



THE
BRIDGE TO
CARACAS

VOLUME ONE OF THE KING TRILOGY

A DOUGLASS CRIME AND ROMANCE THRILLER SERIES
STEPHEN DOUGLASS

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THE BRIDGE TO CARACAS

Volume One of the King Trilogy

Stephen Douglass

This novel is a work of fiction. The characters, names, incidents, dialogue, and plot are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, companies, or events is purely coincidental.

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THE BRIDGE TO CARACAS

VOLUME ONE
OF THE
KING TRILOGY

A STORY OF CONFLICTED, ENDLESS LOVE AND OF A CAYMAN
ISLAND FORTUNE LARGE ENOUGH TO MAKE THE NEW YORK
STATE LOTTERY LOOK LIKE THE CONTENTS OF A SUNDAY
SCHOOL COLLECTION PLATE



STEPHEN DOUGLASS

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To Ann, with a love that comes only once in a lifetime.

FOREWORD

Jim Servito possesses a brilliant criminal mind. Cynical and remorselessly ruthless, he has an enormous contempt for law, police, government, and the system in which they function. Rules are for fools, and Jim takes sadistic pleasure in breaking them.

Karen Taylor is tired of the private school life, the endless doting of her wealthy parents, and the monotony of constant female company at her all-girl school. She wants to experience the real world, preferably on her own, and this drive leads her to a providential and endless love affair with Mike King. However, cruel and unusual fate finds her in a disastrous marriage to Jim Servito.

Mike King has it made. A third generation medical candidate, and a gifted athlete, Mike has a perfect future about to unfold. Then he changes everything. Instead of the career chosen for him, he wants one of his own. After enduring the nightmare of his final night with Karen and disclosing his decision to his parents, he heads for British Columbia. His return a year later leads to a heart breaking reunion with Karen and a perilous confrontation with Servito.

The story you are about read is fiction, but the likelihood of it actually happening is high. During the time-frame of the saga, the conditions were perfect, the opportunities too numerous to mention, and the door was left so wide open it is enough to blow a criminal's mind. Think about it the next time you arrive at a retail gasoline outlet to fill your tank. Do you really know where the gasoline came from? Do you know who delivered it? Are you sure all the relevant taxes are paid? Are you certain the gasoline you're pumping is pure?

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CHAPTER 1

Athens, Greece, Wednesday, May 18, 1963.

“If anyone moves, you will die!” shrieked the hijacker. His shrill declaration resonated through the fuselage of the Boeing 707. The easy conversation of Flight 806 was instantly terminated. Dressed in faded green trousers, a wrinkled white shirt, and scuffed brown side-tie shoes, the man stood in the aisle, staring down the passengers. His wavy black hair and heavily pockmarked face framed two fanatical eyes, which surveyed his prisoners with dart-like precision.

It was the last thing Karen Taylor wanted to hear. She had been enjoying her holiday. It was supposed to be fun. Now, too terrified to move, she slowly shifted her brown eyes to stare at the steel, 45-caliber pistol clutched tightly in the hijacker’s trembling hand. It was mere inches from her head. She slid her gaze to the left, directing a speechless stare at her best friend, Patti Arthur. Patti shook with the same fear.

Most of the passengers aboard Flight 806 were Jewish, carrying either U.S. or Israeli passports. They were escapees from Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and had chosen this particular time to re-visit Germany.

Karen looked past Patti to the window to her left, then beyond, until Patti’s face was a blur. The azure sky was cloudless, the sun glaring down at the hot tarmac. The motionless flags of numerous nations drooped above the terminal building. Thoughts of Mike raced through her head. She desperately wished he was beside her. She remembered the bitter sweetness of their final night together.

“We are The Angels of Freedom!” the hijacker shouted. “We are in complete control of this airplane. We will shoot anyone who moves!” The terrified silence held still until cries and screams erupted at the sound of two shots fired at the front of the airplane. Silence was quickly restored when the man with the pockmarked face fired a shot through the back of an empty seat. “Do not make any more noise or I will shoot to kill!” he warned loudly. “You must all put your passports on the floor in the aisle, immediately!”

The passengers moved slowly to comply with the demand of the terrorist with muffled whispers. Some stood to remove their carry-on luggage from the overhead compartments. When it appeared that all passports had been placed on the aisle floor, the terrorist pointed his pistol at the head of an old man wearing a yarmulke. “You will pick up the passports and bring them to me,” he ordered.

Trembling, the old man pulled himself from his seat. “Put them on the floor at my feet,” the hijacker stipulated. He waited until the old man had knelt to comply, and then struck the side of the old man’s face with his pistol, screeching “Zionist pig!” with a frenzied look in his eye. He snatched the old man’s skull-cap and soaked it in the blood flowing from the fresh wound, and then spit on the cap and threw it to the floor, trampling it beneath his boot.

The blue curtains to first class were flung open by a second terrorist with a thick shock of white hair. Larger and older than his companion, he wore a brown, pinstriped suit with a pale yellow shirt that was open at the neck. In one hand was a pistol, and the passports of the first class passengers were clenched tight in the other. The two terrorists whispered in muffled tones, and then sat on the floor with their backs to one another as they examined the passports.

Karen leaned to her right and stared forward in horror. The captain of the airplane was lying face down on the aisle floor of first class. His arms and legs had been bound with rope, his mouth bound with a red napkin. On the floor of the cockpit lay the lifeless body of the co-pilot. The back of his head rested in a large pool of blood.

At 12:50 p.m., a maintenance crew approached the airplane. The failure of the airplane to move once it had been cleared for takeoff alerted air traffic controllers that something was wrong with Flight 806, and they in turn had contacted Airport Security. A yellow and blue truck raced down the runway in the direction of the stalled aircraft, attracting the attention of numerous passengers on the plane's port side. The older of the two terrorists stood to look, and then dashed to the cockpit and lifted the headset of the co-pilot. "Do not approach this airplane!" he shouted. "All passengers will die if you persist!"

Given this confirmation that Flight 806 had been hijacked, Airport Security radioed the maintenance vehicle and ordered its retreat. Within minutes, numerous two-note sirens could be heard as countless police vehicles converged on the airport.

Throughout the ordeal, Karen and Patti had remained silent and frozen in their seats.

When the terrorists had completed their inspection of the passports, they stood and waved their guns at the passengers. On the floor below them were all but five of the passengers' passports. The younger terrorist held the five passports above his head and shouted the names of the owners, "Malcolm and Mary Christianson. David Alexander. Patti Arthur. Karen Taylor. Those five people will come to me now!" Again, muffled whispers erupted throughout the plane. Several passengers correctly speculated that the Jewish passengers had been segregated. The five whose names had been called were moved to first class, while the seven Jewish passengers in first class were ordered into tourist class.

At 1:15 p.m., the older of the two terrorists again lifted the co-pilot's headset. "We are the Angels of Freedom," he declared. "Please confirm that you can hear me."

"We can hear you," was the reply.

"Ten million American dollars must be brought to this airplane and our flight to Syria must be guaranteed. This must be done by three p.m., or all passengers will die."

"We'll get back to you within an hour."

Before being tied and gagged, the pilot had turned off the airplane's engines to conserve fuel. The heat inside the airplane had swelled and became unbearable. After it became clear that several passengers were in distress, the stewardesses had obtained permission to do whatever they could to comfort them. They had been warned, however, that they would be shot if they tried to do anything else.

Three o'clock passed without a response from the control tower. By four, the terrorists had begun to argue. The younger terrorist paced up and down the aisle while his partner stood at the rear exit, staring through the small window in the door.

With each passing minute, the plane only grew hotter.

Finally, the younger terrorist, his pockmarked face contorted with rage, untied the ropes binding the legs and arms of the pilot. When the pilot flinched in pain, the terrorist slapped his face and swore. He jerked the pilot to his feet and pressed the muzzle of his pistol to the pilot's temple. "In the name of freedom, you will fly the airplane to Syria!" he hissed. "You will do this now, or you will all die!" He poked his gun between the shoulder blades of the pilot and prodded him into the cockpit.

From her window seat, Patti Arthur could see the flashing red, blue, and yellow lights of numerous approaching vehicles. Then she heard the familiar whine of the airplane's engines as they roared to life. The plane shifted and started to glide forward. Then Patti's head was pressed against the seat back as they accelerated and lifted from the tarmac. The reflection of the setting sun glimmered on the waves of the Mediterranean Sea, a thousand feet below. A deafening silence filled the airplane as its passengers struggled to contain their panic.

The Boeing 707 landed at an abandoned military base located almost a hundred miles from Damascus. The older terrorist quickly opened the front door, allowing a welcome rush of fresh, cool evening air into the passenger compartment. He turned and waved his pistol at the five passengers in first class. "Come with me now!" he demanded, beckoning with his left arm. "Get up! We must go now!" he yelled, and then ushered the five passengers from the plane and into the rear section of a waiting truck.

After waiting in silence for less than a minute, they were joined by the younger terrorist. He jumped head first through the opening in the back of the truck. "Go now!" he screamed. The truck raced down the runway away from the airplane. Karen looked back at the darkened silhouette of the airplane, its lights on and its engines idling on the primitive empty air strip, feeling as though her fear would choke her.

A brilliant white light lit up the night sky and a thunderous explosion shook the truck. A ball of fire rose billowing from the spot where the airplane had come to rest.

Karen and Patti trembled in silence as a cold, nauseating sweat bathed their bodies. The passengers and crew had still been aboard.

CHAPTER 2

Mike King'd had it made. A third generation medical candidate, he had been voted, almost unanimously, as most likely to succeed. His near-perfect smile, robin's egg-blue eyes, blond, wavy hair, and tall, athletic frame had qualified him as campus heartthrob. He played first line center for the Meds' inter-faculty hockey team and played bridge on Saturday nights, while managing to maintain a satisfactory academic performance. He, like his father before him and his grandfather before that, was going to be a doctor. There was never any question about it.

Then, like the first snows of winter, everything changed.

His decision appeared sudden, but in reality was the culmination of months of growing discontent. He first refused to write his final exams, and became a de facto dropout. Then he disclosed his decision to his parents and, after a bitter-sweet last night with Karen, left Toronto for good.

For six cold and lonely months he worked on board a filthy fishing vessel off the coast of British Columbia. The sabbatical at sea afforded him the opportunity to reflect on his past and ponder his future. He was delighted by the freedom and sense of independence the life afforded him, but the isolated existence eventually began to wear, and he knew that a fishing career was not his destiny. He slouched over the starboard railing and covered his face with his hands. "What the hell am I doing here?" he shouted into his unyielding palms.

A light rain fell on Mike's dilapidated green Chevrolet when it arrived at the customs checkpoint on the Canadian side of the Ambassador Bridge.

Delighted that his car had survived the journey to his home country, he savored the last bite of a chocolate bar while he relaxed and waited. He glanced down at the stained and wrinkled T-shirt and blue jeans he had been wearing for the past three days. The dark blue Lincoln in front of his car at last moved forward, allowing Mike's car to pull up to the kiosk. He stopped and rolled his window down, looking apprehensively up at the man behind the customs checkpoint.

A middle-aged customs officer gave him a bored glare. He was dressed in the sinister gray uniform of all customs officials who spent each day questioning thousands of traveling motorists. His primary function was to identify smugglers, and he could always tell when someone was lying. He could see it in the eyes. "Where were you born?" the officer asked in a deliberate, icy monotone, continuing his relentless stare.

"Toronto, Ontario," Mike answered. Even though he had nothing to hide but the expired license plates on his car, he experienced an immediate sensation of guilt.

"What is your citizenship?"

"Canadian."

"How long have you been out of the country?"

"Four months."

"What was the purpose of your visit to the United States?"

"Pleasure."

"Do you have anything to declare?"

"No sir."

The customs officer scanned the rear seat area of Mike's car, and then his lips quirked into a microscopic smile. He waved his hand. "Welcome back," he conceded, his eyes sliding over toward the car behind Mike's.

Mike moved his car forward and rolled up his window. The exhilaration of being in his home country for the first time in four months overwhelmed him. He accelerated to the speed limit and squinted slightly to focus through the downpour that splattered on his windshield.

The rain subsided within five minutes, allowing him to relax and again turn his thoughts to home. He thought of Karen—he'd missed her

desperately. Where was she now?

When they'd met, Karen was in a league of her own. Her smile was intoxicating, her raven-haired beauty easily matched by a sharp intelligence and infectious humor. It only took one look to know that you wanted her, and Mike's attraction to her was absolute, the kind most men experience only once in a lifetime.

They'd met when she leased an apartment on Toronto's St. George Street, directly across from Mike's fraternity house. They quickly became inseparable, until his desire to be with her usurped priority over his studies... and her desire for him began to affect her job as a stewardess. Their torrid relationship was only part the reason Mike had lost interest in his studies, however. It was the first time he realized he really didn't want to become a doctor. Instead of thinking about his future as the terms his parents had prescribed for him, he began to focus on his personal satisfaction. It was becoming more and more clear that he would be miserably unhappy unless he followed his own instincts.

One Sunday afternoon in April of that year, Karen had convinced him to go for a walk. It was finally warm enough to shed their winter coats, and the two walked for a while in silence, enjoying the gentle glow of sun against their skin.

Eventually, Karen stopped and pretended to stare at the reflection of the late afternoon sun in the windows of the Texaco Building, which was then one of Bloor Street's tallest structures.

Mike used both hands to straighten his tousled blond hair and frowned. "What are you staring at?"

Karen turned to glare at him. "I've had all I can take, King!" she retorted, eyebrows furrowed.

"All you can take of what?"

"I'm sick of your brooding," she responded, squeezing his hand. "It's obvious something's bugging you, and the longer you hold it inside, the more damage it's going to do. You've got to talk about it."

"Talk about what?" Mike glowered, daring her to discuss the topic he'd been so blatantly ignoring.

“Medicine. It’s obvious you’re unhappy with it. Spit it out. I promise—it’ll be therapeutic.”

Mike chuckled. “You’re beautiful. I think you’d make a much better doctor than me.”

“Talk!” Karen insisted, poking Mike’s ribs.

Mike raised his hands in surrender. “Okay... I don’t know... I’m confused. Or maybe I’m disillusioned,” he admitted. He felt an immediate and pleasant surge of relief. “I want out, Babe. I hate leaving university, but I hate medicine even more.”

“So get out of medicine! But that doesn’t mean you have to leave school. Just take a different course or something.”

Mike shook his head. “I don’t have the slightest idea where I belong. What’s the point in studying something if I find out it’s wrong for me in another two years? What then—skip on to a different subject? I think I’d be better off doing nothing,” he said, wrapping his arms around her as if a strong force was pulling her away. “I’m going to quit,” he said with firm conviction. “I’m just not prepared to spend the rest of my life living someone else’s dream.”

Karen snapped her head back and fixed her eyes on Mike’s. “What are you going to do?”

“Travel. I’m going to stay out of school until I know where the hell I should go next.”

“Then I’m going with you,” she insisted.

“It wouldn’t work. You know I want to be with you every waking minute, Karen, but I’ve got to get my priorities straight. I’ve got to clear my head.”

“I thought I was one of your priorities.”

“You are, but what do I have to offer you, other than a lot of maybes?”

Tears had appeared in Karen’s eyes. “You can’t just walk out on this thing, King,” she protested. “You’re in far too deep.”

Mike wiped her tears with his fingers. “I have to,” he’d said.

As if arranged by the perversity of fate, Jim Servito was also crossing the border into Canada on the same day of Mike's triumphant return. But there were no customs inspectors to greet the twenty-two year old draft dodger when the boxcar he occupied raced northward across the invisible line separating Montana and Saskatchewan. The wind whipped his coal black hair and watered his eyes as he leaned out to scan the flat terrain. He had sharp features, as austere as granite and marred by the scars of his tough years. His steel gray eyes showed deep bitterness and his thick black eyebrows glowered like storm clouds above.

He flicked his draft card into the wind, and then raised his right hand in mock salute. "God bless America!" he shouted, his sharp lips forming a cynical smirk.

CHAPTER 3

The skies had cleared and the sun shone brightly when Mike reached the outskirts of Oakville. While his car raced eastward, his mind once again drifted back, this time to a conversation he'd had four months earlier.

After quitting his job on the fishing vessel, he had traveled directly to Vancouver. There, he visited Doug McAllister, an old friend of his father's and the general manager of Canam Petroleum Limited's Western Canadian marketing department. Canam was one of the largest oil companies in the world.

McAllister, balding and in his late forties, sat in the large, brown leather chair behind his desk and was dressed in a tailored blue suit. He exuded corporate perfection. "Have a seat and tell me about yourself," he'd said, pointing to the chairs on the opposite side of his desk. "Before you begin, I should tell you that I've been expecting you."

"How did you know I was coming?" Mike blurted.

"Your father wrote to me over three months ago. He said you might come to see me."

"Did he tell you why?"

McAllister nodded. "He said you had lost interest in pursuing a medical career. He also mentioned that you had decided to quit school, and to stay out until you knew what you wanted to do with the rest of your life."

Mike had nodded. "That's pretty much the whole story."

"I hope you'll eventually return to university. I think it's extremely important. Without a degree, your chances of significant advancement in any pursuit will be limited, at best."

“I probably will, but I still haven’t decided what to study or where to study it. Dad told me you might be able to shed some light on that.”

McAllister displayed a sympathetic grin. “I hear you. I had the same problem when I was your age. The choice must be yours, of course. You’ll never be completely committed unless you make it yourself.”

“Any suggestions?”

McAllister had given Mike an idea that would change his life. “Get an engineering degree.” He steepled his fingers. “If you do, I can arrange for you to work in the most exciting and fascinating business in the world. I doubt you’ll ever find a career more exciting than one in the oil business.”

Mike was jolted from his musing by the loud horn blast of an eighteen-wheeler that had come up behind him.

Thirty minutes later, he arrived at his parents’ home in Oakville. The door was opened by Mike’s very surprised mother, who was a tall and attractive woman to whom age had done no harm. She stared at her son in disbelief, and then a happy grin appeared. “You should have told me you were coming home. I would have killed the fattest calf.”

Mike stepped forward and hugged her. “It’s good to see you again, Mom,” he said. “How are you?”

“I’m fine and I missed you. Too much,” Mike’s mother replied. She snapped her head backward and stared at Mike’s face. “You haven’t shaved,” she scolded.

Mike smiled and kissed her on the cheek. “I promise I will. As soon as I’ve had something to eat,” he added.

“Well then you’d better come with me to the kitchen, young man,” she ordered, grasping his hand. “I’m going to feed you and ask you a million questions.”

She pulled ham, Swiss, and bread from the fridge and began to lay out two sandwiches while Mike scuffed his feet against the kitchen tile.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do with the rest of your life?”

Mike nodded. “I’m going back to school in September... for chemical engineering.”

“Why engineering?”

“I had a long conversation with Doug McAllister when I was in Vancouver. I’m not sure he realized it at the time, but he did me a favor. He gave me a focus.”

“Are you saying that medicine is out of the question?”

Mike nodded, his eyes showing remorse. “I only hope you and dad will understand.”

Mike’s mother smiled and placed her hands on his shoulders. “It’s okay. Your father and I have learned to live with your decision. I think your father understands how difficult it was for you.”

“Someday I’m going to justify it to both of you, in a very tangible way.”

“I’m sure you will,” she said, and then changed the subject. “Do you have any idea why Karen Taylor’s mother would have called here?”

“When did she call?” Mike asked, his heart pounding.

“Yesterday. She sounded very anxious to talk to you.”

Mike was torn between a happy reunion with his mother and a gripping curiosity. “Would you mind, Mom?”

“Go,” she ordered, pointing to the telephone on the kitchen wall.

Mike jumped to his feet and hurried to the telephone. He dialed Karen’s home number as fast as he could. “May I speak to Mrs. Taylor, please?” he asked.

“Speaking.”

“Mrs. Taylor, it’s Mike King. I understand you called here yesterday.

“I did, and thank you for calling, Mike,” Mrs. Taylor said. “Are you in Toronto?”

“I’m at my parents’ home in Oakville.”

“Could you come here as soon as it’s convenient? There’s something I must tell you. It would be best if I told you in person.”

“I’ll be there in an hour,” Mike said. He hung up and turned to face his mother. “I’m going to Toronto, Mom. I’m so sorry.”

She displayed an understanding smile and pointed to the door. “Just get your ass back here as soon as you can.”

Mike's Chevrolet trundled up to the large iron gates straddling the entrance to Karen's parents' house, which was located in the exclusive Rosedale area of Toronto. His heart pounded as he rang the doorbell. A deep foreboding gripped him as the heavy oak door opened.

An elderly maid dressed in a light blue uniform led Mike to the large, maple-paneled study. "Mrs. Taylor will join you shortly," she said without expression.

Mike paced and waited.

Karen's mother entered, extending her right hand as she approached. In her early fifties, she was still attractive and showed an amazing resemblance to Karen. Her flowing gray hair was swept back and fastened at the back of her head with a black velvet ribbon. She wore a black dress. Her eyes showed pain. "Hello, Mike. I'm Jean Taylor... it was good of you to come." She pointed to a red leather couch to her left. "Please come and sit with me."

Once they were seated, Mrs. Taylor turned to face Mike. "A little over a month ago, Karen went to Europe with her friend, Patti Arthur—did you know Patti?"

Mike shook his head. "Karen talked about her occasionally, but we never met."

"We were able to track Karen's travels because she wrote often." A hint of a smile appeared. "Your name appeared in all of her letters. She didn't hide the fact that you're very important to her." Tears began to stream down her cheeks. She removed a white handkerchief from the pocket of her dress. After wiping her eyes, she looked away.

"Is something wrong?" Mike asked.

"Karen is dead," Mrs. Taylor replied, her voice breaking.

"No!" Mike shouted, sickened and stunned. He closed his eyes tightly.

"The plane they were on was about to take off from Athens when it was hijacked by terrorists. When the terrorists didn't get what they demanded, they forced the pilot to fly the plane to Syria and... they blew up the plane with everyone on board."

"What? No..." Mike whispered.

Karen's mother nodded. "There were no survivors. The Greek authorities have confirmed that both Karen and Patti were passengers."

Mike sat rigid and motionless for a moment. Then he moved closer to Karen's mother and hugged her. He wept while memories of Karen flashed through him. When the ultimate reality of the news began to sink in, he began to blame himself. Karen would still be alive if he had taken her to Vancouver with him.

Karen's mother interrupted his thoughts. "I have something for you." She walked to a large desk near the couch, opened the middle drawer, and removed an unopened letter. "Karen sent this here because she didn't know where to reach you." She handed the letter to Mike.

Mike stared at the letter. "Would you like me to read it to you?"

"I would like that very much."

Mike opened the letter and began to read.

Dear Mike,

The very first thing I want you to know is that I still love you. I always will.

When you read this letter, you will learn that I really did go to Europe. Patti Arthur and I left Toronto on May 10. We spent the first week in England. Even though it rained every day, we had a blast. Now that we're in Italy, I can appreciate how much easier it is to be in a country where people speak English. It takes so much longer to communicate. Italy is an incredibly beautiful country, however. I wish you could be here to see Rome with me. In fact, I think you and I should live here. It's absolutely the most romantic place I've ever seen.

You have left an enormous gap in my life. I ache to be with you again. Now that you are no longer that wonderful emotional and physical part of my daily existence, my job, my apartment, and Toronto have lost all of the excitement they once had. I miss you desperately. So many times I wanted to pack my bags and follow you west. Each time, however, I remembered our last night

together and how important it was to you that you go alone. Now that I've had time to reflect on your decision, I applaud it, but I still don't like it.

I sincerely hope you find the future you're looking for, and hope that whatever it is, it still includes me. I can't wait for the day when we never have to say good-bye to each other again.

With all my love forever,
Karen

Mike's eyes filled with tears. He had dreamed of one day reuniting with Karen, too. Now that dream was shattered.

Karen's mother's covered her face.

Mike summoned every ounce of mental strength to put aside his own grief. The reading of Karen's letter had devastated Mrs. Taylor. He sat beside her and put his arms around her once again. "How could someone so young and so innocent be taken so senselessly from this world?" he asked aloud, startled by a sudden rush of anger.

CHAPTER 4

After a brief and uncomfortable layover in a sleazy Regina motel, Servito raised his thumb on the Trans-Canada Highway and hitchhiked to Toronto. Even though his pockets bulged with wads of stolen and untaxed cash, he immediately commenced a search for an opportunity to make real money. Pumping gasoline at a Canam service station in the core of the city was not exactly what he had envisioned, but it was a start.

The aging and trusting owner of the station, Pop Williams, liked Servito. He allowed him to live in the bedroom at the rear of his office and was pleased to teach him the honest rules of the gasoline game.

Mike's deep sleep was brutally terminated by his mother when she shouted, "It's for you, Mike!"

He slowly lifted himself from his bed and struggled to the telephone in his parents' bedroom. "Hello," he groaned.

"I hope I didn't wake you up," Paul Sanderson said. Paul was one of Mike's fraternity brothers and his former roommate. They were still close friends. The two had played many all-night bridge games and consumed far too much beer together.

"It's time I got up anyway," Mike replied with a wide yawn. "How are you, Paul?"

"Almost insane. I'm twenty-five, still in meds, and working my ass off. If I play my cards right, I might make my first honest buck by the time I'm thirty." He groaned. "How are you?"

"Fine and not the slightest bit envious."

“You always did have a way with words, King.” Mike could hear the smile in his friend’s voice. “The reason I called is to invite you to a cocktail and dinner party at The Dominion Club next Friday night. For you, I have two tickets and a blind date.”

“Who is she, Paul?” Mike asked with extreme trepidation.

“Her name is Barbara Larkin. She’s beautiful and you won’t be disappointed.”

“How beautiful?” he mumbled.

“Ten, without even trying”

“Paul, I...” Mike’s return to the University of Toronto had changed his attitude toward study and commitment. He had purposefully avoided social functions, particularly the frivolity of weekend parties, which had previously been a standard feature. His focus and determination were therapeutic, sparing him from the despair and loneliness that had threatened to consume him in the months following the loss of Karen. “I thought the Dominion club didn’t allow women?”

“Well they are making a special exception, Mike. You won’t believe the guest speaker.”

“Who?” Mike asked.

“Jack.”

Mike racked his brain for a moment.

“Miller?” he guessed, pulling from a mental roster of their fraternity brothers.

“Kennedy.”

Mike was suddenly wide awake. “How the hell did you get tickets?”

“Relative ability. Amazing things happen when your father’s the Ambassador to the United States. I should also mention that this is a \$500 a plate dinner.”

“So the evening’s going to cost me a grand?”

“Not a dime. The tickets are free.”

Mike chuckled. “The ever-so-sweet talking Sanderson. You’re very persuasive, as usual.”

“Then you’re in?”

“Sure.” How could he miss an opportunity to hear and see John F. Kennedy in person?

“Great! See you at the front door of the Dominion Club next Friday. Cocktails are at five and dinner’s at six. It’s black tie, if you can find one.”

Mike hung up with care. Then he paused, wondering what it would be like to be with a girl who was not Karen.

CHAPTER 5

After paying ransom to the parking lot attendant, Mike walked eight blocks to The Dominion Club, a men's business and social organization with members among Canada's most important business leaders. Their building was a venerable old stone structure on University Avenue, near the heart of Toronto's financial district. To honor the visit from President Kennedy and his wife, numerous Canadian and United States' flags adorned the front wall of the building. Police were everywhere. A large contingent of Royal Canadian Mounted Police was positioned at both sides of the entrance to the building, each guard dressed in the red tunic and broad-brimmed hats of antiquity.

Mike met Paul Sanderson, Paul's wife, Florence, and Barbara Larkin outside the opened front doors. Mike realized that Sanderson's assessment had been very accurate—he was not at all disappointed with Barbara Larkin. She was beautiful, tall, and slender with long, flowing blond hair and intoxicating blue eyes. She wore a tight, black satin evening dress with a very low cut neckline. Three elegant strands of small white pearls adorned her lightly freckled neck.

The four entered the building and proceeded directly to the Dominion Club's ballroom, where the cocktail party was already well advanced. Mike scanned the room for the Kennedys, and then turned to Barbara. "Would you like a drink?" he asked.

"Sure. White wine, please."

Minutes later, Mike returned from the bar with wine for Barbara and scotch for himself. "It was courageous of you to accept a blind date," he

said, handing her the wine and trying avidly not to stare at her perfectly proportioned breasts.

“Thank you,” Barbara said with a smile. “Although it wasn’t the slightest bit courageous.”

“Why?”

“Well, Paul told me the Kennedys would be here.”

“Oh,” Mike said, trying hard to remember that he had approached the night in much the same way.

Barbara winked, showing a wry smile. “I hoped for the best.”

Mike changed the subject. “Does Jack Kennedy appeal to you as a man, or a politician?”

“Both,” Barbara replied. She leaned toward Mike and kissed him on the cheek. “You appeal to me far more than Jack Kennedy.” She smirked as she watched him struggle for an appropriate response, and then grasped his hand. “I think we should join Paul and Florence. Everyone’s moving to the tables. We can continue this conversation later on.”

“I can’t wait,” Mike replied.

Everyone stood and clapped as a kilt clad bagpiper led the Kennedys to their seats at the head table. The audience remained standing as a band, consisting of twenty members of the armed forces of both countries, played “The Star Spangled Banner,” followed by “O Canada.”

After being introduced by Peter Carie, America’s Ambassador to Canada, John Kennedy spoke of the wonderful history of peace and friendship that had existed between Canada and the United States for well over a century, of how the two countries shared a common boundary over five thousand miles and, in addition, a common heritage. Mike listened in sadness when Kennedy spoke of the growing violence of terrorist activity around the world and the need to be on guard and to strive to suppress it. Kennedy concluded his speech by showing the audience a book given to him by Lester Pearson, Prime Minister of Canada. “*Between Friends* is an extremely thoughtful and appropriate title. I shall treasure it forever,” he declared, and then displayed the irresistible Kennedy smile. “Jackie and I

wish to thank you all, and indeed all Canadians, for your warm hospitality, and for the opportunity to visit your wonderful country.”

The audience responded with a loud, standing ovation.

Later that night, Mike and Barbara stalled in Mike’s car as it idled in front of Barbara’s Spadina Avenue home, a three bedroom apartment she shared with two other girls. While blissfully oblivious to the passing of time, Mike struggled to suppress his re-stimulated hormones. Their conversation covered a wide range of topics, including Karen. He told her the whole story, and then how it ended.

“I’m so sorry... you obviously loved her very much,” Barbara said, her blue eyes displaying unalloyed sympathy.

Mike nodded, intoxicated by her eyes. “I did, but that was in the past... I have to go on.”

Barbara glanced at her watch. “I can’t believe it,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s twelve-thirty.”

“Is there something significant about that time?” Mike asked, disappointed that his surprisingly enjoyable evening was about to end.

“I have to work tomorrow.”

“Oh? What do you do for work?”

“My father’s in the construction business and my job is to help him stay in it.”

“Then I guess the party’s over,” he said with downcast eyes.

Barbara looked into Mike’s eyes and grasped his hand. “I want to see you again, Mike.”

“You will, very soon,” he promised, and then kissed her for the first time. She did not resist.

Mike and Barbara did see one another again, very soon, and often. He became very fond of her, but it was impossible for him to think of his feelings for her in terms of love. Perhaps it was love, but it was certainly

not what he remembered feeling with Karen. The intensity of that lost love was engraved in his heart, and no one else would ever quite fit.

Still, he came to care for Barbara, and she seemed like a perfect choice. Fiercely denying recurrent worries that he was acting on the rebound, Mike married Barbara in the chapel at Knox College at the University of Toronto. The ceremony was held on a cool, cloudy day in May of 1964. Only Mike and Barbara's parents and Paul and Florence Sanderson attended.

After a weekend honeymoon on Mackinac Island in Michigan, the happy couple hurried back to Toronto and their tiny one bedroom apartment on St. George Street. Mike resumed his summer job at Molson's Brewery and Barbara returned to work in her father's company.

CHAPTER 6

June 17, 1964. 3 p.m.

A large black Lincoln glided to a stop beside one of Pop Williams's gasoline pumps. The driver rolled his window down and leaned out. "Hey!" he shouted. "You gotta minute?"

Servito glanced at his visitor, and then turned away. "Nope, I'm busy," he replied.

"Then I'll assume you're not interested in making a lot of money."

Servito turned and glared at the driver, his deep-socketed gray eyes wary but interested. He pointed in the direction of the building. "Join me in there."

The large man hoisted himself from his car and waddled to the office. He wore a loose fitting, shiny black suit and matching tie, topped with a thick mane of brown, unruly hair. His shoes were enormous. "My name is Jerry Allison," he said, removing his sun-glasses with a smile and extending his beefy right hand.

Servito stared at Allison's humongous palm. "Tell me how you can make me a lot of money," he demanded.

Allison sat on Pop Williams's gray metal desk, his fat buttocks depressing the surface. "Okay. I'll get right to the point," he said with a dimpled grin. "I can supply gasoline to your station at a price that'll blow your mind."

"How do you know this is my station and how do you know what blows my mind?"

"I know you don't make nine cents a gallon."

“Who the hell does?”

“My customers.”

Servito was impressed, but still skeptical. A profit of nine cents a gallon was far more than Pop Williams had ever seen. “How can you supply me when I’m under contract to Canam Oil?” he asked. He didn’t own the station—sure—but Pop had told him enough about it to make it seem as though he did.

Allison chuckled. “You ever heard of the midnight express?” he asked, flashing a devilish smile.

“Nope. What the hell is the midnight express?” Servito demanded.

“Bootleg gas. We’ll bring gasoline in here after midnight and drop it into your tanks. If we do it right, Canam will never know. You pay the driver in cash and get a new life. What do you think of that?”

“How do I know it’s good gasoline?”

“You don’t, and you never will unless you try it.”

Servito stared out the window. He needed time to consider Allison’s proposal and to contemplate how he could take advantage of it. Nine cents a gallon was an absolutely obscene profit. If he presented the idea to Pop Williams, he risked blowing the whole opportunity and losing his job. The old man was far too honest—there was no way he would risk double crossing his relationship with Canam. “I like it,” Servito said with a hint of a nod.

Allison jumped to his feet and rushed to shake Servito’s hand with both of his own. “Then we have a deal. My driver will be here between midnight and three. He’ll drop six thousand regular and fifteen hundred premium. It’ll cost you two grand, cash up front.”

Servito completed a quick calculation on the back of an envelope, and then smiled. It would mean a difference of almost four hundred dollars per truck load. Blood rushed to his head when he mentally calculated how much he could make in a year if he dealt exclusively with Allison.

“See you tonight,” Allison said, and then turned to leave.

Servito frowned. “Wait a minute. How the hell am I going to convince Canam I’m not buying boot-leg gas? They read my pumps every time they

deliver.”

Allison rolled his eyes and chuckled. “You really are a rookie. I thought you knew the game when I drove in here. Let’s go outside. I’ll show you how we solve that little problem.” After leading Servito to the nearest of Williams’s six gasoline pumps, Allison pointed to the glass panel covering the meters. He lowered his finger to the stainless steel panel below. “Take those panels off,” he ordered.

Servito lifted the keys from his pocket, unlocked the panels, and quickly removed them.

Allison pointed to a pipe extending upward from the ground and connecting to the pump. “See that pipe?” he asked.

Servito nodded.

“The pump draws the gasoline from the storage tank, up through that pipe, through the meters and into the customers’ cars.” Allison removed a small screwdriver from his pocket and used it to remove the white metal facing, which obscured a full view of the meters. “Those meters just measure how much gasoline went through. The flow of gasoline through the meters activates an impeller, which activates the volume, dollar, and cents wheels. But you can roll the wheels backwards. The next guy who reads the meters won’t have the slightest idea you moved an extra seventy-five hundred gallons through them.”

“How do you roll the wheels?”

“First you have to break the seal,” Allison said. He showed Servito how to break the lead seal installed by the Department of Weights and Measures. “Then you have to make the seal look like it was never broken.” Allison carefully reinstalled the seal in such a way as to make it appear unbroken. He turned to face Servito. “Do we still have a deal?” he asked.

Servito was amazed. He could move gasoline through the pumps without the Canam driver ever knowing and, if he was careful, he could even do it without Pop Williams ever knowing. “Let’s do it,” he said, flashing a conniving smirk at Allison.

Servito’s criminal mind was in overdrive. The menial job he had taken as a means of survival had led him to the threshold of a beautiful scam. Pumping gasoline was far from the career he had planned, but his meeting

with Allison had brought a whole new light to his prospects. His mind zoomed to the future. If he owned Pop Williams's station, he could make a lot of money by eliminating the Canam supply agreement and buying his gasoline from independent sources. As an independent retailer, he could control the street price and increase the volume with aggressive discounting. If he owned more than one station, the possibilities were limitless.

CHAPTER 7

Mike jerked the telephone to his ear. “Hello?”

“Mike, I’m sorry I won’t be able to join you for dinner.” It was Barbara. “Dad’s sequestered me until nine, at the earliest.”

“You lose, Barb. I’ve got the biggest, thickest pizza you ever saw.”

“Damn! Will you save me some?”

“Sure. See you later,” Mike said.

He glanced at the evening newspaper and his jaw dropped as he focused on the front page. There before him were the pictures and names of the five people who had been spared from the tragic explosion that had allegedly killed all passengers aboard Olympic Airways Flight 806. Karen’s plane. The story confirmed that all five had been held as political prisoners in Syria. Informed sources speculated that the information had not been disclosed to the world pending a resolution of differences between the Palestinian terrorist organization Angels of Freedom and the Syrian government. “One of the five survivors was Karen Taylor, of Toronto, Canada, daughter of wealthy industrialist George Taylor.”

Mike was stunned. Over and over again the pictures shot through his brain like an electric shock. “She’s alive!” he shouted.

He raced to the telephone, his fingers trembling as he dialed Karen’s home number. “It’s Mike King calling, Mrs. Taylor. I had to call. I just read the—”

“It’s true, Mike. She’s alive.”

“Do you know how she is?”

“No. The Canadian government contacted us this morning and advised us that a British Air Force plane will fly her to London today. She’ll be placed in a hospital there for observation. Karen’s father and I are flying to London tomorrow morning. Is there something you would like us to say to her?”

Mike was temporarily speechless. He wanted to tell Jean Taylor how much he loved and missed Karen. This was the one thing he could have ever hoped for, and yet he never believed it was possible. He felt a sudden choke in his throat as he remembered Barbara.

“No thank you,” he said instead. “I think it would be better if I told her in person. When do you expect to be able to return her to Canada?”

“If there are no complications, I expect we’ll be here by Monday morning.”

When Barbara returned to the apartment, Mike rushed to greet her. He hugged and kissed her with aggression, hating himself for his feeble attempt to justify his decision to marry her. “Something incredible has happened, Barb. I... do you have a few minutes?”

“I don’t want to hear it if it’s bad news. I’m on a high and I want to stay there.”

“It’s not bad news,” he insisted, although he was fully aware that she might take it badly.

She grinned. “Then what is it?”

“Karen Taylor’s alive.”

Barbara’s complexion was suddenly ashen. “How do you know?” she whispered.

Mike pointed to the newspaper on the coffee table. “She was taken off the airplane before it blew up. The story’s right there on the front page.”

Barbara glanced at the paper and then stared into Mike’s eyes, her face pained. “Does this... change anything?” she asked.

“I won’t let it,” Mike promised, shaking his head. “I also won’t lie to you. I won’t try to deny that the news affected me... I don’t think it’s possible for a caring human being to turn emotions on and off like a light switch. I loved Karen, but that was in the past. You’re my wife, and I have no intention of ever changing that.”

CHAPTER 8

Allison's red and yellow striped tractor-trailer arrived at Pop Williams's station at 2:45 a.m. It parked parallel to the fill-pipes of the gasoline storage tanks. Allison climbed from the cab of the tractor and slammed the door behind him, having replaced his wrinkled black suit with tight green trousers and an under-sized, matching green jacket. "Sorry I'm late. I had a few traffic problems," he explained, looking entirely too much like an overstuffed sausage as he waddled toward Servito.

"Just hurry up and drop the gasoline," Servito growled.

"You got the cash?"

"Just drop the fucking gasoline, Jerry! I'll give you the cash when you're finished," Servito shouted.

Allison shook his huge head, his thatch of brown hair flying in the wind. "That isn't going to happen. Once I drop that gasoline, it's a son of a bitch to get it out. Then if I find out you don't have the cash, we've both got big problems."

"How do *I* know you've got seventy-five hundred gallons on that truck?"

"Climb up and check it out," Allison suggested, pointing to the top of the truck. "The trailer has five compartments. All you have to do is lift the manhole cover on each and look inside. You'll see that each one's filled to a government-regulated brass finger." He removed a flashlight from the cab of the truck and handed it to Servito. "Here. You can use this."

Servito climbed the metal ladder at the rear of the trailer and carefully examined each compartment. As Allison had promised, each was filled with gasoline to the level of the brass finger. Servito returned to the ground. "Get

your hoses hooked up,” he said as he marched toward the office. “I’ll get the cash.”

Servito had swiped two thousand dollars from Williams’s cash register, planning to replace the money with first receipts from the sale of Allison’s gasoline. “Here’s your bread,” he said, handing a large brown paper bag to Allison.

Allison snatched the bag and looked inside. “Jesus!” he hissed, glaring at Servito.

“What’s the problem?”

“How the hell did you expect me to count it? I’ll be here all night!”

Servito flashed a devilish smirk. “You said you wanted two thousand cash. That’s it. Where did you think I’d get the money? I pulled it from the register. If I take all those small bills to the bank and ask for large ones, somebody’s going to ask questions.”

Allison crumpled the bag from the top, and then pointed an angry index finger at Servito. “I’m going to count it later, kid. If there isn’t two grand in this bag, I’m going to come back here and break your knee-caps.” He hurled the bag through the opened window of his truck.

Karen stared in silence at the window of an airport limousine as it glided southward on Avenue Road. Jean Taylor placed her hand on top of Karen’s. “You’re so quiet, dear,” she implored.

Karen gave her mother an expressionless glance, and then turned away and shook her head. “It’s over, Mom. I just want to forget it. Those bastards stole sixteen months of my life, and there’s no way I’ll ever get them back.”

“What are you going to do now? Have you thought about that?”

Karen again turned to face her mother, her brown eyes showing a burning resolve. “I’m going to find Mike and spend the rest of my life with him. He’s all I could think of while I was in that hellhole. I’d be absolutely insane by now if it wasn’t for that.”

“How did it go?” Allison asked, leaning from the window of his black Lincoln.

Servito smiled, oozing pride. “I sold the whole load.” It had taken less than twelve hours for Pop Williams’s station to sell seventy-five hundred gallons of Jerry Allison’s boot-leg gasoline. Servito had brazenly rolled back the wheels in the pump meters by exactly that volume. He had replaced the two thousand dollars he had removed from Williams’s cash register, and happily pocketed the difference.

“Want to do it again?” Allison asked. “I can have another load here by midnight. Same deal.”

How could Servito refuse? There was no question that he wanted to do it again. His problem was Pop Williams. If large volumes of Allison’s gasoline were moved through the station, it was only a matter of time before Williams noticed the decline in his normal volume, particularly if it only occurred during the night shift sales.

Instead of answering Allison’s question, he used his wily charm, piercing him with gray eyes and beaming with confidence. “Do you know anyone with a lot of cash to invest?”

Allison frowned. “What for?”

“To buy this station.”

Allison was flabbergasted. “Holy shit! I thought you owned this place?”

“I never said I did.”

“If you don’t own it, who does?”

Servito pointed to Pop Williams, who was smoking a large cigar behind his desk in the office of the station. “That old fart.”

Allison narrowed his eyes. “How much cash do you need?”

Servito shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. How much do you think this place is worth?”

“It’s not worth a dime to me,” Allison said. “Call me when you get a number from the old fart. Then we’ll talk.” He scribbled his telephone number on a small piece of paper, handed it to Servito, and drove away.

Servito stuffed the paper into his pants pocket and marched directly to the office. “Hey, Pop. You ever think about selling this place?”

Pop removed his Yankees baseball cap and scratched the stubble atop his head. “Who was that in the Lincoln?” he asked, glaring suspiciously at Servito.

“A customer. He wanted directions to Maple Leaf Gardens.”

Williams nodded and took a long drag of his cigar. “Every day I’m alive I think about selling this place, kid. Who wants to know?”

“Me.”

Williams smiled. He liked Jim Servito, although he couldn’t say precisely why. It certainly didn’t hurt that Servito worked hard and long hours, giving Williams a well-deserved opportunity to relax. He knew that Servito was ambitious and that he wouldn’t be satisfied pumping gas for long. He decided to throw him a bone. He reached into his pocket and removed the keys to the station, dangling them at Servito’s eye level. “If you’ve got a half a million, these are yours and I’m out of here.”

“No shit?”

“No shit,” Williams responded with a wide grin. “I’ll make it easy for you. Give me fifty thousand cash, and I’ll give you a mortgage for the rest. If you screw up, though, I’ll be back in here so fast you won’t know what hit you.”

Karen’s hand trembled while she dialed Mike’s home number. Questions and uncertainties plagued her.

Mike’s mother answered.

“May I speak to Mike, please?”

“Who’s calling, please?”

“It’s Karen Taylor.”

“Karen!” Mrs. King exclaimed, surprised to hear from her and immediately confused about how to handle a situation she had not anticipated. “We were all so very happy and relieved to hear that you survived—”

“It’s over, Mrs. King,” Karen interrupted. “It’s finally over.”

“Where are you and how are you?” Mike’s mother asked, tactfully changing the subject.

“I’m in Toronto. My parents brought me home today. I’ve lost sixteen months of my life and twelve percent of my weight, but I’m fine... Could you tell me where I could reach Mike?”

Mrs. King hesitated, but only for a moment. “He has an apartment on St. George Street. He’s back at the University of Toronto.”

“Do you have his telephone number?”

In spite of her deep concern for the consequences, Mike’s mother closed her eyes and gave Mike’s number to Karen.

Weary from a hard day’s work, Williams climbed into his gray Oldsmobile and left for home at 6:15 p.m. Servito waited five minutes before dashing to the office and calling Allison’s number. “Jerry, it’s me... Jim Servito.”

“What can I do for you?” Allison asked, sounding perturbed. He was probably still miffed that Jim had lied about owning the station.

“You can find fifty grand for me.”

“Oh yeah? What would I do that for?”

“To buy the station.”

Allison chuckled. “That’s bull-shit, kid. Fifty grand isn’t enough to buy you a shit house in the boonies.”

“I’m serious, Jerry. All I need is fifty grand. But if you can’t get it for me, I’m sure I’ll find someone who can.”

Allison did not want to lose Servito’s business, nor the opportunity to broker an investment. There was his take to consider, of course. “I’ll see you tonight. Will you be at the station?”

“I live here. What time?”

“Before nine.”

“Bring fifty big ones or don’t bother coming.”

Allison hung up and made a phone call to Buffalo, New York.

“Bushing,” Allison’s boss said.

“It’s me again. I need to talk. It’s about something entirely different.”

“About what?”

“I need fifty grand.”

“So do I. Now tell me what’s so entirely different.”

“I dumped a load at a station in Toronto last night. I thought the kid I sold it to owned the place, but it turns out he doesn’t. Now the kid says he can buy the place for fifty grand.”

“Come on, Jerry. What kind of dump is it?”

“Nice. It’s a juicer. At least three and a half million gallons a year.”

“Then you tell me how he’s gonna do it for fifty grand.”

“I can’t. The only thing I know is that he says he can do it. He also says he can find the money elsewhere...”

“Has this kid got any money?”

“I doubt it.”

“Can you nail him to the wall?”

“Yup.”

“Okay. Use your float, and don’t call me with any bad news.”

“Is this Mike King’s home?” Karen asked, surprised to hear a female voice.

“Yes.”

“May I speak to him, please?”

“I’m sorry. He’s not home. Is there a message?”

“Do you know where I could reach him?”

“He’s at the university. I doubt he’ll be home much before eleven.”

“Who am I speaking to, please?”

“His wife.”

Karen paused for a long time, at first, because she forgot how to breathe. And after, because she had no idea what to say. “Please tell him Karen Taylor called,” she whispered.

“I will,” the woman said, just as quietly.

Karen put the receiver down, her eyes brimming with tears. All the hopes and dreams she had clung to—the very love that had kept her alive—had disappeared like so much smoke.

CHAPTER 9

The fun of university life was nothing but a distant memory for Mike. His determination to succeed had become a consuming passion that had enabled him to rationalize the change in his marriage. Sure, he and Barbara behaved reasonably and interacted with pleasant demeanors. But the physical component of the union had deteriorated until both were filled with a gnawing combination of stress and guilt that simmered beneath the surface of all their polite conversations. Barbara had continued to be helpful and supportive, but had completely stopped initiating sexual encounters. She continued to make love to Mike whenever he wanted, but her responses were disappointingly passive.

The change haunted Mike. Their mutually extemporaneous sex had been an appealing characteristic of their courtship. When he asked Barbara what had happened, she pleaded ignorance. She agreed that therapy was necessary, but procrastinated that step, hoping that everything would eventually resolve in their favor.

One night, after a particularly clinical session of lovemaking, Mike withdrew with a frown. He lowered his head until his lips barely touched her left ear. "It isn't working, Barbara," he whispered.

Barbara turned to face him. "What isn't working?" she asked, her expression filled with righteous indignation.

"Us. I'm convinced you've been hiding something from me, something very important. Under the circumstances, I think you owe me an explanation."

Barbara turned away and stared at the wall. "I can't believe you would say that now," she said with tear-filled eyes.

“When the hell am I supposed to say it?” Mike asked. “You just participated in one of the most important functions of a marriage, but participation is too strong a word. It’s like you weren’t even there, like I’m making love to a manikin. I can’t keep on this way, Barbara.”

“I guess, it’s because... there’s a part of my past that I haven’t told you about. I promised myself I never would, but now I think you should know... I had a baby,” she said, still staring at the wall, her words barely audible.

“What!”

Barbara wiped her eyes and again turned to face Mike, her expression showing deep pain. “I had a baby girl.”

“Who’s the father?” he asked. Certainly he was not delighted to hear that she had such a burdened past, but it was a relief that she had finally begun to remove some of the distance between them.

“That’s not important.”

“Then tell me what is.”

“He asked me to get an abortion when I told him I was pregnant. He said he wasn’t prepared for the responsibility of a child, or a marriage.”

Mike wiped a tear from her cheek. “What happened then?”

“At first I thought the relationship was more important than the child, so I agreed to have the abortion. But when the time came, I just couldn’t do it... I just couldn’t. It was impossible.”

“What happened to the child?”

“I gave her up for adoption,” Barbara whimpered, tears continuing to flow from her eyes. “It was the most painful thing I’ve ever done in my life, far more painful than having her.”

“Do you know where she is now?”

Barbara covered her eyes and shook her head.

“Where’s the father?”

“Alive and well... He’s a very successful stock broker.”

“Have you ever seen him or talked to him since you met me?”

“No,” she replied, avoiding eye contact.

Mike reached for Barbara's hand. "Look at me," he demanded, and then waited until she did. "You never stopped loving him, did you?" he asked, staring into her eyes, probing for a response.

"How can you say that?"

"Because I need to know. Did you ever stop loving him?"

Barbara turned and buried her face in her pillow. "Of course I did!" she whimpered.

CHAPTER 10

Friday, October 13, 1964. 10 a.m.

Servito stubbed the remains of his cigar into his ashtray before telephoning Allison's office. "Jerry, it's Jim. I need to see you."

"What's the problem, kid?"

"I don't want to talk about it on the phone."

"How about I see you at the station at noon? I'm going to the track this afternoon."

"Then let's have lunch."

Servito left well before noon. He hurried to his favorite whorehouse, Triple A Modeling Service, they called it, and relieved his almost constant sexual urge. He then drove south to Lakeshore Drive and east to Ashbridges Bay, a filthy industrial area in the heart of southeast Toronto. Porky's Diner specialized in greasy hamburgers, draught beer, and waitresses with large breasts. He found the diner already crowded with raucous factory workers. Wrinkling his nose, he proceeded directly to an empty table, as far as possible from the noisy beer drinkers.

Allison waddled in ten minutes later and headed for Servito, his gigantic brown shoes slapping the wooden floor. "How you doin', kid?" he asked, squeezing his oversized butt into a chair on the opposite side of the table. "You ordered yet?"

"Nope. I was waiting for you."

"You wanna beer?"

Servito nodded. No smile. No emotion.

Allison turned and waved to the waitress behind the cash register on the bar. “Hey, Tess! Give us two Black Labels over here!” he shouted, and then turned to Servito. “What’s on your mind, kid?”

“I’m having difficulty figuring out why I can never get a better gasoline price from anyone but you. The only conclusion I can come to is that nobody has a better price.” Servito leaned forward and glared menacingly into Allison’s eyes. “Are you paying taxes on the gasoline you’re selling to me?”

Allison chuckled, and then scowled. “That’s none of your business.”

Servito leaned closer. “Never mind the bullshit, Jerry! Just answer my question. Are you or are you not paying the taxes on my gasoline?”

“You’re stepping over the line, kid,” Allison warned.

Servito bared his teeth and pointed his index finger directly at Allison’s nose. His almost translucent gray eyes bored into the man. “I don’t give a flying shit about lines! I want the whole story and I want it now,” he hissed. “I don’t want to wake up some morning and find the feds climbing all over me for the taxes you evaded. And I don’t want them to tell me that you screwed off to never-never land with all the money.”

Allison’s rotund face blanched and he shook his large head. “You’re an ungrateful prick!” he said, his expression bathed in acid. “If it hadn’t been for my fifty grand, you wouldn’t even be here to worry about things that don’t concern you.” He paused while Tess delivered two large, ice-frosted mugs of draught beer. He leaned back and gave Servito a long, hard look. “One of the things you have to understand is that the gasoline business is a rough game. You have to do whatever it takes to survive. If you don’t, someone’s gonna be there to clean your clock.”

Servito tightened his lips and bared his teeth. “No more bull-shit, Jerry. Just answer my question.”

“I’ve told you as much as I’m gonna tell you, kid. The rest of the story’s my business.” Allison stood, toppling his chair and causing it to clatter on the floor. “Call me when you need another load. If you don’t, I’m gonna send some people into your office to find out why. You got it?” He chugged half of his beer and headed for the exit.

Servito caught up with Allison in the parking lot. “Jesus!” Allison shouted at the sharp pain at his ankle. Then he stumbled, falling forward and spread-eagling on the pavement.

Servito pressed his right foot firmly against the back of Allison’s huge neck. “We’re going to play truth or consequences, Jerry,” he said, smirking. “I have a piece, here, and it’s pointed right at the back of your fat head. Get up and haul your fat ass into the car, now!”

Servito lifted his foot and Allison complied, glancing hurriedly at the bulge in Servito’s right jacket pocket.

Servito barged in beside Allison, pushing him to the passenger’s side. He slammed the door, and then revealed his pistol—a snub-nosed, 38-caliber revolver he had stolen on his way through Billings, Montana.

He lowered his eyes and chuckled as Allison’s involuntary urination spread across the crotch of his beige trousers. “This is the end of the bullshit, Jerry. Just give me the answers.”

“I don’t own a damn thing,” Allison said, shaking, mesmerized by the muzzle of Servito’s gun. “I’m just the pimp. I put people together.”

“How does it happen?”

“I... I do it through a broker and a trucker.”

“Who’s the broker and who’s the trucker?”

“The broker’s a man named Bob Bushing. He owns a company called Empire State Oil. His office is in Buffalo...”

Servito waved the pistol, and Allison yelped.

“The trucker is Dave Lasker,” he said hurriedly. “His company is Amerada Tank Lines. He runs outta Fort Erie and Niagara Falls.”

“Very good,” Servito said, allowing a brief smile. “Now, how is the game played?”

“Bushing buys the gasoline and Lasker hauls it.”

“Who pays the tax?”

“Nobody.”

“So I was right. How does it get done?”

“Empire State buys the gasoline from a refiner in the United States, I think, or maybe in Canada. Bushing warrants that the gasoline is purchased for export to the opposite country. The refiner sells the gasoline to Empire State at the refinery gate on an ex-tax basis on the assumption that the taxes will be collected by governments in the destination country. Then Amerada picks it up and hauls it across the bridge. From there it gets distributed.”

Servito’s swarthy face displayed a puzzled frown. “So why aren’t the feds breaking down my door and demanding the taxes?”

“As soon as the gasoline crosses the bridge, we make it disappear. The feds don’t have the slightest idea where it goes.”

“How do you make it disappear?”

“A million ways. The simplest is to haul it directly to the customer, but that’s risky. The driver has to make sure he’s not being followed, and the feds are real good at following trucks.”

“So what’s the best way?”

“They drop it into Amerada’s storage tanks in the destination country. Amerada waits a couple of days, and then takes it out of storage and hauls it to the customer. The feds have no way of knowing which gasoline came out of storage.”

Servito was impressed. “That’s interesting. But that’s not the only game, is it?”

“Ya, there’s a few,” Allison answered, displaying the hint of a relaxed grin. “One of my favorites is the Regina Loop. It’s beautiful—it shows real imagination... Say you buy gasoline from a Canadian refiner. You tell the refiner that the product’s going to the United States, so like I said it’s sold on an ex-tax basis. Your trucker picks it up at the Canadian refinery and hauls it across the border. He drives a few miles down the road, waits for an hour or two, and then turns around and hauls it back into Canada. He tells customs that the customer didn’t want the gasoline, or that he couldn’t afford to pay for it.”

“What happens then?”

“Customs cancels your manifest and assumes you’re going to take it back to the refinery for refund. But it never makes it to the refinery. Now you’re

home free to sell it in Canada. You sell it for a penny or two under the market and pocket the tax.”

“That’s beautiful. Tell me another one.”

“Yup. The old water trick. It’s an exquisite variation of the Regina Loop. You buy gasoline, ex-tax, at a Canadian refinery for export to the United States, and then deliver almost all of it to a Canadian customer. After that, you fill the truck with water and head for the border... gasoline floats on water you know.”

Servito nodded.

“If Customs check the truck, they see the remaining gasoline on top of the water and assume it’s a full load. You continue into the U.S., wait for an hour or two, dump the water in a farmer’s field, and then turn the truck around and drive back into Canada. Is that beautiful or what? Oh there’s one more. We do a lotta business with the Indians, and they don’t pay tax on gasoline sold on the reservations. So... maybe some of that gasoline finds its way off the reservations. Who’s to know?”

Servito’s gifted criminal mind had shifted into high gear. “How much commission does Bushing pay you?”

“One cent for every gallon I move.”

“That’s chump change, Jerry,” Servito scoffed, aware that a penny was a fraction of the take. Bushing was pocketing a fortune. He returned the gun to his jacket and smiled. “Why the hell haven’t you gone after the big bucks? You know the ropes.”

Allison shrugged his bulky shoulders. “I don’t know... I guess I didn’t want the risk.”

“You’ve been working for nickels and dimes too long. How would you like to make some real money?”

Allison grinned, experiencing a surge of relief. “Yeah.”

Servito’s intense gray eyes focused on Allison’s. “From now on, you and I are going to be partners.”

“Yeah?”

“The way I see it, Bushing’s vulnerable as hell. The customers are yours, Jerry, and Bushing can’t function without them.”

“So what are you saying?”

“We’ll do our own deal. We’ll be the broker and give Bushing the commission.”

“Where do we get the trucks?”

“We’ll use Lasker’s. If he doesn’t agree to haul for peanuts, we’ll get our own trucks... hell, maybe we’ll even buy his company.”

Allison’s surge of relief was extinguished by enormous fear. He squirmed in his cold, damp seat. “You’re talking about playing with fire. There’s gonna be big trouble.”

“Fuck ‘em!” Servito snarled, flashing a fiendish grin. “Trouble’s my middle name. If they hassle us, we’ll arrange some very unfortunate accidents.”

CHAPTER 11

“Where were you born?” the young female customs officer asked, glaring suspiciously at Servito, who was perched languorously behind the opened window of Allison’s black Lincoln.

“Toronto,” Servito lied, calmly returning her stare. It was his first return to the United States since his escape in July of 1963, and if his identity were discovered, his next home would be a U.S. military prison.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“We have a business meeting in Buffalo. We’ll be back here in two or three hours,” Allison said.

“Have a nice day,” the officer said, and then directed her stare to the car behind Allison’s.

The head office of Empire State Oil was located in the recreation room of Bob Bushing’s modest, four bedroom home in Tonawanda, a suburb of Buffalo. Servito and Allison were met at the front door by Bushing’s wife, a short, well-painted brunette adorned with too much jewelry. “Jerry!” she declared, her eyes widening with surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I gotta see Bob, Theresa. It’s real important.”

Theresa ushered Servito and Allison into the house and down a flight of stairs to a tacky, 1950s style recreation room. Bushing was pushing papers at a large and very cluttered metal desk. A thin weasel of a man with a narrow black mustache, he looked like he belonged at a racetrack, making book. He directed an angry glare at Allison. “What the hell is this, Jerry? I told you I didn’t want to see you here. Ever.”

Allison trembled as he attempted to explain. “I... this is Jim Servito... ? He’s here because—”

“Jerry’s here because I brought him here,” Servito interrupted.

“Then why are you here?” Bushing asked.

Servito marched toward Bushing and perched on the corner of his desk. He leaned close to Bushing’s face. “We have a new agenda for you, Bob.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“We’re going to restructure your company, that’s what I’m talking about.” Jim grinned nastily. “From now on, Jerry and I are going to own a slice of the gasoline you’ve been selling to his customers. Empire State will continue to purchase it, but it’ll no longer be just your company. You’re going to sell a controlling interest to us. When that’s done, the company will pay you a commission for continuing as president. I’ll be the chairman of the board.”

Bushing stood and cocked his right arm. Just when Bushing stepped forward, Jim jerked his head backward so Bushing’s fist just missed his chin. Then he dodged up under the unbalanced manager and grabbed his right wrist, twisting it until Bushing leaned forward and then wrapping it behind the man’s own back. “Don’t, Bob. There are three of us against little old you.”

“There’s only two,” Bushing retorted, panting heavily. “And Allison can’t punch his way out of a bottle.”

Servito let go of Bushing’s arm and removed his revolver as the man spun back around. “This is number three,” he said, smirking as he cocked the hammer. “Now sit down and listen.”

Bushing’s face had flushed to crimson. “I don’t give shit if you have a gun. Who the hell do you think you are, coming into my house and telling me who’s going to do what?”

“I’ll tell you who I am, Bob. I’m your new boss. The sooner you accept that fact, the happier we’re all going to be.”

“You can take your new agenda and shove it where the sun don’t shine!” Bushing shouted, his face mean and glowing red. “You can’t take over my company unless I want to sell, and I’m here to tell you I don’t.”

Servito smiled and winked. “You’re not going to like the alternative, Bob...” Something in Servito’s face made Bob blanch. “You’ve been enjoying a disproportionate share of the action for too long, and that’s going to change whether you like it or not. Jerry’s given me a complete and thorough description of how you do business and how you forget to pay gasoline taxes. Now, if you don’t want me to have a nice chat with the Canadian and the U.S. feds, then maybe you’ll do what I’m telling you to do, hm?” Jim stepped forward and smacked him lightly on the jaw. “You’ll be hearing from me real soon... Have a nice day.”

A long, tense silence continued until the Lincoln crossed the Peace Bridge and entered Fort Erie.

Then, and only then, did Allison give a deep sigh. “You really did it now, kid.”

“Did what?”

“Bushing’s mad as hell. There’s no way in hell he’ll ever do business with us.”

Servito bared his teeth. “Trust me, Jerry. He will.”

Two miles beyond the outskirts of the city, Allison turned and drove through the opened gates of a toweringly high chain-link fence. “Amerada Tank Lines” was neatly painted in large gold letters on a black sign above the gates. After parking beside a row of trucks and trailers in varying states of disrepair, Servito and Allison entered a gray building clad in corrugated metal. At a wooden counter, perched on a stool, was a young, dark haired girl wearing a breast-enhancing bra under a see-through, white silk blouse. Her long and curvaceous legs extended from a short, skin-tight, pink mini-skirt. Large sunglasses balanced on top of her hair. She peered over the top of her magazine and smacked her gum. “Hi, Jerry,” she said, stilling her jaw long enough to smile. “What’re you doing here?”

“Hi, Deb,” Allison said, returning her smile. “We’re looking for Dave. Is he here?”

“Go right in. He’s in the back office,” Deb said, pointing her thumb at the heavy metal door behind her. Her head drifted back down toward the magazine.

Lasker was seated at his desk, clamping a telephone receiver tightly to his ear with his shoulder as he leaned back. His feet were propped up on the desk in front of him. Below his close-cut blond hair was a badly sunburned face. He wore green trousers and a white shirt with his name printed just above his heart. He quickly cupped his right hand over the mouth piece when he saw Allison. "Have a seat. I'll be with you in a minute," he said, and then continued his conversation.

Servito extended one last lecherous glance at Deb's legs as he closed the metal door. He and Allison sat on metal folding chairs.

Lasker ended his telephone conversation and greeted Allison with an outstretched right arm. "Good to see you again, Jerry. What can I do for you?"

"I have someone I want you to meet, Dave." Allison gave a squeamish smile. "This is Jim Servito. He's one of my biggest customers in Toronto... And he wanted to meet with you to discuss some business."

Servito stood and shook Lasker's hand, then twisted slightly to sit on Lasker's desk. "I'd like to buy Amerada Tank Lines, Dave. How much do you want for it?"

Lasker's mouth dropped open in that unguarded moment. "Amerada's not for sale, sir... and if it was, my price would be high."

"How high is high?" Servito asked.

"Probably more than you could afford."

"I'll give you a hundred thousand."

Lasker marched to his metal door and opened it. "You're wasting my time, Mr. Servito. I'd like you to leave."

Allison hurried from the office, his mouth twisted in downcast horror.

Servito stood and approached Lasker, his sneer displaying absolute contempt. "You're not going to like the alternative, Dave. I know all about the tax free gasoline you've been hauling across the Peace Bridge. So, if you want to stay the hell out of prison, then I suggest you cooperate, real soon. You'll be hearing from me shortly... have a nice day." He turned and followed Allison.

Allison turned to face Servito the second he entered the car. “Jesus, Jim, now you’ve really done it. I’m out of business! Lasker won’t give me the time of day after that little song and dance.”

Servito rolled his eyes and pointed his palms skyward. “Come on, Jerry. Relax. You’re not even close to being out of business. By the time Lasker thinks about what I just told him, he’ll give us a hell of a lot more than the time of day.”

“What did you just tell him?”

Servito bared his teeth and pounded his fist on Allison’s dashboard. “Same fucking thing I told Bushing! I just made some attitude adjustments, Jerry, baby. We’ll see who’s prepared to give you the time of day. When you have a man by the balls, his heart and mind will follow.”

At a hastily convened meeting with Bob Bushing and Dave Lasker at Lasker’s Fort Erie office the following week, Servito completed a deal to purchase a fifty-one percent interest in both Empire State Oil and Amerada Tank Lines. The purchases were uncontested and based upon earn-out formulas designed by Servito. They allowed Bushing and Lasker to continue as presidents and chief operating officers of their respective companies, while Servito became chairman of the board. Allison was appointed vice president of marketing and received a hefty salary increase.

With his audacious acquisition of Amerada Tank Lines and Empire State Oil, Servito had established a formidable business infrastructure that would launch him on a meteoric criminal career path. His enterprise was poised to grow, and the fuel for its growth would be Servito’s insatiable greed, his irrepressible ego, and—last but not least—inflation.

CHAPTER 12

June 5, 1965.

Mike's formal graduation ceremony was held on a warm, cloudless day on the lawn outside Convocation Hall. He received his degree in Chemical Engineering with honors, ranking seventh in his class. Barbara watched with pride as her husband mounted the podium to shake the hand of the Dean of Engineering and receive his diploma.

The following day, dressed in the slightly threadbare gray flannel garment that was his one and only suit, Mike marched to the front doors of the imposing Canam Oil Building in Toronto at 4:45 p.m. The trappings of wealth and power oozed from every pore of the building, even more so than in the Vancouver office where Mike had visited Doug McAllister. When the elevator doors opened, he was on the top floor of the head office of one of the largest oil companies in the world.

Mike scanned the expansive reception area and saw numerous expensive oil paintings adorning the walnut and mahogany walls. The pink marble floor was dotted with rich Persian rugs. He approached the receptionist to announce his arrival, but stopped when he heard a familiar voice to his left.

"Welcome to Canam, Mike," a smiling Doug McAllister greeted.

McAllister had aged. He had lost almost all of the hair on top of his head, and the surviving strands were almost pure white. Signs of a stressful life were carved into his face. McAllister extended his hand. "I want to congratulate you on your academic achievement... I was so proud of you when I heard."

“I’m happy to be here, Doug,” Mike said, extending his hand. “How did you know?”

“I telephoned your father when I heard you were coming to see me. He couldn’t wait to tell me.”

“I should also congratulate you. Dad told me you’re now the executive vice-president of the company.”

McAllister grinned. “Thank you. It’s been a long, hard climb... but let’s go into my office and talk. It’s this way.” He gestured Mike into his large corner office.

Mike was mesmerized by the incredible view to the south. Beyond the tall buildings of the city, he could see the vast blue expanse of Lake Ontario. The sailboats in the harbor were no more than white dots in the distance. He tore himself from the window and turned to face McAllister. “It was very kind of you to see me, Doug. You must be very busy.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m delighted you’re here. I’m even happier that you followed my advice.”

“It was good counsel. I never forgot it.”

McAllister sat in his dark brown leather chair and admired Mike’s athletic frame and captivating smile. “This might be presumptuous, but I assumed you came to collect on my promise. Was I wrong?” he asked.

Mike was overwhelmed. He was certain he would have to remind McAllister of the promise he’d made in Vancouver in 1963. “You were not wrong. I very much want to work in the oil industry. I acquired a growing fascination for the business while I was at school. I would be honored to be part of it.”

McAllister beamed. “One of the quickest ways to learn about the oil industry is in industrial sales. That’s where I would like you to start, if you are interested?

“When can I get started?”

“Would tomorrow be too soon?”

CHAPTER 13

After an exhausting two month training course, Mike was assigned to an industrial sales territory in Toronto. He dove into his new career with a deep and abiding commitment. His dedication to career, strong sales aptitude, and exceptional communication skills made him very good at the job. A collision with big business bureaucracy, however, brought a swift end to Mike's initial surge of enthusiasm. The company's compensation scheme was heavily based upon job categories and very lightly on job performance. No matter how hard he worked or how productive he was, his salary remained relatively constant. He didn't want to complain about the apparent inequity, but he couldn't help but wonder bitterly what he could do to get a decent raise. The restraint led to frustration and unhappiness, both of which he carried home with him at night and on weekends, further compounding the tension in his marriage.

It soon became clear that remaining at Canam without upgrading his academic credentials meant middle management mediocrity. He had traveled too far and paid too many dues to allow that to happen.

Just when he had decided to look for another job, he was invited to attend a three day marketing conference arranged by Canam's marketing management in Lake Placid, New York. The event was programmed to involve some rest and relaxation, but its primary purpose was to create a sense of teamwork and belonging within the sales force.

The afternoon session of the second day was held in the conference wing of White Face Hotel. The speaker, George Reimer, was the director of retail gasoline for Canam. He talked for an hour with the help of the usual visual aids, including slides and bar-charts, magnified and illuminated onto a large

screen. He spoke with pride about the incomparable retail gasoline network of Canam, the new and expanded credit card facilities, the aggressive real estate acquisition program, and the new, ultra-modern service station designs.

After concluding the visual segment of his presentation, Reimer asked for someone to raise the lights. “I need to talk about a problem that’s facing our company—the entire industry, actually. We’re literally swimming in gasoline, gentlemen. Gasoline surpluses have given rise to what I consider to be a disease—that of the private-brander, an independent operator who buys gasoline at the refinery gate and retails that gasoline through his own outlets in direct competition with us. He can discount to a level which multiplies his annual sales volumes geometrically, and reduces ours proportionately.”

Reimer scanned the audience above his spectacles. “The smart ones in the audience can readily see that I have just described a vicious circle. The private-brander, with about twenty thousand dollars in his pocket, can lease a piece of real estate at the corner of Spruce and Goose, throw some pumps and tanks in the ground, put a price sign on the street, and he’s in business. After he runs this shit-box for a year, he has enough money to build ten more shit-boxes. Then we’ve got ten times the problem. Even worse, the son of a bitch is indestructible.”

Reimer took a brief drink of water. “We’ve concluded that the only viable solution is to buy out the disease once the private-brander reaches a critical size. This policy is only marginally effective, at best. It makes me feel like the proverbial little boy with his finger in the dike.” He scowled and scanned the room. “If any of you can think of a better solution, I would be happy to entertain it. Thank you all for your kind attention.” Reimer displayed an obsequious smile, removed his spectacles, and returned to his seat.

The audience responded with a polite applause.

Mike was amazed. How could such a large and successful company allow itself to be caught in such a dilemma? And why would Reimer disclose the problem to such a broad audience? It was a sign of weakness, the sort that usually was a tightly held secret within the ranks of senior

management. Reimer's presentation had demonstrated the human characteristics of a large corporation—showed that the huge monolith had vulnerabilities. The man had destroyed Mike's long held vision of the corporation as a flawless machine.

In his talk, Reimer had compared Canam to a large ocean liner, forced to dodge traffic in a crowded harbor where small, fast boats had a decided advantage. The smaller boats were free to go wherever they wished, so long as they steered clear of the ocean liner. The speech strengthened Mike's decision to leave Canam. He was certain it would be more exciting and profitable to operate one or more of the small, fast boats than to be a crew member on board the ocean liner. To gamble his youth on the corporate brass ring would involve too much personal compromise, particularly if the brass ring turned out to be no more than a solid gold watch.

CHAPTER 14

Servito's success in the dark side of the gasoline business had blossomed beyond his wildest dreams. The control center for his illegal operations was a large farm he'd bought in the Caledon hills, about fifty miles north of Toronto. There, he installed a number of above ground gasoline storage tanks, which were subsequently filled with three hundred and fifty thousand gallons on which no taxes were paid. He also constructed a runway for his new twin Cessna. Most of the flight plans he filed were to tax free Grand Cayman Island, where he deposited large sums of cash out of sight of the probing eyes of the tax authorities of both Canada and the United States. While his personal wealth grew, so too did his appetite for more. Money had ceased to be a necessity. Accumulating it was now a game—and the game was about to assume a significant new dimension.

He sat in silence in his long white Cadillac limousine as it glided across the Peace Bridge. His hand groped between the thighs of his paid mistress while he stared through a window at the reflection of the full moon on the rippled surface of the Niagara River below. He turned to Allison. "We're gonna buy a bridge tonight, Jerry," he said with a grin.

Allison shook his head. "You're crazy. Absolutely insane."

After stopping briefly at the customs checkpoint on the American side of the border, the limousine continued about two hundred yards to the parking area of a large, two story building. Servito's driver Pete kept the motor running while Servito marched to the front doors of the building.

The heels of his boots made a loud click with each step he took on the polished marble floor of the second floor hallway. He stopped in front of the door to an office at the southeast end of the building. "Director of

Customs and Immigration” was printed in large gold letters on the door. Servito entered without knocking, closing the door behind him with a click. He turned the deadbolt.

A tall, frail man in a tailored, gray pin-striped suit approached Servito from the inner office. He had only the suggestion of snow white hair. “You must be Jim Servito,” he declared with an enthusiastic smile.

“Yup,” Servito replied grimly.

“My name is Earle Langston,” the frail man said as Servito shook his hand. “I’m so happy to meet you, Jim. My assistant, Stanley, told me about you last week. Please come into my inner office and have a seat. Would you like a drink?”

“No, thank you. I’m working on a very tight schedule tonight.” Servito reached inside his jacket and removed a large brown envelope. “This is for you,” he said, handing it to Langston.

Langston opened the envelope and removed five neatly bound packets, each containing fifty hundred dollar bills. He placed them in a neat row on his secretary’s desk, then took one of them, removed the elastics, and counted the bills. When he finished counting, he looked up and smiled. “I won’t waste time counting the other ones. You’re a man of your word, Jim.”

“Are you?” Servito asked.

Langston nodded. “You can rest assured that everything here will be cooled. My people won’t bother with your trucks any more. No more delays or spot checks.”

Servito glared at Langston. “Let’s be absolutely sure we’re both clear on this, Earle. The bridge is mine. If my trucks don’t cross that bridge, both ways, like shit through a goose, I’m going to hold you personally responsible. If there’s any trouble, you’re going to take a nice little trip over Niagara Falls... in a cement boat. Do we understand each other?”

Langston’s smile disappeared. “Loud and clear,” he replied, his lips quivering.

Servito turned and walked toward the door of the office. After opening it, he tilted his head slightly. “You have a nice evening, Earle,” he said, and

then closed the door behind him. He hurried from the building and returned to the waiting limousine, slumping into the white leather seat.

“What happened?” Allison asked.

“We own the bridge, baby,” Servito shouted, and then burst into uncontrolled laughter.

Allison slouched further in his seat and stretched his fat legs as far as they could reach. “I can’t believe it,” he said, shaking his head in amazement. “Are you telling me he bought the whole thing?”

Servito raised both thumbs. “The whole deal. No ifs. No buts.”

Allison continued to shake his head. “You’ve got brass balls, Jimbo. Did you tell him about the cement boat?”

“Damn right! He nearly pissed his pants.” Servito turned to face the driver, who had been listening through the opened window that separated the front section of the limo from the rear. “Let’s get going, Pete. We’re behind schedule.”

The limousine sped north on Route 190. Just before it reached the front gates of the Golden National refinery, the car turned off the road and proceeded slowly across a grassy field to an abandoned corrugated metal building. Pete stopped the vehicle fifty feet in front of the large door of the building and blinked the headlights twice. Seconds passed in silence before the door began to rise.

When the door closed behind them, the building’s fluorescent ceiling lights flickered on.

A giant of a man wearing dirty blue denim overalls and an oil-stained, yellow helmet approached. “Welcome to Buffalo, gentlemen,” he bellowed.

Servito extended his right hand to the large man. “Good to see you, Sam,” he said.

“You too, Jimbo,” Sam replied, nearly crushing Servito’s hand.

Servito winced in pain, but quickly recovered. “Boys, I want you to meet Sam Martin. He’s the superintendent of that big still next door. He’s agreed to help us with our little plumbing job.” He pointed to each of his companions in order. “This is Jerry Allison, a close business associate of mine. The broad in the car is my latest toy. Next is Pete Sarnos, my faithful

driver. Last but not least is Bob Sadowski, the best damn plumber in the world.”

Sam chuckled. “If he’s such a good plumber, maybe you should get him to build you a pipeline across the Niagara River.”

Allison, Sadowski, and Sarnos laughed, while Servito stared stonily at Sam.

The bulky man pointed to a yellow van parked no more than ten feet from the limousine. “Let’s get going. When we get inside the refinery gates, just keep quiet and let me do the talking.”

“I’ll get in the front with Sam. Jerry, you and Bob ride in the back,” Servito ordered. “Pete, you can stay here with the limo.”

Pete returned to join Dianne in the limousine while the others climbed into the van.

Sam opened the large metal door by pressing a button on a small black box mounted on the dashboard of the van. He headed across the open field in the direction of the Golden National refinery, which resembled a gigantic midway with its myriad of lights and numerous flare stacks. When the van passed the heavy-gauge chain-link gates at the refinery entrance, the security guards and refinery workers all smiled and waved at Sam Martin. He was, after all, the refinery superintendent. Sam drove directly to the gasoline storage area at the east end of the refinery and parked as close as possible to the truck loading racks. He turned to Servito. “Relax,” he said, slapping his back with his right hand. “You’re too tense. Nobody’s gonna bother us. I’ve got it covered.”

“Let’s just do it,” Servito ordered.

Sam and Servito got out and opened the rear doors of the van. Sam and Sadowski dragged out two, three-way brass valves, a welding torch, and oxygen and acetylene tanks from the rear of the van. The four men carried the equipment up the metal stairway to the rear deck of the gasoline loading racks. For two long and anxious hours, Servito and Allison watched while Sadowski and Sam spliced one of the brass valves into the regular gasoline line and the second valve into the premium gasoline line. When he had completed his last weld, Sadowski removed his heavy metal mask and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

“It’s about time,” Sam said.

“I don’t know anybody who could have done it faster,” Sadowski retorted, waving the torch close to Sam’s nose. “Did it ever occur to you that this could’ve blown us all to kingdom come?”

Sam chuckled as he slapped Sadowski’s back. “Never! These lines were hospital clean. I had ‘em purged with nitrogen this afternoon. The bosses think we’re out here doin’ repairs tonight.”

Servito sat in contented silence while the limousine headed back to Toronto. He stared out the side window into the blackness of the night. Tonight had seen the final steps of his crowning achievement. The scheme was so audacious, and yet so simple. Now they not only were able to avoid tax on their product, but they wouldn’t have to buy it, either. They could pull it straight from the tanks, so long as Sam got his cut. No one else would ever dream of doing such a thing. But Jim always had grabbed his dreams by the throat.

CHAPTER 15

July 21, 1968.

At one minute before midnight, at North York General Hospital, Mike and Barbara celebrated the arrival of their first child, a beautiful seven pound, six ounce girl. By unanimous agreement, they named her Kerri Elizabeth.

The arrival of Kerri was a defining moment for Mike. His daughter was such a precious gift, and she needed a perfect world to grow up in. He strengthened his resolve to do whatever he could to make his marriage work.

Three days later, Mike and Barbara relaxed on the rear lawn of their new bungalow, twenty miles north of Toronto, watching the sun set over pine colored hills. Kerri slept in her crib between them. Mike separated the business section from his Saturday paper and began to search for something that might warrant careful attention. He reached the back page without finding anything of note, and was about to fold the whole section into the rest of the paper when a brief glimpse of an article caused him to stop. He bolted upright.

Barbara frowned. "What's so interesting?" she asked, continuing to stare at the horizon.

Mike was excited. "I think this company is looking for me."

"Do you know anything about them?"

"I sure do. International Fuel Brokers is a great company and extremely well respected in the industry. It imports petroleum products from all over the world and sells them in North America."

“What makes you so sure they’re looking for you?” Barbara asked.

“I have exactly what they’re looking for,” Mike explained. “But what’s far more important is that International Fuel Brokers has what I’m looking for.”

“What’s that?”

“A box seat. I could learn more about the oil business in one year with that company than I could in ten at Canam.”

The response to Mike’s letter and resume was swift. He received a telephone call at his home on Wednesday evening. “May I speak to Mike King, please?” a woman asked.

“Speaking,” Mike said, struggling to conceal his excitement.

“Mr. King, my name is Evelyn Wells. I’m the secretary of Mr. Owen Christian, the president of International Fuel Brokers. I’m calling to advise you that we have received your letter and resume. Mr. Christian has asked me to invite you to have lunch with him at the Dominion Club at noon this Friday. Would that be convenient for you?”

“Yes, that would be convenient.”

“Fine. Mr. Christian would like to meet you in his office at eleven forty-five. I presume you have our address.” From her lips, it wasn’t a question.

“I do.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. King. I’ll look forward to seeing you on Friday.”

Christian was a tall thin man with extremely fine features and a mosaic of facial wrinkles spanning from the dark circles under his eyes. He was dressed in a perfectly tailored black, pinstriped suit. His thinning brown hair was graying at the sides and combed so that not one hair was out of place. His matching tie and handkerchief—in fire engine red—were over the top.

Christian wasted no time. “Mike, I invited you here today to meet you and to offer you a job, if I like you. Your resume told us a lot about

yourself, and I liked what I read. You appear to be eminently qualified to fill the position.”

“Thank you,” Mike said.

“I see that you’re currently employed by Canam,” Christian continued, staring at Mike with his almost penetrating green eyes. “It’s a fine company. It does a wonderful job of training people. Sometimes I envy Canam’s program, but I think they take far too long to develop talent.”

Mike nodded in agreement, stifling a smirk.

Christian placed his feet on his desk and leaned back in his chair. “Before we go to lunch, I want to tell you a little bit about IFB. Hell, we might discover you don’t like us.” He faked a smile. “Would you agree that’s a possibility?”

Mike nodded.

“IFB is a public company. It’s listed on the Toronto and New York Exchanges, and in Europe on the London and Brussels Exchanges. No company or individual owns more than four percent of the stock. It’s also a very successful company, and with a modicum of humility, I’ll tell you that I am largely responsible for that success. Every decision of consequence is made right here.” He pointed to himself.

“Excuse me, Owen,” Mike interrupted. “How large is IFB?”

“Good question. We move slightly over five billion gallons a year. Is that a satisfactory answer?”

Mike nodded, impressed. “Yes, sir.”

“We plan to get much larger. In the past several years, we’ve been in acquisition mode. Our current policy has been to acquire a half interest in independent distributors—mostly companies selling distillate fuel to homes and factories. The public call it fuel oil, but I call it pure gold. Our game plan is to identify target companies, romance them heavily, and buy fifty percent of their stock. We put the owner on a nice five-year management contract, sign a sweet long term supply contract with him, and then let him run. It’s a beautiful deal for both parties. We lock up the supply and avoid the aggravation and expense of running the companies. Our new partner has

a pile of cash in his jeans, security of supply, and the IFB covenant behind him. You understand me so far?”

Mike nodded again.

“The person we’re looking for is someone capable of identifying target companies. We want someone good enough to move these companies through the romantic phase and drag them into the fold. For obvious reasons, the individual has to know the oil business well. More importantly, he must be an opportunist.” Owen squinted at him with a slight smirk on his lips. “Do you think you’re the man we’re looking for?”

“Yes,” Mike replied without hesitation, simultaneously experiencing a pang of insecurity.

“The reason I’m doing this interview is because I’m a substantially better judge of character than any head hunter. The last idiot those jerks sent us was an accident looking for somewhere to happen. He fell flat on his ass and we’re still cleaning up his mess. It’s a damn shame, you know. The kid had all the right credentials.”

Mike couldn’t resist. He had to interrupt again. “Do you mind telling me what his credentials were?”

“He had an MBA from Harvard. Why do you ask?” Christian asked with a puzzled expression.

“Just curious,” Mike said, fighting an urge to smirk.

Christian glanced at his watch and at Mike. “Let’s have some lunch. You hungry?”

“Very.”

Christian continued to dominate the conversation at the Dominion Club, taking time only to swallow three dry martinis and a toasted club sandwich. When coffees were served, Christian stopped his dialogue long enough to ask, “Your resume said you took a year out of school. I’m curious to know why you did that.”

“I didn’t like what I was doing, and wasn’t prepared to waste any more time and money until I found something I did like.”

Christian nodded and winked. “Good answer. I like that.”

Mike finally mustered enough courage to ask the big question. “Owen, how are you going to decide if I’m the opportunist you’re looking for?”

Christian gave Mike an indignant stare. “I told you I rely on my instinct, son. I’m rarely wrong about people.” He winked again. “The way you asked that question didn’t do you any harm... In fact, I’m going to offer the job to you right now. If you accept, I want you to start as soon as possible. Do you have any problem with that?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Your title will be Sales Engineer. If it works out, we’ll change that. Your starting salary will be seventy thousand. You’ll have a company car, a dedicated parking space in the York Garage, a car allowance of six hundred a month, and a very liberal expense account. You’ll have an office next to mine, and you’ll report to me. I won’t keep track of your hours, but I will track your progress. Are you interested?”

Mike stared at Christian in stunned silence. He had expected that the luncheon meeting would merely be the beginning of a long and tedious evaluation process, although he never doubted that he would ultimately receive a job offer.

“I asked you a question, son. I expect an answer.”

Mike considered a coy response, but the thought of doubling his salary overnight and working in one of the most exciting sectors of the business was far too compelling. He decided to plunge into Christian’s challenge and make it work, in spite of his concerns about the apparent ruthlessness of his new boss. He nodded. “If you’re prepared to commit the offer to writing, I’m prepared to give Canam my two weeks’ notice.”

“Then it’s done,” Christian declared. “I’ll have Evelyn type the offer, and you can take it with you. The only thing I won’t give you is a long term commitment. You must understand that you’ll have to earn your tenure at IFB. Nobody’s going to give it to you.”

Mike left the Dominion Club in a state of euphoria. He soon stopped to buy a large bottle of expensive champagne. “Screw the office—it’s party time!” he shouted aloud when he got home, clutching Christian’s offer in his right hand and shaking his fist high.

Barbara, however, refused to share Mike's excitement. She agreed to share a single glass of champagne with him, and then went to bed, leaving him to finish the bottle alone.

CHAPTER 16

Mike's success at International Fuel Brokers was immediate and spectacular. He took to Owen Christian's game like a duck to water. Much of Mike's success was due to his credibility and infectious personality. He was believable, extremely persuasive, and blessed with the ability to communicate.

Before he had finished his first full year, he had been instrumental in IFB's acquisition of a fifty percent interest in no less than seventeen fuel oil companies. The jewel of the acquisitions was Seaway Petroleum Limited, a medium-sized fuel oil dealer with terminals in strategic markets in both Canada and the United States. Seaway had long been a target of IFB, but only Mike had been able to reel them in.

In early December of 1968, Christian threw a lavish staff cocktail party. Once the initial rush had dimmed and everyone had a drink in hand, Christian clinked a fork against his glass. "Could I have everyone's attention, please?" he shouted. He waited for complete silence before pointing to Mike. "Please join me here, Mike," he said, summoning him with his index finger.

Christian placed his left arm around Mike's shoulders and raised his glass with his right. "I want you all to know that I have my arm around the best thing that's happened to IFB in years. As you all know, this is Mike King. He has taken this company by storm. His contribution has been of legendary proportions." He stared boldly around the room, daring anyone to disagree. "Effective immediately, I am promoting Mike to the title of Vice-President, Acquisitions." He turned to Mike and smiled. "Congratulations,

son. Well done.” He shook Mike’s hand to the shouts, whistles, and warm applause of the entire staff. “I think you should say a few words.”

“Thank you, Owen,” Mike said. His mind reeled with shock as he turned to face the staff. “Thanks to all of you. Thank you for your kind applause, and for the enormous cooperation you have all given me from the beginning. Without it, I could have achieved nothing. I appreciate your support from the bottom of my heart, and will cherish it for so long as I’m alive.” He smiled and raised his glass to loud applause.

Before Mike could step back into the crowd, Christian leaned close to Mike’s ear. “I want to see you when this is over.”

An hour later, Christian closed the door behind the last guest and turned to Mike. “I won’t keep you long, Mike. I just wanted to clarify something with you, eyeball to eyeball. Of course, I want to congratulate you for your well-deserved promotion and the large salary increase accompanying it. However, I have to put a string on it.”

“What’s that?” Mike asked.

“I want your business card to remain unchanged.” Christian’s expression turned hard, his eyes like rocks. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. You’ll be my wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

CHAPTER 17

February 16, 1969.

Among Servito's numerous criminal pleasures, none came close to the rush he experienced when he flew to Grand Cayman and deposited his stolen millions in a branch of the Banco Internacional Venezolano. He had chosen that particular bank because of the secrecy and anonymity it guaranteed.

Servito's Cessna 421A raced down the farm's primitive runway, snow rooster-tails shooting from beneath the wheels as it accelerated to takeoff speed. Hidden in a number of strategic places on board was over two million dollars cash. To avoid paper trails in the process of transfer, Servito had engaged the help of some well-paid friends on the island who would pick him up at the airport and drive him directly to downtown Georgetown. These same friends also ensured that Servito's near insatiable sexual demands were met.

While on the island he partied with Glenda Sharpe, a twenty-three-year-old nurse employed by a consortium of surgeons from Canada and the United States. The consortium owned and operated a clinic in Georgetown for the purpose of providing reconstructive surgery. The wealthy patients happily flew at their own expense to Grand Cayman for the service.

"It's a mutually advantageous arrangement," Glenda declared. "The warm Caribbean sun offers a pleasant and obscure environment for recovery from the surgery, and the fees collected by the doctors are received tax free."

Servito laughed until he cried. “The more things change, the more they stay the same. Are these guys really any different from me?”

April 15, 1969. 9 a.m.

Christian paced back and forth behind his desk, his palms facing skyward. Before Mike could take a seat on the green leather couch facing his desk, he spat, “All my corporate life, I’ve managed to avoid the killing blow, Mike. It was always so easy. I could always put my arms around it and squeeze it to death. But not this one.”

“What’s the problem?” Mike asked.

Christian stopped pacing and faced Mike with tightened lips, his expression showing deep concern. “When I hired you, I forgot to mention that the business won’t ever let you get comfortable... For years, the refiners have been stumbling over each other to sell fuel oil to us. Now the bastards won’t sell it to us unless we buy gasoline. They’ve even attached a formula to it. They want us to buy a gallon of gasoline for every gallon of fuel oil they sell to us. Dammit, Mike! This is an incredible mess. We need the fuel oil. It’s our life blood.”

“Why the formula? I mean, a gallon for gallon.”

“They’re giving us this bull-shit about a major gasoline containment problem. Whenever a refinery produces a gallon of fuel oil, it also produces a gallon of gasoline. And now the demand for fuel oil, or middle distillates, is far ahead of the demand for gasoline.”

Christian’s comments reminded Mike of George Reimer’s speech at the Canam marketing conference. Reimer had not understated the refiners’ problems of gasoline surpluses and containment. “So we’ll just buy their gasoline,” he responded.

Christian shook his head. “You don’t understand. This thing is a lot bigger than us. Buying gasoline from domestic refiners is like pushing a rope. We don’t have a market for it or a single place to store it. Furthermore, the market’s swimming in gasoline. The big independents are making it worse. They’re importing boatloads of it from Rotterdam.”

Again Mike was reminded of George Reimer's speech. He saw a golden opportunity. "Then let's make our own gasoline market," he said.

"You must be joking," Christian scoffed.

"I'm serious. The gasoline independents are no different from the fuel oil independents. They're all human beings, just trying to make a buck. They have to get their gasoline supply from somewhere. Why not us? We could start by supplying them with gasoline. Eventually, we could work the good ones into our fifty-fifty deals."

At last Christian stopped pacing and took a seat. He appeared to be interested in Mike's suggestion. "It's a good idea, but..."

"Don't fight it, Owen," Mike protested, infused with a surge of confidence.

"Dammit, we need to move over three hundred million gallons of gasoline. Can you tell me who the hell's going to find enough independents to buy all that?"

"Me."

"Not possible. Who else will continue what you've been doing?"

"That's ridiculous. How can we take on any more customers if we can't buy fuel oil? If what you're telling me is true, we're going to have a hell of a time supplying the customers we have. We need to shift our priorities, and it sounds like we don't have any time to lose. Besides, it would take too long to find someone else to do the work I know I can do." Mike was amazed by his own confident tone.

Christian pursed his lips. "What do you know about the gasoline business?"

"Not much, but I can learn fast."

Christian leaned back and put his feet on his desk. "Well you certainly have proved that." A grin appeared. "How soon can you get started?"

"Today."

"Then go to it." Christian raised his eyebrows.

"We're going to take a hit," Mike cautioned. "I'm going to need a price if I'm going to barge into this market and try to displace domestic refiners and

European gasoline. In fact, I'll probably bust the market."

Christian stared at the ceiling, and then lowered his head to face Mike.
"Do whatever it takes. If you don't, someone else will."

CHAPTER 18

Ever since he'd come to Canada, Servito had acquired a deep and abiding hatred for cold weather. He longed for the warm sunny days of his reckless youth. Before returning to Toronto, therefore, he stopped at Palm Beach. Business further north had always been a priority, but now Servito was looking for a temperate vacation home.

"Nice plane. She yours?" asked the mechanic who had towed Servito's airplane to a resting place at the Palm Beach International Airport.

"Nope. It's owned by an offshore trust," Servito replied. "Where's a good place to stay around here?"

"Depends," the mechanic replied.

"Depends on what?"

"On how deep your pockets are."

"Suppose the price is no object," Servito replied with a sly grin.

The mechanic pointed east. "Definitely The Breakers. It's a big mega star hotel, right on the ocean."

Servito used the mechanic's telephone to call The Breakers Golf and Beach Club. He booked the Presidential Suite and ordered a limousine. Then he used a fake passport to clear customs, and relaxed while the limousine whisked him off to the island of Palm Beach.

A few minutes later, the Presidential Suite's drapes were flung open by an enthusiastic bellboy to expose a fantastic view. Even though the sun had set twenty minutes earlier, there was still sufficient light to see the vast expanse of greenish gray ocean and the profiles of cruise ships on the horizon. Servito felt he could look out at that view forever. Presently, he

picked up the receiver close to the bed and dialed Jerry Allison's Toronto number.

Allison normally slept until noon, wasted his afternoons at Woodbine racetrack, and spent his nights collecting money for Servito. He answered after five rings. "Hello," he mumbled, his mouth filled with a bite of sandwich.

"It's me."

"Where the hell are you?" Allison garbled.

"Palm Beach."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Don't worry about it, Jerry. Everything's under control."

"How did you get through customs?"

"I'll tell you when I get back. I'm going to stay here for at least a week. Can you handle things?"

"Don't even think about it. Have a nice time. You deserve a vacation."

"I'm at The Breakers," Servito said, and gave Allison the telephone number of his suite.

"Uncle Sam's going to nail you one of these days... and when he does, your ass is gonna be grass," Allison warned.

"You let me worry about that. Meanwhile, I suggest you cover your own ass."

"I'll try not to call you," Allison said. He hung up and reached for his next sandwich.

Dressed in jeans, running shoes, and a well flowered shirt from Cayman, Servito hurried from his suite to the hotel lobby the following morning. "I need the name of a real estate company specializing in beach front homes. Here in Palm Beach," he told the desk clerk.

The clerk nodded while staring askance at Servito's dress and unshaven face. "Yes, sir. I would recommend Everglades Realty. They're absolutely the best."

"Why don't you call them for me? Ask them to send an agent here."

"When would you—"

Servito winked. “Now.”

“Your name, sir?”

“Durant. Arthur Durant. I’m staying in your Presidential Suite.”

“Yes sir. Just give me a minute.” Servito paced back and forth while he waited impatiently. The desk clerk returned less than a minute later. “A representative from Everglades Realty will be here in fifteen minutes, Mr. Durant,” he said, smiling. “Her name is Mary Langley. She’ll pick you up at the front door in a white Rolls Royce.”

Mary Langley arrived at the front of the hotel in exactly fifteen minutes. With ten years of experience in the Palm Beach market and a stunning dress, she was locked and loaded. Servito opened the door and jumped into the seat beside her before the Rolls had even come to a stop. “Hi. I’m Arthur Durant,” he said, flashing his irresistible smile. “How would you like to sell me a house?” he asked. His gray eyes scanned Mary’s well-proportioned body.

Mary was somewhat startled, but forced a smile and shook his hand lightly. “Did you have any particular location in mind, Mr. Durant? We have—”

“On the ocean.”

She gave Servito an incredulous stare. He scarcely appeared to have the means for any property in Palm Beach, let alone beach front. “Did you have any particular dollar amount in mind?” she asked, expecting to shock him with the reality of Palm Beach prices.

“If I like the house, the price is irrelevant,” Servito replied.

Mary Langley doubted her newest client understood how expensive “irrelevant” could be, but his rugged good looks and brash approach appealed to her. She gave him the red carpet tour, showing him eight waterfront mansions.

The last, just south of the Southern Boulevard Bridge, was a thirty-seven room Spanish hacienda with white stucco walls and a rust colored tile roof. The house surrounded a spacious courtyard that featured a large, kidney-shaped swimming pool in the middle. The pool deck and surrounding courtyard were covered with glazed Mexican tile and planters filled with

brightly colored flowers and tropical palms. A portion of the east side of the complex was open to the beach, providing a panoramic view of the ocean.

Servito followed Mary Langley through the courtyard and eastward toward the ocean. She drew his attention to the landscaping as they traversed the rear yard. "The area has been planted with a variety of palm trees, palmetto bushes, and tropical flowers," she explained. "The plantings have been placed strategically to provide maximum privacy without obscuring the ocean view."

"Let's keep going toward the ocean," Servito insisted, after only a casual glance at the plantings. "I want you to show me where the property line is."

They walked toward the ocean, but stopped when they saw a young woman approaching from the beach. She wore a scanty white bikini that contrasted magnificently with her deeply tanned skin and long raven hair.

Mary flung her hand over her head. "Where have you been?" she shouted, smiling and waving.

"Looking for you," the woman replied.

"I've been trying to reach you for hours," Mary said. "How did you know I was here?"

"I phoned your office."

Mary turned to Servito. "I'm sorry, Arthur. I should have introduced you right away. I want you to meet Karen Taylor, a very dear friend of mine." She turned to Karen. "Karen, this is Arthur Durant, a client of mine. I hope." She winked at Servito, but he was staring at Karen.

"Nice to meet you, Karen," he said, struggling to avoid a lecherous body scan. "Do you live around here?"

"If you buy this house, Arthur, Karen will be your next door neighbor. She lives right over there," she said, pointing south.

"In that case, I'll buy it," Servito said, his eyes still locked on Karen.

"What did you say?" Mary asked, shocked.

"I'll buy the house." He smiled. "I like the neighborhood."

"That's wonderful." Mary gulped, still doubting her client's ability to pay for it. She had not even told him the asking price. How could she question

his sincerity with class? “Karen and I are having dinner at The Breakers tonight, Arthur. Would you like to join us? My treat.”

“I’d be happy to join you. Do I need a black tie?”

“You don’t need a tie of any kind. Just meet us there at six-thirty. In the meantime, you and I can go back to my office and complete the paperwork. If you were serious about buying this house?”

“I am always serious,” Servito confirmed, staring at Karen.

Mary drove Servito to her office, where he made arrangements through an attorney in Toronto and a banker on Cayman Island to purchase the house. The purchaser was Bridge Financial, S. A., a company named after the Peace Bridge, which was the fulcrum of Servito’s incredible scam. The consideration was seven and a half million, the asking price.

“I’m on a roll!” Servito declared as he scribbled an illegible signature on the purchase documents. “In less than two hours, I bought the house of my dreams and met the woman of my dreams.”

Karen Taylor and Mary Langley stepped out of Everglades Realty’s white Rolls Royce in front of The Breakers at 6 p.m. and headed for the hotel’s front doors.

“So he did it?” Karen asked as they headed for the hotel’s front doors.

“It was amazing,” Mary replied. “He wasn’t the slightest bit interested in negotiating. He just asked me what the vendor was asking. He called a lawyer in Toronto and, less than thirty minutes later, seven and a half million was wired to our account from a bank in Cayman.”

“What business is he in? Did you ask him?”

“Not yet, but I’m going to—I’m dying to know. I think he’s gorgeous. I’d take a run at him if I wasn’t married.”

Karen and Mary found Servito at the bar in the Emerald Lounge, which was an intimate watering hole adjacent to a brilliantly green swimming pool. He was dressed in light khaki trousers, sandals, and a blazingly red tropical shirt, which gapped open enough to show generous quantities of black chest hair.

“Hi,” Karen said with a radiant smile. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

Servito shook his head. “I just got here. You girls ready for drinks?”

Mary nodded. “What a wonderful idea. I’ll have vodka on the rocks.”

“Karen, what’ll you have?” Servito asked.

“White wine, please,” Karen replied before lifting herself up to the stool on Servito’s right. She was stunningly attractive in a red silk blouse and short white skirt. A thin gold chain adorned her neck.

Servito experienced a strange and unique sense of nervousness. “Where in the world are you from, Karen?” he asked, struggling against a compelling urge to stare at her breasts and long, bronzed legs.

“Toronto. I was born and raised there. Where are you from?” Karen asked.

“What an incredible coincidence! I’m from Toronto, too.”

“Born and raised?”

Servito shook his head. “I was born in Oregon, but I found my way to Toronto ten years ago.”

“What brought you to Toronto?”

“Business.”

Mary could wait no longer. “Arthur, do you mind if I ask what business you’re in? My curiosity’s killing me. It isn’t often someone your age buys ocean front property in Palm Beach.”

“I’m in the oil business,” Servito replied.

“Do you own oil wells?” Mary asked.

Servito shook his head. “My business is at the other end of the pipeline. I’m in gasoline.”

“Obviously, you’ve done well.”

“I’ve been fortunate,” Servito said, resisting a strong urge to brag.

“Do your parents live in Oregon?” Karen asked.

“No. They’re both dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Karen said, wishing she hadn’t asked.

“I was only three when it happened. It was a freak accident.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“The plane they were in crashed in the mountains somewhere in Utah,” Servito said, looking away. “If my father’s car hadn’t broken down at the last minute, they would have driven to Salt Lake City. But they decided to fly.”

“Who looked after you after that?”

“Nobody,” Servito said. Part of him wanted to tell Karen more—reveal to her every inch of his soul—but a larger part wanted to block out the horrible loss of his parents and the miserable years that had followed.

“Nobody!” Karen said, startled by Servito’s answer. “How did you survive?”

“Orphanages.” He shrugged.

Karen placed her hand on top of Servito’s. “You really don’t want to talk about it, do you?”

Servito frowned and shook his head. Then he stared into Karen’s eyes. “Have you ever been in love?” he asked, hoping she would never let go of his hand. “I mean really in love.”

“Just once,” Karen replied wistfully. “It ended a long time ago.”

“So you’re not involved with anyone now?”

“No.”

“I can’t believe it,” he said, shaking his head.

Karen released Servito’s hand. “You can believe it or not,” she retorted, annoyed by his suspicion. “It’s true.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I said it right. I was about to say that I can’t believe what’s happened to me in the past twenty-four hours.”

“What’s happened to you?” Karen asked, turning to look over the bar.

Servito resisted an almost overwhelming urge to wrap his arms around Karen and pull himself close to her. “I was shocked when the girl next door turned out to be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen... I was overwhelmed when I found out she was single and uninvolved.”

Karen conceded a grin. “Well, you’re forgiven.”

Servito remained in Palm Beach for almost three weeks, long enough to move into his new home, mesmerize Karen, and disclose his real name to her. In addition to winning her heart, he succeeded in convincing her that he was a legitimate businessman, and that he had obtained his wealth by hard work and total dedication.

Karen's attraction to Servito might have been chemistry, his charisma, the magic of circumstances, or all three. Whatever it was, her interest in him intensified. He excited her. His energy and crazy enthusiasm made her happy again, and helped her to forget her loneliness and the horror of her captivity in Syria. She found herself looking forward to seeing him again and again, until she ached to be with him.

CHAPTER 18

The oil industry was large, but the community of gasoline independents was small. The players all knew each other, and keeping a secret was virtually impossible. So everyone knew there was an aggressive rookie in the market and that he was the man with a price.

In spite of Mike's persistence and the attractive prices he offered, he collided with reality. Too many gasoline independents had signed contracts that could not be broken without severe legal repercussions. To an independent with a signed contract, a good price was interesting but meaningless. After four weeks of concentrated effort, Mike had managed to sign only four independents.

He met with Owen Christian to give him a progress report. "Owen, I have some good news and some bad news," he said without expression. "I have four signed gasoline contracts. That's the good news."

"What's the bad news?" Christian asked.

"To the limit of exaggeration, they have a combined annual volume of ten million. I expect IFB will lose at least a hundred grand on the deals."

Christian chuckled. "Chump change!" he scoffed. "We're going to lose a hell of a lot more than that if we can't buy fuel oil... But keep going, Mike. We need big ones. Find us some elephants."

In his search for elephants, Mike met Tom Fletcher, a consummate entrepreneur. The timing was perfect. Mike needed a large gasoline customer, and Fletcher desperately wanted a new supplier. A large, overweight man with thinning and slightly graying blond hair, Fletcher was ten years older than Mike. In only twenty years, Fletcher had managed to

parlay his meager savings into a very respectable fortune by developing strip plazas in southern Ontario. All of them had been built on one- to three-acre parcels of extremely strategic commercial real estate, and he owned and operated retail gasoline outlets on thirty-one of his thirty-five properties.

Fletcher's gasoline outlets were all branded by major oil companies with whom he had signed cross-leases before the outlets were built. The cross-leases had provided Fletcher's company with triple-A lease covenants, together with a great deal of money in the form of pre-paid rent.

Initially, the cash proved to be a wonderful supplement to his plaza financing, but the emergence of enormous gasoline surpluses had changed the happy arrangement. With the surge of discounting independents, his gasoline outlets had become miserably uncompetitive. He now realized that if he had not been inhibited by the "exclusive supply" clause of his cross-leases, he could buy gasoline at substantially better prices and make a lot more money.

Mike's first meeting with Fletcher took place in a Tim Horton doughnut outlet in one of Fletcher's Toronto plazas. Fletcher's hazel eyes seemed to protrude from his reddened face as he relentlessly criticized the majors.

"They're ruthless, Mike! The bastards have absolutely no conscience. They should be in jail for what they're doing to me," he raged, and then poured a third heaping spoonful of white sugar into his coffee.

"Tell me what they're doing."

"Their contracts say they're giving me a franchise, but that's a laugh. They supply me with one hand and compete against me with the other. They've built and operated their own outlets directly across the street from five of my outlets. If that's not bad enough, they're dumping wholesale gasoline on the market at ridiculous prices. The independents are buying it and posting retail prices at ten cents a gallon below mine."

"Have you complained to them about it?" Mike asked.

Fletcher nodded. "Exercise in futility. The idiots they authorize to talk to me have no authority to do anything but talk. It's like dealing with robots."

"What about the cross-leases? Has your lawyer looked at them?"

“Iron clad. No way in hell we can break them.”

Mike raised his eyebrows. “Maybe there is.”

Fletcher leaned forward, suddenly very interested. “How?”

“Have you or your lawyer ever taken a good look at the demised premises in the cross-leases?”

“Sure. Why?”

“How much of your land do they cover?”

Fletcher’s puzzled expression gradually gave way to a broadening smile.

“Mike, you’re a genius. Why the hell didn’t I think of that? I’ve spent my whole life in the real estate business and I didn’t see it. It’s beautiful. I could offer a major price and an independent price. That’d be a million laughs!”

The technicality Mike had noticed was that the portion of Fletcher’s land covered by the cross-leases—called “demised premises”—was only a fraction of the total area he owned. Although the demised premises were occupied by the gasoline outlets, Fletcher was legally free to do as he pleased with his remaining land, all of which was properly zoned.

“It won’t be pretty, or cheap, and it’ll piss the majors off, big time,” Mike warned.

Fletcher laughed like a kid with a new toy. “I don’t care who it pisses off. I think it’ll work. How much do you think it’ll cost?”

“How many outlets do you have?”

“Thirty-one, including this one.”

“I think the whole thing could be done for less than a million if you did them all and limited them to bare-bones installations.”

Fletcher turned his palms skyward, shrugged his shoulders, and stared at Mike. “So tell me where I’m going to find a million. I’m leveraged to my eyeballs.”

Mike returned Fletcher’s stare. “If you’ll give me an exclusive supply contract, I’ll dig up the money,” he said, hoping fervently it was true.

CHAPTER 19

Buoyed by his progress, Mike tapped his pencil on the surface of his desk, pressing the telephone receiver tightly to his ear. “May I speak to Darcy Bell, please?” he asked.

After a three-minute wait, Bell finally answered. “Darcy Bell here,” he said with a deep, graveled voice.

“Mr. Bell, it’s Mike King, of International—”

“I know who you are. Listen, if you’re interested in selling gasoline to me, you can continue to call me Mr. Bell. Call me Darcy if you’re interested in buying my company.”

Mike was momentarily shocked, and then impressed. He seized the cue. “Maybe you and I could meet at your earliest convenience, Darcy.”

“Be at my home in one hour? It’s at the southwest corner of Seventh Concession Road and Highway Seven.”

“I’ll be there,” Mike said, convinced he was on the verge of hitting the mother load. This was indeed an elephant. Darcy Bell owned XG Petroleums Inc., an enormous independent with 284 retail gasoline outlets in Ontario, Michigan, and New York. The company’s annual gasoline volume was a mouth-watering 120 million gallons. If Mike could finesse a deal with Bell, IFB would no longer be in jeopardy.

Bell’s estate was marked with a large, green sign that read “Bell Acres” in large gold letters. Bell’s house adorned the end of a long, curving, tree-lined lane. The spectacular stone structure occupied the crest of a steep hill overlooking a pond completely surrounded by mature willow trees.

Mike parked his car beside a white Cadillac Eldorado convertible, which had the initials “D.E.B.” carved on the driver’s side door. He walked to the front door of the house and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a stocky man with a very athletic appearance and a snow white brush-cut. His ruddy complexion hinted that his hair had been red when he was younger. The bright red bow tie he wore complemented his tweed jacket and gray flannel trousers. “I’m Darcy... welcome to Bell Acres.”

Mike extended his hand. “I’m Mike King, Mr. Bell. It was kind of you to invite me to your home.”

Bell shook his hand with a vise-like grip. “Unless I misunderstood why you’re here, I thought you would call me Darcy.”

“My sincere apologies. I think we understand each other very well, Darcy.”

Bell winked, and then led Mike to his den. It was a beautiful, sun-filled room, every surface of it covered with stacks of paper and file-folders. “Sit here,” Bell said after quickly removing two stacks of folders from a white wicker chair. “Please excuse the mess. I would never be able to find a damn thing if I put all of this paper away.” Bell cleared a small space on his desk and sat with one foot dangling and his arms folded. “I could have arranged for one of our distinguished attorneys do this, but it’s not the way I do business. I preferred to meet with you to tell you some important details about the company, and also about myself. XG is a great company. It’s taken me a lifetime to build it, and I’m very proud of it.”

Mike was certain Darcy Bell saw him as a pigeon and resolved to keep him honest. Now that he had flown into Bell’s nest, the game was on. “If the company is as great as you say it is, Darcy, why are you selling it?” he asked.

Bell’s freckled face quickly turned crimson. “I’m not getting any younger, Mike, and I think it’s time I made some changes in my life. I don’t think I have to draw you a picture?”

“No.”

“My good wife, Martha, rest her soul, passed away this year. She gave me three lovely daughters during her wonderful life with me. She also did a

terrific job raising them while I was building XG. I had hoped that at least one of them would take over the company, but that was not to be.”

“Why?” Mike asked.

“None of the girls ever expressed interest, and I thank God their husbands all have their own careers.” Bell shook his head and raised his eyeballs skyward. “I don’t think those three are capable of running a bath, much less my company.”

Mike smirked. “I think I understand.”

“We have a lot of retail outlets in XG, and we burn a hell of a lot of gasoline.”

“Is your supply all under contract?”

Bell shook his head. “Good question. I used to sign long term gasoline supply contracts with the majors, but I don’t think they’re worth the paper they’re written on any more. You know, I actually believed them when they gave me that old bullshit about security of supply? Now the spot prices they offer are a helluva lot lower than their contract prices.”

“Are you interested in looking at a spot price from IFB?” Mike asked, although he was certain that Bell was not.

Bell frowned. “Please don’t make me remind you of why you’re here.”

“Another apology.”

“Accepted. My game plan from the beginning was to get big fast, price the hell out of the gasoline, and live on the momentum and the cash flow. I never believed in owning any of the real estate—it just eats up capital. The outlets we have aren’t the most beautiful on the street, but they’re efficient and they move a lot of gasoline. I knew if I could buy right, I could price it right.” He winked at Mike. “And these days, I can sure buy right.”

Mike winced, again reminded again of the severity of the buyers’ market. “How much do you want for the company, Darcy?” he asked.

Bell chuckled. “As much as I can get. You know how much you can afford, don’t you? All I want to know is what that number is. Then I’ll tell you if it’s high enough.”

Mike was reminded again of George Reimer’s speech in Lake Placid. Bell was living proof of the private-brand disease. He was a plunger—a

businessman who shoots first and asks questions later. To Bell, big was beautiful and small was less than. Profile was everything. He thought only about upside potential and never about risk. Fortunately, Bell had been right for the times. He had plunged into the retail gasoline business at a time when gasoline was in surplus and when refiners had no alternative but to foster the growth of independents.

Bell gave him a large envelope. “Here. It contains all the financial information you’ll need to make a decision. Please keep the information confidential and advise me of your decision as soon as possible.”

Mike studied the statements. After only a cursory look, he realized XG was extremely vulnerable. While the company had a record of consistent profitability, it had to sell huge volumes of gasoline to cover its enormous cost base. Some of the rents XG was paying for properties were outrageously high. Even worse, Bell and his three daughters had taken out all of the retained earnings of the company in the form of dividends. With the exception of its large inventory of gasoline and deteriorating pumps and storage tanks, the company had no assets. Still, it moved 120 million gallons of gasoline per year.

The following day, Mike prepared an information package and distributed one to each of the nine members of the IFB board of directors. In addition to the information contained in Bell’s envelope, he included a proposal to purchase fifty percent of the common stock of XG Petroleum for three million dollars. He had no intention of offering that much to Bell, but wanted approval for as much negotiating horse-power as he could get. He knew that including a proposed supply contract for 120 million gallons would make the proposal extremely attractive to all concerned.

Owen Christian gave Mike the necessary approval two days later. “Congratulations, Mike,” he declared. “The board has given you a mandate to proceed with the acquisition of XG with all possible speed. I want to wish you the best of luck with this deal, son. If you pull it off, the company will be in your debt.”

A week later, attorneys for both companies and the principals met at the head office of IFB for the signing of the formal documents—fifty percent of the common stock of XG exchanged for two and a half million dollars.

With cheering and trepidation, numerous bottles of chilled champagne were opened and emptied.

Within four months, Fletcher had completed construction of bare-bones retail gasoline facilities on twenty-seven of his properties. The remaining four properties were not large enough for more than one gasoline outlet. When he opened each of his new independent outlets for business, he immediately increased the gasoline price posted at the major oil company outlets on his properties to a level that ensured nobody would buy there. The posted prices at his newly constructed outlets, on the other hand, were rock bottom.

This bold and controversial move absolutely infuriated the majors, but there was nothing within the law to stop him. One of the majors tried to stop him by building a six foot concrete wall separating its outlet from Fletcher's outlet, but Fletcher's customers simply drove around the wall.

CHAPTER 20

Saturday, August 26, 1970.

It was sunny and hot, with only gentle lake breezes providing a measure of relief to the guests who had assembled on board. *The Iroquois* had left the Gravenhurst dock at 2 p.m. sharp for the wedding of Karen Taylor to Jim Servito. A beautiful but ancient steamboat, *The Iroquois* glided through the narrows at the north end of Muskoka Bay before heading northward, into the open waters of Lake Muskoka. Its destination was Azimuth Island, a ten acre prominence owned by Karen's parents at the northeast end of the lake.

Since the late eighteen hundreds, Muskoka had been a destination for the super wealthy who sought an elegant lifestyle that could be matched by none but a few resort communities in the world. In addition to providing shelter and relief, the beautiful islands around Beaumaris provided dramatic sites for enormous cottages, many of which had been constructed by wealthy Americans from Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century. The lake and its numerous rock, pine, and hemlock-covered islands were carved twenty-five thousand years earlier by a layer of ice over two miles thick. The pinkish rocks and crystal clear soft water had attracted health conscious visitors to the area for decades.

While most of the guests were out on the decks enjoying the sights, the soft music of the orchestra, and the free liquor, Karen stared without focus at a full length mirror in the stateroom. Memories of the cruel and unusual twists of fate that had prevented her reunion with Mike continued to haunt her. She frowned while examining her lace and silk wedding dress. She had

often dreamed about this day in the eight years since she met Mike King, and she looked back on her former dreams with a twinge of sadness.

Patti Arthur, Karen's life-long friend and maid of honor, sat on the couch smoking a cigarette between sips from a tall glass of red wine. She stared at Karen's reflection in the mirror.

"What's bugging you, babe?" she asked.

"Nothing," Karen lied, returning Patti's stare.

"I've seen that look before," Patti retorted, shaking her head. She pulled up her pink skirt to her hips, kicked off her shoes, and leaned against a stack of fluffy pillows. She took a long drag on her cigarette, and then smiled at Karen. "Is Jim Servito as good as he looks?" she asked.

"Better."

"You're going to have to work at it, you know... marriage is a bitch," Patti warned. She took a long sip of wine. She had married and divorced twice in the time since she and Karen had returned from Syria.

"As hard as you did?" Karen griped.

Patti sputtered over another large gulp. "Don't be nasty. Jack and I just got tired of working at it. Our split was more a default than a divorce."

"This one's until death do us part," Karen vowed.

Patti laughed. "Does that ever sound familiar..."

The ship's bell rang and the boat decelerated. Karen hurried to the window and saw the guests assembling on the aft deck. The young Presbyterian minister stood with his back to the stern railing. Facing him were Jim Servito and his best man, Jerry Allison, waiting in dark blue suits for the arrival of the bride. To commemorate the occasion, Servito had allowed his black hair to grow long and had tied it in a ponytail at the back of his head. A diamond earring adorned his right earlobe.

Karen turned to Patti, her face ashen. "It's like an incredible dream. I still can't believe it's happening."

"Are you really sure you love this guy, babe?"

Before Karen could reply, there was a gentle knock at the door to the stateroom. When Patti peeled it open, Karen's father stood on the threshold,

smiling at his daughter. George Taylor was elegant and handsome in a gray morning suit. The scant strands of his brown hair were oiled and combed straight back. “You sure you want to go through with this, honey?” he asked. On more than one occasion he had expressed concern about the seemingly impulsive wedding. He had been impressed with Servito’s financial achievements, but was worried about his qualifications to be the husband of his one and only daughter.

Karen ran to him and hugged him with tears in her eyes. “With all my heart, Dad. I’ve never wanted anything more in my entire life.”

He grinned and planted a kiss on her right cheek. “Then let’s go. Your man’s waiting for you.” He grasped Karen’s hand and led her toward the aft-deck. Patti gulped the remainder of her wine, butted her cigarette, and followed.

While the orchestra played “Season of Love,” Patti led Karen and her father through a narrow opening provided by the admiring guests. They stopped when they reached the spot where Servito and Allison waited. George Taylor then turned and stepped back into the crowd to join his wife.

When the music to stopped, the minister began. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in this beautiful place and in the sight of God to unite Karen and James. And in celebration of this proud alliance, may choirs of angels be sounded—may the sun blaze in the heavens. May hailstones of fire rain down upon those who would oppose this sacred union.

“Together in strength, James and Karen, may you rise up to smite any enemy who dares to intrude upon your temple of love for one another. Today, the first day of the remainder of your lives together, you have come before witnesses to proclaim your love. There are those here who have raised their voices in song and whose hearts are with you on this blessed day.”

Close to the rear of the crowd of guests, Bob Bushing finished his second martini with a long gulp and jabbed Dave Lasker with his elbow. “Did you raise your voice in song?” he asked, flashing a devilish grin.

“Fuckin’ right I did,” Lasker responded. “The crook’s getting the princess, today.”

The minister faced Servito and grinned. “James, I understand you have something to say to Karen.”

Servito turned to face Karen. He held her hand tighter. “I, James Servito, do take thee, Karen, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death do us part.”

The minister turned to Karen and nodded.

She faced Servito and held his hand with both of hers. “I, Karen Taylor, take thee, James, to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day and forever, for better, for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death do us part.”

“May I have the rings, please?” the minister asked.

While Allison fumbled through his pockets, Patti Arthur handed Karen’s gold ring to the minister. When the minister finally received Servito’s ring, he held both in front of him. “May these rings, symbols of everlasting loyalty and harmony, bind you together always and ever shield your union from discord and from those who would wish you harm. You may exchange the rings now,” he declared, nodding to both.

Servito placed his ring on Karen’s finger. “With this ring, I thee wed.” He paused, frowned. “And all my worldly goods I thee endow,” he declared with extreme trepidation.

Karen then placed her ring on Servito’s finger. “With this ring I thee wed, and all my worldly goods I thee endow.”

The minister grasped their left hands. “You have declared your consent and vows before this congregation. Let the universal resolution that exists within us all confirm your covenant, as I hereby declare you husband and wife. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” He smiled. “You may kiss the bride.”

As Servito took Karen in his arms, the guests clapped, whistled, and cheered while the orchestra resumed play. The anchor was hoisted, and *The Iroquois* resumed its journey to Azimuth Island.

The Taylors’ cottage was a rambling, three-story, white-framed structure built at the height of the island. Its interior was crafted to reflect the rock

and wood surroundings of Muskoka: maple and cedar covered the walls and ceilings, while the floors and furniture were made of oak. The massive fireplace had been cut from the local rock and occupied an entire wall. The chimney towered above the green shingled roof. Many of the guests would sleep that night in four-poster beds in the upstairs bedrooms. Beside the cottage and surrounded by pine trees was a recent addition—the tennis court. The outbuildings, vestigial relics of an earlier era, included a laundry, the icehouse, servants' quarters, and the butler's cabin. An octagonal gazebo stood at the end of a long, rocky promontory on the southwestern shore of the island. Beyond the tennis court and at the end of a gentle slope was the imposing, seven-slip boathouse. The privacy of its upstairs living quarters was reserved for the bride and groom.

On the well-manicured lawn, which sloped from the verandah down to the water's edge, circular tables had been set up for the guests. Each table was covered with a white tablecloth and a large pink and white umbrella. Bottles of expensive chilled champagne, each with its own engraved corkscrew, adorned the tables. Under a large yellow tent erected near the cottage, a long bar was fully stocked. Teenage girls dressed in black skirts and white blouses stood at the ready with numerous trays of finger food and champagne filled glasses.

When everyone had come ashore, the orchestra members hurried to set up their instruments on the verandah while the guests headed for the yellow tent. Jerry Allison was among the first to arrive, and Servito caught up with him there. Once Allison had been served his first scotch, Servito pulled him aside. His gray eyes penetrated Allison's. "Remember, asshole," he warned. "You watch that loose lip. I've managed to convince the Taylors that we run a clean act, and I don't want to blow it just because you had too much loud mouth soup. You understand?"

Allison swallowed the drink that had been arrested between his lips. "You have a nice day, Jimbo. Don't worry about a thing. If anyone asks, I'll tell them you walk on water."

George Taylor stepped to the microphone on the cottage's verandah. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," he bellowed. "I want to welcome you to Azimuth Island. For those of you who don't know me, my name is George Taylor. I'm the father of the bride, and self-appointed master of

ceremonies. It's my very great pleasure to be your host, and to have you here with us to share in the joy of this glorious day. As a departure from most weddings, I won't allow you to be subjected to a barrage of speeches."

A roar of approval erupted from the wedding guests.

"I will, however, take this opportunity to say a few important words. They come straight from the heart. Before I do, I would like Karen to come up here and be with me." Karen had changed into a pale yellow, pleated summer dress. She reached for Servito's hand and tugged his arm. "You're coming with me," she insisted, and Servito followed her to the verandah.

Taylor waited until the cheers had subsided. Tears filled his eyes. "The twenty-third of May, nineteen sixty-three, was a sad day. Many of you joined me on that dark rainy day for Karen's funeral, all of us assuming she had perished in the explosion of Olympic Airways, Flight 806... I thank God that didn't happen. Today, I'm so happy that she's not only alive, but here beside me, and married to a man she loves very much." He turned and hugged Karen. "I love you, honey," he said. "I wish you nothing but happiness."

Karen kissed her father's cheek. Then she moved to the microphone. "Thanks for everything, Dad," she said, tears flowing. She turned to Servito and smiled. "Jim, darling, I owe you so much. You've reminded me in so many ways that I'm alive. I intend to taste and savor each day with you like a rare wine, and I swear to God I won't let one of them go by without remembering how grateful I am for your love."

While the guests applauded and cheered, Servito removed his jacket, loosened his tie, and removed the microphone from its stainless steel post. "I know George told you that Karen loves me very much, but he forgot to mention how much I love Karen. I'm sure it was just an oversight. As part of my vows to her, I promised to love her and cherish her until death do us part. I want to assure you all, and George, of the sincerity of that vow." He turned and handed the microphone to a stunned George Taylor. "Sorry, old boy," he said with a spiteful glare of his steel gray eyes. "I just couldn't leave it unsaid." While the guests cheered and whistled, Servito wrapped his arms around Karen, bent her backwards, and kissed her, long and hard.

George Taylor waited for silence, only a slight stoniness revealing his rage.

CHAPTER 21

Life at International Fuel Brokers had become quite pleasant for Mike. He had earned the respect and gratitude of Owen Christian and the board of directors, who had responded to his success with extremely generous salary increases and perks. Christian had even indicated to Mike that he was the heir-apparent to the president's seat.

His personal life, in grave contrast, had grown miserable. Mike continued to enjoy every precious minute of the time he spent with his daughter, Kerri, but the quality of his time with Barbara had steadily deteriorated. Their sex-life was virtually non-existent. Barbara had told him she was no longer interested in sex and probably never would be again. Mike had asked her on numerous occasions to seek therapy, but she responded to his urgings with stony denial.

He finally resolved to confront Barbara, hoping that the shock of confrontation, or the thought of losing her marriage, might compel her to action. "How would you like to go out to dinner tonight? Just the two of us," he asked, telephoning her from his office.

"Where?" Barbara asked. No enthusiasm.

"The Ivy Roadhouse."

"Is there some special occasion?"

"No special occasion. I just want to talk."

"Aren't we talking now?"

Mike exhaled heavily. "Would you like to go out for dinner or not?"

"I'll have to get a baby-sitter," Barbara warned.

That night, Mike and Barbara drove to the Ivy Roadhouse, which was an elegant country restaurant near their home. They maintained a less-than-companionable silence until they were seated and the waiter had arrived to take their drink orders. Once the waiter had left the table, Mike leaned forward. “Barb, we’ve got to talk. I’m not happy in this marriage, and I don’t think you are, either. I suggest we do something about it.”

Barbara gave him a vapid stare. Then her face contorted into a mask of indignation and anger. “You brought me all the way to this restaurant to tell me that?”

“Barbara, forget the Goddamned theatrics and just talk to me.”

“What would you suggest we do?”

“Get a divorce,” Mike replied, his eyes fixed on Barbara’s, searching for the slightest response.

Barbara’s face reddened. “Is there someone else? Is that why you’re unhappy?”

Mike tightened his lips and shook his head. “It’s obvious you don’t understand how I feel about this situation. Something’s missing from our relationship. It’s a critical ingredient and, as far as I’m concerned, the marriage can’t survive without it.”

“You’re talking about sex again, aren’t you? Is that all you can think about?”

“When we first met, we were fantastic together. We couldn’t get enough of each other. But that’s changed, Barbara. I don’t know why you don’t want to anymore... I get lonely... And I don’t want to be the one who initiates every time. Just once in a while I like to be on the receiving end of desire. I can’t—” He snapped his mouth closed while the waiter placed their drinks on the table.

“Would you like to order now?” the waiter asked.

“No. We’ll finish our drinks first,” Mike said. When the waiter left, Mike turned again to face Barbara. “I can’t go on like this, Barbara. Sex is an important part of my life.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you felt this way?” Barbara asked, her eyes remaining fixed on her drink.

“That’s ridiculous. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve spoken to you about the deficiency in our sex life. You’ve actually admitted you don’t like sex, but I don’t understand. You liked it well enough at the beginning.”

“I wasn’t referring to sex,” she retorted, staring at him with anger in her eyes. “Why haven’t you told me that you want a divorce?”

“Until now, I thought there was an alternative.”

“Well if that’s what you want, you can have it, but you’re going to pay for it, and you can forget about seeing your daughter.” Barbara’s angry blue eyes showed no tears, and no regret.

The acidity of her tone and the speed of her response revealed a preparedness that he had not expected.

“Divorce isn’t what I want, Barb. What I want, and what I’ve wanted from the beginning, is for you and I to be happy in our marriage. It appears that isn’t what you want, and if that’s the case, then divorce is the only viable alternative.”

Barbara threw her napkin to the table and snatched her purse from the floor. She stood, causing her chair to make an awful squeal against the hardwood floor. “I want to go home, now!” she shouted.

Mike set down cash for the two unfinished drinks and followed Barbara to the car. He was relieved to see tears in her eyes, and he confronted her for the second time. “Why have you never told me the whole story about yourself?”

Barbara glared at him, her eyes glazed with indignation. “What the hell do you mean?”

“You haven’t told me the whole story about your former relationship. Every time I bring it up, you’ve deliberately lost eye contact with me. You did it again tonight. There’s something you’re not telling me, something important!”

Barbara turned to face the window to her right. “There’s nothing!” she insisted.

“Please don’t insult my intelligence. I think you owe me that much.”

She slumped in her seat and covered her face with her hands. Finally, she wiped her eyes and spoke, barely loud enough for Mike to hear. “I’ve made

a terrible mistake.”

“You never stopped loving him, did you?”

She turned to face him, her tears flowing fast. “No.”

It was like a hole had been punched in his heart. Barbara had never loved him. She had only wanted to replace the child she had given up for adoption.

Even if there was a hope of saving the marriage, Mike realized that he no longer wanted it.

CHAPTER 22

A week later, a messenger of the courts presented Mike with Barbara's petition for divorce. The document alleged that the reason for the breakup of the marriage was that the husband of the petitioner had been mentally cruel. It further alleged that his cruelty had resulted in intolerable mental and emotional stress and anxiety for the petitioner.

Barbara moved out of the house, taking Kerri and most of the furniture to a luxurious two-bedroom apartment in north Toronto.

Mike wept. He wept because he was alone once again, because Kerri had been taken from him, because his marriage had been an enormous failure. It would be easy to blame the whole thing on Barbara, and yet he felt responsible.

After months of adversarial contact between the lawyers acting for Barbara and Mike, a settlement was concluded. It ordered that Barbara would retain custody of Kerri and be awarded all of the net proceeds from the sale of the matrimonial home, which Mike was ordered to offer for sale forthwith. It further provided for generous child support and alimony payments to Barbara. Mike was granted reasonable visitation privileges.

After their country home sold, Mike rented a one bedroom apartment close to his office and, in an attempt to forget, plunged deeper into his work.

Mike had always known that XG Petroleums walked a tightrope between success and failure. His worst fears had lately become a reality. Facing prolonged and intolerable gasoline surpluses, the refiners had decided to protect their investments in retail gasoline facilities and restore the dignity of their brands, once and for all. Until then, they had watched passively as

independents proliferated in all markets, even those that had once been considered the majors' private domain. By posting brutally competitive retail prices, the refiners moved to recapture the huge and growing price-sensitive segment of the retail gasoline market.

The outcome was massive and prolonged price wars. The enormous profits the independents had once enjoyed evaporated in a matter of weeks. For highly leveraged XG Petroleums, the fallout was immediate and massive. The only attractive feature of the company had been price competitiveness, and it had lost its edge.

The arithmetic of the new situation was ominous. If IFB retained its fifty percent interest in XG, it would lose millions. Even worse, Darcy Bell's fifty percent interest in the company compelled him to make up fifty percent of the losses. A prolonged continuation of hyper-competitive market conditions would almost certainly bankrupt him, leaving IFB with one hundred percent of the catastrophe.

"We have the makings of a major catastrophe here, Mike," Owen Christian declared, stomping back and forth in front of his desk. "Unless something is done about that company fast, one of us is going to be extremely embarrassed." Christian stopped his pacing and pointed an accusing finger at Mike. "And it isn't going to be me. I told you before and I'll tell you again. I'm not going to be the one who takes the hit for XG. I don't care how you do it, but I want IFB out of this deal and I want it done soon. I don't think I have to remind you that your future is riding on how you handle it."

Mike was torn between rage and regret, unable to express either. It was embarrassing to watch a man for whom he once had a great deal of respect covering his ass in such a pathetic, bullying manner. Christian had been delighted with the enormous gasoline volume the XG acquisition had given to IFB, and he had gloated upon announcing that the fuel oil supply of IFB had been saved. And Christian's signature was on the acquisition proposal, the same as Mike's. His initial inclination was to remove Christian's teeth, but he elected instead to swallow his pride. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Owen," he said, gritting his teeth. "I accept the challenge."

Christian's face reddened. "You're damn right you accept the challenge! You have no choice!"

"Would you mind doing me a favor?" Mike asked.

"What?"

"Tell me how much IFB is prepared to accept for its interest in XG. If I'm going to dispose of it, I need to know the ground rules."

For decades, Darcy Bell had operated his business without having to cope with negative conditions, but now the risks he had never considered were a reality. Mike listened patiently while Bell blew off steam, condemning the majors for their incredible stupidity.

"How can they possibly make money at those prices?" he shouted. "The sons of bitches are blowing their brains out! Their fucking credit cards are costing them at least four cents a gallon, and they're not even grossing that much on the street! They can't be!" He paused to give Mike a questioning stare. "What've you got to say about this mess?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "Sooner or later everybody rolls snake-eyes, Darcy. It looks like it's your turn."

"What the hell do you mean? I didn't even get a chance to roll the dice."

"Would you do me a favor?" Mike asked, fully aware that Bell had frequently rolled the dice.

"Sure. What?"

"Tell me how much you want for your fifty percent of XG."

Bell chuckled. "If you can find anyone dumb enough to pay me twenty thousand, I'll buy your lunch."

"Why twenty thousand?"

"To pay my fucking legals."

Mike smiled. "Thanks. I hope we have lunch real soon."

"Me too."

Mike made a deliberate and obvious glance at his watch. "I've got to go. I have another appointment in fifteen minutes, and it's at least half an hour away."

“Then get the hell out of here,” Bell said with a smirk. “But don’t forget. Call me about that lunch.”

“Will do,” Mike said as he shook Bell’s hand.

“You said you wanted to talk. What about?” Fletcher asked.

“How would you like your business to get a lot bigger?”

Fletcher grinned. “Not particularly. Big isn’t necessarily beautiful. Besides, the whole thing’s in the tank right now. You know that.”

“Sure it’s in the tank, but it’s created a beautiful opportunity.”

Fletcher was immediately curious. “Tell me about it.”

“It involves XG Petroleums.”

Fletcher nodded. “I know the owner. I thought I was a high roller, but Bell makes me look like a penny-ante piker. I think he belongs in an asylum...”

Fletcher and Mike shared a grin. Then Mike leaned forward. “Were you aware that IFB owns fifty percent of XG?”

“Yup. Why?”

“Everybody wants out.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“The company can be bought for a song.”

“Who the hell would want to?”

Mike’s eyes lit up. “You and me.”

Fletcher laughed. “You and me and what bank?”

“Don’t worry about the money,” Mike said, his heart in his throat. “Leave that problem to me.”

“Okay, let’s assume you round up enough money to buy XG. What are we going to do with it? The company’s a mess. It’s unsalvageable.”

“I admit it needs some radical surgery. The company would have to be downsized, in a hurry.”

“How big is it?”

“Two hundred and eighty-four outlets in Michigan, New York, and Ontario. Only twenty-five of them make any money. The rest are dogs. They just spin volume and lose money.”

“How the hell could anyone get rid of dogs in this market?”

“It wouldn’t be easy, but it can be done. Every one of Bell’s outlets is on leased land. But if you take a good look at the lease terms, you’ll see that they’re all short, with options to renew. Most of them include options to purchase or rights of first refusal. We wouldn’t have to keep any of the dogs for longer than five years—then we just let the lease slide.”

“Well, suppose I’m interested.” Fletcher set his elbows on the table. “What kind of deal do you have in mind?”

“A lot of independents aren’t going to survive this war, Tom. The ones who do are those who own the real estate under their pumps, and they will do it by reducing their dependence on gasoline and placing more profitable businesses on contiguous property. You happen to be in that fortuitous position. I’m confident that we can do the same with XG. All of its leases on the twenty-five profitable outlets have options to purchase.”

“You really think you can find the money?”

“Yup,” Mike said. Doubt pounded his brain.

“If you do, we’ll talk again. I’m interested.”

“Great!” Mike said, grinning wide. “I’ve got to go look for the money. But you might want to look at this in your spare time.” He removed a folder from his briefcase and gave it to Fletcher. “It contains a complete list of XG’s properties, their addresses, and their individual financial statements. Don’t waste your time looking at the dogs. Look at the profitable outlets. Some of them are amazing.”

Fletcher put on his reading glasses, scanned the contents of the folder, and began to process the equation of Mike’s proposition. Even if the XG deal was only marginally attractive, his instinct prodded him to participate. Mike understood the gasoline business and the players in it—if the gas wars continued, his cooperation would be invaluable. He glanced at the adjacent window over his glasses and grinned. “All of a sudden, I feel like a kid again.”

CHAPTER 23

Seventy-two hours later, Mike was in New York, his nerves jangling as he sat in the vast and ornate waiting room at the head office of Golden National Oil. What had he been thinking? Even if he could find the money, it was possible that XG would drag him down just as thoroughly as it had Bell...

His thoughts were interrupted by the approach of a tall, handsome man in his early fifties. His neatly groomed, graying hair complemented his perfectly tailored, black pinstriped suit. His dense black eyebrows and deep set brown eyes defined wealth and power. “Mike King?” the man asked, his voice resounding with authority.

Mike sprang to his feet. “Yes... Mr. Conrad?”

“Call me Paul. Welcome to New York, Mike. Did you have a pleasant flight?”

Mike nodded. “Fortunately, I picked up a late cancellation. It was very kind of you to see me on such short notice. I’m sure you’re very—”

“Don’t mention it,” Conrad interrupted. “In fact, I’ll share a little secret with you. When you told me you were looking for gasoline, I was prepared to fly to Toronto to see you. I’m sure you know we have a lot of it to sell.”

“And I have a lot of it to buy,” Mike responded.

“Let’s go into my office.”

They sat together on one of two brown suede covered couches, and Conrad’s secretary delivered a silver plated urn of hot coffee.

Conrad crossed one leg over the other and leaned backward. He stared at his guest. “Mike, I must confess I salivated when you told me the volume. I

hope you're interested in placing the whole thing with Golden National."

"If the price is right," Mike said, sensing it was too early to reveal who the real buyer would be.

"I can assure you it will be."

Mike sipped his coffee. "Paul, I'm curious to know why you chose to build a refinery in Buffalo."

"The location was easy. The site we picked had access to pipelines from all directions—it's on the St. Lawrence Seaway, and Buffalo is close to the center of gravity of industrialized North America. But the timing..." He shrugged. "The decision became very difficult when we considered the surplus of refining capacity in the United States and Canada. But when we factored everything into the equation, it was still the best option. We have been extraordinarily successful in finding crude oil in the past seven years, and had to satisfy ourselves with normal crude profits. The refinery is the great multiplier. As you know, the sum of the parts of a barrel of crude is a lot greater than the cost of that barrel. Instead of selling our production to the highest bidder, we can sell it to our refining division for a lot more, and the markup is tax free."

"How is it tax free?"

"Our Bermuda trading company makes the profit on the sale of crude to our refining division. According to Bermuda tax laws, profits generated by Bermuda corporations outside the territorial limits of the country are received tax free..."

"Well there you have it." Mike set down his coffee. "What are you going to do with all the gasoline you produce?"

Conrad frowned, his lips tightened. "We have two less than palatable choices. We're going to have to wholesale it or drink it. We'll have to live with the former until we establish a retail distribution system of our own. Fortunately, we have money coming out our ears, so we plan to build or buy retail distribution as soon as possible."

Conrad's words were music to Mike's ears. The company was swimming in money and desperate for customers. Even better, the president of the company had welcomed him like royalty. Mike locked his blue eyes on

Conrad's. "What would you say if I told you that International Fuel Brokers was not the prospective purchaser?" he asked, his heart pounding.

Conrad raised his eyebrows, but seemed otherwise unperturbed. "Who is?"

"Me. Actually, it's a partnership I hope to form, after acquiring XG Petroleums."

Conrad gave Mike a knowing grin. "This is interesting. I think you're going to have to tell me a lot more."

"Not long ago, I was responsible for influencing the decision of IFB to acquire a fifty percent interest in XG. The deal worked well until the gas wars devastated XG's bottom line. IFB gave me a directive to liquidate its interest in XG, but... the more I looked at XG, the more I saw it as an opportunity."

"What's your objective?" Conrad asked.

"I'm not sure I understand," Mike said, perplexed.

"Did you want to become an owner or did you see a profit opportunity?"

"Both. I want to have more personal control over my future, and I believe that being an independent gasoline retailer is still a profit opportunity. Particularly with XG."

Conrad blinked. "And why is that?"

"XG is a monster," Mike said in a rush. "It operates far too many outlets. Only twenty-five of them make money. Furthermore, it doesn't own any real estate. It pisses away cash flow on ridiculous rent payments. And it isn't involved in a single ancillary or secondary business. That's the real killer. XG has all the infrastructure, but no one willing to make the big changes. I believe diversification is the essential component of any gas war survival plan. If I owned XG, I would cut and keep on cutting until all we have left is profit. I'm absolutely convinced the company can be turned around, and I want to be the one who does it."

"Impressive," Conrad said, smiling and nodding approval. "Obviously, you've done your homework. Tell me, who is your intended partner?"

"Tom Fletcher. His home and office are both in Toronto. He's experienced and his primary business is real estate. He owns over thirty

small to medium sized shopping plazas, most of which include retail gasoline outlets.”

“I don’t think you’ve given me a complete answer. What I want to know is why you think you’ll need Fletcher as a partner?”

Mike resisted an urge to argue. “Fletcher’s experience in real estate development will be a tremendous asset.”

Conrad glanced at his watch. “Will you be staying in New York tonight?”

“I’m prepared to stay for so long as it takes to make a deal. If you tell me it can’t be done, I have no reason to stay.”

“You have a lot of courage, son,” Conrad said with a broad grin. “If your expedition into XG doesn’t work out, come and see me. I’ll give you a job in a heartbeat.”

Mike’s jaw sagged as he stared at Conrad. “Does that mean you can’t do anything for me?” he asked, flattered yet discouraged by the finality of Conrad’s statement.

“Quite the contrary. It means I can and I will. You came to my office with two things Golden National needs. If I can’t have one of them, there’s no way I’m going to let the other one get away. I would love to have you come to work for me, but I know you won’t. It’s obvious you want to go it alone so badly that you can taste it.” Conrad stood and shook Mike’s hand. “Have dinner with me. I’m going to make you an offer you won’t believe.”

CHAPTER 24

Sharp at eight the following morning, Mike met Tom Fletcher at the Sunrise Restaurant, an aging but clean Greek establishment located a block and a half from Fletcher's office. It was time to take his audacious plan to a new level. With Paul Conrad's letter of intent in his briefcase, he now had access to money, which was the prime mover and most crucial component of his plan. If he was unable to convince Fletcher to participate, he was prepared to go it alone.

"What's new?" Fletcher asked as Mike took a seat on the opposite side of the table.

"Everything," Mike said, smirking.

A waitress delivered two clean mugs and a canister of freshly brewed coffee to the table, and the men gave her their breakfast orders.

"I had dinner in New York last night. My host was Paul Conrad, the president of Golden National Oil."

"You're kidding!" Fletcher said, genuinely impressed. "How the hell did you do that?"

"I phoned him and asked for an appointment. You seem surprised. You know him?"

"I don't know him personally, but I know a hell of a lot about him."

"Tell me what you know."

"The guy's a living legend—one of the most incredible rags to riches corporate stories I've ever heard. He wanted to drill a wildcat well in Alberta, but couldn't find partners. He was the only human being who believed there was oil in the Red Rocks area, so he mortgaged everything

he owned and did it alone. The rest is history. That well hit it big and he kept on going. They said he had the Midas touch.”

Mike suddenly realized why Conrad had questioned Mike’s decision not to go it alone. “Did he ever find a partner?” he asked.

“I guess you could say he did. He owned a hundred percent of the common stock when he incorporated Golden National. I don’t think he owns any more than ten percent now... but tell me what he had to say.”

“He told me all the reasons they built a new refinery, but one of them wasn’t downstream market timing. They couldn’t have picked a worse time to be looking for wholesale gasoline distribution. They don’t have any retail distribution of their own, so they’re desperate for large volume gasoline supply contracts.” Mike removed Conrad’s letter of intent from his briefcase and handed it to Fletcher. “He told me they’re looking for contracts like this one.”

Fletcher shook his head from side to side as he stared at the letter in disbelief. “This is incredible! Either Conrad’s really desperate or you’re one super negotiator.”

“It’s a sweetheart deal for you and me, but it’s at least as important to Golden National.”

“Why?”

“Put yourself in their position. You own oil wells and you know you can sell every barrel of oil you produce to some country or refiner for a dollar. But if you owned your own refinery, you could sell those same barrels to your refining division for three dollars. Then your refinery can separate those barrels into petroleum products and sell them for four dollars a barrel.”

“I think we’re wasting our time,” Fletcher said, shaking his head again. “Maybe you and I should go find some crude oil.”

“You’ll cry when I tell you what else he told me.”

“Go ahead. Make me cry.”

“Golden National doesn’t sell its crude production directly to its refinery. Every barrel is sold to its wholly owned Bermuda subsidiary. The Bermuda company never physically takes possession of the oil. It just temporarily

owns it on paper, and then sells it to Golden National's refining division. The profit on the sale is tax free."

"That is a beautiful story. It doesn't make me cry, it pisses me off. They scoop tax free millions while slobs like us beat our heads against the wall trying to make a buck that's bare ass to the tax man."

"And slobs like us still have to eat, right? Let's have breakfast."

"Do you think IFB will actually sell its shares of XG to us?"

Mike nodded. "They'll practically give them to us."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Fletcher mumbled. "How much do you think they'll want?"

"Not much more than a buck. I'll tell you the minute I know for sure. Probably today."

"How much does Bell want for his half?"

"Twenty thousand. He needs it to cover his legals."

"So you're telling me we can pick up the whole damn company for twenty grand?"

Mike nodded. "Yup. And the meter starts running as soon as we do."

"Sure it does. And so do we."

Fletcher pressed his hand against his forehead.

"Listen to this," Mike soothed. "No more than seventy-five days after we ink the deal, the float on credit terms will put at least ten million dollars of Golden National's money in our bank, interest free. You'll put another two million in the bank if you merge your operation with XG. If you still need convincing, XG has at least a quarter of a million dollars worth of motor oil inventory on its shelves, and it's all paid for. And we can junk XG's unused hardware for at least another hundred grand, if all else fails."

Fletcher leaned forward and placed both hands face down on the table in front of him. "All right, I'm in. Where do we go from here?"

"Fairly simple," Mike said, elated. "We'll incorporate a holding company. We'll each have a fifty percent interest. The holding company will buy the shares of XG from IFB and Darcy Bell—then XG will be the operating company and the supplier of bucks."

“I’m sure you know it’s more complex than that!”

“It is,” Mike replied, fully aware that he had not mentioned exactly how Fletcher’s company would merge with XG. “I want you to know that I was prepared to do the XG deal alone when I came here today, if you and I couldn’t agree. I still am,” Mike declared, desperately trying to maintain his confidence.

“Agree on what?”

“A formula for merging your company with the holding company.”

“I assume you have one,” Fletcher said, his lips tightening. “Why don’t you lay it on me? Maybe we agree. Maybe we don’t.”

Mike took a deep breath and exhaled. “I want the holding company to own all the real estate,” he said.

Fletcher frowned. “Not my real estate.”

Mike nodded without blinking.

“Then you can forget the whole deal,” Fletcher declared. “There’s no way that you or XG could afford it.”

“Maybe XG can, Tom. It’s going to have a hell of a lot of cash in the bank from Golden National.”

“But for how long? How much cash is it going to have when we dump all the dogs?”

Mike knew Fletcher was right. The first priority after acquiring XG was to get rid of all but twenty-five of its outlets. The downsizing would dramatically reduce XG’s gasoline volume and its corresponding cash float. He raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, keep your properties, but at least give the holding company a right of first refusal on them.”

Fletcher’s frown gradually gave way to a smile.

“Speak to me,” Mike prompted.

“On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“We don’t pay IFB a dime more than we pay Darcy Bell.”

Mike shook Fletcher’s hand. “We’ll give them less,” Mike promised.

March 20, 1971.

At precisely 1 p.m., Mike brazenly marched into Owen Christian's office and lowered himself into the chair directly in front of Christian's desk. "You still haven't told me how much IFB wants for its shares of XG, Owen," he said, glaring at his startled boss.

"As much as a willing buyer is prepared to pay," Christian replied, quickly regaining his composure.

"That's good. Your problem with XG Petroleums will be history within seven days."

Christian was delighted. "Wonderful! Tell me more."

"A lawyer, acting for a willing buyer, will present a bona fide offer to IFB to purchase its interest in XG."

"May I ask who that buyer is?"

"You can ask but I can't tell you. I can assure you, however, that when the ink on the paperwork is dry, you and IFB will be permanently relieved of the embarrassment of XG Petroleums."

"I presume that whoever's making the offer will be interested in having IFB supply the gasoline. Am I correct?"

"If so, you would have to make a very attractive offer," Mike said, delighted to watch Christian squirm.

"How attractive?"

"I doubt IFB could afford it, but give it your best shot."

Mike's cavalier response succeeded only in raising the level of Christian's ire. "Is that right?" he protested. "I want to know who's making the offer and where the money's coming from. I don't think I have to remind you that IFB still pays your salary."

"That's going to change seven days from now—this is my one week's notice of intention to resign. And I think you know it doesn't matter where the money comes from. XG isn't worth a dime and you're kidding yourself if you think anyone's going to pay you even that much."

Christian, scrabbling for answers, suddenly realized the reason for Mike's insubordinate attitude. "You're involved in this thing, dammit! If I find out

you are, I'll sue you and veto the sale.”

Mike clenched his teeth. The respect and admiration he once felt for his boss had been totally replaced by contempt. “We both know you won't do that, Owen,” he said.

CHAPTER 25

After signing the necessary documentation, Mike had successfully completed a quantum leap from salaried employee to business owner. He entered the Royal York Hotel at seven that evening, planning to dine in style to celebrate his business coup. One of Toronto's finest hotels, the massive old building showed its age, but had managed to retain its elegant charm. He marched directly through the long lobby to the Imperial Room, which was one of his favorite dining establishments. Dinner reservations were normally required, but the maitre d'hôtel happily pocketed a twenty dollar tip and led Mike to the last available table for two.

Seconds later, a waiter approached. "Would you care to order something to drink, sir?" he asked.

"Crown Royal. Lots of rocks," Mike ordered, and then scanned the crowded room. The tables were covered with embroidered white linens and adorned with gold plated cutlery, occupied mostly by couples enjoying the ambiance, the food, and each other. The sight of all the happy couples quickly diminished his euphoria.

A second waiter stopped at Mike's table. "Excuse me, Mr. King. I have something for you," he said.

Mike turned quickly in surprise. In the waiter's right hand was a gold plated corkscrew, and over his forearm was a white linen napkin. A silver tasting cup hung from a chain around his neck. In his left hand was a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon that Mike recognized from the top shelf.

"There must be some mistake," Mike said, bewildered. "I didn't order that."

“No mistake sir.” The waiter pointed to a table in the far corner of the room. “The couple at the corner table asked me to give this to you.” Mike turned to look where the waiter had pointed. His pulse rocketed when his eyes found Karen, looking more beautiful than he could remember. Her flowing black hair barely reached the collar of her white silk blouse, and almost perfectly matched the color of her full length, black satin skirt. He resisted an impulse to race across the room and take her in his arms when he shifted his focus to the man at her table.

“Shall I open it, Mr. King?” the waiter asked.

“Please do,” Mike said. He stood and walked unsteadily in the direction of Karen’s table, his heart pounding harder with each step. He struggled with conflicting emotions when he arrived at the table. The love of his life was once again within his reach, but it was impossible to do what his heart demanded. He smiled and extended his trembling right hand to meet hers.

“What a wonderful surprise!” Karen said. She smiled radiantly and reached for Mike’s hand, and then turned to her partner. “Mike, I would like you to meet my husband, Jim Servito. Jim, this is Mike King, an old friend of mine.”

Disappointment shot through Mike’s body like an electric shock. He released Karen’s hand to shake the hand of Karen’s husband, the man who had utterly destroyed his last hope. “Pleasure to meet you, Jim,” he lied, forcing a smile to conceal his disappointment.

Servito frowned before he stood and accepted Mike’s hand. “Nice to meet an old friend of Karen’s,” he said, unsmiling.

“How are you, Mike?” Karen asked.

“Just fine. I’m older, but a little wiser,” Mike replied, trying to smile and appear cool. “How are you? Are you as happy as you look?”

Karen nodded, and then displayed a strained smile. “Where’s your wife? I see you’re alone tonight.”

“Barbara and I were recently divorced.”

Karen’s smile disappeared. “Mike, I’m so sorry,” she said, stunned and disappointed by the cruelty of fate. If only their timing had been different...

Mike resisted an almost overpowering urge to hold Karen's hand. "It was wonderful to see you again, Karen, and to meet your husband. I really should return to my table and allow you to have your dinner. Thank you both for the bottle of wine. It was very thoughtful. I promise I'll enjoy it."

Servito stared at Mike until he had returned to his table, and then turned to face Karen. "I couldn't help noticing how the two of you looked at each other. Was he more than just a friend?"

She nodded, staring away.

"Lovers?"

She focused on Servito's eyes and nodded again.

Instantly, Servito hated Mike King. "How long ago?"

"When he was in university. He was in medicine."

"How did it end?"

"He went to British Columbia and I went to Europe."

"Is he a doctor now?"

"I really don't know. I haven't seen him since."

Servito wanted to pursue the subject, but decided to postpone further questioning.

Karen picked uncomfortably at her dinner for twenty minutes, and then excused herself to the washroom. There, she reached into her purse and removed a notepad and pen. She scribbled a note, ripped it from the pad, and folded it into her hand. When she emerged from the washroom, she handed the note to the waiter who had delivered the bottle to Mike's table. "Would you please give this to Mr. King? Please don't let anyone see you doing it," she insisted.

After agonizing over the note and its implications until almost noon the following morning, Mike could wait no longer. He reached for his telephone and dialed the number Karen had given him. He felt a surge of relief when he heard her voice. "It's Mike. Can you talk?" he asked, his pulse racing.

“Yes. Jim’s not home. I’m so glad you called, Mike. It was wonderful to see you again.”

“The pleasure was all mine... I was disappointed to see you with a husband.”

“I don’t mean to be sarcastic, but I know exactly how disappointed you were.”

Mike immediately recalled Karen’s call to his apartment years earlier. “I’m sorry. I know people in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

“The worst part of it was having your wife tell me.”

“I’m sorry for that, Karen. I had no way of knowing that you were alive. I felt hopelessly trapped when I found out... I thought it would be best if we didn’t see or talk to each other again.”

“Why?”

“I knew it would hurt too much.”

“Who did you think it would hurt—you or me?”

“Both. It was selfish of me. I hope someday you’ll forgive me.”

She sighed. “What happened to your marriage? I thought you were happy.”

“We were for a while, but eventually it was obvious that we had made a mistake.”

“Did you have any children?”

“One—Kerri. She’s three years old now.”

“Did your wife get custody?”

“No contest.”

“Oh.”

Mike smiled a little as he thought of his daughter. “She’s the light of my life. I really look forward to seeing her, but I detest the time limit. It makes me feel like a paid entertainer.”

For a moment, neither of them knew what to say.

“But enough about me!” Mike persisted. “Tell me about you. When were you married?”

“Last August.”

“That’s great,” Mike lied. “Where did you meet Jim?”

“In Palm Beach. Shortly after I found out you were married, I went there with my mother. I just followed the sun, you know? I spent winters in Florida and summers at my parents’ cottage in Muskoka. To postpone boredom, I picked up some part time jobs, mostly modeling. I met some men along the way, but none of them interested me. I was convinced I was heading for spinsterhood until I met Jim.”

“Are you happy?” Mike asked, desperately hoping she wasn’t.

“... as happy as I could be, under the circumstances.”

“What circumstances?”

“I’m pregnant.”

Karen’s newest revelation hit hard. He fought back tears. “I was hoping you would tell me you were desperately unhappy... I never stopped loving you, Karen. I probably never will. I curse fate for keeping us apart.”

Tears streamed from Karen’s eyes. Her body ached to be in Mike’s arms. She could never love Jim as deeply or as passionately as she loved Mike, but her sense of gratitude prevented her from telling Mike how she felt. Jim had saved her from desperate loneliness and deep depression—if nothing else, she owed him her loyalty.

“I would gladly roll back the years, Mike, but it’s impossible.”

Mike sensed that she wanted to say more, but she hadn’t. If she hadn’t, she wouldn’t. He couldn’t force it out of her... even if he wanted to. He fought down a surge of nausea. If the conversation continued, his pain would only intensify. “I hope we live long enough to meet again, Karen, under entirely different circumstances.”

“Yeah?” Her voice was soft.

“Be happy. You deserve it.”

CHAPTER 26

“Tell me some good news,” Fletcher said, scowling and sitting erect on the edge of a chair in front of Mike’s desk.

“It’s a nice day,” Mike answered, attempting to inject levity into his partner’s morose mood.

“Then give me some bad news. It shouldn’t be hard.”

“It’s the dogs, Tom,” Mike insisted, as he had so often. “We can’t get them out of the system any faster than the leases will allow. They’re dragging the whole damn company into the sewer. It doesn’t matter what the margin is—they’ll never pump enough.”

“You have any bright ideas?”

Mike shook his head. “The only thing I can do is keep on closing outlets, the ones where the lease costs are less than what we lose by operating.”

“Hell, that is good news,” Fletcher said, his voice oozing sarcasm. “Why didn’t you tell me in the first place?”

“It’s shitty news and you know it!” Mike retorted, refusing to echo Fletcher’s sarcasm. “You understand the arithmetic as well as I do. When we lose volume, we shrink the float, and it’s the float that’s financing our losses.”

“How much time do you think we have left?”

Mike pressed his lips together and stared into Fletcher’s eyes. “Maybe twelve months.”

“Maybe!” Fletcher protested. “If it isn’t twelve months, then what the hell is it?”

“No way you can calculate it accurately—there are too many variables. The only certainty is that, in the absence of a miracle, XG runs out of money sometime in the next twelve months.”

“That’s just beautiful!” Fletcher said, his face crimson, his eyes squinting, “You know what really pisses me off?”

“What?”

“It’s my own damn fault. I let you con me into buying this black hole.”

Fletcher was right. For some time Mike had agonized over that simple reality. He had not only conned Fletcher, he had conned himself. In his blind rush to escape the confinement of corporate bureaucracy, he had miscalculated. Never once had he considered the possibility that gasoline margins would stay depressed, or that they might actually run out of money. But Mike was not a quitter. Even though economic conditions had forced him to consider bankruptcy, he had no intention of renouncing his dream without a fight. The dream was all he had left.

He leaned back, resting his head against his hands and lifting his feet on top of his desk. “Answer one question, Tom. I want an honest answer.”

“Shoot.”

“Suppose things had turned out differently. Suppose after buying this financial black hole, margins got fat and XG had made millions. Would you still be talking about how I conned you?”

Fletcher had no defense. He had entered into the XG deal with the same selfish motive as Mike. “So what’s your point?” he asked, scowling.

“I’ve already made it,” Mike declared, continuing to stare into Fletcher’s eyes. “You can’t suck and blow.”

Fletcher’s pride took a firm hold on reason. “Then I’ll just blow,” he said. “I’ve worked far too hard to sit around for the next twelve months and watch XG suck my real estate into the tank.”

“Are you saying you want out?” Mike asked.

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. I’m in the real estate business, and I plan to stay in it. Gasoline was never meant to be anything more than a supplement. I certainly never intended it to be the tail that wagged the dog.”

Mike now truly understood why Paul Conrad had asked him why he thought he needed a partner. He had intended to benefit from Fletcher's extensive real estate experience, but that had not happened. Throughout the entire eighteen months of the partnership, Fletcher had been about as useful as a security blanket. While Mike had been busy fighting and clawing to save XG, Fletcher had spent his time chasing his own interests. Now that it had started to rain, Fletcher was pressuring Mike to provide an umbrella.

Mike removed his feet from the desk and leaned forward. "How do you suggest we do it?" he asked.

"I'll make it easy for you. Give me a buck and the holding company's yours. We can do it today if you want. Just give me the word, and I'll call my lawyer."

Mike's options were extremely unpalatable. If he refused to accept Fletcher's offer, Fletcher would likely reverse the offer by formally inducing the buy-sell clause in the partnership agreement. If that happened, Mike would be out on the street with nothing but a dollar, an enormous disappointment, and a broken dream. If he accepted Fletcher's offer, he would be the sole owner of a doomed business. Until it did die, however, there was still the remote possibility of a miracle.

"Let's do it," he said.

CHAPTER 27

The winds of change had begun to blow. The governments of oil producing countries were openly expressing concerns about the day when their oil reserves would be depleted. They worried that the price the world was paying for their oil was insufficient to replace the incomes they enjoyed while the oil was still in the ground. They had concluded that, as demand for oil continued to rise, a sellers' market would soon arise. But if they were ever to succeed in increasing the price they received for oil, they must do so by acting in consort. A loose relationship of oil producing countries was solidified into a cartel known as Oil Producing and Exporting Countries, or OPEC.

In early 1973, OPEC convened a meeting in Tehran, Iran. The attendees included the oil ministers from the OPEC countries, representatives of the world's seven largest oil companies, and politicians from oil consuming countries. The implications of the event induced thousands of members of the media from around the world to converge on Tehran. With the threat of cut-backs in oil production and the expropriation of oil production facilities owned by the oil companies, OPEC succeeded in extracting an agreement from the oil companies that forced them to pay an additional thirty-five cents for each barrel of crude oil produced and exported from OPEC countries.

The OPEC ministers then convened another meeting in Vienna, Austria. Its purpose was to force an agreement on further increases in the price of crude oil. While the meeting was in progress, the Arab-Israeli War broke out and, as a result of the war, the meeting failed to produce an agreement. Shortly thereafter, the meeting was reconvened in Kuwait City. There, an

agreement was reached to cut back OPEC crude oil production. The diminished output quickly resulted in huge increases in the world price of crude oil.

Mike's improbable miracle was at hand. As the price of crude oil escalated, so too did the margin XG Petroleums enjoyed on gasoline it purchased from Golden National. Paul Conrad deeply regretted that he had agreed to include the price escalation clause in the gasoline supply agreement between Golden National and XG Petroleums. The clause limited the gasoline price increases Golden National could pass on to XG to fifty percent of crude oil cost increases. While North American wholesale gasoline prices increased by forty percent, the price increase to XG Petroleums was limited to twenty percent.

Suddenly, XG was not only alive and well, it was on the threshold of an enormous bonanza. Its retail margin expanded to absurd levels. By Mike's most conservative estimates, XG's annual pre-tax profit would be at least eight million dollars. With slightly more than two years remaining on the Golden National supply contract, he had been blessed.

He decided to use the enormous profits to consolidate the company. He planned to purchase key pieces of real estate that were still being leased by XG from third parties. If the opportunity presented itself, he would also purchase any properties that Fletcher attempted to sell. To Fletcher's dismay, the holding company still held rights of first refusal on all of his properties.

It wasn't long before Paul Conrad arranged a telephone conference with Mike. He initiated the discussion with a classic understatement. "I guess you're fairly happy with the agreement."

Mike grinned. "My only regret is that we didn't make it for ten years, Paul."

"I'm sure that's true... But listen up—I'll give you ten years if we can renegotiate the price escalation clause."

"Not possible. I need this agreement more than you can ever know, Paul," Mike said. He would never tell Conrad explicitly that XG had come within a month of bankruptcy.

“It’s hurting Golden National more than you could ever know. I need some concessions,” Conrad pleaded.

Mike resorted to the same tactic he had used with Fletcher. “Suppose that the price of crude had gone down, instead of up. And suppose the price clause had been written to cover decreases. Tell me honestly: would you have been prepared to make concessions to XG?”

“That’s hypothetical, Mike,” Conrad retorted, even though he couldn’t help but concede Mike’s point. “We’re talking about reality here. Now I’m asking you for concessions. Is there any way we can work this out?”

“I’m sympathetic to your problem, Paul, but the reality is our agreement,” Mike said. “Both of us entered into it in the cold light of day with our eyes wide open. It’s not my fault that you suddenly see it as improvident.”

“Well said,” Conrad conceded. “I’ll share a private thought with you, Mike. If I were in your position, I would be just as tough. I’m going to warn you, though—if I can find a legal way to recover something out of that contract, I’m going to do it.”

Mike suspected that Golden National would attempt to recover part of its losses by increasing its gasoline trucking charges to XG. He studied the contract and discovered that the pricing strategy they had worked out applied only to gasoline bought from Golden National at the refinery gate, and did not include delivery. To eliminate the vulnerability, he set out immediately to replace his mode of transportation. His search led Mike to Amerada Tank Lines in Fort Erie, Ontario. Amerada’s geographic positioning and its vast trucking capability made it by far the most logical candidate to handle XG’s haulage. The logistics were so perfect that Mike was prepared to pay a premium to Amerada if it could handle XG’s entire requirement.

In a meeting with Dave Lasker, the president of Amerada, he negotiated a gasoline transportation agreement under which Amerada Tank Lines would pick up gasoline at the Golden National refinery in Buffalo and deliver it to XG’s retail outlets. The agreement effectively eliminated any possibility that Golden National could recover its losses by raising its trucking charges

to XG. Even better, Amerada's haulage rates were marginally lower than Golden National's.

Seconds after Mike left Lasker's office, Lasker telephoned his boss: Jim Servito.

CHAPTER 28

September 8, 1976. 11:45 a.m.

Mike hurried from his aging station-wagon toward Buffalo's River Club, a swank restaurant on the shore of the Niagara River. Bob Bushing met him at the front door with a big smile and an outstretched hand.

"Bob Bushing?" Mike asked, reaching to shake his hand.

"In the flesh. You have any problem finding this place?"

"No, your instructions were great, and Dave Lasker gave me a good report on you."

"I'll have to tell him how much I appreciate that." Bushing grinned. "But let's go inside. I've reserved a table with a view." Bushing led Mike to a table with a spectacular view of Lake Erie. "So you're interested in a little spot action," he said, attempting to initiate serious discussion.

Mike nodded. "It's not a desperation move. It just makes a lot of sense. My company's supply contract expires at the end of this month. I'm looking for some spot product."

"What's the volume?"

"Slightly over a hundred million."

Bushing's jaw dropped open. "Wow! You want to buy a hundred million?" he asked.

Mike grinned and shook his head. "I've already cut a one year deal with Golden National for seventy million. I'm looking for a spot price on all or a portion of the remaining thirty."

Bushing continued to salivate while mentally calculating his commission on thirty million gallons. “I’ll make you an offer you can’t refuse. Where are your locations?”

“Don’t worry about locations. I want a rack price.”

“Sure. No problem.”

“First, I want to talk about your sources. Where do you get your product, and how do I know it meets government specs?”

Bushing grinned. “We buy most of it from refiners on both sides of the border. We buy some from Europe, and occasionally we get a hell of a deal from Caribbean refiners. It’s all top quality product.”

“Bob, if your price is right, and I decide to buy, I’ll expect you to provide me with certified specs.”

“Give me twenty-four hours. I’ll have all of the above and the right price for the whole thirty million,” Bushing promised.

Servito’s telephone jangled, interrupting the tranquility of his farmhouse office. “Shit!” he barked, and then pushed a scantily clad Dianne Thorpe from his lap. He chugged the remainder of his beer before grabbing his telephone receiver. “What do you want?”

“It’s Bushing. You told me to call if something big happened.”

“What big happened?”

“I just had lunch with a guy who wants to buy thirty million gallons. You interested?”

“Who’s the guy?”

“His name’s Mike King. His office is in Toronto.”

“What did you say his name is?”

“Mike King. You know him?”

“What did he look like?”

“Really good looking dude—he should be in the fucking movies. Tall. About six feet. Blond hair. Mid thirties.”

“I’m interested. But not right now. Give him a highball price, but stay with him. Keep bugging him for the business. Keep your price high until I tell you to drop it.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“One more thing... find out all you can about him and his business. I want a complete book on this guy.”

CHAPTER 29

A freakishly late September heat wave had driven the temperature into the mid-nineties. Sweat drenched the armpits of Mike's shirt and visible stains marred his beige suit jacket. He was anxious to return to his apartment to take a cold shower and change, when the phone rang.

"King," he barked.

"Mike, it's Evelyn," Owen Christian's secretary said. "How are you?"

"Hot and sweaty. And you?"

"Fine. I'm sorry to bother you, but I had to call..." There was a pause, and he thought he heard a sound like coughing. "Owen's dying. He had a stroke in his office this afternoon. He isn't expected to survive."

"Where is he?"

"In the ICU at Toronto General." There was another muffled pause.

"Are you okay, Evelyn?"

"He's been fine, until today. He was on the phone with someone at Canam... thank God I was in his office."

Thirty minutes later, he entered the hospital's lobby.

"Hi, stranger," a familiar voice intoned, causing his heart to race. Mike stopped and wheeled to his left. Karen was no more than ten feet from him, smiling her perfect smile and still looking unreasonably attractive in a pale pink summer dress. Her face and body showed absolutely no signs of the years that had elapsed since their last meeting.

His mind blurred, his blue eyes glazed in disbelief. "Hi," he said, weak kneed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

“I do volunteer work,” Karen said, walking closer. “One of my outpatients had to be admitted tonight. I’m here to see her. What are you doing here?”

“A former boss of mine had a serious stroke today. I’m here because my conscience wouldn’t allow me to forget him.”

“How serious is it?”

“His secretary said he isn’t expected to live.”

“I’m sorry,” Karen said.

“Don’t be. I hated his guts. Do you know where intensive care is?”

Karen pointed to the elevator doors to Mike’s right. “Go to the second floor. You’ll see the duty nurse when you get off—she’ll tell you what room he’s in. Will you be there for long?”

“I suspect not... why?”

“Would you be interested in a cup of coffee later?”

Mike grinned and winked. “I’ll be back in thirty minutes. Where can I meet you?”

“Just take the elevator to the basement floor and follow the signs to the coffee shop.”

Thirty minutes later, Mike joined Karen at a small, circular table in the most distant corner of the shop.

Karen pointed to a styrene cup on the opposite side of the table. “You still take it black?”

Mike smiled and nodded. “Thanks for remembering.” He could scarcely believe he was finally, incredibly, exactly where he had wanted to be for so very long.

“How is he?” Karen asked.

“Comatose,” Mike replied, shaking his head. “I couldn’t wait to get out of there. All I could do was stand there and look stupid.”

“I don’t understand. If you hated the man’s guts, why wouldn’t your conscience let you forget him?”

“I’ve asked myself that question at least a hundred times in the last hour. It was what he did for me that I couldn’t forget. He hired me and gave me

my first real chance. He believed in me and gave me opportunities when no one else would. But then when it counted, he ran for cover.”

Karen’s eyes widened. “What did you do then?”

“I found a partner and bought a retail gasoline company. The partner and I parted company almost two years ago. Since then, I’ve struggled on alone.”

Karen stared at Mike, intrigued. “You can’t just end the story there. How did you get into the oil business?”

“It’s a very long story. I don’t want to bore you.”

“You could never bore me... Are you happy? Any regrets?”

“As far as the business is concerned, no. About my personal life, lots of regrets.”

“I’m sorry,” Karen urged.

“The biggest one is not being able to see my daughter as often as I would like. Unfortunately, my ex remarried and took her to San Diego... But enough about me. Let’s talk about you. Has your life been good?”

Karen took a deep breath and held it. Her brown eyes glimmered with sadness.

“Maybe you’d rather not talk about it.”

Karen stared at Mike with a pensive melancholy. “I don’t know... It’s Jim. I thought I knew him when I first met him. He seemed so sensitive and considerate. He made me feel alive again. But he also led me to believe in things that didn’t exist, and blinded me to things that did.” She dropped her head into her hands. “He never really wanted a wife,” she confessed. “All he wanted was a trophy, and someone to give him a son.”

“And you did?”

Karen nodded. “A beautiful boy. Phillip. He makes me feel like it was all worthwhile.”

She used the fingers of both hands to wipe tears from her eyes. “It gets worse, much worse... for the longest time, I thought Jim was an honest businessman. Now I’m sure he’s not.”

Mike shook his head slightly. Getting involved in a bad marriage, he could understand. But crooked business was still outside his ken. “How do you know he’s not?”

“I’ve overheard too many of his telephone calls. He has people hurt, even killed if they don’t pay him,” she whispered.

“Are you sure? Maybe he was just bluffing.”

“Jim never bluffs where his money is concerned.”

“Does he know you know?”

“No. He would kill me if he did.” Again, Karen wiped tears from her eyes. “He really scares me, Mike.”

Mike’s mind was spinning within a torrid tumult of joy and a rage. “What business is he in?”

“I don’t know, exactly, he’s always been vague. Something in the gasoline business.”

“That’s strange. If he’s in the business, I would have heard about him long before now. The community of players is not that large. What’s the name of his company?”

“He has more than one. Most of them are numbered corporations. Every time he incorporates a new one, one of his lawyers asks me to sign papers—that’s how I know. He said the documents were to protect me, because they exempted me from liability.”

“Where’s his office?”

“He owns a farm in the Caledon Hills. He spends more time up there than he does at home... there and on his plane.”

“He owns a plane!”

“Yes, it’s at the farm. He built an airstrip there.”

“Does he use it for business?”

“I don’t know. I suppose.” Karen’s eyes pleaded with his.

Mike reached across the table to cover her hand with his and stared affectionately into her eyes. “What are you going to do?”

Karen’s eyes watered again. She looked away. “I’m confused... my heart tells me to leave him but my head won’t let me.”

“Why won’t your head let you go?”

“Jim’s an incredibly possessive man. He would never let Phillip go, and I couldn’t leave without him.”

Mike squeezed her hand tighter. “I never stopped loving you, Karen. My heart was broken the last time I talked to you. I was certain we had missed our last chance to be together again. I don’t want to miss it this time.”

Karen turned her hand and grasped Mike’s. Her watery brown eyes suddenly grew radiant. “This time I won’t let you,” she whispered. “Do you know a place where we can be alone?”

CHAPTER 30

“That was beautiful!” Mike panted. “Is it true what you said?”

“Is what true?” Karen asked.

“Do you really have all night?”

She frowned. “I’m not sure... Jim probably won’t be home for days, but I can’t be sure.”

“Then how late can you stay?”

“I told Phillip’s nanny I wouldn’t be later than eleven.”

Mike displayed an evil grin. “Great! Then we have time for the second half.”

Karen smiled and kissed the end of Mike’s nose. “If it’s half as good as the first half, it’ll be great.” She lifted her leg over his thigh and pressed her body against his.

Thirty minutes later, Mike stared once more into Karen’s eyes. “Do you know what would make me the happiest man alive?” he asked.

“What?”

“Living with you.”

She closed her eyes and exhaled. “I would do that in a heartbeat, but it’s impossible.”

“Nothing’s impossible if you want it badly enough.”

Karen stared at the ceiling. “I want it, but Jim is a jealous, vindictive, selfish man. He said he would kill me if I ever tried to take Phillip away.”

Mike’s body stiffened as reality invaded his happy dream. In spite of his desire, he had no right to place her life in jeopardy, or to ask her to choose

between her son and himself. If her assessment of Servito's temperament was correct, a permanent reunion with her would have unthinkable consequences.

"Dammit!" he declared, pounding a fist into his pillow. "I'm not going to spend one more second of my life without you. Are you the slightest bit interested in living the rest of your life with that man?"

Karen looked into Mike's eyes and placed her hand on top of his fist. "If I could, I'd leave Jim and move in here tonight. I told you, King. You're the only man I ever loved."

Mike experienced an enormous surge of confidence. "Then we've got to think of a way of finessing the transition without getting you killed."

"There's only one way... we have to bring Jim down. What can he do if he's in jail?"

Mike mulled over the possibilities as Karen explained, becoming more enthusiastic with every second.

"I'm his wife. I could slip through the cracks in his business. Maybe I can dig up enough dirt to put him in prison." She kissed Mike's chest and smiled. "He'll never know. Besides, he couldn't make my life any more miserable than it is."

Mike shook his head. "I still don't like it. If your husband really is a killer—"

Karen placed her fingers against Mike's lips. "I've made up my mind, and there isn't a thing you can do to stop me," she said, her elegant chin protruding.

Shortly after eleven, Mike eased his car to a stop a full block away from Karen's apartment building. She moved closer to him. "I'll never forget tonight," she said. "I'm alive again."

He stiffened. "I want you to call me the second you sense any danger, or the second you've found something.

"How about the second I want you again?"

"That too," Mike replied with a grin. He kissed her one last time.

Karen entered her apartment and was startled to see her husband standing in front of the television set in the den. He turned the set off and marched toward her. "Where were you tonight?" he asked with a suspicious glare.

"Visiting one of the out-patients at the hospital. She had to be admitted today."

"Until eleven forty-five?"

Karen concluded that her best defense would be a strong offense. "Until eleven forty-five," she confirmed, defiantly returning his piercing stare. "Where have you been? I haven't seen or heard from you for two days."

"I don't have to justify myself to you, ever! I pay the bills around here and you never question that!"

Terrified by her husband's threatening stare, Karen turned, walked to the master bedroom, and closed the door. She closed her eyes, hoping the confrontation was over. Seconds later, the door flung open and slammed against the inside wall with a loud thud. "I haven't finished talking to you!" Servito shouted, lunging toward her. He pushed her to the bed and seized the front collar of her blouse, jerking downward, ripping it from top to bottom.

Karen frantically grabbed at the shreds of her blouse with trembling hands.

He squinted and clenched his teeth, then slapped her face as hard as he could. "Don't you ever walk away from me like that again, bitch!" he shouted, his right knee spreading her legs and pressing hard against her crotch. He held her arms against the bed above her head with a vise-like grip, and then lowered his mouth toward hers.

Fear gripped her. His breath reeked of alcohol. She had never seen such rage in his steel-gray eyes.

He kissed her savagely, inserting his tongue and squeezing her left breast until she cried out. Then he sat upright, releasing her arms. "I don't want to hurt you, darling," he said with a smirk that sickened her. "I just want you to appreciate that I still call the shots in this marriage. Do we understand each other?"

She responded by turning to face the wall.

“Answer me!” he demanded, his right fist clenched.

“Yes,” she whispered, her eyes closed, her reddened and still throbbing cheek pressed against the pillow.

“Good. I have to go to a business meeting. You have a nice sleep.”

She waited until she heard the front door click closed, then climbed from the bed and walked to Phillip’s bedroom. She tiptoed to his bedside and stared at her son in silence for almost a minute. “I’m going to change your life, Phillip... I promise you that with all my heart,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 31

Servito stepped from his taxi and hurried into the Brass Rail Tavern, one of the numerous components of the neon jungle at the south end of Yonge Street. Allison was seated at the bar, flanked by Dianne Thorpe and another extremely attractive young prostitute. The number of cigarette butts in the ashtray in front of the three indicated that they had been there for a few hours already.

He marched to the bar and slapped Allison's right shoulder. "I want to talk to you," he said, and then kept on walking.

Allison nodded and stood. "I'll be right with you." He kissed the girl to his right. "Keep your sweet ass right here, baby. I'll be back." He turned and followed Servito to the washroom.

Servito waited until Allison was facing the urinal, and then turned to him. "Did you get the stuff?" he asked.

"What stuff?"

"The cocaine, asshole! What stuff did you think I was talking about?"

Allison nodded and flashed a proud smile. "It was in the manifolds of two of the trucks that came in from Buffalo this afternoon."

Servito shook his head. "Come on, Jerry! Wake up! Where's the nose-candy for the farm tonight?"

"Got it," Allison said, patting the left breast of his suit jacket. "Right in here, baby."

"Great!" Servito declared. He raised his right thumb, and then frowned. "While we're in here, I want to talk to you about another couple of items..."

The first is my wife—I want her followed. I want to know where she is at all times.”

“You think she’s fooling around?”

“I’m not sure. I just wanna know.”

“Okay. I’ll start tomorrow.”

“No. Get Lanotti to do it. Tell him I want him to start immediately.”

“I’ll phone him right now,” Allison said, zipping up.

“Don’t go away—I’m not finished. Tomorrow, I want you to see a man by the name of Lou Patelski. He runs a chemical operation in Erie called Polyco Inc. Patelski wants to pay us a lot of money to get rid of some poly chlorinated biphenyls. He claims he can cut gasoline with as much as two percent of the shit without changing the performance. I want you to go down there and get him to prove it to you. If Patelski’s right, we’re gonna be in the PCB business in a big way.”

Allison nodded, his mouth slightly opened. “What the hell is PCB?”

“A very nasty chemical. It’s used in electrical transformers. It’s hard to dispose of because it’s toxic and it takes a long time to break down. Nobody wants anything to do with it.”

“But we do?”

“Goddamned right we do! The money Patelski’s offering us is unbelievable, and it’s all cash.”

“I’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

After giving Servito a high five, Allison hurried to the pay telephone outside the washroom door.

Karen searched every cubic inch of the penthouse in an effort to find something that would link her husband to criminal activity. Frustrated and tired, she rested on a stool in her kitchen. When the telephone rang, she placed the coffee on the counter and lifted the receiver.

“Hi, it’s me. I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m just fine, now that you called,” she said, smiling.

“I want to see you again, very soon.”

“I want that, too, but I can’t until I know where Jim is.

“Will you call me when you do?”

“Are you at your office?”

“Yup. I should be here all day.”

Karen sighed. “I just spent the last four hours turning this place upside down. Jim doesn’t keep anything here. The only place we’re going to find anything is at the farm.”

“Do you have a key?”

“Yes.”

“Does your husband know you have it?”

“No. I borrowed his and had a copy made.”

“Smart girl.” She heard his smile, and it delighted her. “When can we go?”

“As soon as he takes another plane trip. He should be taking one soon—it’s been almost four weeks since his last one.”

“Great. Then I’ll wait for your call. I love you.”

“Me too, you.” Karen hung up just as Servito entered the kitchen. She froze in terror as she watched him march straight for the refrigerator, open the door, and snatch a can of beer. He snapped the lid and took a sip, then wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his brown leather jacket. He took another sip before sitting on the stool beside Karen. “Sorry I didn’t make it home last night. We had a meeting at the farm. It didn’t end until three-thirty, so I decided to stay there and come back this morning.”

Karen sat silently, forcing herself not to tremble.

“Aren’t you going to welcome your husband home?” he asked with a devilish smirk.

Relieved, Karen forced a smile. “Welcome home,” she said, her voice oozing with contempt.

“I hate to tell you this, but it looks like I have to go away again.”

Karen gave him a blank stare, attempting to appear disappointed. “When?” she asked.

“Today. I’m taking the plane to Florida.”

“When will you be back?”

“Friday. When I get back, we’ll go out and blow a wad on dinner. Just the two of us.”

Karen frowned, deliberately showing her displeasure. “You should consider staying home and spending some time with your son. He’s eight years old and he hardly knows you.”

“I will. I promise. We’ll have a fabulous dinner on Friday night. Then I’ll spend the rest of the weekend with Phillip,” he promised. He stood and headed for the kitchen door.

After Jim left, Karen waited for five minutes, and then raced to telephone Mike. “He’s gone,” she said. “He left five minutes ago. I’ve never been so happy to see him go.”

“Where did he go?”

“He said he was taking the plane to Florida, but I don’t believe him.”

“Why Florida? And why don’t you believe him?”

“He said he needed to arrange to have some work done on the house in Palm Beach, but I think he uses the plane to take money somewhere else.”

“He has a house in Palm Beach?”

“That’s how we met. He bought a house beside my parents’ place.

“Okay, if he doesn’t take his money to Florida, where do you think he takes it?”

“Grand Cayman. I think. I found a copy of a deposit slip in his wallet. It was from a branch of The Banco International Venezolano, in Grand Cayman.”

“How much was deposited?”

“Two million, four hundred thousand dollars.”

“Wow! Whatever his game is, he’s obviously a big player. Did you keep the deposit slip?”

“No. I didn’t want him to find it missing and I didn’t have time to make a copy.”

“Make a copy of the next one you find.”

“I will. I’ll keep the original if I have to... Do you have any idea how he could accumulate so much money?”

“If he’s really in the gasoline business, there’s only one way. He’s evading taxes. Did he say how long he would be gone?”

“Until Friday.”

“Are you sure he’ll be gone that long?”

“No, but I don’t care. I just want to be with you.”

“You say all the right things. I’ll pick you up at your place at seven.”

CHAPTER 32

Mike closed the door to his apartment and wrapped his arms around Karen. “Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

She grinned. “Show me?”

He kissed her passionately, and then grasped her hand and led her in the direction of his bedroom. Once again, the two born-again lovers recaptured the joy of their love and the ecstasy of their bodies. Fate had given them a second chance, and the rapture of the moment had rendered their problems irrelevant. For them, tomorrow was never.

The following morning, they enjoyed a late breakfast in bed. Then they set out for Servito’s farm. When Mike’s car emerged from the underground parking garage at his apartment building, the lovers failed to notice the black Mustang parked directly across the street. The driver was George Lanotti, and he was photographing as fast as he could click his Minolta.

Inside Servito’s farmhouse, Mike examined the files and invoices in Servito’s office while Karen took the stairway to the second floor. She entered the master bedroom and immediately noticed the bed was unmade. Both pillows had deep depressions, reeked of perfume, and were heavily marked with mascara. Rage and disgust exploded inside her when she found a discarded lipstick cartridge in the en suite bathroom’s waste-basket. She ran down the stairs and hurried from the farmhouse, slamming the door behind her.

Startled by the noise, Mike hurried to the door. He saw Karen leaning against his car with her face buried in her hands. He ran to her and took her

in his arms. “What happened?” he asked.

“This is insanity!” Karen shrieked, pressing her head against Mike’s chest. “I don’t care what the consequences are, I just want out.”

“I don’t understand. Why do you suddenly want out?”

Karen lifted her head and stared into Mike’s eyes. “I gave that animal a son and nine years of my life!” she hissed. “This is my reward!” She removed the lipstick cartridge from her pocket and shoved it into Mike’s gaze.

“Where did you get that?”

“Upstairs in the bathroom. Go upstairs and smell the sheets and pillows in the master bedroom. He’s running a goddamned whore house out here!”

Mike kissed her forehead and wiped her tears. “Don’t run, babe. Let it burn. Let’s bring the son of a bitch down.”

She broke from Mike’s arms and walked away. After she’d gone several yards, she stopped and turned to face him. Her frown gradually transformed into an evil grin. “You’re right. Let’s go back in there and nail the son of a bitch!” she said. She hurried to him, reached for his hand, and led him back to the farmhouse.

Lanotti had watched the whole event from the cover of the trees, no more than a hundred feet away. He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, but passed on the photo opportunity.

“Did you find anything?” Karen asked.

Mike nodded. “Let me show you something.” He took her hand, led her to Servito’s office, and pointed to numerous stacks of invoices on the floor. “I’ve been going through the files one drawer at a time. I pulled out anything that looked interesting. So far, everything looks interesting, but not incriminating.”

Karen descended to her knees and began to flip through a stack of invoices. She studied one for several seconds. “Why did this appear interesting to you?”

“Good question. It shows that Niagara Oil & Gas sold gasoline to Triple K Gas Bars in Rome, New York. It also shows that Triple K paid New York State Road Tax and Federal Sales Tax to Niagara Oil & Gas. Niagara Oil &

Gas is legally bound to remit the tax to the government, but I'm willing to bet Niagara paid it to Servito instead. I just wish there was some way we could prove it."

"Is Niagara Oil & Gas a refiner?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, why did it collect the tax?"

"Niagara Oil & Gas is a licensed wholesaler. It bought the gasoline from a refiner on an ex tax basis, collected the tax from Triple K, and presumably remitted it to the government."

"Suppose Niagara Oil & Gas decided not to remit the tax. How does the government control that?"

"The government licenses qualified wholesalers to collect tax on their account. Niagara Oil & Gas had to post a large bond to get that license, to ensure that the government gets its tax money. They also do frequent audits of wholesalers' books, just to keep them honest."

Karen nodded, but retained a puzzled expression. "If Niagara Oil & Gas is frequently audited, how could it keep any tax money?"

"Imports and exports," Mike replied. "Take that invoice for instance. I bet Niagara Oil & Gas bought that gasoline from a refiner in Canada, trucked it across the border, and sold it to Triple K in the United States. The purchase of gasoline in Canada wouldn't show up in the tax records in New York."

"Wouldn't the Americans get some record at the border?"

"Yes, but unless U.S. Customs physically verified the ultimate destination of the gasoline, and matched the delivery to the export manifest, the records would die in the files. Because the gasoline was bought for export, the Canadian Government assumed the gasoline left the country, and that the American taxes were paid and collected by American governments. Unless an anomaly showed up in American records of gasoline tax receipts, there would be no problem. If an anomaly did show up, the job of finding the cause would be horrendous. The feds would have to cross reference every single gasoline transaction, and physically verify them all."

“Do you think Jim’s evading taxes?”

“If he’s taking a couple million a month to Grand Cayman, I’d bet my life on it.”

CHAPTER 33

Servito was well aware that the day might come when he would have to leave North America and never return. The primary thrust of his retirement savings plan was thus to launder his money and to spread it to as many safe havens as possible, thereby ensuring a comfortable exile. His monthly deposits in the Banco Internacional Venezolano on Grand Cayman were courtesy of Bridge Financial Inc., a company incorporated in Curacao and named after the Peace Bridge, which was still the fulcrum of his incredible scam. From there, Bridge Financial transferred the funds to a numbered account in Switzerland. Occasionally, Bridge Financial wired funds to its account in a branch of the Banco Internacional Venezolano in Curacao. Those funds were used to purchase U.S. government treasury notes, in bearer form, of course, to preserve the anonymity of the owner. A tax treaty between the U.S. government and the Netherlands Antilles allowed Bridge Financial to avoid the thirty percent withholding tax levied against non-resident recipients of treasury note interest income.

When Servito landed his airplane at the farm, the flashing red light on the answering machine in his office beckoned. Most of the messages were business related. One, however, was not. “Boss, it’s George... George Lanotti. I followed your wife like you said I should do. She’s been real busy while you’ve been gone. You ain’t gonna like the pictures I took. Call me when you get back.”

“Fuck!” he shouted, and then called Lanotti at his home in Toronto. “George, what the hell did you mean when you said my wife was real busy?” he asked.

“She’s been spendin’ a lotta time with another guy.”

“What other guy?” Servito shouted.

“I don’t know him, boss. I never seen him before.”

“Did you get pictures of him?”

“A ton of ‘em. I even got pictures of him and your wife goin’ in and out of your farm. You wanna see ‘em?”

“Jesus! When were they at the farm?”

“Yesterday.”

“How long did they stay?”

“About five hours.”

“That bitch! Get Allison and get your asses up here right now! Tell him to bring the limo, and don’t you forget those photographs!” Servito ordered. He slammed the receiver down violently, the desire to see his wife suddenly replaced with rage and hatred. He paced back and forth as he thought of what he would do to Karen, and of what he would do to the man he expected to see in Lanotti’s photographs.

A few hours later, Servito heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. He swore as he watched his white limousine racing down the lane toward the farmhouse, bouncing up and down before huge clouds of dust. He rushed outside and jerked the passenger side door open. “It’s about time you got here,” he snarled.

“We got here as quick as we could, boss,” Lanotti said, his sheepish smile displaying brown stained teeth.

“Did you bring the photographs?”

“Yup,” Lanotti replied. He removed a thick, white envelope from his jacket pocket.

Servito snatched the envelope. He frowned as he examined the pictures, one by one. His face flushed. “I knew it!” he shouted. “I knew that son of a bitch had the hots for her!”

“You know him, boss?” Lanotti asked.

Servito bared his teeth as he continued to stare at the photographs. “My wife introduced me to him a long time ago.”

“Who is he?” Allison asked.

“His name’s Mike King. He’s a big player in the gasoline business. He owns XG.”

“Wow! He really is big!” Allison said.

“What are you gonna do to him, boss?” Lanotti asked.

Servito flashed an evil smirk. “Fix his ass. Let’s go inside and I’ll tell you how.”

Allison and Lanotti followed Servito to his office. “You guys take a seat,” Servito ordered, clutching the photographs with his right hand and pacing back and forth. “My first inclination is to have both of them wasted.”

“You want me to cut ‘em, boss?” Lanotti asked.

“No, that would be too easy. I want them both to experience excruciating pain and I want it to last for a long time.” Servito turned to Allison. “Jerry, did you do those PCB tests with Patelski?”

“Yup. Two percent’s no problem. Even three percent works. We got too much smoke with four.”

“Good. Call Bushing, and get him in touch with Patelski. I want them both ready to cut our gasoline with PCB. Tell them not to move on it until I give the word to go.”

“You want PCB in all of the gasoline?”

“No, just the gasoline we’re going to deliver to King’s outlets.” He smirked. “George, I want you to keep watching my wife. Stick to her like her underwear and don’t let her out of your sight.”

Servito waited until Allison and Lanotti left the farmhouse. Then he called Bob Bushing. “It’s Jimbo. I want to talk to you about Mike King. You’ve been bugging him for his gasoline business, right?”

“At least once a week, but my price has always been a little too high.”

“I just found out he’s been screwing my wife, and that didn’t make me very happy. I want you to call that prick on Monday morning and give him a price he can’t refuse. Offer him a price that guarantees we get the whole thirty million gallons and make sure we do the trucking. I don’t care if Lasker has to do it for nothing.”

“No problem.”

“One more thing. I want you to do business with King through a company I’ve just incorporated. It’s called Reserve Oil Limited. My beloved wife is the president and sole owner of all of the shares.”

CHAPTER 34

Karen was relaxing with a magazine in the living room when Servito entered. She placed her magazine on the glass coffee table and glared at him, waiting for him to explain why he had returned more than a day late.

He moved to sit on the couch beside Karen. Without a word, he reached into the vest pocket of his jacket and removed the white envelope containing Lanotti's photographs. He smirked as he lifted them from the envelope and lay them on the coffee table in front of her, one at a time.

Karen stared at the photographs in horror. Who could have taken them? Even more terrifying—what would her husband do next?

“You goddamned slut!” Servito shouted, his face purple with anger. He leaned toward her and grasped the hair at the back of her head with his left hand. He stood, and she had to follow the sharp pain on her scalp upward. He hit her mouth as hard as he could with his fist. The next blow hit her right cheekbone. Blood flowed from her mouth as he flung her backward onto the couch. She leaned forward and covered her face with her hands; drops of blood oozed through the gaps between her fingers.

“I hope you enjoyed your little fling with King,” Servito said, and then flopped to the couch beside Karen. “It's over. You're done. I'm going to be watching you. You don't even want to think about what I'll do to you if I find out you've been with him again. It won't be quick, baby. It'll be slow and extremely painful. Do you understand me?”

Karen held her hands against her face and nodded.

Servito stood and pointed his index finger at his wife. “I'm only going to tell you this once, so you better listen. You are my wife and the mother of

my son. That's the way it is, and that's the way it's going to stay. The alternative is totally unthinkable. God help you if you forget it!" he snarled. He glared at her one final time before turning and marching from the apartment with a slam of the door.

When Karen saw herself in the bathroom mirror, she wept. Her face and the front of her nightgown were splattered with blood. The skin below her right eye had turned to a bluish red and the lid had swollen nearly shut. Both lips were cut and swollen. Her hands trembled as she cleaned the blood from her face with a damp washcloth. The throbbing pain in her eye was like nothing she'd ever—suddenly it occurred to her that her husband might be on his way to Mike's apartment. She raced to the telephone beside her bed and dialed Mike's number. "Mike, it's Karen!" she shouted before Mike had a chance to speak. "Listen very carefully! Jim may be on his way to your apartment as I speak!"

"Why?"

"He knows. He had someone following us this week. He just showed me a lot of photographs of us, including pictures of us at the farm."

"Did he do anything to you?"

"He hit me and said he would do all kinds of nasty things to me if we see each other again."

"Stay right there. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Mike, you can't. He'll kill us if he sees you here. He really means it."

"I don't give a damn if he means it or not. I'll be there in twenty minutes." Mike hung up and ran to the door of his apartment. He could no longer live in fear of what Servito might do to Karen or himself—his only thought was to get her out of there. He pounded the elevator button, desperately trying to think of a way to escape Servito's terrible psychological vise.

Karen was waiting in the hallway outside Servito's penthouse. "Aw, shit!" Mike groaned when he saw what Servito had done to her. Suppressing his anger and frustration, he took her in his arms and led her into the apartment, and then closed and locked the door. "I can't understand how he could do this. What kind of animal is he?"

“I’m really scared, Mike,” Karen said, her head pressed against his chest.

“You’ve got to get out of here. It’s insane for you live with that bastard.”

“Mike, I love you with all of my heart. There isn’t anything I want more than to live with you, but I can’t. Jim doesn’t think like normal people. He’ll kill us both, and he’ll do it without remorse. Even if he doesn’t, we’ll be looking over our shoulders as long as he’s alive. I don’t think I have any choice. I have to stay here until we can find some way to get him out of the picture.”

Servito’s vise was now Karen’s vise, and Mike’s frustrations magnified two-fold. Even though the pain of accepting Karen’s logic was excruciating, he acknowledged that his demand had been impulsive. “I should kill him myself,” he said, venting some of his frustration. “Meanwhile, I’m taking you to a hospital.”

Karen tried to smile. “You don’t like my new facial?”

“I love you even more.”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about me. It hurts, but I’ll survive. I just called Dan Lazari. He’s a dear friend and the best plastic surgeon at Toronto General. He’s on his way here now—he lives in the other penthouse.”

“Then I’ll stay until he gets here.”

“You can’t, Mike. It’s too dangerous.”

“I can’t go. Leaving you now offends every fiber of my existence. I need —”

Karen placed the tips of her fingers against Mike’s lips. “Go,” she demanded. “Just think of it as an investment in our future.”

Mike hated to leave. It offended every fiber of his ego, but he knew his continued presence endangered Karen. He had never experienced the level of anger he felt at that moment. He had always been able to navigate any problem, but this one seemed beyond his grasp. Was there nothing he could do?

He hugged her and kissed her gently on her swollen lips. “I keep forgetting how tough you are,” he said, grinning bravely. “I’ll go, but I won’t be far away... I love you too much.”

“Me too, you... be careful.”

CHAPTER 35

“May I speak to Mike King, please?” Bushing asked, anxious to offer Mike a gasoline price so attractive he couldn’t refuse. The price had to be somewhere on the low end of the scale of credibility. If it was too low, Mike would certainly get suspicious.

“One moment, please,” Mike’s secretary replied.

Seconds later, Mike picked up. “Good morning, Bob. I assume you’re calling to offer me another great price du jour?”

“How did you know?”

“You’re our number one consideration. I can’t remember what’s in second place.”

“In anticipation of that fundamental reality, I have a price I’m sure you’re going to like.”

Mike chuckled. “How many times have I heard that one?”

“No bullshit, Mike. I just got real lucky and I want to share my good fortune with you. I bought a company two weeks ago. Among the many things that made the company attractive were the gasoline futures it bought this summer. The recent firming of gasoline prices has made those futures extremely attractive. Now I want to bring your thirty million gallon requirement and those futures together in a happy marriage.”

“It sounds exciting, but if the price isn’t right there will be no wedding.”

Bushing tremulously made his offer.

“That’s a good number!” Mike said, surprised and excited. “It’s over a cent a gallon below the market! How the hell can you make any money at that price?”

“The gasoline futures. I told you they were attractive. I’ve been so frustrated listening to you tell me my price was too high, I decided to do something about it. Well, what do you think? Will there be a marriage?”

“How much can you sell me?”

“Like I just said, the whole thirty million.”

“I hear wedding bells.”

Servito’s next instruction was for Bushing to convince Mike to let Reserve do the hauling. Once again, his pricing was constrained only by the bounds of credibility. “Can we do the hauling?” he asked. “The more truck utilization we can guarantee our hauling company, the better trucking rate we’re going to get on all the other business we do.”

“What rate?”

“Fifty points a gallon.”

“To any destination?”

“Sure... within a hundred and fifty miles of the Golden National rack.”

“Who’s your hauler?”

“Amerada.”

“I’ve used Amerada for some of my own hauling. They’re good.”

“So?”

“There’s no way I can find anybody to do it for fifty points.”

“That’s beautiful. That puts the whole deal into a nice package. When can we get started?”

Servito was in his office at the farm when he received the call. “Yah!” he said.

“King bought the deal. It went down ten minutes ago,” Bushing announced proudly.

“That’s good. When does it fly?”

“He’ll start drinking thirty million tomorrow.”

“Who hauls?”

“Reserve Oil sells and hauls.”

“Beautiful! I’m gonna give you a big kiss the next time I see you.”

“I prefer money.”

Servito had finessed a masterstroke. While exacting a cruel and unusual punishment on his wife and Mike King, he could continue to steal gasoline from the Golden National refinery, evade the road and sales taxes on that and other gasoline, and collect millions for the illegal disposal of one of the most dreaded and toxic chemicals on the planet.

CHAPTER 36

November 5, 1978.

Dan Campbell, Golden National's senior vice-president, attributed his success to his consistent record of responding quickly and decisively to challenges. He held his telephone receiver tightly to his ear as he waited for Bill Wirtz, his Buffalo refinery manager, to answer.

"Wirtz, here."

"Bill, it's Dan. How serious is the shrink? I need numbers."

"At least half a percent. It's driving me crazy. I can't understand it. It's the weirdest thing I've ever seen."

"Well, I suggest you understand it damn soon. It is costing us millions."

"Back off, Dan. We're doing everything we can to stop it. We're even going to—"

"Clearly what you're doing isn't enough. I want the hemorrhaging stopped! I don't care how you do it, just stop it, dammit!"

"Maybe you can suggest what else we can do."

"I'm taking the company jet to Buffalo this morning. I expect to arrive by eleven. Have someone pick me up at the airport and set up lunch in the cafeteria."

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Yes. Have Sam Martin join us. I want his input."

Wirtz and Martin picked up Campbell at the Greater Buffalo International Airport and drove him directly to Golden National's executive cafeteria. When the three men were seated, Campbell turned to face Sam

Martin. “Sam, I’m curious to know if you have any theories or ideas about what’s causing these gasoline shortages.”

Martin, having anticipated intense interrogation by both Wirtz and Campbell, had a well-rehearsed answer that was designed to deflect suspicion from Servito’s gasoline valves. He was confident their existence and location were so utterly preposterous that no one would even think of looking for them. He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “I’m completely mystified, Dan,” he said. “I had two separate and independent crews run through a critical path analysis of the system. Neither has come up with an answer.”

Wirtz applied more pressure. “I don’t give a shit about critical path, Sam! I want answers! We’re showing big shortages here, and if you can’t stop them, we’ll find someone who can.”

Martin rolled his eyes and smirked. “You guys are beautiful. You’ve both been around this business long enough to know there are thousands of reasons for inventory shortages at a refinery. You also know that finding the right one is like finding the proverbial needle.” He paused, and then locked his eyes on Campbell’s. “I’m the man, Dan. I’m prepared to give you a personal commitment to find the needle within forty-eight hours.”

Surprised by Martin’s boldness, Campbell and Wirtz stared at him in silence. Seconds later, Campbell turned to Wirtz and nodded, signifying his approval. “Okay, Sam. You’ve got forty-eight hours...” He frowned. “But if I don’t get good news from you within that time frame, I’ll assume we’ve sent a boy to do a man’s job.”

When lunch was finished, Martin raced to his 1977 Oldsmobile and drove to a shopping plaza a mile from the refinery. He hurried to the pay telephone he had used in the past to call Servito.

“May I help you?” the operator answered six rings later.

“I want to place a collect call to Jim Servito,” Martin said.

“Your name, please?” the operator asked.

“Auggie Doggy.”

“Who?”

“Auggie Doggy,” Martin repeated.

“Yes sir,” the operator said with a muffled giggle.

“One moment please.”

After only one ring, Servito answered. “Yah.”

“I have a collect call for Jim Servito from Auggie Doggy. Will you accept the charges?”

“Yes.”

“Go ahead, sir.”

“We got big problems down here, Jimbo!” Martin warned. “The big boys are starting to miss the juice. They called me in for a big show and tell session today, and they were shitting their pants about the shrink.”

“So what? Tell ‘em to wear diapers.”

“These guys are serious, Jimbo. They aren’t gonna stop.”

“So what did you tell them?”

“I told them I would find an answer within forty-eight hours.”

“Did they buy it?”

“Yup.”

“Don’t do anything stupid. You can’t—”

“Don’t worry. I can handle it, but I need your help. I’m gonna fix the meters to show they were out of calibration. It’ll appear that the refinery’s been giving away big gallons. They’ll buy that answer if they see immediate results.”

“How do they see immediate results?” Servito asked, although he was already certain of the answer.

“We cool the Golden Valve Program. There’s no other way.”

Servito winced. Slowing the rate at which he was stealing gasoline would delay his retirement program. “How cool and how long?” he asked, deeply disappointed.

Martin knew that Servito hated bad news, but he had no alternative. “Cut it back seventy-five percent for a month.”

“Jesus!” Servito shrieked, wincing again. “Is there any other way? We need the juice,” he pleaded.

“You’re just gonna have to get honest and buy the juice for a while. Sure as hell somebody’s gonna come in here and find those valves if I don’t get these guys off my back. Then we’re all in a world of shit. Even worse, we’re out of business.”

“You’re trying to make an honest man out of me, Auggie!” Servito protested.

“I’m just trying to save our asses.”

“Okay, we’ll cool it for a month. But let me know when the heat’s off. I want to crank the program up again, real soon.”

“Then it’s only a matter of time. You know the bells are gonna ring again if we go back to full speed. Sure as hell they’re gonna find those valves,” Martin warned.

“You let me worry about that.”

“But who worries about me?”

“I’ll look after you, Auggie. Haven’t I always?”

CHAPTER 37

The Iranian Revolution shook the world when the Shah of Iran was deposed by the Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shah, who had deeply pro-Western sentiments, had passively allowed Iranian crude oil production to exceed five million barrels per day. Until then, Iran's expanded production level had helped to prevent an increasingly thirsty world from experiencing any real shortages. The Ayatollah was convinced that the industrialized world, particularly the United States, had been bleeding Iran dry. He immediately reduced crude oil production in his country by four million barrels per day, which had immediate and dramatic results. World crude oil prices shot up to forty dollars per barrel. Some oil experts confidently predicted that the price of crude oil would soon rise to one hundred dollars per barrel. Refiners were suddenly starved of their usual supply, and horrendous gasoline shortages emerged. Gasoline prices rapidly followed crude oil prices and vehicles lined up for miles at gasoline stations around the world. Consumers had suddenly realized how vulnerable they were to their heavy dependence on oil, and were about to pay dearly for it.

While long line-ups proliferated at gasoline outlets in the United States, Canada was technically self-sufficient in oil. The Pierre Elliot Trudeau-led liberal government of Canada declared that its citizens should not have to pay the outrageous prices demanded by the OPEC countries. Instead, they decreed that Canadians would enjoy a "made-in-Canada price" for crude oil, which was set artificially at a level far below the official world price. Hence, while gasoline prices escalated in the United States, they stagnated in Canada. Suddenly, American motorists raced across border points to buy Canadian gas.

In contrast to Mike's troubled personal life, his business was performing extremely well. The deal with Reserve Oil for thirty million gallons of spot gasoline was enormously profitable, exceeding his expectations by a wide margin. The debt incurred in the purchase of Tom Fletcher's fifty percent interest in the holding company had been paid off, freeing Mike to search for opportunities to expand his business.

The fateful purchase of a gas bar on a large piece of land on the Queen Elizabeth Highway was his first expansion venture. He reasoned that the gasoline outlet, less than five hundred yards from the Peace Bridge and the international border, was ideally positioned to capitalize on the huge gasoline price differentials that had routinely developed from time to time on both sides of the border.

At the end of January, Mike received an urgent call from the manager of his new gasoline outlet in Fort Erie. "Mr. King, it's Darryl Ross in Fort Erie," the young manager said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I—"

"Don't worry about it, Darryl. Just tell me why you called."

"Something weird is happening here. Someone should come down here and see this. It's unbelievable."

Mike's curiosity was aroused. "What's unbelievable?"

"They're lined up all the way across the Peace Bridge to buy our gasoline. We can't sell it fast enough! We'll sell thirty million gallons this year if this keeps going!"

Mike's initial reaction to Ross's news was excitement. He began to calculate the profits accruing to XG as a result of such a fantastic volume of gasoline sales. His smile disappeared and he stopped calculating when it occurred to him that the reason for the huge increase was the world oil crisis. XG would soon experience a shortage, because all of its gasoline supplies were purchased in the United States.

Ross became impatient. "Mr. King, are you still there?"

"Yes. Sorry, Darryl. I was lost in thought. Listen, can you handle the volume? Do you need more staff?"

"It's like a zoo here, but so far we've been able to handle it. The biggest problem is the cash. The floor safe fills up every two hours or so. I have to

bring the armored car in here six or seven times a day to take it to the bank.”

“Keep up the good work, Darryl. And thanks for calling. From now on, I want you to call me at least twice a day. I’ll need to monitor your volume. Leave a message if you can’t reach me. I’ll get back to you.”

“I will.”

Mike hung up and immediately placed a call to Paul Conrad.

“How are you, Mike?” Conrad asked. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m feeling a little anxious these days, Paul. I’m looking for a security blanket.”

“You may have called the wrong person.”

“I want you to confirm that our gasoline supply contract is still valid, and that Golden National will honor it.”

“Mike, as long as I’m associated with this company, its commitments will be honored to the letter. You have a valid contract with Golden National and I can assure you it will be honored, even if I have to buy the gasoline on the spot market.

“Thanks, Paul. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear,” Mike said. That contract meant XG still had seventy million gallons of gasoline supply.

“I hope you understand that the price will be based on forty dollar crude,” Conrad warned.

“I expected that,” Mike said, dejected by the implications. “Thanks again, Paul. I’ll stay in touch.”

He quickly telephoned Bob Bushing to determine the extent of the damage. The gasoline spot market troubled him. In the current, squeaky-tight situation, it was unlikely Bob Bushing would have any supply... and if he did, who knew what the price would be?

“What’s happening, Mike?” Bushing asked.

“Let’s talk about gasoline,” Mike replied, anticipating the worst.

Bushing chuckled. “That’s a very interesting subject these days,” he said, reveling in Mike’s desperation.

“Price, Bob. I want to know what you’re going to charge me for the Reserve Oil gasoline,” Mike said, deliberately avoiding the crucial and sensitive subject of supply.

Bushing decided to make Mike sweat. He paused for a long time before responding. “I can’t possibly tell you what that price is going to be. I don’t know myself. In fact, I don’t even know if we can continue the supply. It was only a spot deal, you know.”

Mike’s heart was in his throat. “I do... How soon can you let me know?”

“I’ll get back to you in an hour.”

Now desperate, Mike called his old friend Doug McAllister. He hated to rely on the strength of their personal relationship, but hoped it might help him to pry some gasoline from Canam’s tanks. He was grateful that his supply was consistent from Golden National, but gasoline refined from forty dollar crude would be horrendously uncompetitive in Canada. XG would incur an enormous financial loss on the sale of Golden National gasoline through its Canadian outlets. Mike had to move quickly to replace the Golden National supply with Canadian gasoline. In addition, he worried about satisfying the voracious thirst of this new retail outlet in Fort Erie.

“Nice to hear from you again, Mike,” McAllister said. “How are you?”

“Just fine. I was—”

“I want you to know how proud I am of your achievements. I’ve been following your business career through mutual acquaintances. I wish we could have kept you with Canam.”

“Thanks, Doug. I appreciate the compliment,” Mike said, feeling even more embarrassed. “The reason I called was to see if there was any way you could help me to get some gasoline supply through Canam. My contracts are solid, but thirty percent of my supply is on a spot basis. I’m interested in firming that volume up under contract, if possible.”

McAllister chuckled. “I’m sure you would—you and the whole rest of the world. I’m not directly involved in that area of the business any more, but I’ll call Bill Harmon, our vice-president of marketing. He might be able to help you... How much product are you looking for?”

After a moment's thought, Mike shot for the moon. "At least a hundred million gallons."

There was a pause. "Wow! Is that only thirty percent of your total volume?"

"I'm padding it a bit," Mike admitted.

"I'll get Harmon to call you this morning."

"Thanks, Doug. I really appreciate—"

"Don't mention it. Good luck, Mike."

Harmon called fifteen minutes later. "Mike, it's Bill Harmon, of Canam Petroleums. Doug McAllister asked me to give you a call."

"Thanks for calling so soon, Bill. Did Doug tell you what I'm looking for?"

"He sure did. It must be nice to have friends in high places."

"Did I get lucky?"

"Let's just say I've been encouraged to squeeze out twenty-five million for you."

"That's fantastic! I can't tell you how much I appreciate that, Bill."

"It won't be necessary. I could have moved at least a hundred times that volume with one telephone call. The only appreciation I want is for you to keep this deal confidential. It would be messy and very embarrassing if the word got around."

"No problem for me, but I don't see how we can keep a lid on it. There are too many—"

"We're setting it up to appear as an exchange deal. As far as our employees know, your company traded the twenty-five million with us in the U.S. Officially, the deal was made to eliminate transportation differentials. Do you have any problem sticking to that story?"

"No."

"Good. You'll be lifting in equal monthly volumes from our Oakville rack. You'll pay us on the fifteenth and the thirtieth of each month. Whose trucks will we see at the rack?"

"Amerada Tank Lines."

“Do you want us to send them the loading tickets?”

“Sure.”

“That’s it then. Any questions?”

“What’s the price?”

“I have no idea. I could give you a price today, but it would probably be higher tomorrow. It should make you happy to know it’s based on Canadian crude.”

“It’ll help,” Mike said, relieved but still very concerned. The twenty-five million from Canam was a start, but he was far from solving his supply crisis.

Meanwhile, Bob Bushing was on the telephone with Servito. “King wants me to keep on supplying him, and I really don’t want to do that. I need that gasoline. I can sell it to anybody and make a fucking fortune. The people down here want it bad, and they don’t give a damn what they pay for it.”

Servito was torn. His greed for money prodded him to sell the gasoline to the highest bidder, but his vindictive nature encouraged him to continue supplying King. He would have to compel Bushing to continue the gasoline supply to Mike King’s outlets if he wanted to see his vengeance come to life.

“Let’s let him sweat for a while... Don’t return his call until I tell you to.”

CHAPTER 38

Four hours later, Servito relaxed in the rear section of his limousine while it glided south on Yonge Street. Seated close to him was Dianne Thorpe. The two laughed hysterically while they shared a joint and drank chilled martinis. At twenty-four years of age, Dianne was still extremely attractive, but had aged beyond her years. Her life in the profession had been hard and filled with compromise. She wore tight, faded blue jeans, brown cowboy boots, and a heavy, fur-lined brown leather jacket over a white turtle-neck sweater. She treasured her relationship with Servito, thrilled that he had selected her above all of her competitors and had kept on choosing her over the years. He paid her more than enough to forget other Johns.

Pete Sarnos eased the limousine to a full stop at the curb in front of the glittering entrance to The Harbor Castle, an ultra-modern and expensive hotel decorating the shore of Lake Ontario just half a mile from Toronto's business district.

That night, the lovers enjoyed a dinner of Chateaubriand for two, several bottles of red wine, and Irish coffees. Servito seemed happy, and was much more open and talkative than Dianne could ever remember. He exuded pride when he spoke of his achievements, which, according to him, included evading gasoline taxes, stealing gasoline, and smuggling cocaine in the manifolds of his trucks. He spoke with absolute contempt for the politicians, bureaucrats, and oil company executives he had bribed and deceived.

A waiter interrupted the conversation. "Excuse me, Mr. Servito," he said. "I have an urgent telephone call for you."

Servito turned and glared at the waiter. "Who's calling?" he growled.

“Mr. Allison.”

“Shit!” Servito snapped. “Where can I take it?”

“You can take it in the office, or I can bring a telephone to your table.”

“Bring it here.”

The waiter quickly returned and placed a telephone on the table beside Servito. “Just press two,” he said.

Servito jerked the receiver to his ear. “Why in hell are you calling me now?” he shouted.

“I had to. We’ve got problems. The feds are following our trucks again.”

Servito rolled his eyes skyward. “Which trucks?”

“The ones going to Bushing’s storage tanks.”

“You sure it’s the feds?”

“Yup. Same cars, same license plates as before.”

Servito picked up his Irish coffee and finished it with one gulp. “Phone Lasker,” he demanded. “Tell him to radio every driver. I want them to stop wherever they are and not to move for twelve hours. Then I want them diverted to the tanks on Grand Island. We’ll store the gasoline there until the heat’s off... got it? Good. I’ll call you in the morning.”

Servito dialed Bushing’s home number next. “It’s me. I’m in Toronto. I want you to call King tonight and give him all the gasoline he wants. Phone him right now and make him happy.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Bushing warned.

“Shut your mouth. I also want you to open the Golden National valves again, flat out.”

“Have you gone stark raving mad?”

“Trust me. Just do it. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“But what—”

Servito hung up before Bushing could say another word. His next call was to Sam Martin at his apartment in Buffalo.

“It’s Jimbo, I’m in Toronto. I know you wanted us to cool the Golden Valve Program, but the plan’s been changed. We’re going into overdrive

right now.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!”

“I’m deadly serious. We need the juice.”

“You might as well kiss the valves and your ass goodbye.”

“You worry too much. Just fix the meters like you said you were going to do. Tell the big boys you’ve found the problem and fixed it. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Mike was preparing to leave his office when his telephone rang. He lifted the receiver before the first ring had ended.

“Mike, it’s Bob Bushing. I’ve got some great news... I’ve got thirty million sweet gallons for you.”

“That’s fantastic!” Mike said, overjoyed. “How the hell did you do it?”

“I called in some markers and got a lot more than I expected. Some of the players down here think this shortage isn’t going to last much longer and I agree with them. So I decided to take a pass on the short term windfall and bet on the longer term. I’m going to need customers like you when the system gets back to normal. I just want it understood that you’ll move it exclusively through your own outlets. I can’t let you have any product if you’re going to wholesale it. If you agree to that stipulation, I can sell you thirty million.”

“Sure, but why the stipulation?”

“I don’t want the whole world to find out I’m giving you all you want. I’ve had to cut a lot people short and turn a lot of people down in the last couple weeks. I’m still doing it.” Bushing’s explanation and Mike’s desperate need for supply were sufficient to explain the unique terms of the agreement. His better judgment should have told him the gasoline supply crisis was not a short-term thing, that anyone with a lick of sense could tell, and that something was terribly wrong with the deal.

“Bob, I’m grateful. I want you to know that I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me,” Mike said, instead.

Servito and Dianne stumbled from the hotel and climbed into the limousine, laughing and hooting all the way. Servito leaned forward and pressed a button to open the darkened window separating the driver's compartment from the rest of the limousine. "Take us to the Blue Tavern, Pete baby!" he shouted, waking Sarnos from a deep sleep. "We're on a roll here!"

Sarnos jerked himself to an upright position and started the car.

The Blue Tavern was an extremely popular singles bar located less than a mile away. The music was live and loud, the dance floor jammed with bumping and grinding humanity. Flashing strobe lights created a psychedelic atmosphere. Servito grasped Dianne's hand and led her to the dance floor, where they moved together in a microscopic space. Servito's smile disappeared when he was accidentally bumped from behind by a pinstriped yuppie. He wheeled instantly and delivered a hard right fist to the yuppie's stomach. When the man bent forward in pain, Servito broke his nose with an uppercut from his right knee.

Everyone surrounding the event watched in horror as the yuppie slumped to the floor, blood gushing from his nose. Servito kicked his victim's ribs and raised the middle finger of his right hand. "Have a nice night, dickhead!" he hissed, and then turned to Dianne. "Let's get the hell out of here," he demanded.

Servito opened the rear door of the limousine, pushed Dianne inside, and jumped in beside her. "Take us to the farm, Pete!" he ordered before slamming the door.

Sarnos parked the limousine as close as he could to the front door of the farmhouse, but kept the motor running while Servito and Dianne struggled to dress and extract themselves from the limousine. "Take it back to Toronto, Pete. I'll call you tomorrow," Servito ordered.

The lovers stood in the parking area for several minutes, inhaling the cold night air while the limousine turned around and glided down the snow covered lane. When the car had disappeared from sight, Servito put his arm around Dianne's shoulder. "Let's go in and make love for a change," he chuckled, guiding her toward the farmhouse. When Servito closed the front door, Dianne hugged and kissed him hard, her right hand sliding down his body until it came to rest between his legs. "Let's get it on," she whispered.

Servito faked a smile. Without a word, he released her and flopped on the couch. He removed a 38-caliber revolver, complete with silencer, from behind a cushion. Dianne froze in stunned silence, her hands raised as if to shield her extraordinarily magnificent breasts. He waved the revolver at her. “You’re a good broad, Dianne,” he said. “But time’s up. You know too much and I gotta let you go.”

“What?” Dianne whimpered.

“You know enough to put me away for the rest of my life!” He pulled the trigger twice in rapid succession.

Twenty-four-year-old Bobby Grieves and his twenty-year-old wife had entered the deserted stone farmhouse for a quick rest after a long evening of cross-country skiing. They had been giggling and warming up their cold hands when they heard the sound of someone trudging slowly through the snow. They stared through one of the glassless windows as a man dragged a large burden wrapped in a white sheet to the nearby barn. Once the man had returned to his Corvette and driven away, the couple raced to the barn. Bobby turned on the headlamp he wore for night cross-country skiing, illuminating the dust Servito had disturbed in a long cylinder of opaque light. “He left it in here,” Bobby whispered.

They both jumped at an unearthly sound.

“What was that?” Jan asked.

“It sounded like a moan,” Bobby said. He pointed his flashlight in the direction of the horse stall. The moan came again. He and Jan rushed to the stall, fell to their knees and began to grope through the pile of hay. Within seconds, they had uncovered a bloodstained white sheet.

“My God!” Jan shrieked.

Bobby removed the sheet from Dianne’s head and leaned down to place his ear against her chest. “She’s alive!” he shouted. “I can hear a heartbeat!” He jerked his head upward. “Stay here and try to keep her warm. I’m going for help.”

CHAPTER 39

March 2, 1979.

Alex McDowell, aging head of Canada's Security Intelligence Service, was deep in thought as he quietly read a letter in his spacious office on Sparks Street in Ottawa, Canada. A consummate bureaucrat, McDowell was jowled like a bloodhound. His dress code was distinctly antique, and his colleagues gave him the reverence due to a modern day Sherlock Holmes.

The letter's author was McDowell's longtime friend John Hill, head of the Criminal Investigation Department of the IRS, in Washington, D.C. The subject of the letter, designated "Sensitive and Confidential," was the federal gasoline sales tax. Hill's department had recently been advised of unsettling anomalies in the data, which had identified substantial and growing revenue deficiencies.

"I have Mr. Hill on line seven," McDowell's secretary announced.

McDowell nodded and opened up the line. "How are you, John? It's been a very long time."

"It has indeed," Hill confirmed. "I'm well and fine. It's good to hear from you, Alex. How are you?"

"The years have been unkind to my body. Every day it takes me a little longer to get up to speed."

"And your brain, does it still function?"

"With considerably reduced capacity," McDowell responded.

"Did you get my letter?"

“That’s why I called. It was very timely.”

“How so?”

“Elementary. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

“Fire! We’re dealing with a raging inferno, Alex, and who knows what else... I mentioned in my letter that we have reason to believe your problem and mine might be connected in some way. I think it would be a good idea for us to get together and discuss it in detail.”

“I agree. My place or yours?”

“Mine. Washington is a little warmer than Ottawa at this time of year.”

“Fine. I can be at Dulles by about eleven tomorrow morning. Is that too soon?”

“That’s perfect. I’ll pick you up at the airport. What’re you flying these days?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. Every time I look around, the government has a new toy. I’ll get my secretary to call you later this morning to confirm.”

Hill met McDowell at Dulles Airport sharp at eleven the following morning. McDowell had arrived on board a government owned Gulfstream III, which regularly ran the route. Hill instructed his driver to proceed directly to The Garden, a chic new restaurant in nearby Georgetown.

After several martinis, followed by Caesar salads, rare fillets, and coffee, Hill and McDowell had exhausted all pleasantries and the library of stories they had gathered in the years they were classmates. Pointing to his briefcase, Hill changed the subject. “Alex, I brought a number of studies along to show you my motivation for writing. I could haul them out right here, but I think it would be better if you reviewed them at your leisure. I’d like to talk about them now.”

“Where do we start?”

“At the beginning. We became involved in this thing about a year ago, when I received a letter advising me that New York State gasoline tax revenues were going south. This was happening at the same time gasoline

consumption was going north. Normally, we wouldn't get involved in a state tax problem, but this one was different. We figured if there was some state gasoline tax missing, there was a pretty good chance some federal gasoline tax would be missing also."

"Was it?"

Hill frowned and nodded. "We interrogated tax officials in other states and found that Michigan was experiencing the same problem. Ohio, Pennsylvania, and a number of other states were hurting, too, but to a lesser extent. All the data's in my briefcase... By the way, can you tell me what New York and Michigan have in common?"

"They're border states," McDowell replied without hesitation.

The corners of Hill's mouth turned upward, forming a wry grin. "Obviously your brain does maintain some functionality. I was serious when I said we had a raging inferno here. It's not only a matter of money—it's Goddamned embarrassing. Neither the states nor the feds want any information about this to find its way into the hands of the media. Can you imagine politicians appearing on a televised press conference and trying to explain why they can't find hundreds of millions of gasoline tax dollars?"

McDowell chuckled. "Some of them can't even find their way home at night..." The two shared a wry grin. "Seriously John, I've got the same problem. My boss is a politician from top to bottom. He made it crystal clear that he'll have my ass on a platter if the press gets one sniff of this fiasco."

Hill chuckled. "Do you remember when we actually believed in the system?"

McDowell nodded, and then frowned. "How bad is it, John? Give me numbers."

"It makes the New York State Lottery look like a Sunday school collection."

"Of course."

"What's the situation in Canada?" Hill asked.

McDowell sipped brandy and leaned back in his chair to light his pipe. "Pound for pound, we have the same problem. Ontario and Quebec borders

are the hot spots. If you insist, I could bore you with the data.”

Hill shook his head. “Let’s talk.”

“You mentioned something interesting in our telephone conversation yesterday—you said you had reason to believe our problems might be interconnected in some way.”

Hill nodded. “We had a number of fact finding meetings with the tax people in the states involved. They described how they collect the gasoline tax from the oil companies, particularly when it comes to inter-state gasoline transfers. Did you know that the transfer of gasoline across the international border is taxed on blind faith—an honor system? And our monitoring systems are not up to the task of accounting for every transfer.”

McDowell sucked on his pipe several times. “Do you have any particular criminal in mind?”

“Yup,” Hill replied with tightened lips. “Do you?”

“Jim Servito.”

Hill’s face lit up like a bulb. “Bingo!” he declared. “How did you come to that conclusion, may I ask?”

“We stumbled across a trucking company by the name of Amerada Tank Lines during the course of our normal surveillance work. The company is extremely active in the Buffalo area and is by far the largest hauler of gasoline across the U.S. and Canadian border. A corporate search revealed that Servito is listed as the controlling shareholder.”

Hill looked bored. “So what connects him to tax evasion?”

“Let me drop another name on you,” McDowell said. “Mike King. Does that name ring a bell?”

Hill shook his head. “What’s his connection?”

“He’s a big player in the retail gasoline business—his company retails gasoline in all of the areas of mutual concern. When we took a closer look at him, we discovered Amerada’s trucks were dropping a lot of gasoline at his outlets, on both sides of the border. The activity certainly suggests a connection.”

“It suggests a connection, but doesn’t prove it.”

“We certainly don’t suspect the major oil companies. They’ve got far too much to lose to be fooling around with tax evasion. Amerada is the only independent hauler large enough to play the game on the scale we’re talking about but small enough to stay under the IRS radar. We suspect King might be guilty of complicity. A lot of Servito’s gasoline is going through his outlets.”

“Well, they’re your pigeons, Alex. Both Servito and King are out of our jurisdiction.”

McDowell turned his pipe upside down over the heavy glass ashtray and clanged it three times, filling the tray with ashes and unburned tobacco. He squinted at Hill. “We’ll deal with them,” he vowed.

“I’m sure you will. I’m willing to bet my pension that both Servito and King are up to their asses in tax evasion.”

“I suspect you’re right about Servito, but I must say I have reservations about King.”

“Why?”

“We did a profile check on him. Would you believe he doesn’t even have a parking ticket?”

“What about Servito?”

“Servito’s a horse of another color. He entered Canada from the U.S. in 1963, and became a Canadian citizen in 1970.”

Hill frowned. “Probably a Goddamned draft dodger.”

“We’re entertaining quite a few. Would you like us to send them back?”

“No thanks. You can keep them.”

“Servito keeps an airplane at his farm north of Toronto. Almost all of the flight plans he’s filed in the last several years are to a single location. An island. Can you guess which one?”

“Grand Cayman,” Hill responded without hesitation.

McDowell smiled and nodded. “And you can bet your ass they aren’t pleasure trips.”

CHAPTER 40

Alone in her cream nightgown, Karen stood facing the expansive windows in the living room of her penthouse. She cradled her coffee mug with both hands, sipping it slowly while surveying the city below. At least three inches of snow had fallen on Toronto during the night, causing enormous traffic jams in the morning's rush hour. The clouds had broken enough to allow the morning's sun to melt the snow covering the concrete ledge above the window. Water droplets sparkled as they fell.

When the phone rang, she hurried to the kitchen.

"I just wanted to tell you I love you and miss you."

Karen smiled, thrilled to hear Mike's voice. "Me too you," she said.

"I want you to phone me at my office from a pay phone at exactly four-thirty. Will you do that?"

"Sure."

"Good. I can't live another day without being with you."

"Don't tell me about it, King. Do something about it."

Servito chuckled when he read the police press release. He was surprised to learn that Dianne's body had been found so soon, but delighted to read that the trail was cold. According to the release, the police had not been able to determine any motive for the shooting and did not have any leads.

The loud slamming of a number of car doors outside the farmhouse made him rush to the window. One car blocked the entrance to the lane, while two other cars had stopped in the parking area. Five men, dressed in dark suits

and overcoats, approached the front door. Servito raced to lock both the front and back doors, managing to complete this task just before he heard a loud knock on the front door. He spread the curtains covering the window in the door and stared at his visitors.

The tallest of the men had closely shaven brown hair and dark sunglasses. “Are you James Servito?” he shouted.

“Who the hell wants to know?”

The man stepped forward and reached into his vest pocket, removing a badge that he slammed against the window. “My name is William Dare. I’m an inspector for Canada’s Security Intelligence Service, and I have a warrant to search this premises. Would you open the door, please?”

Servito released the dead bolt and opened the door.

Dare waited until the last of his colleagues had entered before turning to Servito. “Are you James Servito?” he asked.

“Yup,” Servito replied, glaring defiantly at Dare.

Dare removed a folded document from his vest pocket. He opened it and dangled it in front of Servito’s nose. “Mr. Servito, we have sufficient reason to believe that you and your companies have been involved in unlawful activity. Accordingly, a warrant has been issued to search this premises and to seize whatever material we deem necessary to support that belief. I would very strongly advise you to cooperate with us in every way possible. If you do resist, you will do so at your peril. Is that understood, sir?”

Servito glared at the warrant, and then swatted it with a descending blow of his right hand. Before the paper hit the floor, three of the five men accompanying Dare had removed their pistols and were pointing them at Servito.

Dare calmly bent over and picked up the warrant. He folded it carefully and returned it to his vest pocket. “I’ll say it again, Mr. Servito. If you resist, you will do so at your peril.”

Servito feigned surrender by raising his hands, and the three agents returned their pistols to their shoulder holsters.

“Go ahead,” Servito challenged. “You can search this place until hell freezes over, but you’re not gonna find a damn thing. You better enjoy it,

because this'll be the last time you'll ever be here. I'm gonna have a restraining order slapped on you so fast, you won't know what hit you."

Dare and his four agents proceeded to search the farmhouse from top to bottom. Dare and two others went directly to Servito's office while the remaining two searched the rest of the interior.

Servito stood near his office door and watched passively while the agents opened each of the drawers of his desk and searched through the contents. They proceeded to the drawers of his filing cabinets and sifted through numerous files.

Dare turned to Servito. "Mr. Servito, are you familiar with a company by the name of XG Petroleums?"

"Why?"

"We would like to confirm that at least one of your companies is supplying gasoline to that company."

"I can assure you that none of my companies is supplying gasoline to XG Petroleums," Servito replied. Technically he had told the truth. Reserve Oil, owned entirely by Karen, was currently supplying gasoline to XG.

After almost two hours, Dare and his agents had removed well over half of Servito's files and invoices from their drawers. They had stacked and bundled them on the floor and carted them to their cars. Dare faced Servito to announce his departure. "Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Servito. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. We'll return your files as soon as possible. In the meantime, if you should require the use of any of the files that we've removed, please contact me at this address in Toronto." He handed his card to Servito.

Servito crumpled the card and hurled it to the floor. "Fuck you!" he hissed with a defiant sneer. He knew the feds would take months and spend a fortune chasing hundreds of dead end paper trails in the evaluation of his files and invoices. He had scrupulously filled his filing cabinets with thousands of dummy invoices issued by fictitious companies. In addition, he had papered his files with records of gasoline and tax payments from hundreds of fictitious customers. With the exception of sales by Reserve Oil to XG Petroleums, all of his real gasoline transactions had been completed in cash, which was substantially more difficult to trace than checks. Only

one business relationship was accurately represented in the material seized by Dare's agents: Servito had deliberately seeded his files with copies of all the Reserve Oil invoices to XG Petroleum.

CHAPTER 41

Martha Perkins led eight-year-old Phillip Servito into the penthouse. She was under strict instructions from Phillip's father to ensure that no harm came to him during the twenty minute walk from his school to the penthouse. When Phillip burst into the kitchen, Karen wrapped her arms around him. "Hi, darling. I missed you," she said as she kissed and hugged him. "Did you have a good day at school?"

Phillip nodded. He a miniature carbon copy of his father, she thought.

"Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving."

Karen gave Phillip the two peanut butter and jam sandwiches she had prepared, and then turned to Martha.

"I'm leaving now, Martha," she said. "I'll be at the hospital until eleven."

Karen's taxi stopped in front of the Medical Arts Building at the corner of Bloor Street and St. George Street. "Wait for me here," she said, handing the driver a twenty dollar bill. She got out, waved and smiled at Lanotti, who was parked inches behind her taxi, and hurried to a bank of pay telephones in the lobby of the Medical Arts Building. She inserted a quarter and dialed Mike's office number.

"Hi, babe," Mike answered before the first ring had ended.

"How did you know it was me?"

"I just guessed. You're right on time."

"I told Martha I was going to be at the hospital until eleven—I'm at Bloor and Avenue Road. I'm going to take a taxi to the hospital, walk in the front door, and leave from the back. Then I'm going to walk to the

southwest corner of Bay and College. I should be there by five-thirty. Can you meet me there?”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Karen entered Toronto General Hospital and marched directly toward Becky Singer, who was on duty at the reception counter.

“Hi, Karen,” Becky said with a big smile.

“Hi, Becky. I need you to do me a giant favor?”

“Sure. What?”

“I want you to tell whoever calls me tonight that I’m in the hospital, but can’t be reached. Will you do that for me?”

Becky winked. “You walking on the wild side tonight?”

“Just making up for lost time.”

Karen saw no sign of Mike’s car when she arrived at the southwest corner of Bay and College. She glanced at her watch and realized she was five minutes late. Her heart beat faster. She imagined Lanotti’s black Mustang pulling up to the sidewalk, its slimy driver relentlessly staring at her with a grin.

The shrill sound of a car horn caused her to turn to sharply, and she saw a sparkling new, dark green Jaguar XKE at the curb, no more than five feet away. Mike waved to her from the driver’s seat.

Karen hurried to the car and quickly climbed into the passenger side.

“When did you get this?” she asked with a big smile.

“Yesterday. It’s a little extravagant, but it beats the hell out of driving a station wagon. I thought it was about time I enjoyed some of my hard-earned money. Your husband could make me one of the richest men in the graveyard if I’m not careful.”

Karen frowned. “That’s a poor attempt at humor,” she scolded, and then hugged Mike hard. “Let’s go somewhere and get naked.”

Mike drove to the Inn on The Park, a luxury hotel overlooking the Don Valley in Toronto.

After drinks in the Copper Lounge and a candlelight dinner in the elegant Cafe de L’Auberge, the happy lovers toasted their rendezvous with an

expensive bottle of merlot. They danced briefly after dinner, and then disappeared to the Presidential Suite. The king-sized bed was the focal point of two glorious and passionate hours free from the perils of the dangerous world to which they knew they would soon have to return.

Alex McDowell telephoned John Hill two days later. “Good morning, John. I thought it was about time I brought you up to date.

“Go ahead. I’m holding my breath.”

“We conducted a search and seizure operation on Jim Servito’s farm on March fifth.”

“That must have been fun. How did Servito enjoy it?”

“He wasn’t happy. His behavior was described as extremely hostile.”

“Catch any fish?”

“We did, and we still think Servito’s our man, but I’m afraid it’s going to be extremely difficult to get an indictment. His paper’s a joke. It’s obvious he went to a lot of trouble to set up smoke screens. Most of what we seized were copies of bogus gasoline invoices. Tracking them is like taking a trip through Disneyland—it’s all make-believe.”

“I’m confused. What the hell is it that makes you still think he’s our man?”

“He made one mistake. Mike King.”

“You said he was a big player in the retail gasoline business. You have something on him?”

“One of Servito’s companies sold a lot of gasoline to King’s company. We found a ton of invoices corresponding to the sales.”

“That’s wonderful. Then you’ve got him.”

“Not quite.”

“Why?”

“Jim Servito isn’t the owner of the company that made the sales. His wife is.”

Hill shifted in his seat. “So where do we go from here?”

“At this point, I really don’t know, John. One thing is immutable, however. The burden of proof is ours. We have to prove the son of bitch evaded, and that isn’t going to be easy.”

“Do you have a game plan?”

“I wish we did. Suspicion of guilt and seventy-five cents gets you a cup of coffee. We’re dealing with an extremely smart and slippery individual, and he’s also extremely well advised. He’s retained some pretty high priced lawyers, and they’re giving us all kinds of flack. The hell of it is that the politicians are putting serious pressure on me to find the money. They want a perp and I really don’t think they give a shit about who takes the fall.”

CHAPTER 42

Three government-issue, dark blue Fords slowly rolled into the parking area of Mike's office at precisely 10 a.m. the following day. One stopped to block the entrance to the lot, and another blocked the exit. William Dare and two muscular agents emerged from the middle car and marched to the front door.

When Mike saw the three cars through the window of his office, he went directly to the front door and opened it. "May I help you?" he asked.

Dare stepped forward. "Are you Michael King?" he barked.

"Yes."

Dare immediately removed his badge and held it up for Mike to see.

"Mr. King, my name is William Dare. I'm an inspector with Canada's Security Intelligence Service. We have sufficient reason to believe that you and your company have been involved in unlawful activity. In that connection, we have a warrant authorizing us to search this premises, and to seize whatever material we deem necessary to support that belief. I would strongly advise you to cooperate with us in every way possible, sir. If you refuse, you will do so at your peril."

Dare replaced his badge, and then showed Mike the warrant.

"May I ask what the sufficient reason is?" Mike asked, staring at the warrant in disbelief.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not at liberty to disclose that to you at this time," Dare replied. His face was stone.

Adrenaline rocketed through Mike's blood vessels. "May I ask what you're looking for? Maybe I could save you some time."

Dare's eyes narrowed. "Mr. King, could you confirm that you are the sole owner of XG Petroleums?"

"Yes."

"Could you also confirm that XG Petroleums has recently been purchasing gasoline from a company by the name of Reserve Oil?"

"That's correct."

"Do you have records of those purchases?"

"Yes."

"Where would those be?"

"Everything related to those purchases is in a filing cabinet in my office." Mike led Dare and the two agents to his office. "In there," he said, pointing to a gray metal cabinet against the wall behind his desk. Dare's two agents opened the cabinet and removed all paper related to transactions between XG Petroleums and Reserve Oil. As each file was removed, it was placed on the floor in one of several growing piles. When the cabinet was emptied, the stacks of invoices and files were bundled and taken out to the waiting cars.

Dare interrupted Mike's deliberations. "We've completed our work here, Mr. King. I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you. As you can see, we've found it necessary to remove some of your files. If you require the use of such files while they're in our possession, please contact me at this address in Toronto." He handed his card to Mike.

"How long do you plan to keep them?"

"I'm unable to answer that question at this time, but I will contact—"

"Mr. Dare!" Mike interrupted. "I'm a tax-paying citizen of this country and I have never knowingly broken the law! What you and your agents have done here today is a travesty and a violation of my rights!"

"I'm sorry if we have inconvenienced you, Mr. King. I can assure you that we have operated entirely under the process of law," Dare said. He turned and left Mike's office with his two agents following.

Mike waited until the door closed behind them, and then rushed to his desk and placed a call to Marc Peterson, a partner in the large and prestigious law firm of Turner, Peterson, Greenwell, and Worthy. "I think

I'm in some kind of trouble, Marc. I need your advice. I had a visit by five CSIS agents this morning. They just came in here like Nazis and took my files."

"All of them?"

"No. Only the ones related to our deal with Reserve Oil."

"Did they tell you why?"

"No."

"Can you speculate?"

"The point man, William Dare, said they had reason to believe that me and my company were involved in unlawful activity."

"Have you?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Then it sounds like a typical fishing expedition. I suggest you try to cooperate with them in every way. Absolutely the worst thing you can do is to alienate those guys. They can make your life miserable."

"Do you have any idea what the hell I should do?"

"I'm a commercial lawyer, Mike—this situation is outside my area of expertise. I think any further advice should come from Dan Turner... he eats this stuff for breakfast. Hold for a second. I'll transfer your call."

Dan Turner was an internationally renowned and respected litigant specializing in the area of government-business interface. After graduating as an engineer from MIT, he worked in private industry for three years in Connecticut before obtaining a law degree from Yale. Before entering private practice, he had spent six years serving the Canadian government in External Affairs.

"Turner," he said in deep baritone voice.

"Dan, it's Mike King. Marc—"

"Yes, Marc just told me. From what little information he's given me, I think his advice was correct. We could harass the hell out of the feds at his point, but I think we should conserve that option. I want you to stay in close contact with me on this—it's vitally important that we stay on top of it. Don't say another thing to these men under any circumstances. I'm going to

contact CSIS now. Unless you disagree, I plan to advise them that you have retained me as counsel.”

“I agree.”

“Good. Marc told me the contact is William Dare. Is that correct?”

Mike confirmed and gave Dare’s telephone number to Turner. “What happens next?”

“I’ll talk to Dare. Then I’ll have my secretary call you to set up an appointment. I want to see you here as soon as possible.”

Mike hung up, feeling only slightly more comfortable. He had a heavy hitter in his corner, but now the meter was running. Gnawing on his mind was the knowledge that he had no idea who, or what, his opponent was.

CHAPTER 43

“Dammit!” John Hill swore. Another interruption to Hill’s schedule was the last thing he wanted. But he picked up the line anyway.

“Mr. Hill, my name is—”

“My secretary told me who you are.” It was Victor Mayer, a junior bureaucrat employed by the New York State Department of the Environment. “Why are you calling me?”

“Please listen to me, and please don’t refer me to anyone else. You’re the fifth person to whom my call has been transferred. I have some extremely important information and you’ll be making a big mistake if you do not listen to it.”

“What is it?”

“For the past month, the Buffalo Board of Education has been sending its school busses across the Peace Bridge into Canada. It’s so much cheaper to buy gasoline over there right now. The effort is saving the taxpayers an enormous amount of money. The purchases are being made at a gas bar in Fort Erie Ontario, about five hundred yards from the Peace Bridge. It’s the normal practice of the Buffalo Board of Education to take samples of the gasoline they use and to have them analyzed by independent laboratories in Buffalo. As I speak, I’m looking at copies of the results of those analyses on my desk. And here’s the killer, Mr. Hill. They all reveal that the gasoline contains between two and three percent PCBs!”

“They contain what?” Hill asked, his voice rising with each word.

“Poly chlorinated biphenyls, an extremely toxic chemical.”

“Are you absolutely certain?”

“There’s no doubt about it. We sent our own people to Canada to verify the analyses provided by the Buffalo Board of Education, and had them analyzed by a different and trusted laboratory. The results were identical.”

“Did you find out who owns the gas bar?”

“Yes, it’s owned by XG Petroleums. The company’s head office is in Toronto.”

“That’s very interesting. Thank you very much for calling. You did the right thing, Victor. You can rest assured that we’ll take it from here. It would be very appreciative if you would send copies of your findings to me as soon as possible.”

“I’ll be happy to do that.”

Hill immediately telephoned Alex McDowell.

“You’re not going to believe this. I just picked up a shocking piece of information. If it’s true, it would suggest Mr. King is not be as clean as you think.”

“What’s the shocking piece of information?”

Hill related the entire text of his conversation with Victor Mayer.

“That’s incredible! Who in his right mind would put PCBs into gasoline?”

“Someone who was being paid a lot of money to dispose of it?”

Paul Conrad received a telephone call from Dan Campbell at 11 a.m. “Paul, we found it!” Campbell said. “We found the leak!”

“How?”

“Wirtz and I hired an outside contractor to go in there and do an independent check of the entire system. You won’t believe what they found.”

“Why don’t you tell me? I’ll let you know if I believe it.”

“Two valves were spliced into the gasoline lines leading to the east loading rack. They’re just two inches behind the meters—so obvious that they weren’t obvious! They were installed by somebody who knew what he was doing and who wanted to steal gasoline. It was a first class inside job.”

“Did you have the valves removed?”

“You bet. Right after we photographed them from every angle.”

“Have the police been notified?”

“An hour ago.”

“How do you know it was an inside job? Do you have any idea who was involved?”

“We can’t prove it, but we think it’s Sam Martin. He was the one who recalibrated the meters after the meeting. He set them up to show big gallons.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“No. He’s managed to disappear, and nobody knows where he is.”

“That’s just wonderful,” Conrad snarled. “Where the hell were our security people?”

“It looks like they blinked.”

CHAPTER 44

Sam Martin was scared. He slipped across the Rainbow Bridge into Canada at 7 a.m. and drove his red Oldsmobile over the Queen Elizabeth Highway as fast as his conscience would allow. When he reached the western limits of Toronto, he stopped at a pay phone.

“How may I help you?” the operator asked.

“Ah, yes. I wanna make a collect call to anyone at that number.”

“Your name, please?”

“Uh... Auggie Doggy.”

“Who?” the operator asked, muffling a giggle.

“Auggie Doggy! Please hurry!”

“Yes sir. One moment, please,” the operator said.

After three rings, Servito answered. “Yah.”

“I have a collect call for anyone from Auggie Doggy. Will you accept the charges?”

“Yup.”

“Go ahead sir.”

“The Golden valves are dead. They went in there last night and found the plumbing.”

“Where the hell are you?” Servito asked.

“At a pay phone in Toronto. I’m running, man. I had to blow town. My ass would be history if I showed up there today.”

“Get your ass up here. We’ll figure out how to handle it together.”

Servito immediately called Bob Bushing. “The Golden valves are dead,” he announced.

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. Sam Martin just told me they found ‘em.”

“Shit! What the hell am I going to do now?”

“Keep supplying King’s stations with as much gasoline as you can get. You understand?”

“I understand, but I haven’t the slightest idea where the hell I’m gonna get the juice.”

“Do whatever you have to do. Cut back other customers if you have to.”

“I can’t. I’ve already cut them back as far as I can. Most of them are already bone dry.”

“Call Lasker and tell him to haul from the barge and the farm. We still have some of Golden National’s juice in storage at both places. I want it all to go to King’s outlets, and I want it cut with maximum PCBs. Got it?”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Just do it,” Servito demanded.

He heard the slamming of a car door an hour and a half later. He stood and opened a hidden cabinet in the wall behind his chair, removed a twelve-gauge shotgun, and loaded it with two shells. He hid the shotgun under his long, black leather overcoat, and then proceeded outside to greet Martin.

“Jesus Jimbo, it’s sure great to see you,” Martin said, blowing on his hands while his brown street shoes crunched the snow.

“Does anyone know you’re here?” Servito asked.

“Not a living soul. I haven’t talked to anybody.” Martin’s mouth opened in horror as Servito lifted the shotgun and pointed it straight at him.

“Good,” Servito said. He unloaded both barrels into Martin’s face. Blood, bone, and brain tissue splattered the snow behind Martin, just before his headless body crumpled atop it.

Servito removed the keys from the pocket of Martin’s jacket, opened the trunk of his Oldsmobile, and hoisted Martin’s body inside. He drove to the top of a slope above the pond behind his barn, shifted into neutral, and

climbed out. He pushed the car forward and watched as it slowly rolled down the slope, plowed through the thin layer of ice, and sank into the dark water.

Long before the next morning, the water in the hole would freeze again, entombing the car and Martin's body at least until spring.

CHAPTER 45

Large, wet, fluffy snowflakes fluttered onto the parking lot of the Ontario Provincial Police station on the Queen Elizabeth Highway, two miles west of Fort Erie. Marty Piniero emerged from the warmth of his white Impala into the cold March air. He cupped his hands near his mouth to warm them, then pulled the collar of his jean jacket around his ears and walked slowly toward the station. He opened the side door and proceeded up the short flight of stairs to the main floor. At the door to reception, he stood motionless. He glanced at the counter with a bewildered expression.

Officer Wendal Smith was on duty at the reception counter, no more than thirty feet away. “May I help you, sir?” he bellowed.

Piniero, a diminutive Venezuelan who could easily have passed for a jockey, walked slowly toward Smith and leaned over the counter. Using his right index finger, he beckoned Smith to come closer.

When Smith complied, Piniero whispered, “I need to see the chief.”

Smith grinned. “Why do you need to see the chief?” he asked with a whisper.

Piniero glanced around apprehensively. “I got some real important information for him,” he whispered.

“What information?” Smith bellowed.

“I got some information about stolen gasoline. Just go and tell the chief that.”

“Don’t go away,” Smith said. He turned and hurried down the hall to his left, returning just seconds later with a tall, square-jawed man with graying

blond hair. “This is detective Mitchell Chandler,” Smith said. “He’s the chief around here today. What did you say your name is?”

“Marty Piniero.”

Chandler shook Piniero’s hand. “Please come this way, Mr. Piniero.”

They entered a small office, and Chandler closed the door behind them. “Come over to my desk and have a seat, Mr. Piniero. We can talk there.”

“It’s Marty. Call me Marty,” Piniero said. He sat on the front edge of a wooden chair in front of Chandler’s desk.

Chandler sat on his desk and faced Piniero. “Okay Marty, give me the information you have for the chief.”

Piniero fidgeted with the buttons of his jacket before looking up at Chandler. “First I want to make a deal,” he insisted.

“What kind of deal?”

“You give me complete immunity from prosecution, and then I give you the information.”

Chandler broke a faint smile. “Maybe you could be a little more specific about the information. Maybe it isn’t useful enough to prosecute anybody.”

“I’m going to tell you who stole the gasoline.”

“You’re going to tell me who stole what gasoline?”

“I’ll tell you who installed the valves at the Golden National refinery, and who used them to steal gasoline.”

Chandler salivated, aware that Golden National had reported the theft of huge quantities of gasoline. It was a big case. He stood, walked around his desk, and sat in his chair. After activating a tape-recorder with his right foot, he began to bait Piniero. “Marty, please understand that I’m now taping this conversation. Now how can I be sure the information you propose to give me is the truth?”

“You don’t until you check it out,” Piniero replied.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a truck driver for Amerada Tank Lines in Fort Erie.”

“Have you ever hauled stolen gasoline?”

“Maybe,” Piniero replied.

“What do you mean? Either you did or you didn’t.”

“I’m not going to tell you any more until you guarantee my immunity.”

“Okay, I can guarantee you this. If you can give me information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for the illegal installation of the valves, and the theft of gasoline at the Golden National Refinery, you will not be charged. There’s only one exception to that guarantee.”

“What?”

“I have to assume you’re not a party to the crime. If you are, I can’t guarantee immunity. You understand?”

Piniero nodded. “Put it in writing and I’ll spill my guts.”

Chandler opened the top right drawer of his desk and removed a lined sheet of yellow writing paper. He removed a pen from his vest pocket and proceeded to scribble the proposition he had given verbally to Piniero. He signed it and dated it. “I think this is what you want,” he said as he handed the paper to Piniero.

Piniero nodded while he read. He folded the paper and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket, then folded his arms and stared directly into Chandler’s blue eyes. “I’ve been hauling stolen gasoline for the last eight months. Two or three times a week I was sent to the Golden National Refinery. When I got there, I was sent to the east loading rack and was always told to load my truck from those illegal valves. They said the real valves were closed for repairs.” He scoffed.

“How did you know the valves were illegal?”

“I saw it right away. The gasoline that moved through them didn’t go through the meters. The wheels in the meters weren’t even moving.”

“And who sent you to those valves when you arrived at the refinery?”

“Sam Martin. The refinery superintendent.”

“Okay. Please continue. You said you knew who installed those valves. Who is that?”

“Sam Martin and the owner of the company that sold the gasoline I was hauling.”

“What company is that? Do you know the name?”

“It’s called Reserve Oil.”

“How do you know that? I mean how do you know Sam Martin and Reserve Oil installed those valves?”

“I heard Sam Martin talking. He didn’t know I was listening.”

“Who is the owner of Reserve Oil?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you ever accept payment for any of the stolen gasoline?”

“Yup. Always cash and before I dropped the gasoline.”

“Where did you drop the gasoline?”

“Mostly at XG outlets.”

“You mean XG Petroleums?”

“Yup.”

“Something puzzles me about this, Marty.”

“What?” Piniero asked, gripping his knees tight with both hands. Did Chandler suspect him of lying?

“You said you’ve been hauling stolen gasoline for eight months. Why didn’t you come in earlier? Why did you wait until today to come in here?”

Piniero had anticipated the question, and his answer was well rehearsed. He lowered his head and closed his eyes, then pretended to weep. “I didn’t want to rat because I didn’t want to lose my job... but I couldn’t stand it any more,” he whimpered. “I felt dirty and guilty. Every day it kept eating away at me.”

Chandler sat back. “I don’t have any more questions. Is there anything further you wish to say?”

“Nope.”

“You did the right thing, Marty. Before you leave, I would like to get a copy of your driver’s license.” Chandler copied Piniero’s driver’s license, shook his hand, and pointed to the door. “Thank you, Marty. I believe we’re through. I suggest you tell no one about our conversation.”

When Piniero had driven out of sight of the building, he breathed a sigh of relief, and then burst into laughter. Thirty minutes later, he stopped at a pay telephone in Niagara Falls.

“I have a collect call for Arthur Durant from Stoolie,” the operator said. “Will you accept the charges?”

“Yup,” Servito replied.

“Go ahead, sir,” the operator said.

“It’s done. The fuzz bought it this morning.”

“Yes!” Servito shouted, his teeth flashing, both fists clenched with thumbs up. “See you in Caracas,” he said.

Mitchell Chandler placed a call to the Buffalo Police Department and advised them of Piniero’s confession. The Buffalo Police confirmed that, at the request of Golden National’s management, they had launched a full-scale investigation into the illegal valves and stolen gasoline. Chandler advised them that he had taped a confession from a witness and that he would have a copy of the tape sent to them by courier.

The news of Piniero’s confession reached John Hill within an hour. He immediately telephoned Alex McDowell. “Alex, I’ve got something you won’t believe. It’s white hot.”

McDowell chortled. “I bet you’re going to tell me about a truck driver by the name of Marty Piniero.”

Hill’s excitement evaporated. “How the hell did you know?”

“My ears are almost as big as yours. You think the confession is bona fide?”

“I don’t know. But whether it is or isn’t, it gives you the green light to move on King. Don’t you agree?”

“Definitely. I think it’s safe to assume he’s guilty. There’s still a possibility we can nail Servito, if King can give us the dirt.”

“Servito, still? Is there something I’m missing?”

“Piniero said the owner of Reserve Oil was responsible for installing the valves at Golden National. We both know who that is, don’t we?”

“Maybe we’ll kill four birds with two stones... we’ll get the politicians off our backs by arresting King, and we smoke out Servito by arresting his wife.”

CHAPTER 46

It was a bitter cold morning, but the sun was shining, unobstructed by clouds. Snow crunched beneath the wheels of three dark blue Fords as they rolled slowly and in single file into the parking lot beside Mike's office, blocking the exits. Four men dressed in dark suits and overcoats emerged and walked briskly toward Mike's office. The largest of the four men opened the door and marched in, his companions following close behind.

Mike was startled but remained calm. "What's this all about?" he asked, assuming he was entertaining more CSIS agents.

The largest visitor withdrew his badge and showed it to Mike. "Are you Michael King?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Michael King, my name is Richard Morrison. I'm a detective with The Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I have a warrant for your arrest. You are charged with unlawful possession of a stolen substance, unlawful sale of a stolen substance, and the unlawful sale and disposal of a toxic substance. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to you by the courts. Do you understand what I have just told you, sir?"

Mike nodded.

"I didn't hear you!" Morrison barked.

"Yes," Mike said. Two of the officers frisked and handcuffed him while he stood, stunned and silent. They led him into one of the waiting cars and

transported him to the Don Jail in downtown Toronto. There, he was fingerprinted, photographed, and locked in a holding cell.

“Hey!” Mike shouted to the officer who had locked the door and was walking away. “When do I get a chance to call my lawyer?”

“In about fifteen or twenty minutes,” the officer replied, refusing to turn or even pause.

The same officer returned to Mike’s cell slightly more than an hour later. “Mr. King, we’re now going to give you an opportunity to call your lawyer. Come with me, please.” He unlocked and opened the cell, and then led Mike to a room with no windows and walls painted chalk-white. The room contained nothing but a gray metal table and two chairs, and on the table was a black telephone. The officer closed and locked the door behind them. “You may make your call now, sir,” he said, his eyes locked on Mike.

Mike sat at one of the two chairs and proceeded to call Dan Turner. He was in big trouble and aware that only Turner stood between him and bigger trouble. He tried to remain calm. “Dan, please listen very carefully, I’m not sure how much time they’re going to give me. I need your help. I was arrested this morning by the RCMP.”

“Surely you’re joking,” Turner said.

“I wish I was. I’m really here, and I’m a goddamned prisoner in the Don Jail.”

“What’s the charge? I’m sure they told you.”

“Unlawful possession and sale of a stolen substance, and unlawful sale and disposal of a toxic substance.”

“Incredible! What do you know about it?”

“I don’t know. Either somebody’s set me up or I’m having a hell of a nightmare.”

A consummate professional, Turner took immediate control. “Have you said anything to anyone?”

“Nothing.”

“Good. Don’t. I want you to remain absolutely silent. We certainly don’t want to help those bastards in any way. I’ll be there in an hour.”

Turner met Mike in the windowless, white-walled room. He began the discussion after sitting on the only chair available. “I did a little scratching before I left the office, and I’m afraid the feds have a pretty good case against you,” he said with his booming baritone voice. He leveled his hazel eyes at Mike in a deep, penetrating stare. “I want you to be completely honest with me. Is the case justified?”

Mike shook his head vigorously. “Dan, I’ve never stolen a thing in my life. As far as the toxic substance is concerned, you probably know more than I do.”

“We’ll talk about that later, but first I want to deal with a higher priority. I took the liberty of talking to Marc Peterson before I left the office. I asked him to make the necessary financial arrangements to get you out of here. If you’re prepared to sign the papers...”

“How much, Dan?” Mike asked.

“Half a million.”

Mike winced, and then nodded.

“It’s to make sure you don’t run. You don’t need to come up with the cash—you just need to guarantee the amount with tangible assets.” Again Mike nodded. “Let me change the subject. Do you know a woman by the name of Karen Servito?” The flush on Mike’s face gave Turner the answer.

“I certainly do know her. Why do you ask?”

“The feds think she’s also involved in this thing.”

Mike lurched forward and glared at Turner. “In what way?”

“They’ve charged her with theft and unlawful sale of gasoline, and unlawful transportation of a stolen substance across an international boundary.”

Mike rolled his eyes and raised his hands. “I suppose you’re going to tell me they’ve arrested her, too.”

Turner nodded. “Shortly after they arrested you.”

“Where the hell is she? Do you know?”

“In a cell, right here, right now.”

“Put everything on hold!” Mike demanded, barely able to contain his rage. “I don’t care what it costs, I want you to represent Karen Servito, and I want you to do whatever it takes to get her out of here. I’ll look after her bail and all of your expenses.” His wheels spun, and then clicked. “I’m convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that we’ve been shafted, and I have a pretty good idea who did it.”

Turner nodded. “On two conditions.”

“Name them.”

“The first is that Karen agrees to have me as her legal representative. The second is that you’ll both come to my office and answer a lot more questions.”

It took Turner less than an hour to guarantee Mike and Karen’s release. As they met outside the police station, Karen rushed to Mike’s arms. “It was Jim. I know it from the bottom of my heart. If it takes the rest of my life, I’m going to pay that son of a bitch back,” she promised, tears filling her dark brown eyes.

“You two really do know each other,” Turner said with a smirk.

He brought them to his office, which was on the sixty-fifth floor of the North American Bank Building, a steel clad structure near the foot of Bay Street. He began to fire questions at his clients the second they entered. “How did you two come to know each other? I’m sure you understand why I need to know.”

Mike smiled at Karen. “You answer that one.”

“We met eighteen years ago. Mike was a student at the University of Toronto, and I was a stewardess with Air Canada. For one reason and another, we’ve been prevented from doing what we should have done then.”

“What was that?”

“Get married,” Karen said, continuing to smile at Mike.

“Good answer. Do you two have any mutual business interests?”

“None whatsoever,” Mike replied with emphasis.

“That’s good.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think about this situation, Dan,” Mike continued. “The theory I was twirling in my brain really crystallized when you told me the feds had arrested Karen, too. I think a lot of your questions will be answered if I tell you what I know.”

“I would be pleased if you would. Go ahead.”

“Karen has been unhappily married to Jim Servito for a number of years. Eventually, she became so unhappy that she had an affair. I happen to be the individual with whom she had the affair. When Karen’s husband found out about us, he beat Karen up and threatened to kill her if she ever saw me again. We ignored the threat and continued to see each other anyway. Even though we took particular care to avoid being seen together, he knew. So he decided to get even. He wanted us to suffer, so he set us up. It had to be him, Dan. Who else would bother to finesse this nightmare, and have the means to do so?”

Turner stared at the ceiling for a moment, and then turned to Mike and nodded. “Let’s assume for now that your theory’s correct. How do we go about proving Karen’s husband should be the one who was put in jail, instead of you and Karen?”

“I wish I knew,” Mike said, feeling the same helpless frustration he felt the day he and Karen searched Servito’s farmhouse.

“Mike, I sincerely believe that you and Karen are innocent. The feds don’t share my belief, and so I have no alternative but to prepare to defend you. I don’t have the time to prove or disprove your theories, however.

“How much time do we have?”

“Two, maybe three months.”

Mike and Karen glanced at each other with pained expressions.

“Karen, what do you know about your husband’s business activities?” Turner asked.

“Not very much. He’s always been very secretive about his business. He rarely tells me anything.”

“What can you tell me about Reserve Oil?”

“Nothing. I didn’t even know it existed.”

“I find that very difficult to believe. You must know you’re the president and sole owner of that company?”

Karen was surprised and shaken. “I had no idea.”

“Didn’t your husband ever mention it?”

“Never.”

“Was a lawyer present when you signed?”

“I signed a lot of papers for Jim... and Robert Grenstein was always there. My husband said he was our family lawyer.”

“Do you have any knowledge of the existence or installation of illegal gasoline valves at the Golden National refinery, in Buffalo, New York?”

“What!” Mike shouted.

“No!” Karen said with extreme indignation. “I’ve never even heard of Golden National.”

“Dan, what the hell is this about?” Mike asked.

“In my telephone discussion with William Dare today, he advised that two alien gasoline valves have recently been discovered in Golden National’s Buffalo refinery. Golden National claims the valves were installed without the knowledge or consent of management, and were used to steal a very large quantity of gasoline. Dare claimed to be in possession of a taped confession from some individual who says that the owner of Reserve Oil is responsible for the installation of the valves.”

“Who was the individual?”

“Dare declined to provide that information.”

“Did he explain about the toxic substance?” Mike asked, fully expecting more bad news.

Turner grimaced. “He claims they have irrefutable evidence that the gasoline you were retailing at your outlet in Fort Erie contained between two and three percent poly chlorinated biphenyls. They’re now conducting extensive tests at all of your retail outlets.”

Mike’s heart sank. Even if Turner could defend him against the charges, irredeemable damage had been done to the reputation and financial capacity of his company.

CHAPTER 47

Within seconds of Servito's arrival at the Brass Rail Tavern, his eyes found the bulbous cheeks of Jerry Allison's rump draped over the rim of a red bar stool. Allison's lips were inches from his third scotch when he felt the sting of Servito's slap on his back. The scotch leaped up and splashed his face.

"Follow me," Servito ordered, beckoning with his index finger.

Allison nodded, wiped his face, and followed Servito to a small table at the rear of the bar, carrying the remains of his drink with him. Servito waited until Allison had arrived at the table, and then snatched his drink and dumped it unceremoniously on the floor.

"Aw, shit! What did you do that for?" Allison protested.

"Sit your fat ass down and listen!" Servito ordered. "I don't want your tiny brain clogged up with booze tonight." He waited until Allison had lowered himself onto a chair between the wall and the table. "Did you pack a bag?" he asked.

Allison nodded. "It's in the limo. What the hell's happening?" he asked. When Servito passed on a chance to party, something big was going down.

Servito placed both hands on the table and glared at Allison. "The party's over, Jerry. It's been a good party, but it's over."

"What are you telling me?" Allison asked.

"There's too much heat. We're going to close up shop."

"And do what?"

"Get out of Dodge. You and I are going to retire in Caracas."

“Where?”

“Caracas, Venezuela. It’s time for a change of scenery. We’re leaving in my plane tomorrow.”

“Caracas! What the hell are we gonna do there?”

“Who knows? Maybe we can play the gasoline game down there. Trust me, I’ll think of something exciting.”

Allison rubbed his face with his hands and exhaled. “I need another drink. I don’t think I can take all this without one.”

“Forget the booze, Jerry. We’re going to a very important meeting. It’s scheduled to start in Fort Erie in four hours. First, I want you to take the limousine and follow me to Pearson Airport. I made arrangements to meet George Lanotti out there at seven-thirty.”

“Is George going with us?”

“I’ll tell you when we get there. Let’s go. We’re late.”

Servito’s Corvette led the long, white limousine up the circular ramp leading to the sixth and top level of the parking garage at Pearson Airport. The two cars parked on each side of Lanotti’s Mustang. Lanotti was in a mustard colored suit and green shoes, pacing in front his car, blowing on his hands in an effort to keep them warm.

“I got the photographs, boss,” he said, and handed a thick white envelope to Servito.

Servito snatched the envelope and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. When his right hand reappeared, it held a 38-caliber revolver, complete with silencer. He smiled at Lanotti. “Sorry, George. Your services are no longer required.” He pointed the revolver at Lanotti’s heart, and then pulled the trigger three times in rapid succession.

Lanotti jerked violently. His lifeless body slumped to the pavement.

Allison raised his hands above his shoulders and stared wide-eyed at Lanotti’s body, then at Servito. “What the hell did you do that for?”

“He knew too much,” Servito said.

CHAPTER 48

After sitting silently in Servito's Corvette for almost thirty minutes, Allison's curiosity got the better of him. "What's this big meeting all about?" he asked.

Servito flashed an evil smile. "Like I told you before—when you close up shop, you have to let your employees go."

"Jim, you can't tell me it's necessary to go all the way to Fort Erie at night just to fire some employees. Level with me. What are we really going to do?"

"Get rid of some loose ends. There are three of them, and they're all going to be at the meeting."

"Who?"

"Lasker, Bushing, and Langston. They all know too much."

Allison swallowed dryly. "You going to do them, too?"

"Yup."

"Jesus! Why the hell do you need to do this if we're gonna disappear to Venezuela?"

"Because I want my wife and King to fry in hell—I want to make sure there's nobody around to clear them when I'm gone."

"So how are you gonna do it?"

"You see the red blanket on the back seat?"

Allison turned and glanced at the blanket. He nodded. "There's a briefcase under it. It's packed with enough dynamite and gasoline to solve our problem. It's also rigged with a timer. Just before we go in, I'm going to

set the timer for eleven-fifteen. I'm going to take the briefcase with me and set it under the table. At five after eleven, I want you to stand up and say you forgot to phone the office, and that you'll do it from the secretary's phone. At ten after eleven, I want you to run back into Lasker's office and tell me there's an urgent call from my wife. Say it's about my son. Tell me he's been hurt bad. Then we'll both leave." Servito grinned. "The meeting will end with a bang."

Allison rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Isn't that a little extreme?"

Servito pounded his fist on the steering wheel and glared at Allison. "Fucking right it's extreme. You gotta be extreme if you wanna live happily ever after in paradise. If we don't waste these guys before we go, pretty soon the feds are gonna be all over them like a tent. Sure as hell at least one of them is gonna start singing. Now we don't want that to happen, do we?"

Allison shrugged his shoulders in resignation. "What about Martin and Sadowski and Sarnos? You gonna let them go too?"

Servito chuckled. "Lanotti did Sadowski and Sarnos last night and Martin's already on ice."

Servito's Corvette raced past the opened gate of the chain-link fence surrounding the property of Amerada Tank Lines and skidded to a stop at the Amerada head office. He reached for his briefcase, set the timer for 11:15 p.m., and then turned to Allison. "Don't screw up, Jerry," he warned. "We have got to be out of there and at least a hundred yards away when this thing blows."

Servito immediately took control when he and Allison entered Lasker's inner office. He exuded charm while shaking hands with Bushing and Lasker, and then grabbed Allison's arm and pulled him in Langston's direction. "Earle, I don't think you've met Jerry Allison. Jerry's a business associate of mine."

Langston, forcing a smile, extended his frail hand. "Nice to meet you."

"My pleasure," Allison said with a squeamish smile.

"Gentlemen, we'll start as soon as everyone's seated," Servito announced, pointing to the large wooden table in the center of the office. He sat as close as possible to his three intended victims, and then shoved his briefcase as far as he could in front of his feet. Quickly glancing around the

room, he saw that it was small and cramped, just as he had remembered. He looked at his watch. It was 11:04 p.m.

“Gentlemen, I called this meeting tonight because we have some major problems to discuss. The game has changed. It was beautiful when we didn’t have to spend all of our time worrying about the feds. Now they’re around us like flies. We can’t make a move without bumping into them. We need to develop new ways of avoiding the heat, new ways of—”

Allison stood abruptly. “Excuse me, Jim. I gotta call the office. I forgot to do it before we came in here.”

Servito nodded approval, and then turned to Lasker. “Dave, do you mind if he uses Trish’s phone?”

Lasker nodded. “No problem. Go ahead.”

Allison headed for the door.

Delighted with Allison’s performance, Servito continued his time-consuming rhetoric until the door to the inner office burst open at 11:09 and Allison rushed in. “Jim, I’m sorry to interrupt. You better call your wife... your son’s been hurt bad.”

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Servito said, feigning a frown of sincere concern. He hurried from the office.

Allison followed and closed the door behind him. Servito had already started the engine by the time he reached the right door of the Corvette.

“Get your fat ass in here!” Servito shouted. “We’ve got less than a minute!”

While Allison struggled to squeeze into the car, Servito jerked the car into reverse, knocking him back into the seat and swinging the handle of the opened door out of his reach. Allison leaned out toward the door as Servito pushed the gearshift into drive and slammed the accelerator to the floor. The forward momentum caused the door on Allison’s side to reverse direction, and the window slammed against his head.

“Jesus, Jim!” Allison protested. “Wait ‘til I’m in the Goddamned car!”

“We’re outta’ time, baby!” Servito shouted as he raced the car through the open gate and onto the highway. Within seconds, the Corvette was over two hundred yards from the metal shack and continuing to accelerate.

Allison glanced at his watch. It was exactly 11:15 p.m. He turned his head to look through the rear window, and the night sky lit up as if the sun had suddenly reappeared. The sound of the explosion reached the car a fraction of a second later.

Servito glanced at his rear-view mirror and saw a brilliant orange and yellow fireball rising above the tree line. He looked at Allison and grinned. “Guess they all got a real bang out of that meeting, Jerry baby!” he shouted, laughing hysterically.

“What if somebody survives?” Allison asked.

“Nobody survived that sucker!” Servito scoffed. “We just killed three birds with one stone, and them birds ain’t gonna sing no more.”

Servito drove directly to the parking lot behind the Airport Hilton and parked beside the limousine. “Take the limo to the Holiday Inn,” he ordered, pointing to the long, white car. “I’ll call you at seven tomorrow morning.”

“Why don’t we just stay here together?”

“Because I don’t want anyone to see us together.”

Allison had begun to open the driver’s side door when Servito stopped him. “Don’t run away. I’m not finished.” He handed a small piece of paper to Allison. “I want you to memorize this address, and then burn it.”

Allison stared at the paper. “What the hell is this?”

“My house in Caracas.”

“Why are you giving it to me? We’re going together tomorrow, aren’t we?”

“Sure, but I want you to have it in case you miss the flight. I’m going to stick around the farm until one tomorrow afternoon. If you aren’t there by then, I’m flying without you.”

“You mean you want me to get to Venezuela by myself. How the hell am I gonna do that?”

“You’ll have enough money to fly around the world at least twenty times by the time you finish your rounds tomorrow. And here—you’ll need this if you do have to travel alone.” Servito handed Allison a fake passport,

complete with a photograph of Allison. The name “John Walter Smith” was neatly printed below the signature line at the bottom of the photograph.

Allison examined the passport. He chuckled.

“What the hell’s so funny?”

“You’re beautiful. You think of everything.”

“It’s a good thing I do, asshole! Before you put that passport in your pocket, I want you to sign it with John Smith’s signature.” Servito handed a pen to Allison. “I’ll call you at seven to make sure you’re awake. Then I want you to do the rounds. You should be able to collect at least two hundred grand. Head for the farm when you’re finished, and be quick about it. I’m taking off at one—with or without you.”

CHAPTER 49

Mike held Karen's hand while they walked from Dan Turner's office to the shore of Lake Ontario, less than a mile south of the North American Bank Building. The dull gray sky matched their spirits. A biting cold southeast wind howled in from the lake, causing huge waves to crash against the concrete pier beside them.

"What are we going to do?" Karen's voice faded with the wind.

"We have to find a way to convince the feds we're innocent. Servito must have had help. We just have to find out who."

"But how?"

"It'll be hard, but I still think we can do it."

Karen tried to smile, but her smile quickly contorted. "What if we can't?"

Mike looked away, staring at the lake.

"We'll both be sent to prison, won't we?"

Mike silently agreed with Karen, but shook his head. "There's a lot we can do before show time," he said with tightened lips.

"You have something in mind?"

"I don't want to sit around in the blind hope that Turner's going to save us. I want to do something."

"So do I. But what?"

"Bob Bushing has to be number one on our hit list. He's the individual who introduced me to Reserve Oil. Next is Dave Lasker. He runs the company that delivered all of Reserve Oil's gasoline. I'm willing to bet both of them know everything."

Karen was encouraged but skeptical. “They won’t tell us a damn thing if they’re involved in any way.”

“Probably not, but I still think it’s a good place to start.”

“But what if I’m right? What if they refuse to tell?”

“Then we’re screwed,” Mike conceded, staring sadly into Karen’s eyes. “Then I’m going to kill your husband. I’m not going down without him, babe.”

Mike’s absurd logic served as a poignant reminder of the enormous difficulties facing them, all the direct results of her husband’s merciless and vindictive behavior. She wrapped both arms around Mike and pressed her head against his chest. “I’ll never regret loving you, Mike King, but I deeply regret the trouble it’s caused you,” she said with tears in her eyes.

Mike placed his hands against Karen’s cheeks and kissed her forehead. “I could never blame you. No regrets, babe. Not one.” He looked deep in her eyes, searching. “Live with me. I don’t want to waste another second of my life without you.”

She turned hugged him hard. “You know I want that with all my heart. I don’t care about myself any more, but I’m still terrified of what Jim will do to you...”

“He can go straight to hell. I think he gets some kind of sadistic pleasure out of watching us suffer. So let’s suffer together. Stay with me tonight. Tomorrow we’ll go to your apartment, pack your things, and pick up Phillip.”

CHAPTER 50

Servito ate a full breakfast at the Airport Hilton before checking out and heading for home. At 8:20 a.m., he entered the kitchen, barely avoiding a collision with Martha Perkins.

“Mr. Servito!” she exclaimed, startled and surprised at the rare sight of him at that time of the day. “How are you today?”

Servito smiled. “Just fine, Martha. Is Karen here?”

“No. I think she stayed at the hospital last night.”

“I’m going to drive Phillip to school today. Is he ready?”

Martha nodded. “He’s in the bathroom, brushing his teeth. I make him do that after every meal.”

The kitchen door burst open and Phillip appeared. “Dad! How come you’re here?”

Servito wrapped his arms around his son and lifted him from the floor. “I’m going to drive you to school today. Is that okay with you?” he asked, hugging him tightly.

Phillip jerked his head backward and looked into his father’s eyes. “Did you have another fight with Mom?”

“No, I just got here. I just wanted to see you and take you to school today.”

“In the limousine?”

Servito shook his head. “I don’t have it today.”

“Where is it?”

“Being fixed.”

“Did you crash it?”

“No.”

“Then why is it being fixed?”

“You ask too many questions,” Servito said, playfully rubbing his knuckles on Phillip’s scalp. “Let’s get going. I don’t want you to be late.” With Phillip still in his arms, he marched to the door.

Martha handed Phillip his school bag when they passed by her. She shook her head, shrugged her shoulders, and then returned to the kitchen to finish her coffee.

The Corvette reached the front gates of Royal Canada College in less than five minutes. Just inside the enormous stone archway of the college gates, Servito turned to the side of the long driveway and stopped the car. “How would you like to take the day off school and have an airplane ride with me?” he asked, turning to Philip.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Phillip shouted without hesitation.

Servito completed a wide turn across the lawn of the school, drove back through the gates, and headed north on Avenue Road.

“You should call Mom and tell her where we’re going,” Phillip suggested, suddenly worried.

“That’s a very good idea. I’ll call her as soon as we see a telephone booth. You can help me look for one.”

“There’s one!” Phillip shouted seconds later, pointing to a telephone booth on the lot of a Texaco service station.

Servito turned onto the lot and stopped beside the booth. “I’ll be back in a minute,” he said as he opened the door. He jumped from the car, ran to the booth and pretended to make a telephone call. After an appropriate delay, he hung up and returned to the car. “We’re flying today, son. Mom said it was okay with her,” he said with a huge smile.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Phillip said, pumping the air with his fists.

CHAPTER 51

Karen opened her eyes early. She would have slept longer, were it not for the warmth of the morning sun on her face, or the smell of breakfast and Mike's gentle kiss on her lips. She closed her eyes again, pretending to sleep.

When Mike bent to kiss her again, she locked her arms around his neck and pulled him to the bed. "I missed you this morning, Tiger," she said as she reached between his legs.

The two made slow, deliberate, passionate love, forgetting their problems during the brief but ecstatic interlude. Afterwards, they sat on the edge of the bed and ate a breakfast of orange juice, eggs Benedict, and coffee, all affectionately prepared by Mike.

Karen sipped her coffee, frowning at Mike over the brim of her cup. "I have a suggestion."

Mike displayed a naughty grin. "Is it that we make love again?"

"Yes, but that isn't what I had in mind... I think we should go and see Bob Bushing and Dave Lasker."

Mike glared at her and raised his hands in exasperation. "So again we postpone our happiness."

"We've waited a long time to live together. We can wait another day."

"There's always something in the way, isn't there?"

Karen smiled. "Maybe that's our destiny."

"If we ever get this mess behind us, I'm going to get a lawyer and ask him to draw up new wills for both of us. I want it explicitly stipulated that you and I are to be buried in the same casket."

“You have such a morbid sense of humor,” Karen scolded, then hugged Mike and kissed his ear. “You still haven’t said whether you agree...”

“Sure. Let’s go to Buffalo.”

“Good. I’ll call Martha.” Karen dialed the telephone number of the penthouse.

“Hi, Martha. It’s Karen. Did you take Phillip to school already?”

“No... your husband arrived here shortly after eight this morning. He took Phillip to school. I assumed you knew.”

Karen’s heart pounded. Instinctively, she knew something was wrong. Her husband had not driven Phillip to school in years. “Did Jim ask you where I was?”

“Yes. I told him you stayed at the hospital last night.”

“Thanks, Martha. I’ll talk to you soon,” Karen said. She hung up and dialed the office number of Royal Canada College.

A female answered.

“This is Karen Servito calling. I want to confirm that my son, Phillip, made it to school this morning.”

“One moment please. I’ll check with Phillip’s counselor. Please hold.”

Karen prayed her instinct was wrong. Her uncontrolled trembling made every second an eternity.

“This is Whitney Stewart speaking, Mrs. Servito,” Phillip’s counselor said. “Your son is not in class this morning. I took the time to talk to his classmates when I was informed of your call. None of them has seen him today.”

“Did Phillip’s father call the school?”

“I took the time to check that too. We have no record of his call.”

“Thank you. Would you please have someone call my home the minute Phillip shows up?” Karen said, sickened at the certainty that he would not. Her face had lost all color and tears streamed from her eyes.

“Now he’s taken Phillip,” she said, covering her face with her hands.

Mike’s mind raced through a checklist of possibilities. “Do you have any idea where he would have taken him?” he asked.

“They could have gone to the farm.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Just a guess. Phillip loves to go there.”

“I think we should forget about Buffalo and go to the farm.”

“What if I’m wrong?”

“Can you think of a better idea?”

“Maybe we should call the police.”

Mike chuckled. “Sure we should. Can you imagine how cooperative they’ll be when they get a call from a couple of suspected felons? Besides, your husband is Phillip’s father. His only transgression was to sanction his son’s truancy.”

CHAPTER 52

Alex McDowell flew to Washington to speak to a Congressional subcommittee on the subject of gasoline tax evasion, which had been proven to be rampant in both Canada and the United States. Revenue losses to both governments from that source had reached intolerable levels—levels high enough to induce politicians to ask embarrassing questions.

After the hearing, John Hill invited McDowell to lunch. Once again they sat at The Garden in Georgetown. McDowell sipped his coffee and looked across the table at his friend. “I have some extremely good news, John. We’ve arrested both Mike King and Jim Servito’s wife,” he declared, expanding his chest with obvious pride.

“That’s great,” Hill replied with little apparent enthusiasm. “What are the charges?”

“We charged King with unlawful possession and sale of a stolen substance, and unlawful disposal of a toxic substance. Karen Servito was charged with theft and sale of stolen gasoline and unlawful transportation of a stolen substance across an international boundary. I should add that my bosses still don’t have this news. I was in Washington at the time of the arrests. I want to tell them in person. I’m not going to let anyone else grab the credit for this one.”

“When you made the arrests, did gasoline tax evasion fall within the realm of your consideration?” Hill asked.

The proud smirk on McDowell’s face vanished. “No.”

“Then you still don’t have a damn thing on the big fish?”

McDowell’s face flushed to crimson.

“You mean Jim Servito?”

“Yup,” Hill said, cognizant of the fact that he had hit a very sensitive note.

“Uh, no... we’re still working on it.”

“Well, at least you put some heads on the platter.”

McDowell elected not to respond.

CHAPTER 53

“Let’s stop at my office,” Mike suggested as he raced his XKE northward on Avenue Road.

“Why?” Karen asked.

Mike was grim faced. “A lot of fires to put out,” he conceded. “I’ve got to do something... at least to slow them down.”

Ten minutes later, Mike hurried to his desk, ignoring the stack of telephone messages his secretary had handed him. Karen trailed after him like a ghost.

“Take a good look at the front page of the Globe,” Mike’s secretary said. “It’s on your desk.”

Mike lifted a copy of the morning Globe & Mail. The front page photograph immediately caught his eye. It showed firemen picking through the charred remains of the head office of Amerada Tank Lines. Shocked, he read the story detailing eyewitness reports of a large explosion that occurred shortly after eleven the previous evening. It stated that the head office of Amerada Tank Lines Limited had been completely destroyed, and that police investigating the incident believed at least three people had been killed. Mike’s heart sank when he read that police had identified Dave Lasker as one of the three victims. Other victims were still unidentified, and the cause of the blast was still unknown.

He turned back to the door. “Barb, would you call Empire State Oil and get Bob Bushing on the line?” He turned to his other secretary. “Marlene, I want you to phone every outlet in the system and tell them to stop ordering gasoline from Empire State Oil. I need to know exactly how many are

affected by contaminated gasoline. I want the ones that are affected to close until further notice and tell them to pump their tanks. Tell the employees there will be no interruption to their salaries or benefits. When you're finished, I want you to get in touch with all of our sales representatives and tell them to allocate available gasoline supply equally among all of the outlets. If the media calls, tell them we have absolutely no comment."

"I've already talked to Bushing's wife," Barb said. "She called here, looking for him. She said she doesn't have the slightest idea where her husband is. Evidently he left home last night and she hasn't seen him since. I asked her to have him call you if he shows up?"

"Thanks. I'm going to be in my car for most of the day," Mike said. He reached for Karen's hand and led her toward the door. "I'll call."

Mike glanced at his gasoline gauge as he threaded his XKE northward on Bayview Avenue through the heavy city traffic. The needle pointed precariously close to empty. "I've got to stop for gasoline. We're running on fumes," he said as he turned onto a Shell service station lot and stopped beside one of the three parallel gasoline islands. Karen immediately noticed the car parked beside the adjacent island. The sight of a long, white Cadillac limousine made her blood run cold. She jumped from the car and examined the license plate at the rear of the limo. "That's it!" she shouted.

"That's what?" Mike asked. He inserted a gasoline nozzle into the fill pipe of his XKE.

"It's Jim's!" she screamed, pointing frantically at the limousine. "I know it's his!"

Mike stepped up and scanned the limousine's interior. "There's no one in it," he said. Then he turned and continued to fill his gasoline tank, keeping his eye on the door of the station. "Get back in the car and hide," he ordered.

"But Phillip—"

"Now, Karen!"

Karen returned to her seat and lowered herself until her eyes were parallel to the bottom of her side window.

Mike finished filling the tank and returned the gasoline nozzle to the pump. He glanced again at the station, to see a large fat man emerging from the office. He carried a white canvas bag and was heading straight toward the limousine. Mike opened his car door and leaned in to face Karen. "Have you ever seen him before?" he asked.

Karen nodded, her face devoid of color. "His name is Jerry Allison. He works for Jim... he was also Jim's best man at our wedding."

Mike hurried toward the man just as he closed the door to the limo. In spite of his haste, the limousine had begun to move. He hit the driver's side window with his fist. "Hey! I want to talk to you!" he shouted.

Allison looked up at Mike and recognized him immediately as the man with Servito's wife in Lanotti's photographs. He looked straight ahead and kept the limousine rolling.

Mike continued to run with the limo and pounded hard on the windshield. "Stop!" he demanded, his face no more than a foot from the glass.

Allison panicked and slammed his right foot against the accelerator. The limousine jerked forward, its rear wheels screeching against the pavement. The side mirror struck Mike's ribs and hurled him to the ground. He sprang to his feet and ran back to his car, ignoring the wincing pain in his side. He fumbled with his keys, trying to watch the limousine at the same time as he started his XKE. He accelerated across the station lot in pursuit. "Why is he running?" he shouted.

"He knows we're looking for Jim!" Karen replied.

Allison glanced at his rear-view mirror and now saw Karen, who was sitting up in the back seat. He looked at his watch. He had slightly less than an hour to make it to Servito's farm, but he did not want to arrive with Mike and Karen in tow. If he took the time to lose his pursuers, he would probably be too late for Servito's flight. Sweat covered his fat face and his heart beat faster. He accelerated to seventy—more than twice the speed limit—tires squealing each time he changed lanes. Again he looked in his rear-view mirror. Mike's car was moving closer. He went faster.

"Damn!" Mike shouted. "He's out of his mind!"

Allison glanced to his right and saw a large green and white sign indicating the exit to Highway 401. The turn onto Highway 401 was crucial

—the super highway would save at least thirty minutes. But that didn't mean he had to turn on his blinker. Instead, he swerved into the passing lane and accelerated to ninety. With less than a hundred yards between the limousine and the exit ramp, he veered sharply to his right, cutting across three traffic lanes with the goal in sight.

The limousine missed the exit ramp by less than five feet. When the front wheels hit the curb, the jolt hurled Allison forward, slamming his forehead against the top of the steering wheel. The blow stunned him and opened a long, bloody gash. The limousine rocketed over the curb and flew thirty feet to the face of a concrete retaining wall. The violence of the impact pushed the engine into the front seat, crushing both of Allison's legs. Allison's forward momentum again carried his face into the steering wheel, breaking his neck.

Karen caught a glimpse of the crash as they raced by. "Oh, God!" she shouted, twisting her body to stare at the wreckage.

Mike had heard the terrible sound of screeching metal. "Was that the limo?" he asked.

"He hit the concrete!" Karen shouted.

Mike slammed his foot on the brake and brought his car to a stop within inches of the steel guardrail dividing the north and south bound lanes. Traffic whizzed by, making it impossible to open either of the doors. "I have to go back there," he said, and opened the convertible roof.

"Oh God, be careful," Karen warned.

Mike stepped from the car onto the top of the guardrail, walked several paces along it, and jumped to the road surface behind his XKE. He waited for a break in the traffic, and then darted across the three north bound traffic lanes to the far curb. He raced toward the limousine. Smoke and steam slowly emerged from the compressed remains of the front of the limousine. Allison remained motionless and slumped against the twisted steering wheel. His bloodied face was pointed at the driver's side window, so Mike could see that his mouth was partially open, his hazel eyes unblinking.

Mike tried in vain to open the driver's side door, but it was welded in place by the violence of the impact. Using a grapefruit-sized chunk of concrete that had been split from the retaining wall, he carefully broke away

the jagged edges of shattered glass. He leaned inside far enough to see that the fat man was still breathing. “Where’s Servito?” he shouted.

Allison stared silently at Mike, his eyes glazed, his pupils dilated.

“Come on, speak to me,” Mike pleaded. “Where’s Jim Servito?”

Seconds later, Allison blinked. “Help me,” he whispered faintly.

“What did you say?” Mike asked. He leaned further into the car and placed his right ear an inch from Allison’s mouth.

“Help me,” Allison whispered.

“I’ll help you if you tell me where Servito is.”

“His farm.”

Mike pulled his head backward and saw that the fat man’s eyes had closed. “Don’t die now!” he pleaded, convinced that the fat man would never speak again. He reached inside Allison’s jacket pockets and found a passport, then glanced at the two large canvas bags on the floor of the passenger’s side. Mike put the passport in his pocket, picked up his chunk of concrete, and raced to the far side of the limousine. He used the concrete to break the window and clear the glass before reaching in to extract the bags. When he emerged from the window, he noticed a large number of people had left their cars to stare at the limousine.

“Call 911,” he shouted.

He raced to his car, jumped onto the guardrail, threw the canvas bags into the space behind his seat, and then climbed in. He started the car and rocketed from the scene.

“Did he tell you anything?” Karen asked.

Mike nodded. “We were right. They went to the farm.”

“Did he say anything about Phillip?”

“No. He wasn’t in the mood for conversation.”

Once they’d cleared the scene, Mike handed Allison’s passport to Karen. “I’m going to put the roof up. Take a look at this,” he said.

Karen turned to look at the canvas bags behind Mike. “Why did you take those?” she asked.

“Curiosity. Tell me about the passport, first.”

Karen opened the passport. "It's a fake. It says his name is name is John Smith," she said, staring at the photograph of Allison. A small, folded piece of paper fell from the passport onto her lap. She picked it up and stared at it in horror. Written by the hand of her own husband was an address: No. 830 Av. Pral. de Mariperez, Caracas, Venezuela. Tel: 261-50-80. "This is Jim's writing," she said with a pensive frown.

"What does it say?"

"It's an address in Caracas, Venezuela." Her lips tightened as she gave Mike a worried stare. "What do you think it means?"

Mike frowned. "Why don't you open the bags?"

Karen reached behind Mike and pulled one of the bags to her lap. After loosening the tie-cord, she stared at the contents in stunned silence.

"What's in it?" Mike asked.

"I can't believe it! It's full of money!" Karen gasped. She pulled the second bag to her lap and looked inside. "This one's full of cash too! Where do you think he got it?"

"It's obvious. Allison was a bag man for your husband."

"What's a bag man?"

"He picks up the cash from your husband's bootleg gasoline sales." Mike started the car and started to drive. "We're going to the farm as fast as I can get us there. Meanwhile, you should count the cash. I can't wait to know how much is in those bags."

Karen reached into one the bags and removed a wad of bills. She stopped and looked at Mike after fifteen minutes of counting. "This is incredible! I've counted a hundred thousand dollars and I'm still not finished with the first bag."

"I rest my case," Mike said with a satisfied smirk.

"Do you think we could use this money as evidence?"

Mike nodded. "Sure, if we can connect it to your husband."

"How the hell do we do that?" Karen asked with a worried expression.

"Good question... tell me about your husband's airstrip. How do I get to it?"

“It’s in a field on the west side of the road. We can drive right to it.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to find when we get there, but it could be dangerous. I—”

“I don’t care about danger anymore,” Karen interrupted. “That animal has taken my son.”

“We have to be careful. For Phillip’s sake, as well as yours. That animal might do something irrational if we get in his way.”

“There it is.” Karen pointed ahead. “That’s the driveway. The landing strip’s just over the top of that hill.”

Mike pulled his car over to the side of the road to look at the hill, which had a steep grade covered with sumac shrubs, pine trees, and patches of snow.

“What’s the problem?” Karen asked.

“I’m trying to decide how we should approach the plane. Do we climb the hill on foot, or go right at him in the car?”

“Let’s drive,” Karen said without hesitation. “We can’t do a damn thing on foot.”

“I’m not sure we can do anything in the car, either, except let him know that we’re coming...” Still, Mike drove the car forward two hundred yards, turned left at the driveway, and continued up the narrow dirt road to the top of the hill.

Servito’s sleek, white and blue twin-engine Cessna was parked at the end of the runway, no more than fifty yards away. Servito and Phillip were walking from Servito’s red Corvette toward the plane.

“There they are!” Karen shrieked.

Mike stepped hard on the gas pedal. Dirt, stones, and dust flew from behind his rear wheels as the car shot forward. Karen slumped in her seat, gritting her teeth.

Servito glanced up at them and then grabbed Phillip’s arm, pulling him against his leg. He reached into his brown leather jacket and withdrew a 38-caliber revolver.

The XKE skidded to a stop between Servito’s Corvette and the airplane.

Phillip was still dressed in his private school uniform. He was wide-eyed, bewildered by the sudden turn of events.

“We’re going to put Phillip back in school, Servito,” Mike said as he emerged from his car. “That’s where he belongs.”

“I’ll decide where my son belongs,” Servito challenged. He pointed his pistol at Mike’s head. “If you want to stay alive, you’ll get back in your car and leave.”

Mike’s blue eyes glared at Servito. “You’d put that gun away if you had any balls,” he taunted. “Come on, Servito. Let’s find out how much of a man you really are.”

“I don’t need to fight with you, King,” Servito scoffed. “The feds are going to do that for me. You and my dear wife are going to do a lot of time for all those nasty little things you did.”

“Let Phillip go, Jim!” Karen demanded as she stepped from the car.

“I’m scared, Mom!” Phillip shouted. He attempted to run to Karen, but Servito pulled him back against his body.

“Don’t be scared, son,” Servito said calmly. “We’re going to a really nice place. You’ll be a lot happier, there.” He turned to Karen and displayed an evil smirk. “Besides, your mother’s been doing a lot of very bad things lately. You don’t want to stay here alone with your mother in jail, do you?”

Phillip silently pondered this turn of events.

“Where are you taking him?” Karen asked.

Servito chuckled. “I’ll send you a post card when we get there.” He turned to Mike and smiled. “Now that you’re here, Mike, maybe you can tell me how you like that new performance improving additive we put in your gasoline.”

“If it takes me the rest of my life, I’m going to bring you down. You’re going to rot in hell for this, Servito,” Mike promised.

Servito’s expression turned stone cold, his steel gray eyes burning with resolve. “I’m going to give you three seconds to get back in your car and get the hell out of here. If you’re not behind the wheel when the counting’s finished, I’m going to start shooting and I’m going to start with your kneecaps. One... two...”

Mike and Karen reluctantly returned to the car. Mike started the engine and drove back down the driveway to the gravel road. He stopped after driving no more than fifty yards. "I can't do this," he said. Both leaped from the car and quickly climbed the hill. They watched in horror as Servito's plane raced down the runway directly toward them, and then lifted off and roared over their heads.

Servito stared at the distant horizon as he reveled in thoughts of his successes. With over three hundred million dollars waiting for him to begin the rest of his life, he looked forward to retirement. And his son would be there by his side, while his enemies endured nothing but torment.

Phillip stared at his father, his big brown eyes wide open and filled with tears. "How come Mom has to go to jail?" he asked. He used his fingers to wipe tears from his cheeks.

Servito swallowed, realizing that he had been overly optimistic to assume Phillip would soon forget the separation from his mother. He placed his right hand on Phillip's shoulder. "She made a big mistake, son... Your mother was in business with a criminal who stole gasoline and a lot of money. He even put poison in the gasoline that he sold to the people."

"Is he the man who drove Mom to the farm?"

Servito nodded. "He's going to spend a very long time in jail."

"Did people die from the poison he put in the gasoline?"

"Yup. Unfortunately lots of people died."

"Can't you get Mom out of jail?"

Servito feigned a doleful frown and shook his head. "You have no idea how hard I tried, but the court won't allow it. They said they've convicted her, she's going to jail, and that's all there is to it."

"How come you have a gun?"

"To protect us from bad people, like the man you saw with your mother."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to a country where it's warm all the time, and we have a beautiful new home to live in and all new clothes when we get there."

“Are you going to let Mom come and live with us if she gets out of jail?”

“No. She isn’t getting out of jail. Not for the rest of her life.”

CHAPTER 54

The drive back to Toronto was far from pleasant. Mike and Karen were silently lost in thought as they considered the compounding effect of the day's events. The singular consolation in all of their misery was that they were now totally free to be together without fear of Servito's reprisals. Unfortunately, the happiness both had long envisioned was soured by the bitterness of their desperate situation.

The evening newspaper lay on the plush red carpet in front of the ornate front door of Karen's penthouse. On the bottom of the front page was a large photograph of heavily clad firemen removing Allison from the smoldering wreckage of Servito's limousine. The story below the photograph indicated that the driver, Jerrold Allison, who lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment on Spadina Avenue, Toronto, was rushed to North York Hospital, where he was currently in a coma from which he was not expected to wake. It added that the destroyed limousine was registered in the name of Reserve Oil Inc., a company owned by Mrs. James Servito of Toronto.

"That's just wonderful," Mike hissed as he handed the paper to Karen. "The remains of the fat man and the limousine are on the front page. I'm surprised he survived long enough to get to the hospital. And your beloved husband registered the limousine in Reserve Oil. I'm sure the feds are going to love that one."

Karen opened the paper and stared at the photograph. "Do you have any idea where we go from here?" she asked, her soft voice breaking.

"In the unlikely event that Bushing appears, he's the first person I want to talk to. There's no question that he can link your husband to the crimes we

know about, and probably some we don't... but if he doesn't show up, we've got a problem."

"You mean the whole thing's dead-ended, don't you?"

Mike tightened his lips and nodded. "I wish we could just call the police and ask them to help us, but that would be a waste of time. They wouldn't believe us."

"Do you still think that going to Buffalo is worth the risk?"

"What risk?"

"Crossing the border. They said we have to stay in Ontario until our trial. If Customs stops us and finds out we've broken bail, they'll put us back in jail and we'll forfeit the bonds."

"I don't care about the risk," Mike said. "I'm going to do whatever it takes to bring this nightmare to an end."

"Don't move. I'll be right back," Karen said. She turned and hurried to her bedroom, returning just seconds later with a chrome-plated nine millimeter Colt Defender revolver in her right hand.

"Where did you get that?" Mike demanded.

"I had it hidden in the bedroom. Jim gave it to me years ago. To protect Phillip and me." She handed it to Mike.

"What the hell am I going to do with this?" he asked, staring at the weapon, which dangled from the grip of his thumb and index finger.

"Persuade Bushing to talk."

Mike shook his head. "That's not me, babe. I could never pull the trigger. All it could ever be is a bluff." He glanced at his watch. "Anyway, I should call him. Maybe he's off the missing list."

"Use the phone in the kitchen. It's just beside the bar."

Mike hurried to the kitchen and dialed Bushing's number. He heard several rings, and then a click.

"What number did you dial, please?" an operator asked.

Mike gave Bushing's office number to the operator.

"I'm sorry, sir. That number is no longer in service."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes sir.”

Mike hung up and looked skyward. “Shit! Where the hell are you, Bob Bushing?” he yelled.

The kitchen door swung open and Karen appeared. “What happened?”

“I just had a nice conversation with the operator in Buffalo. She said Bushing’s office number is no longer in service. I wouldn’t be surprised if he went to Caracas to join your husband.”

The door to the kitchen opened again and Martha Perkins appeared. “Oh! I’m sorry,” she said, eyeballing the stranger in her kitchen. She turned to leave.

“Martha, please stay,” Karen coaxed. “I want you to meet Mike.” She turned to Mike. “This is Mike King, a dear friend of mine. We’ve known each other for a very long time.”

“Nice to meet you, Mike,” Martha said, smiling politely. “Karen just told me what happened to Phillip today. I’m so glad you’re with her.”

“So am I,” Mike said.

Martha turned to Karen. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am. If there’s anything I can do...?”

“Thanks, Martha. Before you go, I want you to know that we’re going to get Phillip back, and I plan to continue to employ you as Phillip’s nanny for so long as he needs one, and whether he’s here or not.”

“You’re very kind, Karen. Good luck to both of you.” Martha turned and left the kitchen.

Mike returned to the telephone on the wall and dialed his office number. “Hi, Margaret. It’s Mike. I’m in—”

“Thank God you called, Mike,” Margaret said. “We’ve got big problems. We heard on the radio today that the police identified the other two men who were killed in the explosion at Amerada. One of them was Bob Bushing. Empire State Oil and Reserve Oil are out of business—now we’re short over thirty million gallons.”

“Who was the third?” Mike asked, shaken and demoralized.

“His name was Earle Langston. I couldn’t believe it... the Director of Customs and Immigration.”

Mike stared at the ceiling in anguish. He had suspected Servito had someone on the inside, someone who allowed his trucks to cross the border unopposed. Langston was the missing link. And now he was dead.

“Mike, are you still there?” Margaret asked.

“Yes. Please listen carefully. I’m going to try to find replacement supply as soon as possible. In the meantime, I want you to do whatever you can to allocate all existing supply among the outlets we still have operating. I know it’s going to be difficult, but we have no choice. When an outlet has sold its allocated supply, I want it closed until it gets its next allocation. I want every outlet to post prices at one penny above the market. Also, I want you to advise every employee that our payroll will continue, without interruption.” Mike knew that he was administering a death blow to his business, but he had obligations to meet.

“Is that it?”

“No. I’m sure the media is going to call. They’re going to ask all kinds of questions about contaminated gasoline. Give them nothing. Tell them we have no comment at this time. Do you understand everything I’ve told you?”

“Yes, sir. By the way, Mike, Dan Turner called several times today. He’s extremely anxious to talk to you.”

“Thanks, Margaret. I’ll call you again in an hour.” Mike hung up and immediately called Dan Turner.

“I’m glad you called, Mike,” Turner said. “I have some rather bad news for you.”

“Why not? So does everyone else,” Mike snorted, clenching his teeth and stiffening his lips. “What is it?”

“The feds are doing some very heavy breathing. They want to start discoveries next week. If they can, they’ll push this thing into court in less than a month. I know I told you and Karen it would take longer and I’m sorry for that. For us to try to stop them at this point would be like trying to stop a hurricane with an umbrella. At best, we can only slow them down. I

want you and Karen to meet me in my office some time tomorrow. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Tomorrow’s fine. What time?”

“Can you get here by ten?”

“Sure. See you then.”

“Mike, are you okay?” Turner asked.

“Why?”

“You sound different. Tired.”

“Karen and I have had a tough day.”

“Anything you want to tell me about?”

“We just spent the day chasing Karen’s husband. He took their son out of school today and left the country with him.”

“He did what?” Turner shouted.

“He kidnapped Phillip and left the country.”

“Where did they go? Do you have any idea?”

“We think they went to Caracas.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s a long and complicated story. I’ll tell you the whole thing at ten tomorrow morning.” Dejected, Mike hung up and walked to one of the massive floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. He stood in agonized silence as the rush-hour traffic crawled by below. Slowly shifting his eyes to the horizon, he saw a long, narrow strand of blue sky separating the horizon from the dense gray clouds that had covered the city with a half an inch of cold rain earlier in the day. His eyes focused on a low flying stretch DC-8 moving sluggishly westward over Lake Ontario.

The warmth of Karen’s body interrupted his thoughts. “What are you thinking about?” she asked, tightening her arms around his waist.

“Us,” Mike said. He turned to face her. “Let’s go to Caracas,” he said.

Karen frowned. “You can’t be serious.”

“How can I not be when our lives are on the verge of total destruction?”

“We still have lots of time,” Karen pleaded. “If we stay here and keep digging, I’m sure we’ll turn up something.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have lots of time. Dan Turner just told me the feds want to start discoveries as soon as next week. He said they’ll probably haul us into court in a month. We don’t have a chance, babe. They’re going to fry us.”

Karen persisted. “I think we still do have a chance. If we—”

“Karen, we’re screwed. Your husband has murdered everyone who could possibly help us. My secretary just told me Bushing was identified as one of the three men who died in the explosion at Amerada Tank Lines. The third was Earle Langston. He was the director of Customs and Immigration at the Peace Bridge. And the fat man’s dying as we speak.”

“If we go to Caracas, we’ll never be able to come back to Canada.”

“Screw it, babe! I’d rather leave the country than stay here and face this bullshit lynching. If we stay here, we lose. We’ll both go to prison and sit there hating ourselves for not taking the only chance we had left...”

Karen was deeply troubled. The idea of escaping from the charges and the problems was appealing, but it conflicted with her sense of responsibility, not to mention justice. “Suppose we did go to Caracas, and suppose we were lucky enough to find Phillip. How on earth do you expect to get him and convince my beloved husband to give up?”

Mike shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. The only thing that’s certain is that going to Caracas is our least worst option. Besides, we’re going to be a lot better prepared than we were today.”

“How?”

Mike reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew the chrome plated Colt Karen had given him earlier. “I’ll have this when I see him again. In his case, I wouldn’t be bluffing.”

“Sure,” Karen declared with a sarcastic smirk. “You’re going to point the gun at him and order him to give us everything we want. Right?”

Mike wrapped his arms around her and fixed his reddened blue eyes on hers. “I’ve spent a lifetime building a business while I waited for you. I don’t have the strength to make it all happen again. I’d rather die than sit on

my hands and watch everything fall apart. We have a chance to get it all back, and we've got to take it. We could lose it all, but at least we'd have tried."

Karen could see the determination in Mike's eyes. She knew it was impossible to change his mind. The thought of being incarcerated once again and losing both Mike and Phillip had tempered her fears. She was still terrified of the risks, but conceded. "Let's do it," she said. She closed her eyes and held Mike tighter.

CHAPTER 55

Phillip pressed his nose and hands against the dark blue airport Lincoln limousine's window. He stared at his father's enormous Palm Beach mansion. "Is this place really yours?" he asked as the vehicle came to a full stop in the circular driveway of the oceanfront home.

"Yup, and someday it'll be yours," Servito replied. He paid the driver from a fat wad of bills—then he and Phillip stepped out into the warm, late afternoon Florida sunshine. Numerous tropical birds chirped and squawked in nearby trees while the constant drone of a lawn mower disturbed the natural tranquility. Servito opened the massive wooden front door, ushering Phillip through the atrium and out toward the ocean. Phillip dashed ahead to stand at the edge of the beautiful, kidney-shaped swimming pool. He stared longingly at the pool's cobalt blue water.

"Why can't we live here, dad?" he asked.

"I told you, son, my new business is in Venezuela. We're going to get a good night's sleep here. Then we'll be fresh for the flight tomorrow."

"Is Venezuela far from here?"

"Hell, well we're almost half-way there. We'll be making just one more stop before we get there."

"Where is Venezuela?"

"It's a beautiful country in the northern region of South America. It's bordered on the west by Columbia, on the east by Guyana, on the south by Brazil, and on the north by the Caribbean Sea. You hungry?"

Phillip nodded.

“Then follow me. We’re going to eat our hearts out.” Servito led the way to the kitchen. He was about to open the massive refrigerator when the kitchen door was pushed open by a slim, middle-aged black woman. Her graying hair was swept backward to a tight bun and she wore wrinkled gray slacks and a white blouse. A freshly lit Marlboro dangled from her lips. “Mr. Servito!” she declared, and then jerked the cigarette from her lips.

Servito flashed a smile and hurried toward the woman. He hugged her and lifted her from the floor. “It’s been a long time, Rose. How the hell are ya?”

“Jus’ fine,” Rose replied with a deep Georgian drawl. “But I don’t keep track of time no more. It don’t do no good... who’s the boy?”

Servito lowered Rose to the floor and turned to Phillip. “The best thing that’s ever happened to me. He’s my son.”

Rose gave Phillip a critical stare, and then winked at Servito. “He’s a whole hell of lot better looking than you.”

“Smarter, too.” Servito chuckled as he turned again to face Phillip. “Son, this is Rose Jackson, the official queen of this house. She looks after it when I’m not here.”

“How old are you, son?” Rose asked.

“Ten.”

Rose smiled with pursed lips and shook her head. “You’re goin’ to be a heart breaker, boy. That’s for certain.”

“Chip off the old block,” Servito said with a wink.

“Where’s his mother?” Rose asked.

Servito rolled his eyes skyward. “Uh, she decided not to join us.”

Aware that her boss wanted the subject terminated, Rose nodded with a smirk. “Y’all hungry?”

“Starved,” Servito replied.

“Then y’all take a swim or whatever. I’ll make us dinner. It won’t be fancy, but I’ll have it ready in a jiffy.”

CHAPTER 56

Mike glanced at the stately grandfather clock in the corner of the ornate boardroom of Turner, Peterson, Greenwell, and Worthy. It was 10:05 a.m. In two ticks of the second hand, one of the double oak doors swung open and a neatly dressed, curvaceous young brunette appeared. “Good morning,” she sang, smiling warmly. “My name is Kate Daniel. I’m Mr. Turner’s private secretary.” She placed a silver tray and urn filled with hot coffee on the polished mahogany table in front of Mike and Karen. On the tray were two gold rimmed coffee cups and saucers, along with matching cream and sugar bowls. “He asked me to tell you he’ll be with you very shortly,” she said before leaving the room.

Mike had barely filled Karen’s cup when the door burst open and Dan Turner rushed in. He closed the door behind him and hurried to a chair on the opposite side of the table. “Good morning,” he said as he placed his black briefcase on the table. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Let’s get started. We have a lot to do.”

“Dan, Karen and I have something to tell you. Before we do, I want it clearly understood that we enjoy lawyer client status,” Mike cautioned.

Turner stared at Mike over his spectacles, and then gave him a barely perceptible nod.

“Is that understood, Dan?” Mike said, demanding a verbal response.

“Of course it is. What is it?”

“Karen and I have decided to leave the country.”

Turner winced and jerked his head sideways. “Sure you have! You need to relax from the stress and pressure of it all, so you’re going to trundle off

somewhere on a nice little vacation.”

“It’s not a holiday, Dan.”

Turner gave Mike his patented penetrating stare. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in? Do you have any idea how much trouble you will be in if you leave the country? In the unlikely event you make it out, you’ll immediately forfeit your bail bonds and you’ll be the subjects of international extradition agreements. When they catch you, they’ll have you back in this country before you know it. Then they’ll have you both incarcerated with no possibility of bail.”

Mike continued as though Turner had never spoken. “Dan, we’re absolutely convinced that Karen’s husband has set us up, and we don’t think there’s any way we can prove it if we stay here. We would rather risk it all than stay here and allow this travesty of justice to continue.”

“Did you tell me that Karen’s husband has gone to Venezuela?” Turner glinted steely eyes, preparing to bargain now that he realized how very serious Mike was.

Mike nodded.

“How do you know you’re going to find him there?”

Mike handed the piece of paper containing Servito’s Caracas address to Turner. “Take a look at this.” Turner examined the paper for several seconds, and then looked up at Mike. “It’s obviously an address in Caracas. What’s the significance?”

“Karen recognized the writing. It’s her husband’s.”

“Where did you get it?”

“When we found out that Servito hadn’t taken Phillip to school, we guessed that they had gone to his farm. So we decided to go there. On our way, we spotted Servito’s limousine in a service station. We chased it until it crashed into a retaining wall in North Toronto. The driver was Jerrold Allison, a bagman for Servito. We found that piece of paper inside Allison’s false passport.”

“So you’re going to Caracas on the basis of that information?”

“It’s a long shot,” Mike conceded. “But we think it’s our only chance.”

“Okay. You’re obviously still convinced that Jim Servito set the two of you up. Help me to believe you’re right.”

“Well while Servito was staring down the barrel of his gun at us and pushing Karen’s little boy onto his private airplane, he made it very clear he knew that Karen and I had been charged by the feds. That wasn’t public knowledge, Dan. He also asked how I liked the new performance improving additive in my gasoline. There was only one way he could have known... he put it in there.”

“Wait, when was this?” Turner exclaimed.

“Yesterday.”

“You really did have an exciting day.” Turner grimaced. “I have a question for you, Mike. I want you to give me an honest answer.”

Mike shrugged his shoulders. “I have nothing to gain by giving you a dishonest one.”

“Have you ever evaded the payment of taxes to any government?”

Mike replied without hesitation. “I’ve avoided but never evaded. Why?”

“During the last several days, I’ve been communicating informally with the attorneys who are acting for the feds in your cases. I was astounded when they told me they have enough evidence to charge both you and Karen with gasoline tax evasion.”

“Unbelievable!” Mike said, shaking his head in disgust.

“Well, you had better believe it. I don’t think they’re bluffing.”

“Let me ask you a question. Are you aware of a large explosion that occurred in Fort Erie four days ago?” Mike asked.

Turner nodded. “I read about it in the newspaper.”

“There were three people killed in that explosion. Let me tell you who those three people were—then you can draw your own conclusions.”

“Okay,” Turner said. He leaned back in his chair and lowered his spectacles to the end of his nose.

“One of them was Dave Lasker, the president of Amerada Tank Lines. Amerada’s the company that hauled most of my gasoline. Another one was Bob Bushing, the president of Empire State Oil. Bushing was the broker

who introduced me to Reserve Oil and sold gasoline to me through that company. The third was Earle Langston, director of Customs and Immigration on the U.S. side of the Peace Bridge.”

Turner leaned forward. “That is very suggestive, but not conclusive. You need something more, something linking Karen’s husband to the explosion. If you don’t have that, you’re just blowing smoke. One might just as well say that you killed those men.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me the feds want Karen and I for arson now, too!” Mike roared.

“No, I’m not going to tell you that.”

“Then for God’s sake, Dan! Who else could have done it?”

“That’s not my point. I merely said that you have to prove it was Servito. You need tangible evidence.”

“How about two hundred and sixteen thousand dollars, cash. Is that real?”

“I’m sure it is, but I don’t have the slightest idea what it proves.”

“We found two large canvas bags in the front seat of Servito’s limousine. Those bags were packed with cash, Dan. Two hundred and sixteen thousand dollars that we can link directly to Servito.”

“How do you propose to do that?”

“It’s obvious. Allison works for Servito and he was found carrying a ton of cash in Servito’s limousine.”

“Did you leave the cash in the limousine?”

“No, we took it. We still have it.”

“So there is still no conclusive link to Servito—there’s no chain of custody for the evidence. If you showed up in court with that money, the feds would immediately link it to you. Besides, two hundred and sixteen thousand is nickels and dimes to the government. They’re looking for hundreds of millions.”

Exasperated by Turner’s contrariness, Mike raised his hands above his head, as if in surrender. “That’s it, Dan. With no disrespect to your considerable professional talents, we think we’re screwed. Servito holds all

the cards. He decided he had enough money to retire and live happily ever after, so he sanitized his trail and left the country.”

Turner’s lips tightened, his dark eyebrows furrowed. “Privately, I agree with you, but my job as your attorney is to advise you, in the strongest possible terms, to stay here and fight this thing.”

“Not going to happen, Dan. It’s an exercise in futility to try to prove it here. The only way to do it is to find the man, and we think he’s in Venezuela.”

Turner pressed his fingers against his temples. “If you two really want to go, I can’t stop you. The best I can do is stall the feds for a while. But eventually...”

“Do what you can,” Mike said.

“How are you going to get there? Have you made any plans?” Turner glanced up over his spectacles.

“Not yet,” Mike replied.

“The best advice I could give you both is to be extremely careful. Avoid using public transportation.”

“Isn’t it rather difficult to make it all the way to Venezuela without using some form of public transportation?” Karen asked.

Turner smiled. “I have a friend who owns an airplane. His specialty is covert transportation. He’s very private, very good and very expensive. He likes cash.”

“Maybe he’d like some of Servito’s cash,” Mike said, surprised and delighted with Turner’s revelation.

Turner scribbled on a small piece of paper. “Here’s his name and telephone number. He’s in Toronto at the moment. He likes his money up front and I’m sure he isn’t the slightest bit interested in where it came from. I’m going to leave this paper here while I go to the washroom. I don’t expect it will be here when I get back.” He turned to Karen. “Promise me you’ll make sure Mike doesn’t do anything crazy. I don’t want to lose a client.”

“I will. I don’t want to lose him, either.”

He turned to Mike. "Mike, I suspect Marc Peterson's going to need a power of attorney before you go."

"He already has it."

"Then this meeting is over," Turner said. He stood and headed for the door. After opening it, he turned to face Mike and Karen. "Is there any way I can convince you to change your minds?" he asked.

"Only if you can convince the feds they're making a gigantic mistake," Karen replied.

Turner grinned. "No guarantees."

"Then we'll send you a postcard from Caracas."

CHAPTER 57

That night, Mike sat at a stool in the kitchen of Karen's penthouse and dialed the number Dan Turner had given him.

After four rings, a man answered.

"Is this Dale Casey?"

"Yes. Before you tell me your name, I want you to tell me why you called."

"Dan Turner gave me your number. He said you have an airplane and that you—"

Casey interrupted. "Good. I know who you are. Are you calling from a pay phone?"

"No."

"Go to one and call me back as soon as you can. Then we'll talk."

Mike hung up and turned to Karen. "Do you know where the nearest pay phone is?"

"I think the closest one is on the corner, just south of this building. Why?"

"He wants me to call him from a pay phone. I'll be back soon." Mike hurried from the penthouse and ran to the pay phone as fast as he could. He dialed Casey's number again.

"Yup." Casey answered on the first ring.

"I just talked to you ten minutes ago," Mike said. "I'm using a pay phone."

“Good. Now I know this call isn’t bugged. I assume you want to go somewhere, anonymously.”

“That’s correct. My friend and I want to go to Caracas.”

“How soon do you want to leave?”

“As soon as possible.”

“We can take off at seven tomorrow morning. Is that okay with you?”

“That’s great.”

“I have some stipulations. The first is that the flight will be one way only. The second is that it will cost you twenty-five thousand, cash in advance. Is that a problem?”

“No.”

“Fine. Then my third stipulation is that you get to Pier Four at three-thirty tomorrow morning. Bring a flashlight with you. When you get to the end of Pier Four, flash it twice. I’ll take you to the Toronto Island Airport and drop you there, and my partner will take you from there to the plane. We’re going to have to hide you on the plane until we take off. They don’t allow flights from the island until seven... Do you both have passports?”

“Yes. Canadian.”

“Good.”

“Is this a breakfast flight?”

Casey chuckled. “No. Bring food with you. We’ll be in the air for at least five hours before our first landing.”

“Got it.”

“See you at Pier Four at three-thirty. Don’t be late.”

Mike and Karen spent the remainder of the evening preparing for their trip into the unknown. Neither could sleep, and both were filled with anxiety over what they would find in Caracas and what might happen if they were discovered. Mike phoned his secretary and told her he was taking a short business trip to New York, and that his second in command should take over in his absence. He assured her he would be back soon. Karen advised the administration office of Toronto General Hospital that she was leaving for a week’s skiing vacation in British Columbia.

CHAPTER 58

Servito smiled when he saw the north coast of Venezuela.

“Holy smoke!” Phillip exclaimed, straining to get a better view. “Look at those mountains, Dad. How high are they?”

“Six, maybe seven thousand feet.”

“Are they in Venezuela?”

“Yup.” Servito pointed to his left. “See those three large islands down there?” Phillip nodded.

“They’re the ABC islands: Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao. There’s a large oil refinery on each one. Those refineries process the oil that’s produced in Venezuela.”

Seconds later, Servito’s plane commenced its descent for its approach to the mountainside airport at La Guaira, a port city on the north coast of Venezuela. The airport had been sliced into the side of a mountain, high above the azure blue Caribbean Sea. The plane continued its descent to an altitude of one hundred feet and sped toward the runway.

Phillip pressed his nose and hands to the window, amazed and terrified that his father would try to land in such a precarious place. “Go back up, Dad!” he shouted. “We’re going to fall into the water!”

“Relax, son,” Servito said. “I’ve done this before. It’s easy.”

After clearing customs, the ease of which was facilitated greatly by a substantial cash donation to certain officials, Servito and Phillip took a taxi from La Guaira along a magnificently engineered highway that climbed abruptly from the lush green coastline to the height of the mountain range, over three thousand feet above sea level.

The taxi proceeded the five miles to Caracas, and then climbed a series of winding streets on the southern slope of the coastal mountains. When it appeared that the taxi had come to a dead end, it turned sharply to the right and into a long paved driveway, which was lined on both sides with tall royal palm trees. It stopped near the entrance to a magnificent and sprawling ranch-style mansion. Servito placed his hand on Phillip's shoulder. "Welcome to your new home, son."

"Can we go in?" Phillip asked, struggling to open the taxi door.

Servito depressed the door latch with his right hand and quickly opened the door with a sharp blow of his foot. "I'll be with you in a second," he said, and then turned to pay the driver as Phillip scampered to the front door. Servito joined his son with the key in hand. "Go on in, Phillip. Have a good look."

Phillip took several hesitant steps inside, and then stopped and stared at the south wall. It was constructed almost entirely of floor to ceiling windows and sliding glass doors. Beyond the glass wall was a large, sculptured swimming pool filled with inviting azure blue water. Beyond the pool was a black, wrought-iron railing that delineated the edge of a steep rocky cliff. The city of Caracas stretched beyond for miles until it disappeared into the horizon.

Anxious to move after being confined for the long plane ride, Phillip opened one of the sliding glass doors and proceeded onto the concrete patio surrounding the swimming pool. He was exhilarated to breathe the fresh air and feel the warmth of the late afternoon sun on his skin. He continued to the edge of the cliff and stopped at the railing, leaning over to study the rocky chasm more than three hundred feet below. To his right, he could see a yellow cable car climbing slowly toward the summit of Mount Avila, which was the mountain next to theirs.

"Come over here, son," Servito shouted. "I want you to meet some people."

Phillip turned to see his father standing outside the sliding glass door that led to the kitchen. With him were two women and one man. All three had light brown skin and black, shiny hair. Young, attractive, and generously endowed, the women wore black skirts with white blouses and white

aprons. The man, on the other hand, was large and menacing. He wore black trousers and a black shirt, which was unbuttoned enough to show the mass of black hair on his chest. A four inch scar decorated his left cheek, while a large gold skull and cross-bones pendant dangled from a thick gold chain around his neck.

Phillip rounded the swimming pool and stopped about two feet away. His mouth opened involuntarily as he stared at the terrifying man standing next to his father.

“Son, this is Maria, and this is Carla. These lovely ladies are going to live with us. Maria’s going to keep our house clean and Carla’s going to cook our meals.”

Phillip nodded while both women smiled politely.

Servito turned to the large man on his right. “This is Carlos. He’s also going to live with us. He’s here to protect us and keep us safe. He’ll make sure nobody comes into our house without our permission.” Servito returned to the house with an arm around the waists of his two female servants, his hands just beginning to raise their short skirts. Carlos folded his arms and watched silently as Phillip returned to the railing to look at the city once again.

CHAPTER 59

The shrill ring of an alarm awakened Mike and Karen from their restless sleep. It was 2 a.m. when Mike clamped his palm to the top of the clock. Although tired, his mind instantly focused. He turned to Karen and reached for her hand. "This is it, babe," he said.

Karen's eyes were opened wide. "Any doubts?" she asked as she squeezed Mike's hand.

"All kinds."

"You still want to do it?"

"With all my heart. You?"

Karen grinned. "There's no way I'm going to chicken out now."

The air was damp and cold, the sky clear and moonless, as Mike and Karen stepped out of the taxi at Pier Four. They carried bags over their shoulders, containing a change of clothing for each, toiletries, food, a flashlight, Karen's chrome-plated revolver, and two hundred and sixteen thousand dollars of Jim Servito's cash. They stared at the black expanse of water, barely able to discern the profile of Centre Island, even though it was less than a mile away. The water's surface was as smooth as glass.

Mike reached into his bag and removed the flashlight. He pointed it straight out at the water and turned it on and off twice. Within a few minutes, Dale Casey arrived in his eighteen foot Mercruiser, approaching without running lights to avoid being seen. He turned off the motor and allowed his boat to glide until it came to rest against the pier. "You people going to Caracas?" he asked.

Mike jumped down four feet into the boat, and then turned to help Karen.

“Welcome aboard,” Casey said. “Dale Casey’s my name. Discrete transportation’s my game.”

The darkness made it difficult to see Casey’s face, but Mike and Karen could see he was tall, slightly over six feet. Mike extended his hand. “I’m Mike, and this is Karen.”

“Do you have something for me?” Casey asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Your airfare. I don’t want to get into this thing and find out you don’t have the money.”

Mike reached into his bag and withdrew five elasticized wads of bills, each containing exactly five thousand dollars of Servito’s cash. He handed them to Casey. “This should do it,” he said.

“Thank you,” Casey said. “I’ll count it before we take off. Meanwhile, I’ll get you two to the plane.” He turned the ignition key and the motor started with a muted gurgling idle. As he slowly eased the throttle forward, the bow rose slightly and the boat accelerated toward Blockhouse Bay, which lay between Muggs Island and Centre Island.

Within five minutes, the boat bumped gently against a wooden dock. Someone on the dock grabbed the bow rope and fastened down the line.

“Liz, meet Mike and Karen,” Casey said.

“Good morning. I’m Liz Casey, Dale’s wife. I’ll be the co-pilot and your stewardess for this morning’s flight. Can I help you with your bags?”

Mike and Karen handed their bags to Liz, and then climbed from the boat. “See you soon,” Liz called to Casey as she pushed the boat away from the dock.

“I’ll pick you up in forty-five,” Casey replied. The boat disappeared into the night.

Liz turned to Mike and Karen. “Let’s get to the plane. It’s just beyond those trees.” She pointed toward a large clump of leafless trees, no more than a hundred feet from the dock and partially obscuring the lights of Toronto Island Airport and the city. When they emerged from the trees, they found the end of one of the airport’s runways. They walked the length of the

runway, past numerous single and twin-engine airplanes parked near the well-lit terminal and adjacent hangar.

“Damn!” Mike said, stopping abruptly.

Liz stopped too. “What’s wrong?”

“Can’t you see the security guards?” he asked, pointing to two uniformed men standing in the gaping opening in front of the hangar.

Liz chuckled. “Don’t worry about them. Part of your airfare was used to ensure they don’t say a thing. We can walk right past them.” When they reached the hangar, the two security guards waved and smiled before turning away from the intrusion. Liz led Mike and Karen straight to the airplane, which was an almost new, twin-engine Cessna 421B, painted light gray with two parallel gold stripes running the length of the sleek fuselage.

“It’s beautiful, Liz,” Mike said. He could hardly take his eyes from it.

Liz frowned. “It ought to be. It cost a fortune to buy, and another one to keep. One day I’m going to convince my husband to get rid of it and get a real job.” She opened the cabin door and a set of steps were slowly lowered from inside. She turned and smiled at her passengers. “Climb aboard.”

“No boarding passes?” Mike asked.

Liz grinned and shook her head. She followed Mike and Karen into the plane. “The tricky part of this trip is for you two to stay out of sight until we’re in the air. Unfortunately, you’re going to have to lie on the floor for about three hours until the airport opens. You might want to catch up on your sleep while you’re waiting.” She shrugged, and then opened a compartment above her head and removed blankets and small pillows. “These should help,” she said, handing them to Karen. “Dale and I will be here about six. It takes about an hour to go through all the checkouts and get out to the runway. Hopefully, we’ll be in the air shortly after seven... and we’ll see you around then.” She turned and left the plane, purposefully leaving the cabin door open.

CHAPTER 60

Phillip was awakened early by a loud conversation between Maria and Carla. They were talking just outside his bedroom, their rapid-fire Spanish periodically interrupted by loud laughing and giggling. He climbed from his bed, walked to the sliding glass doors, and witnessed the beginning of a perfectly clear day. He put on his new blue bathing suit and opened the glass door just wide enough to squeeze through.

At the pool, he kneeled and timidly lowered his right hand into the water.

“Last one in’s a rotten egg!” Servito shouted, standing behind Phillip in his new red and yellow swimming trunks.

“It’s going to be you, Dad!” Phillip shouted. He raced to the shallow end, descended to the first of the four steps, and dove in. Seconds later, his head emerged from below the water. “You’re the rotten egg!” he shouted.

Servito laughed, and then he dove in. They swam, laughed, and splashed each other. When they emerged from the pool, the morning sun quickly warmed their bodies.

Carla, dressed in tight white shorts and a form-fitting T-shirt, appeared at one of the sliding glass doors leading to the main section of the house. “Breakfast is ready!” she shouted in broken English.

Servito placed his hand on Phillip’s shoulder. “Go get dressed. I’ll see you in the kitchen in a minute.”

Phillip arrived in the kitchen to find his father already seated at the massive wooden table. A breakfast of strawberries, scrambled eggs, bacon, and Belgian waffles with maple syrup awaited him.

“Get over here and eat your heart out, son,” Servito ordered. “Carla’s the best cook in Venezuela.”

Servito finished his breakfast and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He marched to the stove and placed his right hand on Carla’s left buttock. She giggled as he fondled her breasts with his left hand. When he kissed the back of her neck, she turned and playfully poked his ribs with her finger. He doubled up as if in great pain, and then turned to Phillip. “Hurry up, son. We’re late.”

“Where are we going?” Phillip mumbled, his mouth still full of toast.

“Down to the city. We’re gonna buy a car.” Phillip gulped the remainder of the toast down with a swallow of milk, and then followed his father to a yellow taxi that was waiting near the front door. He stopped abruptly when he saw Carlos, who was standing beside the taxi and talking to the driver. He was terrified by the man’s tremendous size and scarred face. He trembled before the gold skull and cross-bones dangling from the bottom of the heavy gold chain around Carlos’s neck.

“Come on, son,” Servito shouted from the back seat. “If you’re not in here in three seconds, we’re going without you.”

Phillip ran to the taxi and climbed into the back seat beside his father. Carlos closed the door behind him, and then got into the front seat beside the driver.

The taxi took them down the mountainside and into the business section of Caracas, where it came to a full stop in front of the Banco National Venezolano, a modern, three-story concrete building with a massive front wall of bronze tinted glass. Carlos and the driver remained in the taxi while Servito and Phillip got out and climbed the concrete steps leading to the bank’s front doors. One of the doors was opened by a short, plump man in his early sixties. His head was devoid of hair and he was neatly dressed in a brown, pinstriped suit, white shirt, and a brown bow tie. “Mr. Servito!” the man exclaimed, smiling and shaking Servito’s hand. “Welcome back to Caracas. It is indeed a pleasure to see you once again.”

“It’s good to be here, Alfred,” Servito replied. “I want you to meet my son, Phillip. He’s come to live with me.” He placed his hand on Phillip’s shoulder. “Phillip, this is Alfred Schnieder. He’s the president of this bank

and a very good friend of mine. I don't know what I would have done without him all these years."

"You're very welcome here, young man," Schnieder said, smiling broadly and displaying a large number of gold teeth. He had a sharp German accent that made Phillip feel tired. "You may have need of my services, some day." He extended his hand.

Phillip shook Schnieder's hand.

"Please come to my office and have a drink," Schnieder said, pointing the way. "We have much to talk about." He led his guests to a large, tastefully decorated office filled with expensive furniture and numerous South American works of art.

While Phillip amused himself by looking at the hundreds of glass statues and trinkets blown and shaped by Venezuelan artists, Schnieder hurried to his enormous bar. He poured three large brandies and opened a cola for Phillip. After downing one of the brandies, he took the remaining two and the cola to his hand-carved, French Provincial desk. "Help yourselves to the drinks, gentlemen," he said, flashing another golden smile. After seating himself with another brandy, he said, "Now, my friends, let's talk."

Servito finished his brandy in one gulp, and then plunked his briefcase on the desk. "This is for you, Alfred," he said.

"What have we here?" Schnieder asked.

"Open it."

Schnieder snapped the brass latches on the briefcase. "Very impressive," he said as he stared at the neatly stacked and bound bundles of cash in the briefcase. "How much?"

"A quarter of a million."

Schnieder removed one of the bundles and casually flicked through the bills. "Would you like it placed in your account?" he asked.

"No. I want the equivalent in Bolivars."

Schnieder frowned. "Surely you're not serious. The equivalent will fill at least four briefcases."

"I'm very serious, Alfred. Phillip and I are going to buy a car today, and cash has more horse power, as I'm sure you well know."

“As you wish,” Schnieder conceded. He replaced the bundle and closed the briefcase. “Excuse me, gentlemen. I shall return in two minutes.” When he returned, he handed a sheet of paper to Servito. “The exchange rate and the equivalency calculation are typed on the paper. Before you leave, my assistant will give you that amount. Please consider the briefcases a gift from me.”

Servito nodded to signify his approval.

Schnieder turned to Phillip. “Now, young man, your father has asked me to talk to you and to look after your financial affairs. I know you don’t have a great deal of money at this point in your life, but some day you will. Your father is an extremely wealthy man and for many years he has honored me with the responsibility of looking after his financial affairs. I am completely familiar with every detail, no matter how minute, of his personal and business financial activities. God forbid, should anything should happen to him, you will come to me and I will continue that responsibility with you... do you understand what I have said?”

Phillip nodded, unaware that his mouth had fallen open.

Schnieder handed his business card to Phillip. “Do you have a wallet?”

Phillip reached into the rear pocket of his shorts and pulled out his wallet. “Here it is,” he said, holding it in front of him.

“Very good. Please keep my card in there. Just in case you need me.”

Phillip carefully slithered Schnieder’s card into his wallet.

Servito extended his hand and winked. “Thank you for the hospitality, Alfred. It’s been a pleasure, as usual.”

“The pleasure is always mine, Mr. Servito. Come to my assistant’s office. I’m sure he has something for you by now.”

Manuel Blanco, a diminutive native Venezuelan in his mid-thirties, pointed to four large brown leather briefcases on the floor beside his desk. “Your cash is in those briefcases, Mr. Servito. Would you like to count it?”

Servito laughed. “You gotta be kidding. That’d take all day.” He turned to Phillip and pointed to the briefcases. “You take two and I’ll take the other two.”

Twenty minutes later, the taxi arrived at a luxury car dealership at Sabana Grande in Caracas. After an hour of haggling, Servito succeeded in exchanging two of the briefcases for a slightly used, jet-black Rolls Royce convertible. He and Phillip climbed in and motored up the southern slope of Mount Avila to the base of the cable car. From there they rode to the summit. They walked a short distance to the abandoned Humbolt Hotel, and then continued on to a native fruit stand, where they bought two lemonades. Throughout the day, Servito had tried in vain to make cheer his son. The boy had thwarted every effort—he had hardly said a word.

“Is something wrong, son? Servito asked. “Don’t you feel well?”

Phillip drew a mouthful of lemonade through his straw, and then stared at his father, his big brown eyes wide open. “How come you’re so rich?”

Unprepared for the question, Servito fumbled with an answer. “I... I’m... because I was a good businessman. I bought low and sold high.”

“Will I be rich, just like you?”

“You already are, son. Everything I own is yours, and some day you’ll be able to use our money to grow even richer.” Servito reached inside his jacket and removed his black, leather-bound notebook. It contained the keys to his fortune, the fruit of his crimes, the secrets for which so many people had died. He handed the notebook to Phillip. “Do you have any idea what a lot of money is?” he asked.

“I think a lot of money is a million dollars.”

Servito chuckled. “Chump change,” he scoffed. He pointed to the notebook in his son’s hands. “That book is worth more than three hundred times as much as you think is a lot of money.”

Phillip gazed at the book in amazement. “Can we sell this book for three hundred million dollars?”

Servito chuckled again. “No. The book just tells us where the money is.”

“What money?”

“The money I’ve saved. It’s in banks and businesses all over the world. That book tells us how much money is in each bank and each business. Someday it’ll all be yours.”

“What day?”

“The day I die.”

“Are you going to die?”

“I hope not,” Servito replied, rolling his eyes skyward.

CHAPTER 61

“What was that?” Karen asked, startled by the sudden movement of the airplane.

Mike raised himself high enough to peek out the window beside him. “We’re being towed out of the hangar,” he said.

Dale and Liz Casey entered the cabin seconds after the plane came to rest. They waved and smiled at their passengers, and then disappeared into the cockpit without a word. Seconds later, the motors roared to life and the plane started to move slowly forward. After a long and monotonous period of slow and bumpy rolling, the plane finally came to another brief stop. The sound of the motors grew to a deafening pitch, and then the plane lurched forward.

Mike and Karen had been through many take-offs, but never on the floor of an airplane. They gasped as their prostrate bodies were thrust backward and upward at a steep angle. When Mike could no longer stand the sight of the roof of the plane, he climbed to the seat beside him and looked out the window. “We did it!” he shouted, staring downward at the tall buildings of downtown Toronto.

Karen pulled herself to her feet and looked over Mike’s shoulder. “We may regret it. For the rest of our lives,” she said with a frown.

Mike privately agreed. The odds were heavily stacked against them, and he couldn’t help but know it. Was Servito even really in Caracas? Even if he was, and they were lucky enough to find him, he wouldn’t hesitate to kill. “We’re going to need a lot of help,” he said, still staring downward.

“What kind of help?”

“Neither of us has ever been to Venezuela. I hardly know where it is. Do you speak Spanish?”

Karen shook her head.

“We’re going to need an interpreter.”

Within three hours, the sleek gray and gold Cessna was streaking southward over the Atlantic Ocean. The comfort of the airplane and the smoothness of the flight had conspired to dull Mike and Karen’s anxieties. They had just finished their breakfast of apples and tuna sandwiches when the door to the cockpit opened and both Dale and Liz Casey appeared. When Liz removed her extremely dark sunglasses, she revealed a tanned and very attractive face. Her straight, long blond hair hung down over her white turtle-neck sweater, and her well preserved body fit perfectly into her tight, faded blue jeans.

Beside her, Dale was an imposing figure. Tall, handsome, and extremely athletic, he wore a heavy red sweater and baggy beige trousers. His salt and pepper hair complemented his ruddy complexion. “Are you two reasonably comfortable?” he asked with a warm smile.

Both Mike and Karen nodded.

“Who’s flying the airplane?” Karen asked.

“Nobody,” Dale replied with a grin. “It’s flying itself—on autopilot. I just told the on-board computer what to do, and let it take over. It’s far more accurate than me.”

“Dale and I thought we should come back here and get to know our passengers,” Liz said.

“Well, that’s thoughtful of you,” Karen said with a smile. “May I ask, have you been doing this very long?”

“A few years,” Liz replied. “My father owned a ski resort in Aspen for a number of years, and Dale was a ski instructor there when I met him. After my mother passed away, Dad couldn’t handle the stress of running everything on his own. That’s when Dale and I took over. We bought the plane with the idea of selling exclusive and expensive ski vacations. It worked really well until the energy crisis.”

“What did the energy crisis have to do with your business?” Mike asked.

“A real bummer. The price of aviation fuel and the resort’s bottom line went in opposite directions. We had to either sell the resort or do something to supplement our income, so Dale got us started in the private transportation business. He loved this plane so much he couldn’t part with it. The business was small and unprofitable at first, but through Dale’s connections and hard work, it grew. Now it’s in the process of becoming a very lucrative business. There are a lot of very wealthy people who like to travel incognito.”

“When do you expect we’ll be in Caracas?” Mike asked.

Dale glanced at his watch. “We’re going to land and refuel in Nassau in about two hours. That shouldn’t take long. From there, we’ll fly to Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic. If you two don’t mind, we’d like to have dinner and spend the night there. We should land at La Guaira about two or three hours after takeoff tomorrow morning.

“Where’s La Guaira?” Karen asked.

“It’s an airport on the north coast of Venezuela. It’s very convenient, only a short drive from Caracas,” Dale replied.

Casey landed his plane at Las Americas Airport in the Dominican Republic at five in the afternoon. After moving quickly through Customs, the four took a taxi along the Avenida de Las Americas, a fourteen mile journey to Santo Domingo. When they reached the outskirts of the sprawling city, Dale turned to the taxi driver. “Hostal Nicolas de Ovando y Calle Las Damas, por favor,” he said.

The driver smiled and nodded. “Si, señor.”

Dale turned to face Mike and Karen. “We have reservations at the Hostal Nicolas de Ovando. I think you’ll like this hotel. It’s a restored sixteenth-century mansion in the oldest part of the city. It’s comfortable and small—only sixty rooms.”

Mike and Karen proceeded directly to their room after checking into the hotel. They showered together, and then flopped on the bed. They were awakened an hour later by jangling of the telephone. Reluctantly, Mike rolled over and lifted the receiver. “Hello,” he groaned hoarsely.

“Hi Mike, it’s Dale. Liz and I are just starting to dress for dinner. Could you and Karen meet us at the desk downstairs in half an hour?”

“What’s the dress code?”

“Casual.”

“Good. See you in thirty minutes.”

The four took a taxi to Meson de la Cava, an upscale and unique restaurant constructed inside a natural cave. While they all enjoyed pre-dinner drinks, Mike turned to Dale. “How do you know Dan Turner?” he asked.

“Both Liz and I have known Dan for years. He’s been coming to our resort for a long time. It’s through him that we got a lot of our passengers.” He winked. “Which brings us to you and Karen. I don’t suppose you’d like to share why you’re going to Caracas?”

Despite his reluctance to answer the question, Mike took a chance. “Sure. Maybe you know someone in Caracas who could help us.”

Dale gave Mike a suspicious stare. “Are you running or looking? Maybe you should tell me.”

“Looking,” Mike replied, acutely aware that he and Karen were doing both. “We’re looking for Karen’s son. Her husband kidnapped him and we believe he took him to Venezuela. We’re going to try to bring the boy back to Canada.”

“Have you asked the police for help?” Liz asked.

Mike shook his head. “The police are out of the question.”

Having learned from their previous business experience when to stop asking questions, Dale changed the subject. “I know only one person in the entire country. If he can’t help you directly, I’m sure he’ll know someone who can. He’s very well connected.”

“I’ll take all the help I can get,” Mike said, sitting up straight and twisting to face Dale.

“His name is Adi Blankenship. I’ll call him and set up a meeting for you when we get to La Guaira. We go way back.”

“Thanks, Dale. It’s extremely kind of you to do that,” Karen said, thrilled and relieved to know she and Mike would have an immediate foothold in Caracas. The relief made it possible for her to enjoy a sumptuous dinner, which was followed by dancing to live Latin American music, into the night.

CHAPTER 62

As the gray Cessna roared into the sky the following morning, the passengers' anxiety escalated with each passing minute. Soon they would be in a country neither had ever seen. Soon they would be looking for a man who would be delighted to kill them.

When Casey landed his plane at La Guaira, the mid-day sun had heated the air to just over ninety degrees. All four emerged from the plane and walked briskly to the air-conditioned refuge of the terminal. Liz, Karen, and Mike waited in the airport coffee shop while Dale telephoned his old friend.

“Did you talk to him?” Mike asked the second Dale reappeared.

Dale nodded, then wrote Adi Blankenship's telephone number and address on a paper place mat. “I told him as much as you told me about your situation,” he said, handing the place mat to Mike. “This is Adi's phone number and address. He said he would be happy to help. He's invited you and Karen to have dinner with him at his house tonight. At six. He also suggested that you stay at the Residencias Anauco Hilton. It's an apartment hotel in Parque Central—your taxi driver should know where it is.”

Karen frowned. “Aren't you and Liz staying?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, we can't. We have to go to New York and pick up more passengers. Sincerely, we both wish we could stay here and help you. It looks like you're going to need all the help you can get.”

“We have no right to ask more of you,” Mike said, extending his hand to Dale. “You've already done far more than we—”

“Forget it,” Dale interrupted. “Liz and I enjoyed this trip more than any we've ever taken. Good luck to you.”

Liz hugged Karen. "I hope you find your son," she whispered.

"So do I."

After leaving the terminal and returning to the stifling La Guaira heat, Mike gazed eastward at the haunting and beautiful beaches lined with coconut palms, hotels, and the warm, turquoise water of the Caribbean Sea. "God it's hot!" he complained, swiping beads of sweat from beneath his eyes.

A decaying purple Chevrolet taxi screeched to a halt beside them. The driver honked his horn twice, leaned out of his window, and waved frantically. "You go to Caracas?" he shouted.

"Yes," Mike replied. "How much?"

"Twenty dollars."

"Let's do it." Mike jumped into the back seat and shut the door, with Karen close behind.

"Where you go in Caracas?" the driver asked.

"Residencias Anauco Hilton," Mike answered.

"Si." The driver spun his rear wheels and accelerated from the curb.

Thirty minutes later, the taxi arrived at the Residencias Anauco Hilton. Located in Parque Central on Avenida Bolivar, the hotel was a large, modern thirty-story building surrounded by numerous mature trees and other contrived plantings. Mike paid the driver, and then he and Karen climbed out, reveling in the cool, dry breeze. At three thousand feet above sea level, Caracas enjoyed a constant spring-like climate, with warm sunny days and cool nights.

A loud recording of Frank Sinatra's "Strangers in the Night" greeted their ears when they entered the lobby. Behind the reception desk was a tall, elderly gentleman with thinning gray hair, dressed in a light beige summer suit, white shirt, and yellow tie. The sight of prospective guests caused him to remove his spectacles, jump to his feet, and set his newspaper down. "Buenos dias," he said, a warm smile spreading across his wrinkled face.

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "Do you speak English?" he asked.

“No problem,” the gentleman replied with a deep, Southern drawl. “You folks here for a holiday?”

“Business,” Mike replied.

“Stayin’ long?”

“No longer than necessary. We would like a one bedroom apartment. Do you have one available?” Mike asked.

“Sure do. It’ll cost you one hundred and twenty-three dollars per night. Seven hundred a week.”

“We’ll take it for a week,” Mike said without hesitation. He signed the registration card with falsified names.

The elderly man smiled warmly. “Welcome home, Mr. and Mrs. Kendall. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it here. My name is Clifford.”

“Could you show us the apartment, Clifford? My wife and I are anxious to get cleaned up and get some rest.”

Clifford led his new guests from the lobby. They climbed a flight of stairs and walked to a one bedroom apartment at the rear of the building. He opened the door and led them in. “You’ll like this one. It’s got a real nice view.” He hurried to open the drapes.

The apartment was clean and neat, with white broadloom on the floors of the living room and the bedroom. The kitchen and bathroom floors were covered with glossy white ceramic tile. There were large windows in the kitchen, living room, and bedroom, all facing a well-treed park.

Mike turned to Karen. “What do you think?”

“It’s fine,” Karen said. She began a thorough examination of the contents of the kitchen cabinets.

“I guess this is home for a week,” Mike said, smug in the knowledge that Servito’s stolen money would pay for it. “This is for your trouble.” He gave Clifford a huge tip, shook his hand, and thanked him.

“Thank you, sir. You be sure to call me at the desk if you need anything,” Clifford said before he closed the door behind him.

Mike reached into his pocket and removed a quarter. He flipped it in the air and caught it in his right palm. “Call it, babe,” he said with an impish

smile. He sandwiched it between his right palm and the back of his left hand. “Heads or tails?”

“Why?”

“To see who gets the shower first.”

“Screw the call, King. I’ll see you in there.”

Mike awoke and bolted upright. After a moment of disorientation, he glanced at the watch he had left on the night table beside the bed. It was four o’clock. He turned to Karen and kissed her forehead.

Karen’s lips formed a perceptible smile. “Go’way,” she mumbled.

“It’s four o’clock, babe,” Mike said, planting a more lasting kiss on her lips. “We have to be at Adi Blankenship’s by six.”

Karen turned and pulled Mike down on top of her before he could finish. “Make love to me first,” she demanded, reaching between his legs. “It improves my appetite.”

CHAPTER 63

A few hours later, their taxi stopped at the front door of an enormous stone mansion. The mansion had vine-covered stone walls, turreted towers with jagged rooflines, and numerous windows, all with leaded glass. It resembled nothing so much as a storybook castle. The driver turned to face his passengers. "This is it."

"Are you sure?" Mike asked, staring in disbelief at the ostentatious display of wealth.

"No mistake, sir."

Mike paid the driver, and he and Karen walked slowly across the curved stone driveway toward the massive entrance. The front door was made of a thick slab of solid oak and recessed in cut stone. It had three enormous black iron hinges and a small leaded glass window in the center, about the height of Mike's eyes. Mike took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

Seconds later, a tall, blond man opened the door. Dressed in a tuxedo and appearing to be in his forties, he carried a large martini in one hand and half a cigarette in the other. His blond hair was parted in the center and combed flat. He sipped his martini and stared in apparent dismay at his guests, who were dressed in sweaters, jeans, and sneakers.

"Are you Adi Blankenship?" Mike asked.

Blankenship nodded and smiled, put his cigarette between his lips, and extended his right hand. "You must be Mike and Karen. Welcome to Venezuela, and to my humble abode. Please come in."

He led his guests through the enormous house to a secluded room, recessed three steps below the level of the main floor. The room featured a

gigantic floor to ceiling aquarium that gave off a deep turquoise glow, disturbed by the shadows of multicolored tropical fish gliding aimlessly inside the thick glass enclosure. Before it was a long bar lined with Cyprus and adorned with hundreds of gold and silver coins, encased in a thick layer of clear polyurethane.

Mike and Karen sat on two of the many green leather-covered bar stools while Blankenship hurried behind the bar to take drink orders. “Karen, what’s your pleasure?” he asked.

“Do you have white wine?”

Blankenship reached under the bar and lifted a bottle above the surface. “You’ll love this. It was made in Venezuela. It’s called Primo Orinoco.” He removed the cork with a gold corkscrew, and filled a tall wine glass. “Enjoy,” he said as he handed it to Karen. He turned to Mike. “What’s your poison, Mike?”

“Scotch on the rocks, please,” Mike said.

“You’ve got it... So, tell me why you’ve come to Caracas.”

“Karen’s husband is the reason we’re here. He kidnapped their son in Toronto and flew him to Caracas. We’re here to try to get the boy back.”

“Can you give me some detail, or would you prefer not to talk about it?”

Mike sensed the importance of gaining Blankenship’s trust. If they were to succeed in their mission, he and Karen needed a strong ally in Caracas. And if Blankenship was not fully aware of their dilemma, he might not be able to help them in the most appropriate way. He proceeded to disclose the whole story to his host, sparing no details.

“That’s incredible!” Blankenship declared. “How can I help you?”

“We’re looking for a native of Venezuela,” Mike said. “Ideally, he speaks both Spanish and English, and he’s very familiar with the city of Caracas.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Blankenship said.

“Do you know of such an individual?”

“I certainly do.” He pointed to himself.

Mike smiled. “With no disrespect to you Adi, we’re looking for someone with a little less profile... your appearance is quite aristocratic.”

“You mean you would prefer someone from the working class? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

Mike nodded.

Blankenship’s face brightened. “I know just the person. I hired him two months ago. He’s a native of Venezuela and fluent in both Spanish and English.”

“That’s fantastic!”

“His name is Luis Martinez. I’ll ask him to call you at your hotel tomorrow morning. Is nine too early? You are staying at the Residencias Anauco Hilton?”

“Yes. It was very kind of you to recommend it to us,” Karen replied.

One of Blankenship’s male servants appeared at the door. “Excuse me, Mr. Blankenship,” he said. “Dinner is served.”

Blankenship nodded, and then gulped the remainder of his martini. “Drink up, my friends. It’s time for a feast you won’t soon forget.” He led his guests to the vast and ornate dining room, where they were seated at an enormous table covered with an intricately embroidered white linen tablecloth, gold cutlery and candle holders, priceless china, and numerous bottles of red and white wine. Dinner was pabellan criollo, the national dish of Venezuela, which consisted of shredded beef, rice, black beans, cheese, fried plantain, and empanadas—deep-fried cornmeal turnovers with a filling of baby shark meat.

Mike and Karen left the mansion at ten-thirty. As they traversed the driveway to their waiting taxi, Blankenship, clinging to his fourth full brandy, stood at the opened front door of his mansion and waved to his guests. “Good luck!” he shouted.

CHAPTER 64

Early the next morning, Martinez's call was transferred to Mike's apartment. "Is this Mike King?" Martinez asked, extremely nervous.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"My name is Luis Martinez. Mr. Blankenship asked me to call you this morning. He told me you're looking for a man who is here in Caracas?"

"Thanks for calling, Luis. We could sure use your help. When can you be available to meet me?"

"Mr. Blankenship told me I could go whenever you need me."

"Do you have a car?"

"Yes."

"Then come to the Residencias Anaucó Hilton. Do you know how to get here?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm in apartment number two hundred and twelve. How soon can you get here?"

"Thirty minutes."

"Good. I'll see you then." Mike hung up and turned to Karen. "Adi kept his promise," he said with a satisfied grin. "His man will be here in thirty minutes."

Half an hour later, Mike's incessant floor pacing was interrupted by a soft knocking on the apartment door. He hurried to open it, and then extended his right hand to his visitor. "You must be Luis. Please come in."

Martinez was still dressed in his work uniform: khaki trousers and a white, short-sleeved shirt. He entered timidly, and stopped when he saw Karen. “Hello,” he said.

Karen stood and shook Martinez’s hand. “Hi, Luis. Adi Blankenship told us you could help us... May I ask, what work do you do?” She gave an inquisitive stare.

“I drive a truck for him.”

“What did you do before that?”

“I left Venezuela twelve years ago and went to the United States. I got a job as a taxi driver in New York. I wanted a better life, but I hated the cold winters. I returned to Caracas as soon as I had saved enough money to get back.”

Mike nodded thoughtfully, and then handed Martinez the piece of paper with Servito’s address printed on it. “Do you know how to get to this address?”

Martinez nodded.

“Can you take us there?”

“Why do you want to go there?”

“We think that’s where Karen’s husband is living. We also think her son is there with him and we need you to help us verify that.”

“How can I do that?”

“We don’t want Karen’s husband to know we’re in Venezuela. I am hoping that you are willing to go to the door and pretend you’re an assessment officer with the City of Caracas. Tell whoever opens the door that you need to know the names of the occupants of the house. I certainly understand if you are uncomfortable with that.”

While Mike’s proposed deception was way beyond Martinez’s job description, he knew his job would be in jeopardy if he refused. “Okay,” he said nervously, furrowing his brow.

Less than an hour later, Martinez applied the brakes to his light green 1970 Pontiac as it approached the entrance to Servito’s driveway. “That’s the driveway to the house,” he said, pointing. “You want me to drive in?”

“Yes,” Mike replied, straining to get a glimpse of the house through a line of densely foliated shrubs. “Take this with you to the door.” Mike handed Martinez a clipboard that held a pad of letter-size paper. “While you’re there, I want you to try to remember as much as you can about the house, the surroundings, and the people. Any problems?”

“Not yet.”

Mike patted Martinez’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Luis. All they can do is ask you to leave.”

Martinez turned the car into the driveway and drove straight to the house, parking beside Servito’s newly acquired black Rolls Royce. When the car had come to a full stop, Mike and Karen lowered their bodies below the windows. Martinez exited his car, marched to the front door, and rang the doorbell. So close to her son and yet still so far, Karen could hardly contain her anxiety. She struggled with an intense urge to leap from the car and run through the front door.

The door opened. “What do you want?” A burly man growled, glaring at Martinez.

Martinez trembled at the man’s imposing figure. “My name is Luis Martinez. I’m an assessment officer for the city of Caracas. Could you tell me the names and ages of all of the full time occupants of the house, please?”

“Wait here,” the man barked, and then closed and locked the door. Martinez paced back and forth, excruciating over every second of the wait. His pacing stopped abruptly when the door opened again. The burly man stepped outside with a sligher, and yet even more menacing, man at his side.

“What did you say your name is?” the white man asked.

“L... Luis... Luis Martinez.”

“Carlos here tells me you’re an assessment officer for the City of Caracas. Is that right?”

“Yes sir.”

“Show me your identification,” the man demanded.

Martinez licked his lips. He had no identification. With the likely demise of the scheme and his charade, the immediate problem was how to extract himself. "It... it's in the car," he stuttered. "Do you want me to get it?"

The man nodded. "No identification, no information."

Martinez turned and hurried to his car. "Stay down," he whispered, and then jumped into the driver's seat, started his car, and raced down the driveway.

"Luis, what happened?" Mike asked.

"He asked me for identification," Martinez replied, breathing heavily and continuing to drive very fast. "I had to leave."

"Who did you talk to? What did he look like?"

"There were two men. The first one who came to the door was Venezuelan. He was very large and very ugly. He had a heavy gold chain around his neck. The second man was the one who asked me for identification. He was North American. Very good looking. About six feet tall. Long black hair. Spoke perfect English."

"How old was the second man?"

"I'm not sure... thirty-eight. Maybe forty."

"It could be Jim," Karen said. "Did he have a small scar on the left side of his chin?"

Martinez shrugged his shoulders. "If he did, I didn't see it. I was concentrating on his eyes."

"What color were they?" Karen asked.

"Gray. Very angry eyes."

"Did you see anyone else?"

"No. Just those two men."

"Damn!" Mike swore, pounding his fist into his palm. "I should never have sent you in there unprepared."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. King."

"Don't be, Luis. It wasn't your fault."

Martinez stopped his car at the curb in front of the Residencias Anauco Hilton. Mike got out and reached through Martinez's opened window.

“Thank you, Luis,” he said, shaking his hand and leaving two crisp one hundred dollar bills in his palm. “We really appreciate your effort.”

Martinez stared at the bills, and then looked up at Mike. “I don’t deserve this. I have wasted your time,” he said, attempting to give them back to Mike.

“Keep it, Luis. You deserve every bit of it. Are you married?”

Martinez grinned and nodded.

“Then give it to your wife. She’ll know what to do with it. Thanks again for your help, Luis, and please also thank your boss.”

Martinez placed the bills carefully in his wallet and drove away. He made it no more than a hundred yards before he slammed his foot on the brake pedal, shoved the gearshift into reverse, and floored the gas.

Startled by the sound of tires screeching against asphalt, Mike and Karen turned to see Martinez’s car race in reverse before stopping again in front of the hotel.

Martinez jumped from the car, waved frantically, and then cupped his hands against the sides of his mouth. “I just remembered!” he shouted. “The second man had a diamond stud in his right ear!”

Stunned and overjoyed by the revelation, Karen threw her arms around Mike. “It’s Jim! It has to be!”

“Maybe,” Mike said, turning again to face Martinez. “Are you sure it was in his right ear?” he shouted.

“I’m positive.”

Mike nodded. “Thanks again, Luis!” he shouted.

Martinez smiled. “Let me know if I can help again!” He waved, and then lowered himself into his car and drove away.

It was impossible for Karen to contain her excitement. “We’ve got to do something, Mike,” she insisted.

“I’m still not convinced, babe. It may be just a hell of a coincidence, but whatever it is, we need time to plan our next move.” He wrapped his arms around her and touched her cheek with his index finger.

“Hell, we’re fugitives without a country. We’ve got all kinds of time.”

CHAPTER 65

Flush with cash from an oil rich economy, the Venezuelan government had constructed numerous, gleaming white apartment buildings in Caracas. The buildings blended nicely with the existing structures, which were some of the most impressive examples of modern architecture in North America. The apartments were offered to the poor for next to nothing, but there were few takers. The poor elected instead continued to live in the vast expanse of ranchos, which were sprawling slums consisting of corrugated metal shacks covering the hills surrounding the city, where goods and services were cheaper and family was close by. Luis Martinez was one of these inhabitants. Carlos had succeeded in verifying that fact by tracking Martinez's license plate.

Servito's black Rolls Royce followed Luis's green Pontiac onto a narrow dirt road. Both cars stopped less than thirty feet from Martinez's tin shack. The stench of rotting garbage and urine pervaded the track. Servito and Carlos emerged from the Rolls and approached Martinez. "Are you Luis Martinez?" Servito barked.

Martinez immediately recognized both of his visitors. "Si," he replied, terrified and clinging to his steering wheel.

Servito frowned. "I know you speak English. Now get the hell out of your car and talk to me. I want to ask you some questions."

Martinez climbed from his car and trembled as he faced Servito.

Servito's evil smirk was a portent of what was to come. He pointed to Carlos with his right thumb. "You've already met my bodyguard. His name is Carlos. He doesn't like liars, and he particularly doesn't like people who

come snooping around my house. In fact, I've given him instructions to kill people who do that. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," Martinez gulped, his lower lip quivering.

"Good. Then tell me what were you doing at my house today. Tell me the truth and I won't let Carlos kill you."

Martinez closed his eyes and shook his head. "I... I can't tell you," he mumbled, his entire body consumed with fear.

Servito turned to Carlos. "We're wasting time. Kill him and let's get the hell out of here."

Carlos removed a machete from the front seat of the Rolls and approached Martinez with a menacing scowl. He lifted the machete above his head and prepared to swing.

Martinez raised his arms in defense. "Please don't kill me," he begged. "I'll tell you."

"Good. Do it."

"My boss ordered me to do it. He—"

"Who's your boss?"

"Mr. Blankenship."

"Why did he order you to do it?"

"He... for a friend of his."

"Who's his friend?"

"Mr. King."

"Who?"

"His name is Mike King. He was in the car with me when I came to your house."

"No!" Servito gasped, surprise and shock contorting his expression. "Was there anyone else?"

Martinez nodded. "Her name is Karen. She's looking for her son."

Servito rolled his eyes and shook his head in amazement. "I can't believe it. How the hell did they find me?" His right hand shot for Martinez's

throat, and he gripped tight, with bared teeth. “How did they find me?” he shouted.

“I don’t know,” Martinez whimpered.

“Where did you find them?” Servito screamed.

“At the Residencias Anauco Hilton.”

“Is that where they’re staying?”

Martinez nodded. “In suite two hundred and twelve.”

Servito released Martinez and spat on the ground. “This is the last fucking time!” he vowed. He turned to Carlos and nodded. Carlos lifted the machete and decapitated Martinez with one powerful swing.

CHAPTER 66

Marty Piniero turned his white, 1977 Cadillac Eldorado into Servito's driveway and accelerated toward the house. He leaped from the car and ran to the double front doors, anxious to see his old friend again and to learn how much money he was going to make. Immediately following his false confession to the Ontario Provincial Police in Fort Erie, Piniero had returned to his native Venezuela. To finance the trip, he used a portion of the fifty thousand dollars Servito had paid him to implicate both Mike and Karen in gasoline theft. He pressed the doorbell button and whistled happily while he waited.

"What do you want?" Carlos growled.

Piniero gulped and stepped backward, his eyes riveted on the gold skull and crossbones dangling from Carlos's neck. "Is... is Jim here?" he asked.

"Who are you?"

"Marty... Marty Piniero. He... Jim's expecting me."

"He's okay, Carlos," Servito said as he stepped into the doorway behind his huge bodyguard. He smiled as his eyes shifted to his guest. "Marty, baby!" he said, shaking Piniero's hand and patting his back. "Good to see you. Come on in. We have a lot to talk about... how have you been?"

"Good," Piniero replied. "You?"

"Fantastic." Servito led Piniero to the swimming pool deck, and Carlos followed. "Have a seat, Marty. I'll get Carla to bring us drinks. What'll you have?"

"You got any beer?" Servito turned to Carlos. "Tell Carla to bring us two cold Corona."

Carlos nodded and returned to the house.

“You got a great place here, Jimbo,” Piniero said as he relaxed in one of Servito’s deck chairs.

“Thanks. I’m very happy with it.”

“How come you’re here so soon? I thought you were gonna stay in Canada for a couple more years.”

Servito shrugged. “Long story—I’ll tell you later. Right now, I have a job for you to do, and I want you to listen very carefully.”

Piniero quickly hoisted himself to an erect position.

“That prick, Mike King, is in Caracas.”

“You’re shittin’ me! I thought he was in jail.”

“So did I, but he isn’t. He’s here with my beloved wife, who also isn’t in jail.”

“How the hell did they find you?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care, but I’m going to make sure they never find me again!”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Set up a nice little surprise party for them. I want you to phone King at his hotel and introduce yourself as Pedro Montoya, first cousin of Luis Martinez. Tell him Luis asked you to call because you work for the City of Caracas. You’re in the tax department. Tell him how sorry Luis is about not being able to get the names of the people living in this house.”

“I don’t understand. Why the con?”

“I want you to tell King and my wife that you’ll bring them up here and get the job done. Tell them you’ll pick them up at their hotel. Carlos and I will be joining you and I want to be sure they’re going to be there.”

“You gonna kill ‘em?”

Servito flashed an evil smirk. “They’ll be taking a nice, long swim.”

CHAPTER 67

“Luis Martinez is dead, Mike,” Blankenship announced over the telephone. “His wife found his body on the ground beside his car last night. He was decapitated.”

“My God! How could that happen?” Mike asked, guilt wracking his heart and mind, horrified that a man had died as a result of his poor planning.

“I have no idea, and nor does anyone else. Luis had no enemies—everyone loved him. It’s the strangest damned thing.”

“Did he have any cousins?”

“I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

“I got a call an hour ago from a man named Pedro Montoya. He said he was Luis’s first cousin. He also said he works for the City of Caracas and that he’s prepared to help us get the information we want.”

“You want me to check him out?”

“I’d be grateful if you would.”

“It’s the least I can do. I’ll call Luis’s wife and a friend of mine who’s in city politics. What did you say his name is?”

“Pedro Montoya.”

“Are you at your hotel?”

“Yes. We’ll be here all night.”

“Good. I’ll call you when I have something.”

Mike hung up and turned to Karen. His face was white as a sheet. “Luis Martinez is dead. He was murdered.”

Karen covered her distraught face with both hands. “Oh, no! How did it happen? Did Adi say?”

Mike shook his head and turned away. “He told me Luis’s wife just found him beside his car last night.”

“Jim did it! I just know he did it!” Karen declared. “Every time we get close to him, somebody gets killed.”

“That’s a hell of a stretch, babe. How could your husband have known where to find Luis Martinez?”

“I don’t know, but it’s one hell of a coincidence,” Karen insisted. “What about Luis’s license plate?”

Mike closed both eyes and nodded, privately chiding himself for letting Luis use his own car. “You’re right,” he conceded. “How could I have been so stupid? I’ll never forgive myself.” He wrapped his arms around Karen. “I’d give anything to change what happened, babe. Sending Luis in there was the dumbest thing I’ve ever done.”

After midnight that night, Mike and Karen were awakened by the cry of the bedside telephone in the otherwise silent night. Reluctantly, Mike reached for the receiver. “Hello,” he groaned.

“Mike, it’s Adi. Sorry to bother you so late, but I have some extremely interesting information. I spoke to Luis Martinez’s wife tonight. She told me Luis didn’t have a cousin by the name of Pedro Montoya. In fact, she said he didn’t have a cousin at all. Also, I just got off the phone with a friend of mine. He’s a solicitor for the City of Caracas, and he confirmed that there’s absolutely no record of Pedro Montoya on the city’s payroll.”

“Thanks, Adi. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the call.”

“My pleasure. Good luck to you and Karen. Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do.”

“I will. Goodnight, Adi.” Mike deposited the receiver in its cradle. “Pedro Montoya’s a fraud, babe. He’s not on the city payroll and Martinez’s wife has never heard of him.”

“Then it’s obvious that Pedro Montoya is Jim, or one of his henchmen.”

Mike nodded in the darkness.

“What are we going to do about the meeting tomorrow?”

“Find out what his game is.”

CHAPTER 68

Marty Piniero's white Cadillac rolled to a stop beside the curb in front of the Residencias Anauco Hilton at 8:45 a.m. He opened the door and stepped out onto the street. Carlos and Servito emerged from the back seat.

"Remember, no noise and no shooting," Servito warned. "I don't want the cops swarming all over this place."

The three men hurried to the hotel and raced up the stairs to room two-twelve. Piniero knocked several times. No response. He turned the door knob and was surprised to find the door unlocked. All three men rushed inside and found the apartment unoccupied. Livid and infuriated, Servito raced to the reception counter in the lobby of the hotel. "Where's the manager?" he shouted.

"You're talking to him," Clifford replied.

"I'm looking for a man named Mike King. He's with a woman by the name of Karen Servito. You wouldn't happen to know where I could find them, would you?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Arthur Durant. I'm with the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Clifford examined Servito suspiciously. He doubted that a man dressed in jeans and a red T-shirt was FBI. "Do you have some identification, Mr. Durant?"

"Yes, but I'm not at liberty to display that to you or anyone else. I'm outside my jurisdiction. I am, however, authorized to pay a substantial

reward to anyone who can provide information leading to their arrest and conviction.”

Clifford leaned across the counter. “I appreciate all donations, Mr. Durant, but I don’t understand why you think I’m in position to help you.”

“Come on, Clifford,” Servito cajoled. “We know King is registered at this hotel, and we know he’s in two-twelve.”

“And how do you know that?”

Servito smirked. “We have our sources.”

Clifford grinned. “I think your sources are incorrect, sir. We have a Mr. and Mrs. Kendall registered in two-twelve.”

“How old are they?”

Clifford pressed his lips together and looked skyward. “I’d say they’re in their late thirties. Maybe forty.”

Servito’s frown transformed into a broad smile. He removed one of George Lanotti’s photographs of Mike and Karen from his jacket and showed it to Clifford. “Is this Mr. and Mrs. Kendall?” he asked.

“That’s them,” Clifford replied without hesitation, then shook his head. “Mercy! What have they done? I can’t believe it. They appeared to be such a nice couple.”

Servito frowned. “Let’s just say they’re on the run from the law.”

“How much is the reward?”

“One hundred thousand dollars,” Servito replied, and then handed ten fifty dollar bills to Clifford. “Put these in your pocket. They’re to help you to remember to call me when you know where King is.”

“Is there a number where I can reach you, Mr. Durant?” Servito printed his home number on the top of a desk pad. He ripped off the top sheet and handed it to Clifford. “Call me here any time, day or night.”

Clifford leaned across the counter. “Mr. King and the woman left here at eight thirty this morning,” he whispered. “I don’t have the slightest idea where they went.”

“Will you call me when they get back?”

Clifford nodded. Servito smiled and extended his right hand. “The Bureau will be grateful, Clifford.”

Mike and Karen sat the comfort of a lime green 1966 Chevrolet taxi, parked a half a block away. Mike smiled when he saw the three men returning to the white Cadillac. “He doesn’t look happy, babe. I’d love to see the look on his face when he found us gone.”

“That son of a bitch was going to march in there and kill us,” Karen said.

Mike’s triumphant smirk transformed into a worried expression. “The good news is that we’re still alive. The bad news is that he knows we’re here.

Mike leaned forward and tapped the middle-aged taxi driver’s shoulder. “Let’s get out of here, Julio. Give us the tour.”

Julio drove Mike and Karen to El Junquito, a tiny mountain village where they bought oranges and barbecued spare ribs. Afterward, they continued along a narrow mountain road that provided a spectacular view of Caracas on one side and the Caribbean Sea on the other. The road ended at Colonia Tovar, an isolated mountain village at over six thousand feet of elevation, which had once been so isolated that a few of its blond and blue-eyed residents still spoke the Black Forest German of their ancestors who settled there in 1843.

The taxi returned to Caracas at four in the afternoon. After an hour of shopping, talking, and planning, Mike and Karen ordered Julio to return them to the hotel.

“Come back here in an hour, Julio,” Mike instructed. “We’ll be right here waiting for you.”

Clifford smiled when he saw Mike and Karen enter the lobby. “Did you have a nice day?” he asked.

Mike nodded and approached the counter. “The best in a long time. Thanks, Clifford. Julio’s a great tour guide.”

Clifford nodded. “He’s not just great. He’s the best.”

“Clifford, you must know the city pretty well. Where’s a really special place to have dinner?”

“Is Julio waiting for you?”

Mike shook his head. "I told him to come back in an hour. Karen and I just want to shower and change our clothes."

"Tell him to take you to Casa Zavala. It has the best food in Caracas and it's not far from here. You'll both love it."

Clifford waited until the elevator door had closed behind Mike and Karen, and then lifted the telephone receiver.

CHAPTER 69

Marty Piniero's white Cadillac Eldorado screeched to a halt in front of Casa Zavala within seconds after Mike and Karen emerged from Julio's taxi. Carlos leaped from the Cadillac, wrapped his long arms around Karen, and dragged her, kicking and screaming, into the front seat. Before Carlos could slam the door, Piniero pounded his foot on the gas pedal, causing his Cadillac's rear wheels to screech in agony against the dry pavement.

Mike's heart pounded wildly. His stomach writhed and twisted into knots. During the seconds he had taken to pay Julio, he had once again lost the love of his life. Enraged, he raced on foot in a vain attempt to catch up with Piniero's car. "Damn you, Servito!" he screamed as he quit his unequal race with the Cadillac. He turned and ran back to Julio's taxi. "Follow them, Julio!" he puffed. "Don't lose them! I'll pay you anything you want—just don't let them get away!"

Julio's lime green taxi immediately took off in pursuit of the Cadillac, weaving and dodging through dense city traffic.

"Faster, Julio!" Mike urged, his eyes focused on the Cadillac, his mind refusing to touch on Karen's fate. "You've got to go faster!"

"But I want to stay alive," Julio protested.

"I want Karen to stay alive. She's the only woman I've ever loved. They'll kill her if we don't stop those bastards!"

Julio crossed himself, clenched his teeth, and depressed his gas pedal almost to the floor. His taxi caught up with the rear of the Cadillac within ten seconds. "Try to get in front of him and cut him off," Mike demanded.

Julio again crossed himself and floored the gas pedal, gradually moving his taxi beside the Cadillac.

Piniero swerved hard to his left. “No!” Julio yelled when the Cadillac slammed hard against the taxi with a sickening thud. “I can’t do this!”

“Try it one more time!” Mike pleaded. “Just once more, Julio! We’ve got to stop that car!”

Both cars raced through a red light, with the taxi several inches behind the Cadillac’s rear bumper.

“Turn hard right and hit him!” Mike urged. “I’ll buy you a new taxi!”

Julio’s taxi grazed the rear bumper of the Cadillac. Almost simultaneously, a red flatbed truck clipped the rear bumper of the taxi, causing it to spin out of control. It ricocheted off a concrete abutment and crashed against the side of a yellow Volkswagen bus that was parked by the side of the road. The noise and smoke immediately drew a crowd of pedestrians and started a world class grid-lock around the accident scene.

Julio used his handkerchief to wipe the blood from a gash on his forehead, and then turned his soulful brown eyes to Mike. He shrugged his shoulders and turned his palms skyward. “I’m sorry, Mr. King. I tried.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mike said. He handed a huge wad of bills to Julio. “Take this and call me at the hotel if you need more.”

The sound of police sirens became louder and louder.

“I’ve got to go. I can’t let the police find me.” Mike patted Julio’s shoulder before jumping from the taxi and running from the scene.

Despondent and dispirited, Mike returned to his hotel apartment and flopped, face down on the bed. “Damn you, Servito!” he muttered again and again, pounding his fist on the pillow.

Thirty minutes later, Mike’s bedside telephone rang. He reached for the receiver and jerked it to his ear.

Servito’s repulsive voice was unmistakable. “Now I’m going to see how big your balls are, King. My beloved wife is at my house and I’m going to give you a chance to save her life.”

“How?”

“Do you remember the white Cadillac you tried to catch tonight?”

“Yup.”

“It’ll be on the street in front of your hotel at eight tomorrow morning, and it’ll be leaving for my house at one minute after eight. Karen will die if you’re not in that car when it gets here.”

“Why the hell should I bother, Servito? You’re going to kill her anyway.”

“The choice is yours, King.”

At 8 a.m. the following morning, Mike lowered himself into the passenger seat of Piniero’s white Eldorado. “What’s your name?” he asked, deliberately avoiding eye contact.

“They call me Marty... Marty Piniero,” he replied as he pulled away from the curb.

“How much is Servito paying you for this job?” Mike asked.

“A lot.”

“How much is a lot?”

“More than I can make in five years of hard labor.”

“I’ll double it if you’ll help me.”

Piniero chuckled and shook his head. “You couldn’t pay me enough. Servito will kill me if I cross him. Can you bring me back from the dead?”

“He’ll kill you anyway, as soon as he doesn’t need you.”

“No he won’t. He’s my friend.”

Mike laughed. “I don’t know if you noticed, but Jim’s friends have a bad habit of ending up dead. After he’s killed Karen and me, he’s going to kill you.”

Piniero swallowed dryly but remained silent, his eyes fixed on the road.

“Did you hear me?” Mike shouted.

Again Piniero failed to respond.

“Then I’ll have to assume you’re prepared to participate in the murders. That’ll make you just as guilty as Servito, and you’ll have to live the rest of your short life with our blood on your hands.”

Silence.

“For God’s sake, help me!” Mike pleaded.

“Shut up!” Piniero shouted, tears now watering his eyes. “Leave me alone and let me do my job!”

“You’re a real sweetheart, Marty. You want me to shut up and let you help Servito to kill me and the woman I love.”

Piniero held the wheel firmly with his right hand while using his left to wipe his eyes. Seconds after Piniero wheeled his car onto Servito’s driveway, Mike pointed Karen’s chrome-plated Colt at Piniero’s right temple. “Stop the car, now!” he barked.

Piniero immediately applied the brakes. His shocked eyes found the muzzle, his hands trembled.

Mike pointed to Servito’s house. “I don’t want to use the front door. Is there any other way in?”

“You... you can use the back doors. You just have to go through those bushes to the right of the house.”

Mike glanced at the long and neatly trimmed row of Eugenia bushes to the right of the house. He turned to Piniero and allowed the cold muzzle of the Colt to touch his temple. “Get out,” he demanded.

“You want me to get out of the car?”

“Yup. Now!”

“Why.”

“Never mind why. Just get the hell out.”

Piniero quickly got out, and Mike slid into the driver’s seat. Mike closed the door without engaging the latch, and then depressed the accelerator to the floor. He pointed the Cadillac’s hood ornament at the center of the double front doors, waited until the car was no more than thirty feet away, and then jumped. His forward momentum caused him to roll twice, stifling a cry as flesh scraped from his knees, elbows, palms, shoulder.

The car hit the front doors with a thunderous crack, and then penetrated the house with the awful sound of crunching metal and breaking cement. Mike hoisted himself to a painful upright position. He stared for a second at the terrible damage, then hobbled around the right side of Servito’s house.

He charged through the Eugenia bushes and emerged onto the concrete swimming pool deck.

Maria Santos, clad in a minuscule, peach colored bikini, raised her hands and shrieked in terror. Mike pointed his Colt at her head. "Where's Karen?" he shouted, his eyes flicking back and forth between her and wreck of Piniero's Cadillac.

Servito emerged from the kitchen, his left arm around Karen's neck and his pistol pointed at her head. "She's right here. Thanks for wrecking my house, King. You're going to pay for that," he growled.

"Where's Phillip?"

"He's not here, but he's fine," Karen replied. "One of the maids took him for a walk."

Mike pointed his Colt at Servito. "Let her go, Servito!" he commanded, aware of the futility of his demand but not knowing what else he could do.

Servito pushed the muzzle of his gun tightly against Karen's cheek. "Give it up, King. Put your gun on the deck and kick it into the swimming pool."

Mike defiantly refused to move. "I've waited a long time for this pleasure, Servito."

"Don't mess with me, King! My wife's going to lose her head if that gun isn't in the pool in three seconds! Do you understand me?"

Karen saw Carlos emerging from the master bedroom behind Mike, his twelve gauge shotgun pointed at the back of Mike's head. "Mike!" she screamed. "Behind you!"

Servito began to count: "One... two..."

Defeated again, Mike slowly lowered his gun. He closed his eyes and released his grip, allowing the pistol to clatter on the concrete below him. Disheartened, he kicked it into the pool. His life flashed through his mind while he watched it splash and sink to the bottom. In his haste to solve their mountain of problems, he had made a gigantic error in judgment. Now, his immediate priority was to stall for time and to stay alive. He stared boldly into his adversary's eyes. "I'll bet you're wondering how we found you," he said.

Servito chuckled. “The only thing I was wondering was how I’m going to kill you.”

“Karen and I found ourselves in a little automobile race with your fat friend, Jerry Allison,” he continued blithely. “Jerry thought he could lose us, but drove far too fast and turned far too sharply. A terrible mistake. Unfortunately, he hit a concrete wall and seriously reduced the length of your limousine... But, fortunately for us, he survived just long enough to sing like a bird.”

“That’s bullshit, King,” Servito scoffed.

Mike smirked and shook his head. “You should be ashamed of yourself, Servito.”

Servito just laughed.

“Allison told the police all about your dirty little games. He even told them about how you installed the gasoline valves at the Golden National Refinery, and how you used them to steal gasoline. He told them how you cut gasoline with poly chlorinated biphenyls and sold it to my company through Reserve Oil.”

“He wouldn’t,” Jim growled.

Mike continued. “He even told the police how and why you killed Bob Bushing, Dave Lasker, and Earle Langston... and he stayed alive long enough to tell them all about the millions of gasoline tax dollars you evaded.”

Servito tightened his lips and bared his teeth, his wanton gray eyes glazed with rage. “You son of a bitch, King! You’ve fucked with my life for the last time! I’m going to put a bullet where it belongs!” His face contorted as he pointed his gun at Mike’s groin and pulled the trigger. The bullet pierced Mike’s left thigh, glanced off the bone and exited at a ninety degree angle. As his leg buckled, Mike slumped to the concrete.

Servito hurled Karen to the pool deck and strode toward Mike. He smirked as he watched his adversary writhing, his hands pressed tightly against the wounds. “You got in my way too many times!” he screamed, kicking Mike again and again in the head and stomach until his adversary was motionless and silent.

Marty Piniero had watched the entire event from the living room. He had only just now learned that Servito had killed his old boss and friend, Dave Lasker. He felt dirty and guilty... and enraged. The limits of his conscience were finally breached as he watched Servito kick Mike as he lay wounded and helpless on the pool deck. He removed a tire iron from the opened trunk of his destroyed Cadillac and raced through the master bedroom and out to the pool deck behind Carlos. He gripped the tire iron tight, and delivered a vicious blow to the side of the man's head.

Carlos fell unconscious, face first to the concrete. Piniero stooped to the concrete to pick up Carlos's shotgun.

"You miserable, rotten son of a bitch!" Servito yelled, pointing his gun at Piniero and pulling the trigger. The bullet whizzed past Piniero's ear and shattered the plate glass behind him.

Blinded by guilt and anger, Piniero stood and ran directly at Servito. Servito fired again, hitting Piniero's shoulder. But Piniero charged on, seemingly unhurt.

Servito shot again and Piniero slumped to the concrete, blood flowing from his neck.

"You animal!" Karen shrieked. "How could you?"

Servito turned to glance at Karen, momentarily distracted that the woman who had been his complacent wife could now have become this red, squalling creature.

Summoning all of his remaining strength, Piniero managed to raise the shotgun and pull the trigger.

Servito gasped and cupped his left hand over the gush of blood from his massive stomach wound. The pellets had severely injured him, and his hand could not stop the fast flow. He staggered to the black, wrought iron railing at the far side of the swimming pool, and allowed his buttocks to descend to the railing. He pressed both forearms against the wound and groaned to see a large and growing pool of blood on the concrete beneath him.

At last Karen saw her chance. She picked up Piniero's tire iron and raced toward her husband. Hearing her footsteps, he raised his pistol in her direction, but the shot went wild.

With one swift swing of the tire iron, she broke his forearm and dislodged the pistol from his grip. “You’ll never do this again!” she screamed, and then hit him squarely in the face with a violent second swing.

“You bitch!” he screamed, his face a bloody mess of shattered bone and cartilage, his body wobbling precariously on the railing.

Karen placed the business end of the tire iron against her husband’s forehead and shoved. A horrified expression appeared on Servito’s bloodied face as he fought desperately to regain his balance, but found himself toppling slowly backward. In the work of a moment, he had plunged three hundred feet to the rocks in the chasm below. Karen leaned over the railing, watching in dispassionate silence until she was certain he was dead. Then she turned and ran to Mike. Maria was on her knees beside him, her peach colored bikini stained with blood.

“Is he alive?” Karen asked.

Maria nodded, pressing a bar towel tightly against the wounds in his leg.

“Call a hospital! Tell them to send an ambulance here as quickly as possible!”

Maria stood and raced to the house.

Karen descended to her knees and removed Mike’s jeans, washed his wounds with a wet towel, and then used the towel to wrap his leg.

Mike slowly opened his eyes. “What happened?” he groaned, his voice barely audible.

“It’s over! It’s finally over!” Karen cried, hugging him, her soft lips kissing his forehead.

Maria hurried from the house with a roll of gauze and a pair of scissors. “The ambulance is coming,” she said.

CHAPTER 70

Karen and Phillip entered Mike's room in the Clinica El Avila in Altamira later that afternoon. They found Mike sitting up in bed and staring out the window. He turned his head to face his visitors. "Come over here, you guys," he ordered, a giant smile adorning his bandaged and bruised face.

Karen hurried to him and hugged him as hard as she dared. "How are you, Tiger?" she asked.

"I hurt like hell, but I'm alive."

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too," Mike said, and then turned to Phillip. "How are you, Phillip. Are you okay?"

"He's fine," Karen replied before Phillip opened his mouth. "I told him the whole story. He knows the truth about his father."

Mike's blue eyes widened. "Where is he?"

Karen nodded. "He's dead. The Caracas police confirmed it this afternoon."

"But how? What happened? I can't remember a thing after your sweetheart husband kicked me in the head..."

"Marty Piniero saved our lives," Karen said. She told Mike the rest of the incredible story.

Mike closed his eyes. "Incredible! A miracle! I thought it was the end of the road." Mike reached for Phillip's hand, drew him closer, and hugged him. "You're a very brave young man... I'm so sorry you've lost your father."

“I’m not sorry,” Phillip said. “He lied to me about everything...” He looked up to his mother, and she placed a hand on his shoulder. “How long do you have to stay in the hospital?”

Mike pointed to a pair of wooden crutches leaning against the wall beside his bed. “I can leave right now, but I have to use those.”

Karen stared at the crutches and frowned.

Mike recognized the frown immediately. “Something’s wrong, babe. What is it?”

Giant tears appeared in her beautiful brown eyes. “I told you it was over, but it really isn’t.”

“Why?”

“We can’t go home. We still don’t have one shred of the evidence we need. Now Jim’s dead and so is everyone connected to him.”

“Who cares? We can stay here and make a new life for ourselves. I could live anywhere with you,” Mike said.

His words comforted Karen, but her tears continued. “But we can’t live on love. When our cash is gone, we’re broke.”

“I have some money,” Phillip said.

Mike and Karen stared at Phillip in disbelief. “Is that so?” Mike asked, struggling to postpone a doubting grin.

“Over three hundred million dollars. Dad took me to see a man who runs a bank in Caracas. The man told me he looks after my father’s money, and that I should go to him if anything ever happened to Daddy.”

Mike and Karen exchanged a wide-eyed glance as Phillip removed Alfred Schnieder’s business card from his wallet and handed it to Mike.

“This is it!” Mike exclaimed, staring at the card. “This man holds the keys to all the money your husband’s been stealing. You’re a very wealthy woman, Karen.”

Karen frowned and shook her head. “That money doesn’t belong to me. If we ever tried to spend it, we’d be in a hell of a lot more trouble than we already are.”

Mike gritted his teeth and clenched both fists, suppressing his frustration. Why couldn't she let it go? They could start a whole new life together, and all she could think about was the criminal charges back home! "We can talk about that later... , But where's Marty Piniero? Did he make it?"

Karen nodded. "He's one floor below us."

"I'd like to go see him... Can you guys help me get out of this bed?"

Piniero's neck and shoulder were heavily bandaged. He was awake, but unable to speak.

Mike hobbled to the edge of his bed, which was one of many in a very large ward. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Marty," he said. "We owe you our lives."

Piniero managed a weak smile as he grasped Mike's hand.

Phillip ran to the bedside and tugged at Mike's arm. He continued to tug until Mike leaned down close. Mike chuckled while Phillip whispered, and then turned to face Piniero. "As an expression of his gratitude for what you've done, Phillip would like you to have his father's house, his car, his airplane, and enough money to ensure that you never have to work for the rest of your life... Oh, and—by the way—I don't think you'll need your Cadillac anymore."

A huge smile spread across Piniero's rugged face as he slowly closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 71

Mike and Karen stepped from the hot sunlight and opened one of the heavy glass and bronze front doors of the Banco International Venezolano. More than a hundred people had preceded them and were already lined up at the tellers' windows. Mike grasped Karen's hand and stared into her eyes. "I'm serious about this, babe!" he said with a warning expression.

"But what if—"

"There are no 'what if's! That money nearly cost us our lives! We're going to keep it and the feds can go straight to hell! They didn't give a damn whether we were guilty so long as they had someone to blame. They knew they couldn't touch your husband, so they took the scraps of proof he provided... just enough to hang us with. I'm not greedy, Karen. But I'm sure as hell not interested in funding those bastards."

Karen saw the same determined expression she remembered from when Mike had convinced her to fly to Venezuela. In spite of her concerns for the implications, the thought of keeping her husband's millions had an extremely large measure of appeal. Her frown gradually melted to a grin. "What the hell!" she said, shrugging her shoulders. "It isn't as if we stole it."

Mike scanned the vast interior of the modern structure and saw a diminutive Venezuelan hurrying toward them. He was dressed in an oversized, olive green suit and walked with a perceptible limp. When he came within ten feet, he stumbled to his knees on the polished marble floor. "Is very much bad way to meet you," he said, righting himself with Mike's assistance and looking very embarrassed. He smiled and extended his hand. "You are Mr. King?"

Mike nodded.

“My name is Manuel Blanco. I am Mr. Schnieder’s assistant. He is waiting for you. Please come.” He led Mike and Karen to the opened doorway to Schnieder’s office.

Schnieder sprang to his feet and moved around his beautiful, handmade desk to welcome his new clients. He smiled, displaying his glittering array of gold teeth. He shook Mike’s hand vigorously, and then Karen’s. “Welcome, my friends. Please come in and have a drink.” He turned to Blanco and nodded, indicating that his presence was no longer required. Blanco left, closing the door behind him.

Schnieder hurried to the bar in the far corner of his office and poured four brandies. After chugging one, he returned to his desk with the remaining three. He gave one to each of his guests, and then returned to his chair with the third. Mike and Karen seated themselves in the comfortable, tan leather chairs facing Schnieder’s desk. “Now my friends, we have much to talk about,” he said, flashing another golden smile.

“Before we start, Alfred, Karen and I need to clarify an extremely important point,” Mike said.

“Yes?” Schnieder’s golden smile vanished.

“How much secrecy can we attach to this meeting?” Mike asked, focusing on Schnieder’s beady green eyes.

Schnieder stared at his swirling brandy while spinning the stem of his glass between his index finger and thumb. He looked up at Mike. “The utmost. Many years ago, when I came to Venezuela from Germany, I learned very quickly that secrecy is of paramount importance in the banking business. I learned that if one wants to survive in it, one must be discrete with his clients and their holdings.”

Relieved by Schnieder’s answer, Mike took a large gulp of his brandy. “How much do you know about the methods Jim Servito employed to acquire his fortune?”

Schnieder squinted at Mike and shook his head. “It is neither my duty nor my intention to discuss with you or anyone the activities of a former client. That is privileged information.”

“Then you wouldn’t be prepared to act as a witness for us?” Mike asked. Although he was already certain of the answer, he felt deeply disappointed to see his expectation come true.

Again, Schnieder shook his head. “Definitely not. I am, however, compelled to discuss with you and Karen the disposition of his considerable fortune. First, I must ask you—where is young Phillip?”

“He’s at his father’s home. Two of Servito’s former maids are looking after him... His mother and I have told him that it’s our intention to return every dime of his father’s money to its rightful owners.”

Schnieder raised his graying eyebrows, his facial wrinkles broadcasting disappointment and every one of his sixty-four years. “Is that really your intention?”

“No. We intend to keep it, but we don’t want the boy’s youth to be corrupted by the money.”

Schnieder relaxed. “Then how would you like me to deal with the money?”

“Exactly how much is there?” Karen asked.

Schnieder opened a drawer on the right side of his desk and removed a folder. He examined several pages, and then turned to Karen. “It’s quite difficult to give you a precise answer to that question at any specific point. The amount is constantly fluctuating. Conservatively, however, I estimate its current value at three hundred and twenty-five million.”

Mike and Karen shared a glance, and then Karen turned to Schnieder. “Why does it fluctuate?” she asked.

“A small portion of the fortune owns shares of companies. As the fortunes of those companies fluctuate, so too does the value of their shares. The stable and more predictable component of the fortune is its holdings of U.S. government T-Bills and bonds. The constant flow of interest income increases the value of the fortune as we speak...”

“How do we perpetuate secrecy?” Mike asked. “I want the memory of the money to die a natural death.”

“To perpetuate the secrecy, you might want to consider removing yourselves from a direct connection.”

“How could we do that?”

“We could arrange for Phillip to own an anstalt. The anstalt could then be the owner of the trust.”

“What’s an anstalt?” Karen asked.

“When tracking evaded taxes, the American feds usually look for direct ownership or control of the money itself, or assets purchased with it. On a personal income tax form, the taxpayer is asked to disclose such ownership or control. If one owns an anstalt, one could truthfully answer those questions without revealing a connection to the trust.”

“How?”

“According to the laws of Liechtenstein, an anstalt is a person. Its owner, irrespective of nationality, may direct the person to do whatever he or she wishes. Nowhere on the income tax paperwork is there a place where the feds ask the taxpayer if he or she owns a person.

“That’s incredible!” Mike said, shaking his head in amazement.

Schnieder took the opportunity to wax philosophical. “It’s really not incredible to those even slightly familiar with homeless money, largely the fruits of crime. This enormous quantity of renegade money has limited the ability of governments to generate sufficient tax revenues from domestic sources to balance their budgets. Hence, they run deficits and accumulate debts. In order to attract sufficient funds from offshore sources, they have learned to be tolerant of certain games. They know a lot of the money they are borrowing is hot, but they wink at it, realizing they have no palatable alternative. If they refused to borrow hot money, interest rates would shoot into the stratosphere.”

“Setting up an anstalt sounds like a good program,” Mike said, looking at Karen for approval.

Karen nodded.

“Splendid! I’ll have our attorney prepare the necessary forms. Perhaps before you leave Caracas, you could come here and sign them.”

“What forms?” Karen asked with a concerned expression.

“Nothing serious. The forms just give us the authority to proceed. Once signed, they will remain in our confidential files. You will have nothing to

worry about, short of a cataclysmic financial disaster.”

“What on earth does that mean, Alfred?” Karen asked, suddenly even more concerned.

“I’m sorry if I alarmed you. I did not mean to do that. My duty as an officer of this bank and executor of your late husband’s estate is to advise you that, for as long as I retain that position, I am ultimately responsible for the fortunes of the estate, both good and bad. If I continue to pursue conservative and prudent investment strategies, you should never have a reason to worry.”

Karen persisted, a hard gaze in her eye. “I still don’t understand. How could it ever be a problem?”

“Let me illustrate the point by using a hypothetical example. Assume I managed a trust of a million dollars for you, Karen. Suppose I decided to place the funds in a very high-risk investment. If it proved to be a good investment, you would be very happy and so would I—we would get good returns for the investment. If, however, it was a poor investment, we would both be unhappy, for you would lose the money with the investment. Perhaps all of your original investment. My strategy, from the very beginning of my relationship with your husband, has been to employ his money in only the most conservative and low risk investments, however, so the likelihood of losing the money in this way is practically nil.”

“I understand,” Karen said, only slightly relieved.

Schnieder stood and returned to his bar. “More brandy?” he asked as he refilled his own glass.

Instead, Mike stood and extended his hand to Schnieder. “Thank you for everything, Alfred. Your personal attention to our little secret is very much appreciated.”

Schnieder stood and took the man’s hand. “It is not necessary to thank me, Mike. The pleasure is all mine.” He turned to Karen and reached for her hand, as well. “I wish you much happiness, my dear.”

CHAPTER 72

Mike telephoned Dan Turner's Toronto office from Servito's mansion, and Turner's secretary received the call.

"May I speak to Dan Turner, please?"

"May I tell him who's calling?"

"Mike King. I'm calling from Caracas."

"One moment, Mr. King.

"Is this my most itinerant client?" Turner's deep, authoritative voice asked.

"It is and you won't believe what's happened here."

"Sure I would. After what's happened here in the last twenty-four hours, I would believe anything."

"What's happened there?"

"You talk first. It's your nickel," Turner insisted.

"Okay. You want the good news or the bad news?"

"The good news."

"We have Phillip and Jim Servito is dead."

"That's incredible. Tell me how it happened."

"It's a long and wild story. I'll tell you after you tell me what's happened at your end."

"First tell me if you found Servito's money."

"That's the bad news. We haven't found the money or one shred of the evidence we need to clear ourselves. We can't come home, Dan."

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Dan said. He could hear the silence of Mike’s held breath. “Make sure your seat belt’s fastened for this one... all of the charges against you and Karen have been dropped.”

“What!”

“Believe it or not, I received a call from a lawyer acting for the feds shortly after you left the country. He told me Jerry Allison lived long enough to confess. Apparently, he sang like a bird. You’ll be pleased to know that you were right about Servito. He did a wonderful job of setting you and Karen up. I could tell you a lot more, but I’ll do that when you return. You’re both free to do that now.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Dan. See you soon.” Mike hurled the telephone receiver into the air, and then hobbled to hold the only woman he had ever loved. “Now it’s really over, babe,” he said, and told her Turner’s incredible news.

Overwhelmed with joy, she smiled into his deep blue eyes. “No, Tiger. It’s just beginning.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Douglass was born and educated in Canada. After graduating, he spent thirty years in the oil industry. His career began with Exxon and Royal Dutch Shell, the largest and second largest companies in the business. He spent the second half of the three decades building one of the smallest companies in the industry: his own.

Now retired, he spends his summers in Niagara Falls, Canada, and his winters in Florida, USA.

I sincerely hope you enjoyed *The Bridge To Caracas*. If you did, then you might be interested in learning what happened to Jim Servito's stolen fortune, and how it devastated the lives of everyone who touched it.

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