The third missed him, but hit me in the side. I let go of St. Pe and he fell to the floor with the boneless plopping of a ragdoll.

I looked down at the blood blossom opening on my shirt.

I was bleeding front and back. I was going to die. I had two corpses and a retired hitman who shot blind from the hip in my living room. I didn't know whether to laugh, cry or just howl at the moon along with the sirens I could hear coming up Dauphine and all I could think of was Carlos, his eyes filled with stars and Beanie, waiting for me, eyes filled with tears, and how I had forgotten he was waiting for me on the steps of the Jazz Hole. Carlos

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winked at me, owlishly wise in Death's belly, and I slid down the doorjamb and sat on the floor, drifting into shock because shock is a nice, safe place. No one can reach you there.

Winston strolled over. Kicked St. Pe in the head, then the balls. "Asshole's dead," he said, very satisfied with himself.

"You fuck," I managed. "You shot me, too."

He looked at me. "Jesus, Denker, you're really bleeding."

"Yeah," I said. "Seems so."

The sirens stopped. Police strobes raced across the ceiling. Feet pounded in the courtyard. I motioned for Winston to bend down to me.

"Who were the triggermen on JFK?" I whispered. "I'm dying. You can tell me, Tim."

"You ain't dying," Winston said. He smiled a little.

"You see any loved ones waiting for you over here?" Carlos said. "Except me? Then you're not dying yet."

Strange people were all over me, trying to cut my clothes off, strapping things to me and on me.

"You're going back to the World this time, buddy," the medic said and I could smell mud and blood and cordite on him. Napalm flamed at the edge of the jungle. "You're going home, Marine."

"Where's that?" I asked. "Antarctica?" I was godawful cold.

"Ask me again when you're really dying," Winston said. "I might tell you if I ain't forgot by then, of course. Rest, now. Say goodnight, Dickie."

"Goodnight, Carlos," I said and slipped away.

CARLOS AND MARTINIQUE

I was walking in a forest, the kind they grow in the Pacific Northwest, full of greens and golds, stupendous trees, tiny bright flowers and a cathedral serenity of silence.

I felt good, really good, even though my clothes were bloody and I had not forgotten being shot just a short time before coming out on this walk with Martinique.

"Is Carlos here?" I asked her, tilting my head to admire the way the sunlight drifted down among the tree crowns.

"We'll come on him in a moment," she said. "I wanted this time with you to make a final request." Her speaking voice was lush, as lovely as her singing.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," she said. "We all go home."

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"Stay here," I said. "With us. We died for your secrets. Have the dead no duty to those who finish their unfinished business?"

"You are not dead and will not die. That is why I can make this request of you."

"More unfinished business," I grumped. "Alright. Whatever it is, I'll do my best."

"In my house, in the library, hidden among many books, there is money. Money for my Christian."

"I'll find it," I promised.

"Thank you," she said. Her lips brushed my cheek. I reached for her, but the trees parted and a great light took her.

"Death eats everything but the final light, Dickie. Everything but love," Carlos said. "He may rule the world, but he does not rule here."

"Where are we, Carlo?"

"In an edge-place, Dickie. I've come to say goodbye for now and to remind you not to grieve. Like this light, this forest, love is unending."

"I love you, man," I said.

"I love you. Tell Elanora how much I love her, too, will you?"

"I will."

"So long, Dickie. And remember. When the light come for you, don't be afraid. Embrace it. It comes to take you home."

Again the trees were parted by light and Carlos stood in it. Waving and smiling, he stood in it. And it embraced him.

The light swelled, became too intense, and I closed my eyes.

AFTER

1.

When I opened my eyes again, William was sitting at the foot of my hospital bed, reading a big, beige Bible. I turned my head a little and saw Elanora sitting beside me, holding one of my hands against her cheek. Her eyes were closed, but her lips were moving so I deduced (what a Sherlock Holmes I was!) that she was awake.

"Hey, Ellie," I croaked like a swamp rasper. "Carlos said to tell you how much he loves you."

"Oh God," Elanora gasped and turned on the waterworks at flood level.

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"Praise Jesus," William said and hurried from the room.

"Hey. Hey, Elanora. Stop that," I rasped as loud as I could. "Stop crying. You're scaring me."

"Well, you scared me!" she semi-wailed and kept on crying. She kept a strangler's grip on my hand, too.

William came back, bringing the doctor with him. This doctor, a Ben Casey type who looked like Lauren Hutton, stood beside the bed, scowled at me and snapped, "I am Dr. Timochenko. How do you feel?"

Russian. OK, that explained the scowl, the lack of bedside manner. I hoped the nurse would be friendlier big hooters, California smile and soothing hands friendlier, but then I remembered Elanora crying beside me and felt guilty for my crass chauvinism.

"Guilty," I said and Elanora wept even harder, saying Carlos' name between sobs.

"Mr. Denker, please answer my question," Dr. Timochenko said. "How do you feel physically?"

"I was stabbed in the back and shot in the front and you're asking me how I feel?" I said.

"I am your doctor," she said. No smile. She grabbed my wrist and fingered for a pulse. No friendly hands, either. "Doctors ask patients how they feel. It is a duty. Part of the Hippocratic Oath."

Well, she had me there. She must have been taking lessons in comebacks from Elanora. "Miserable," I said humbly. "I hurt all over. Even the soles of my feet hurt. Even my hair hurts. And I'm dying of thirst."

"That's fine," Timochenko said. "Those are all signs of incipient recovery."

2.

Whatever the shortcomings of her bedside demeanor, Dr. Natalya Timochenko was an excellent physician, probably the only one in New Orleans capable of saving my life, which is my one criteria for a good doc.

Winston's bullet didn't inflict any real damage. It just, as Elanora said, blasted through my lovehandle relieving me of some extra fat I didn't need anyway. But I lost a kidney to St. Pe's dagger and infection set in at the wound site, rapidly becoming systemic and prodigiously ravenous like some bizarre cousin of a flesh-eating bacteria.

Timochenko, being a frustrated research scientist and a pure genius, thank God for me, wasn't about to let an infection carry me off into the light, not with the certainty of an esteemed article in an esteemed medical journal bearing her byline and a portentous title (*Human Feces, Toxic Dihydroxyphenlaline and the Saprotaxins: A Voodoo Cult Poison and Problems of Treatment in a Patient at Louisiana Medical Center New Orleans*) if she could save me.

No one told me I was dying, but no one needed to. I knew because I kept dreaming I was strolling through that green and gold forest. I didn't even have to be asleep to have the dream.

Sometimes, like a thin, almost transparent barrier, the forest would interpose itself between me and the hospital room where Elanora sat in silence beside me and William read his Bible at the foot of my bed. To tell the truth, I preferred the forest to my room where Elanora wept all the time, then pretended she wasn't crying when she saw I was conscious and looking at her.

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Usually I was alone, walking beneath those immense, awesomely lovely trees. Occasionally I saw other people. Once, a little girl in a yellow dress, clutching a yellow stuffed rabbit, ran into the light shouting happily, "Granma, Granma!". Another time I came to a clearing and saw there an old woman being embraced by a handsome boy dressed in WWII flyer's kit. They went into the light together, becoming light themselves. Watching them, I understood what Carlos said to me before going on ahead.

St. Pe saw only the surface of death's relationship with life. He saw what it devoured and did not know that only the mortal is capable of being devoured. He did not know that light and love exist before life and wait to receive us after death.

I could hardly wait to get back to my hospital room so I could tell Elanora. I didn't want her to grieve when I, too, went into the light.

3.

But I did not go (thanks to Dr. Timochenko's massive ego) and the time never seemed right to tell Elanora about the dreams.

A week from that Friday when we were all supposed to have dined in the opulence of Windsor Court surrounded by lavish artwork and the ersatz glow of movie stars, I was allowed to dine on my first 'solid' food Kiwi jello.

By the following Monday, Elanora decided I could have visitors. Beanie was the first she allowed in to see me. He didn't say too much, but he didn't cry at all, and that was a real first for one of our meetings.

Miles O'Brian, who got us into this, did cry. I lied and told him that Carlos' death was nobody's fault and he left, dry-eyed and self-convinced. Why not? Sure, he'd led us to the cliff, but I was the one who yelled BANZAI! and taken the first leap, so why should both of us suffer?

During that second week in the hospital, Tim Winston came to my rescue a second time, thus cementing our less than friendship forever.

"You're lucky I'm a reasonable man," he said grandly, sitting in Elanora's chair, having shooed her from the room by harping on her health and the need for sunshine, a tact I had failed to think of myself. "If I hadn't decided to come over and try reasoning with ya, you'd be one dead frog fuck, Denker."

"I know this," I said. "You've got my undying gratitude and all that, but you aren't getting a dollar of the twenty grand back. I need it to pay my hospital bill."

We grinned at each other. For a Mafia buttonman, retired, he wasn't too slimy.

"Hey!" he said. "You hear what happened to Bobby Boudreaux?"

"What?" I asked, hope springing eternal.

"Fucker got mashed by an RTA bus on Rampart Street and Howard. Deader than fuck. Amazin', huh?"

"Karma," I said. "It's a magnificent thing. What about Pontreaux?"

"Disappeared. Probably got ate by that cocksucker St. Pe."

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"Probably," I agreed. "How's Beanie? He was really quiet when he was up to see me."

"Beanie's doing great for a change and about time the kid had a break, too. He's got a new brother since you saw him."

"Christian?" I didn't know if I should be happy for Martinique's son or horrified. Johnnie Santini wasn't a good father and he sure wasn't a good role model, but, on the other side of the chip, Beanie would smother the boy in love and Santini would never let a material need go unfilled. He was a gangster, but he wasn't a cheap gangster.

"Yep, Christian," Winston said. "Did ya ever see such a beautiful kid, Denker, and he ain't dumb, either. Just turned four and he already reads."

"When did you learn to read, Tim?" I asked innocently.

"Fuck you," he said happily.

I thought of Martinique and Carlos. How I missed Carlos!

"Say," Winston said. "You look kinda down. Anything I can do to sort of cheer you up?"

"Only if you can smuggle some real food and a couple of beers past Elanora."

"No fucking problem," he winked.

Every couple of days after that, Winston showed up bearing goodies and I was thereby rescued from hospital food induced insanity. That's a real psychiatric disorder, you know. A veteran nurse can tell you some juicy horror stories about that at two or three a.m. over a shared beer behind a closed hospital room door.

About a month after I got out of the hospital, Elanora decided I'd been coddled enough and fired the private nurse she'd insisted on, informing me it was time to come back to work.

The first assignment I gave myself was to break into Martinique's house and locate the money I'd dreamed about (or whatever). In the library, taped to the pages of estate quality sets of Dickens, Proust, Hawthorne, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, I found \$210,413.00 in fifties and hundreds.

I took the money to Santini to hold in trust for Christian, refused to tell him where I'd gotten it, and reminded him he still owed me a favor.

"That's right," he said. "Here to collect?"

"No," I said. "Just checking."

Santini laughed. "Check whenever you want. It'll be waiting for you to collect. The only condition I'm putting on it is that it's just for you. It's not to be wasted on a second party."

"It won't be," I said and thought of JFK's assassins. Now there was something I really wanted to know.

4.

On November first, All Saint's Day, I visited my people out at Holy Swamp Cemetery. It's tradition in this part of

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Louisiana, a tradition I'd never before bothered to observe.

I weeded around the Denker family mausoleum, put a fresh coat of whitewash on the walls, cleaned out the grungies accumulated in the carved lettering of the older marble inscriptions, arranged delicate tea roses and gaudy sunflowers in front of my mother's name and, for the first time, talked to my dead as I puttered around with polishing and cleaning.

Finally, I placed, over Carlos' newly carved name, his favorite 3D hologram of a Monarch butterfly and over Martinique's, a cameo photograph of her son. I'd laid them both to sleep in the Denker family crypt.

Carlos' sister, the only member of his family still speaking to him at the time of his death, did not object. She was glad he had somewhere shady to lie, somewhere beautiful. There was no one to object on Martinique's behalf. Christian, when he's grown, may want to move her, and if he does, I won't make a fuss, but until then she'll rest safely between Carlos and my father, one of my people, no longer alone with her secret.

By late afternoon, I'd finished sprucing up the mausoleum and its surrounding grounds. Nearly everyone else who'd come out to do their All Saint's Day duty had already gone, but I didn't feel like leaving yet. I sat on a stone bench overhung by live oaks, face to the sun, feeling husked out, clean, wonderfully warm and peaceful. Smoking a cigarette, watching the Spanish moss sway gracefully like lace curtains in a sedate breeze, I thought of life as something too little appreciated in the rush of living, and then I thought of Elanora.

Carlos had said she loved me. Hell, Carlos had been positive I loved her. I did feel something for her, but was it love, and if it was, was it the right kind of love? The kind a lasting and happy marriage can grow from? I didn't know. I also didn't know if Elanora loved me as anything more than a long-time boss she could manipulate the way a sculptor does wet clay, but in the hospital, when I was dying, she'd sure acted like a woman on the verge of widowhood.

Maybe the thing to do was put Carlos' assertions to the test and maybe the time to do it was now. Neither Elanora nor I was going to get any younger or better looking, after all. Elanora was astride the mid-30's and I was, want to face it or not, pushing hard at the mid-40's.

Maybe, I thought, watching the cemetery darken with the twilight, I'll just drive into Holy Shelter and catch Bubba Charbonnet before he closes up his travel agency for the night and buy us first class tickets to Paris. They say that in April there's no more perfect place to fall in love. Could be that in November, it's the perfect place to find out if you're ready for the altar.

What the hell, I thought, standing and stretching. Why not? Paris in November and St. Petersburg in July. Now that Elanora had her PI license, I'd lost her services as a secretary anyhow.

I picked up my tools and whitewash bucket and truckled them back to the car. I put them in the trunk, wondering how much this trip was going to cost me.

I got in the car and decided not to worry about how much it was going to cost. As I pulled out of the cemetery and onto the road leading into Holy Shelter, my new cellular phone rang sounding a lot like the apartment doorchime. Irritating as hell.

"Richard," Elanora gasped. "Where are you? I've been calling and calling."

"Sorry," I said. "I'm still out at Holy Swamp Cemetery. Elanora, listen. Let's go to Paris. Tomorrow. I'd like a real vacation and Paris has always been your fantasy capital, right?"

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"Not now," Elanora said in that funny gasping voice.

Huh?

"You've got to get back to New Orleans right now," she said. "Tim Winston's been trying to reach you since ten this morning. Johnnie Santini's been arrested for murder."

"So? He's a mob boss. Mob boss's get arrested sometimes. Now, about Paris. I know it's not April, but ..."

"Richard! Shut mouth and open ears. One million dollars. Up front. Win or lose. One. Million. Dollars." I couldn't tell from her gasping and hiccuping if she was laughing or sobbing in her ecstasy.

I made a hasty U-turn and stepped on the gas.

Elanora, who used to be my secretary and who was now my new junior partner, was right.

For a million dollars, even Paris could wait.