

= PART III =

Chapter 22

He was playing the dark notes now: he could feel them in his nerve-heavy legs, hear them in his voice as he bought a ticket at the AirCal counter.

A few minutes later, the 12:40 flight from Orange County to Sacramento groaned into the sky. Shephard leaned back and watched the buildings tilt away below, shrinking as the landing gear thumped into place.

What if Hannover knew he was looking for a dead man? Or Wade? Or Tina Trautwein, who believed in getting deeper than the headline? He waited with a cigarette in his mouth and a lighter in his sweaty hand, hoping the No Smoking light would hurry the hell up and go out.

When the jet leveled off, Shephard smoked and tried to take stock. He had two victims, three if he wanted to count Colleen—and he did. He had a motive. He had a suspect who'd been dead for half a decade. Shephard tried to imagine the lines he'd use at Folsom Prison, but they just didn't play. Johnny Cash's blues kept moaning into his mind instead. On the other hand, he thought, then listed the things that still seemed to make sense to him. Cal. The Jota. Ten stitches, holding nicely, Jane...

For the moment, a few other things would have to hold, too. He had left Helene's apartment, locked the door, and told Mink she'd killed herself. The Newport Beach police would be calling on him, soon.

At the Sacramento airport he rented a car, making Folsom just after three in the afternoon. The town was quaint and somewhat sorrowful. He looked out at the old houses, Victorian and a little self-conscious, he thought. The prison was away from the city, a steadfast brick building with ivy-covered walls and an appearance of absolute lifelessness. The desk guard, one of those minor officials who take pleasure in bearing bad news, offered a crisp litany. „Can't see the warden 'cause he's home, and can't see the assistant 'cause he's busy. Can't get into records without permission from one or the other. Sorry, detective.“

Shephard dredged up the name from memory. „Assistant Warden TeWinkle is a friend. Call him for me, would you, buddy?“

„Told you he's busy...“

„Don't know he's busy until you try, now do you? He's expecting me.“

The guard poked the telephone buttons with martial address, waited, explained the situation. Then the hold button: „Never heard of you, Shephard. Maybe you ought to make an appointment and—“

„I got people back in my hometown dying by fire, mister. You heard of that? I'm a cop and I need some help, so tell TeWinkle this is the biggest emergency he's had all night.“

The guard eyed him, sighing. This time his tone was a little more encouraging. He explained again, nodded, hung up. „Be right with you.“

„Thanks, chum. You've done a fine thing, really.“

Assistant Warden Dave TeWinkle was right with Shephard a half hour later. He was a thin, wiry man in his late fifties, Shephard guessed, with taut orange hair and the bright nose of a drinker. He led Shephard upstairs to his office, which was paneled in redwood and oppressively hot. „Mercante? Sure. Won't ever forget that sonofabitch. Killed in the riot of 1980, along with fifteen other inmates. Could have saved yourself a trip and used the phone, detective.“

Shephard gathered what assurance he could muster. „What I want, Dave ... what I need is to talk to someone who was there. At the riot. Someone who knew Mercante.“

„Well, I was there. Me and a riot gun, holding down what was left of the east wing for twenty-four hours. Watched most of it burn.“ TeWinkle jerked his thumb toward a photograph framed on the wall. Behind the dense smoke in the picture's foreground, Shephard could see the forms of men scurrying through the cellblock surrounded by flames, like bodies lost in hell.

„What happened to Mercante?“

TeWinkle chortled, as if he were being pestered by a four-year-old. „He died. I wasn't *that* close. I didn't blast him with the twelve gauge, though I wouldn't have minded too much. What do you mean, what happened?“

„How did he die? Fire? Shot? How?“

TeWinkle leaned back, put his hands behind his head, and stared up at the ceiling. „Guess I don't remember exactly how it went down for old Azul.“

„Can you get the account? The record? His file?“

„Get anything I goddamned want,“ TeWinkle said with a dry smile. „Stay put.“

He was back in five minutes with a thin manila folder that bore a red sticker saying INACTIVE on it. He laid it on the desk in front of him, hunched over, and brought a pair of reading glasses from his pocket.

„Bad time,“ he said. „Late summer and quiet. That's how you know something's up in the joint. You come to work and the men are fighting and swearing and generally making a scene, you know things are okay. You come in and it's nothing going on, look out. I was in charge of guards back then. Supervisor. Spent a lot of time in the north tower, just watching.“ TeWinkle flipped a sheet and nodded.

„Started about this time of night,“ he said. „Fight in the mess hall got out of hand, and when the guard came to break it up they were ready for him. Half a dozen of them was the story. Beat the hell out of him and dragged him off to the east block and put him on the phone to the warden. They had a whole list of crap they wanted. Longer time in the yard, better *extermination*, I remember. The summer was a hot one and the place was full of fleas and roaches. Full of inmates, too. Much too crowded. Warden said he'd see what he could do if they'd let Connell go, but they killed him instead, then started setting fire to things. Mattresses, blankets, their own stuff mostly. Everybody runnin' wild. Couldn't hardly tell who was who, so much fire and smoke. Got into the rec room and set that on fire too.“

„The prisoners held the blocks for four days. Guards shot three of them dead. Couple more died in the fire. One or two got killed by their own kind ... here, that was Mercante. Says right here: *Killed by unknown assailants during prison disturbance of August, 1980. A piece of sharpened bed frame was driven into his chest.* Someone shanked him. Couldn't have happened to a better guy. Open and shut, Shephard. That do ya?“

He handed the folder across the table. Shephard studied the profile and face shots, a fresh set taken every few years. In the last pictures, taken in May of the year Mercante died, he wore a full beard and mustache.

„Strange fellow, that Azul,“ TeWinkle said. „Little guy, but everybody scared of him. Even the gangs left him alone. Got sent up for murder, life, I think. Now I'm a skosh hazy on this—you can check it there if you want—but I think he killed a guy while he was inside. Long before I came here, late fifties maybe. A fight down in the showers, and when it was over, Mercante had busted the fella's head open on the tiles. So they tacked on another life sentence for that. Hell, he'd a been out a long time ago if he'd stayed low. Life is more like twenty if you do it straight up and keep clean.“

Good memory, Shephard thought, reading a paragraph from the third sheet in Mercante's file. The man was jumped in the shower—three on one—and he lived to be sentenced for it. Azul's first five years had been hard time: three fights, two vacations in the cooler, moved to the trouble block, then back out with the regular population until he tried to use the bathroom. But after 1962, Shephard saw a change in the man's lifestyle.

„Understudy to the prison priest?“

„The worst of them always end up on God's side,“ TeWinkle said as he fiddled with a pipe. „No wonder He's losing. Look at Manson out at Vacaville. Everybody's saved. Know why? Because it makes them feel good.“

Shephard looked back at the file. Mercante, the acolyte, had outdistanced three prison priests in his twelve-year career. He witnessed daily to the prisoners, made some converts, upped the church attendance. He still had time for a job in the Folsom records room, \$1.25 an hour, a trusty.

And he painted. The transcript mentioned a „successful“ business he ran, charging inmates to have their portraits done. His work was featured twelve years running at the annual prison arts and crafts show. The guards commissioned him in 1972 to do a likeness of a retiring warden. He gave classes. And if his file was accurate, Azul Mercante changed. A 1953 entry described him as „deceitful, extremely violent, untrustworthy and not improving.“ Ten years later he was „patient, agreeable, and apparently without violent tendencies.“ By early 1973, his goodwill was no longer a hot topic among prison observers, and Mercante was „quite simply a model prisoner in all respects. It is regrettable that the inmate's past record prevents his consideration for parole.“

„Detective?“ Shephard looked up to find TeWinkle studying him from behind a thin cirrus of smoke. „Mind me asking just what the hell you're looking for?“

Shephard tossed the INACTIVE file onto the desk. „Someone who was there. When he died. Right in the middle of it.“

„If I knew what you were—“

„If I knew, I'd ask, Dave. Someone inside at the riot. Someone who might have picked up the gossip afterwards. A man who's been inside a while. It's important. Can you get me inside, alone, with someone like that?“

„Shephard, you expect the damndest things. Yeah, I can get you into a visitor's room. If you want somebody who's been here and knows the place, I got that too. Ed Matusic, but we call him Shake. Writes all the time.“

„Not the visitor's room. I need to see him on his own ground, where he's comfortable.“

„It isn't comfortable anywhere in this place.“

Shephard set his Python on TeWinkle's desk and stood up.

The sounds of West Block echoed around him as he stepped through the last set of sliding steel doors, flanked by two solemn guards. Music blurted from several of the cells, cacophonous and competitive. Two men screamed at each other—one dressed like a woman—from inside the cubicle to his left. From down the block, something raked against the bars in a clanging, methodical riff. Someone was singing and strumming a guitar, and a harmonica whined accompaniment from across the walkway. A Dylan song; Shephard recognized it. He could see faces coming into the dull light as he walked by, hands wrapping around bars. Somebody yelled, „Hey, sweet thing, come here to daddy.“ The guard on his right nodded to the stairs at the end of the hall. „Matusic, two hundred B, as in boy. Upstairs.“

Shake got off his bed and came to the bars as they approached. Shephard studied his small eyes, set like jewels in the meaty face. He was a big man, but plump, and his expression hinted at a boy picked on for his softness. But when he smiled, Shephard saw the brutish guile of a man who'd learned how to get even. There was something damaged in it.

„Got a visitor, Shake. Mr. Shephard. Behave yourself, and show him this is a joint with class.“ The guard opened the door. „I'll be top of the stairs. Call when you're done.“

Shephard stepped in, glanced at the open notebook on the bed, and the pen beside it. „A writer. Shake for Shakespeare?“ The door slammed closed behind him. He'd forgotten to ask what Matusic was in for.

„And 'cause I shake when I move.“

They shook hands. „Tom Shephard. What are you in for?“

„Mostly rape. You're a cop.“

„Laguna Beach.“

„Never heard of it.“

„It's a long way.“

„You can sit on the bed or the chair.“ Shephard took the chair, and Shake fluffed his pillow before sitting back on his bed. He balanced the notebook on his belly. „I don't want out. So if you're here to make a deal, forget that kind of stuff. I'm home. Everything in the world I got right here.“

„Not a thing you want? Nothing?“

Matusic pondered the question, doodling in his notebook. Shephard looked around the cell: two stacks of books in a corner, piled almost head-high; more books under the bed; a sink and toilet; one wall covered by a huge photograph of

mountains with flowers in bloom; the other by large sheets of graph paper clotted with tiny, dark handwriting.

„Always use a little money,“ Shake said finally. „I collect it. What you want’s the question, isn’t it?“

Shephard studied the man’s face for some avenue of appeal. „Where do you keep your stuff? Your writing?“

„Under the bed. This is my hundred and forty-third book, when I’m done with it. Collect them, too, like the money.“ He tapped the notebook with the pen, and something seemed to catch his eye. He wrote slowly, his face tensing with concentration. When he was finished, he looked back to Shephard, relaxed and grinning as if he’d been caught torturing a cat. Shephard felt the hairs bristling up his neck. He put a twenty on Shake’s bed.

„I need to know some things about the riot in ‘eighty, Shake. Nothing you tell me is going to come back on you, on anyone. It’s a ... personal thing for me.“

Matusic’s little eyes seemed to light up. He crumpled the bill toward him and grinned. „Bad riot. Four days of confusion and pain. Sixteen men and one guard died. Brought in the National Guard, finally.“ He leaned forward, catching the notebook as it slid away. „Fire everywhere and everything busted up. Guards thought we caused it, but it was the fleas caused it. That, and too many of us in the blocks.“ He spread out the twenty, pressing it against his knee.

„Do you remember it well?“

„I wrote nine books about it.“

„I want to know what happened to Azul Mercante.“

„He died. How about some more money?“

Shephard put another twenty on the bed and Shake pounced. It was time now: if Matusic had what he needed, this is where it would be. „How? And don’t tell me he got shanked, Matusic. I’m not here to buy shit.“

Shake blushed, tried to straighten himself into composure, looked at Shephard with a worried grin. He’s afraid, Shephard thought. Here’s my way in. But don’t turn your back on him, not for a second. Matusic lowered his voice, speaking confidentially: „The real story is he burned to death,“ he said. „That stuff about the shank was never true. This is what really happened...“

Shephard stared at him as Shake told the story, about the mattresses piled up in the black man’s cell and the way they caught fire with the paint thinner from the supply room, and the cell door slamming shut at the last minute with Azul inside and no one could get him out, so he burned up right there, I remember it, East Block number fifty-one Z.

„I heard he might have died from the guards, too,“ Shephard said quietly. „Shot him, Shake, is one way I heard it.“ He put down another twenty and Matusic collected it with a grin.

„That’s possible, too,“ he said. „The way it happened was this.“

Shephard stared at him again as he told the story about Mercante shot by a tower guard when he tried to make it from the rec room across the exercise yard with some more towels to burn...

He studied Matusic’s carnivorous smile, which grew bigger and more eager to please. The big man folded his newfound wealth, then unfolded the bills and straightened them against his leg. He laughed, unsurely.

When Shephard stood up, he watched Shake bring up his legs and wrap his hands around them, leaning his face onto his knees, still laughing quietly. Shephard looked outside to the guard, who was kibitzing with a prisoner near the stairway. The music was still loud. „You know what happened to Azul, don't you?“ No change from Matusic, just little eyes laughing from atop his wide knees. The twenties were still in his hand. Go for broke, he thought. He brought the last of his money out, a twenty and a bunch of ones, but it looked good. He waved it.

Matusic's big head shook sideways. „I told you,“ he said quietly.

„You told me,“ Shephard whined back. Fast as he could move now: the money back into his pocket with one hand, ripping away the pillow with the other, then a grab at Matusic's throat, jamming his head into the corner of the mattress while he hopped on top and braced his knees on the big man's belly. Shake moaned, swatted up with his empty paw, and—Jesus Christ, Shephard thought—worked his money hand between the bed and the wall where he wouldn't lose his paycheck. Knees on the flabby arms now, and both hands secure around his neck. The longshot: „Mercante didn't die in that riot, Shake, we all know that. Your problem now is to tell me what happened before you choke to death. How you going to manage that, buddy?“

Matusic pushed out a strangled whine; his legs pounded the bed behind Shephard, and his good hand waved harmlessly from the outside of Shephard's knee. „I can't... I can't...“

„Can't breathe? That's a problem, Shake.“ He loosened his hands a little. „We were talking about Azul, remember? How it went down in 'eighty. You still there?“ Cinching his hold again, hoping the guard wouldn't wander back.

„I can't tell you, I swore.“

„Unswear, Shake. I'm either going to strangle you or take my money back, or both.“

Incredibly, Shephard thought, Shake used what strength he had left to jam his money down farther toward the floor. Behind him, the sounds of a radio shrieked, and there was laughing too, excited and cruel. Showtime, Shephard thought. He let up a little. „Matusic, if you've got any brains in your head, listen up. You're going fast, another few minutes of this and you're history. Mercante. What happened? Tell now, you can keep your money and twenty more. That's a lot of money, Shake.“ The poor man really was gasping, he thought. He loosened his grip a little more. „You're not quite sure on that, are you? Shake? You there? Come clean, goddamnit, I'm getting tired of choking you.“

One last try. He readjusted himself over Matusic's arms, then closed his grip with a slow, patient strength. He could hear the laughter from behind him, quiet enough not to draw the guards. Shake was gurgling something. „...I ... rrr ... rokay ... rokay.“ Shephard let up. „I'll tell you ... no more...“ Shake's chest was working deeply.

„You're on, Shake. Spill it and grow rich.“

Then the big man's arm fell to the mattress, and his expression relaxed. Shephard got off and pulled him up, propping him against the cell wall. Face to face, Shake's lips trembling into a smile. Still, he kept the money, clutching it away from Shephard like a child.

„Mercante ... just died. Like I told you.“

„Shake, you disappoint me.“ Shephard wrenched the man’s money hand from behind the bed and tore away the bills. He put them in his pocket and retreated to the far end of the cell. Then, a sound more agonized than any he’d managed to beat out of him, a high-pitched sorrowful keen that came from deep inside.

„Nooo ... oohh nooo! I earned that. It’s miine...“

„Death and taxes, Shake. I’m charging you this sixty plus the twenty more I was going to give you. For feeding me a bunch of shit and making me break a sweat. Deal’s off.“

Shake scooted up against the wall again, eyeing Shephard with a heartbroken pout. His chin trembled. „You can’t do that.“

„I just did.“

„You broke the deal.“

„Shut up, Matusic. Have a nice life.“ He leaned toward the cell door, looking for the guard.

„Wait! I can maybe tell you something.“

„I just about strangled you. Now you want to talk.“

„It’s a matter of honor.“

„Tell me about it. I’m all ears.“

„The money?“

„Stays where it is until I hear what I need.“

Shake buried his fleshy face in his hands. Shephard heard him sigh. „Okay, but when I tell, you pay. Right?“

„That was the deal ten minutes ago. Weren’t you paying attention?“

„This is it. Come here. Come a little closer and I’ll tell.“

Shephard sat on the end of the bed. Shake scrunched up closer to the wall, hugging his legs to his chest. It was almost a whisper: „Azul didn’t die in ‘eighty. He just played a little cut and run.“

„Cut and run?“

„Get somebody else’s tags. Get their clothes and cell. Be them, if they’re up before you. You know ... out before you.“

„Won’t work unless they’re twins, Shake. Am I going to have to keep your money?“

Shake leaned forward, licking his lips, boring into Shephard with his tiny eyes. „They practically *were* twins, except for a beard. Azul grew a beard, and when I saw him do that I knew what he was gonna try. Knew it. They were real alike. Enough to make it work. And Azul worked in Records, so I’ll bet that helped. He could *change* shit. Azul even cut off his middle toe—right behind the first joint—because that’s how—“

„What was his name?“

„Manny Soto ... because Manny had a joint missing. Azul pulled it off during the riot. Caught Manny alone, then shanked him, dragged him off to his own cell. Changed everything with him and left him there. I was the only one who ever knew. I ... swore I’d never tell.“

„And he helped your money collection to make sure.“

„Five hundred dollars. It’s still under the bed, with my books.“ Shephard stood up, his mind racing but his body heavy, as if in a dream. „I never thought he’d get away with it. After the riot was done, bunch of us got transferred out so they could

rebuild what we wrecked. I think Azul went to Lompoc. I never saw him again. He just got lost. I thought they'd find out, send him back. After a year I quit even thinking about it. Azul gave me money lots of times.“

„I'll bet he did.“

„Wanna see it?“

Shephard went to the door and called the guard, yelling over the din of the music and singing. The prisoner below was still mangling the Dylan song, but the harmonica had wandered off to its own wild melody.

„Hey ... what about our deal?“

Shephard tossed the sixty on the bed, then chased it with one more twenty. He had eight dollars left. „Shake, Azul bought a lot of honor for five hundred bucks. I almost strangled you and you wouldn't give. But I take away sixty dollars and you squeal. Why?“

Matusic gathered up his hard-earned pay, organizing the bills in a neat stack. „I told you. I collect it.“

„But what the hell for, if it's sitting there under the bed?“

The damaged grin again, self-satisfied and cruel. „Don't you know anything about the world? Shit man, money is freedom.“

TeWinkle was in his office, halfway through dinner. „Ah, Shephard. Find anything?“

„Manny Soto. Remember him?“

TeWinkle rearranged his diced carrots, frowning into the plate, then looked back up with a nod. „Vaguely. I think we relocated him after the riot. In for murder too, I think. You keep some nice company, Shephard.“

„Lompoc?“

„Think so. Here. Try 'em yourself.“ He pushed his telephone toward Shephard, who dialed and was put on hold. Five minutes later, he was put through to the assistant warden. No need to check the files, said the assistant, Manny Soto was released two weeks ago.

Shephard hung up, retrieved his Python from the desk, and walked out.

Chapter 23

As the last boarding call for Flight 321 droned through the Sacramento terminal, Shephard repeated the three names to Pavlik. Judge Francis Rubio, District Attorney Jim Peters, Wade Shephard.

A condemned trinity, he thought. „Carl, you've got to get them out of wherever they are, and into someplace else. Anyplace. Just get them out. You got that?“

Pavlik's voice came back thin and unsure over the long-distance wires. „Tom, would you mind telling me—“

„I can't, Carl, buddy. My plane's leaving without me, and this is one I don't want to miss. Trust, Carl. Call me at my father's in an hour and a half.“ He gave the number. „And Carl, try Wade last. I just called the church and he's gone home.“

Should be there in half an hour.“ He hung up, hustling toward the gate with a sweat-drenched boarding pass in his hand.

The landing at Orange County was vicious and abrupt, the jet buffeted by winds that still howled in from the desert. Even the LaVerda seemed tentative as he sped down 405, for the first time in his recent life keeping an eye out for cops.

Wade’s car wasn’t on the street, nor was it in the garage. Shephard wheeled in his motorcycle and closed the door. He let himself in with a key he hadn’t used for a decade and a growing sense of dread.

The house smelled of dried eucalyptus, and of Sunday bacon and eggs. He realized he had been expecting smoke.

„Pop?“

The living room was empty, the kitchen as spotless as ever, the den door closed. He listened, then pushed it open. The evening sunlight slanted through the blinds, ribbing the wall in light and shadow. He passed down the hallway with a faintly growing optimism, went through the main bedroom to the bath. „Pop?“ When he pulled back the shower door, he saw only the glistening tub and a bar of soap that had slid off its tray and now covered the drain. Shephard picked it up and set it back in place. Wade’s secretary had said he’d left, he thought. Almost two hours ago, for home. Dinner? Date? A party?

He heard a car pulling into the driveway, and went to the window. His .357 clunked against the frame as he moved aside the curtain and watched his father step from the car, then lean back in and take out two big bags of groceries. Shephard could not remember being so happy to see him in all his life. He met him at the door and took a bag, Wade studying him intently. „You look like a young cop with something on his mind,“ Wade said.

While his father put away the groceries, Shephard told him the story. Wade’s face tightened, and he feigned concentration on the chore at hand. The toothpaste went into the refrigerator. Shephard outlined his evidence: the threats to witnesses Tim and Hope, the cobalt and cadmium traces used in paints, the near match between the Identikit and the old Surfside photograph of Mercante, Ed Matusic’s tale of violence and cunning at the Folsom riot, and „Manny Soto’s“ release two weeks ago from Lompoc. Wade leaned against the counter, the color draining from his face. „Mercante ... simply *can’t* be alive. He died, five years ago.“

„The cons call it cut and run, pop. Azul raised it to an art form.“ Shephard filled a glass of water from the tap and handed it to Wade. „It’s Mercante. He may as well have signed his name. You said it yourself once. Money, a woman, silence, or revenge. He wants revenge. He wants you. By the way, pop, Helene Lang is dead. She killed herself this morning.“

He watched his father close his eyes, try to stand straight and reconstitute himself. Wade labored into the dining room and slumped into a chair. Shephard followed.

„She may have been a crazy old woman,“ he said, „who thought Joe was in love with her, that Joe killed Burton. But she believed it right to the end.“ When Wade looked up he seemed smaller, as if what part of him had slumped into the chair had continued into the fabric and vanished. Shephard wondered if he would ever get it back.

„I suppose she did,“ Wade said, in hardly more than a whisper.

When the phone rang, Shephard answered it. Pavlik's voice came through, rushed and excited: „Tom, I did your homework. Jim Peters doesn't have anything to worry about today. He died a few years back in an auto wreck. But the Honorable Francis Rubio is alive, somewhere. I got in touch with his son, Francis Junior, but he won't give us the old man's address. Did you find Wade?“

Shephard looked into the dining room. „He's here.“

„What next?“

„Give me Rubio Junior's number. Maybe I can ... make an impression.“

Wade eyed Shephard quietly while he hung up from Pavlik and then dialed. On the fourth ring a woman answered hastily. „One moment,“ she snapped.

A very long moment later, Shephard found himself talking to Frank Rubio, Jr., who spoke in a clipped and irritated voice. „He doesn't live with us any more,“ he explained. „I'm handling medical and estate matters now. I suppose that's what you're calling about.“ Mr. and Mrs. Rubio are in the middle of a nasty one, Shephard thought.

„Not exactly. Can you tell me where he lives?“

After another long silence, Francis Rubio, Jr., said that his father was now in a very fine house in Santa Ana, but had all but lost his mental faculties. His Newport Beach home was in escrow, his finances in order, and visits by old friends, new friends, and financial sharps of any kind would be useless. Was this clear?

„Clear as day, Frank,“ Shephard answered. „How about a visit by an old enemy?“

„For what purpose?“ Rubio demanded, losing patience.

„To kill him,“ he answered flatly. He waited for the click of the receiver. „Rubio, are you alone right now?“

„No.“

„Can you get that way?“

The phone hit something hard. Shephard heard their voices in the background, then Frank Rubio was back. „Okay. Now just what the fuck is going on? Who are you?“

Shephard explained. He told Frank Rubio that his father had heard a case thirty years ago, that he had sent the defendant to prison, and the man had been let out. He explained that two of the witnesses had been murdered, and Francis Rubio stood a good chance of being next. Rubio listened without comment, then grunted.

„Sounds pretty farfetched to me,“ he said. Years of experience had taught Shephard that the best antidote for stupidity was silence. He waited and Rubio grunted again, but with less conviction. „You're not kidding?“

„I'm not kidding, Frank, buddy. And this isn't my idea of a fun Sunday. Give me your father's address. How much longer do I have to sit here and beg you to help me save his life?“

Another long pause, then: „Maybe you're not who you say you are. How do I know you're not the one who's after him?“

„Francis, I'm a detective. My badge number is two-seven-one-eight, my partner is Carl Pavlik, and you can call him at the station right now to check me out. I'm demanding your help. And I'm telling you, the more time you waste, the sorrier you might be.“

„It's called... Ross Manor. He's... in a nursing home, a very good one, though. Ross Street in Santa Ana, it's in the book. The director is Claire Bailey. I—“

„Don't even think of going out there. Stay put and wait for my call.“

When Shephard heard the woman's voice again, he realized Rubio was speaking under pressure. „Maybe we could bring him back here,“ he said quietly.

„You might have to.“ Through the line, Shephard heard a door slam.

„I can do that,“ Rubio said finally. In the background, the woman's voice barked impatiently. „I can at least goddamned do that much.“

Wade had disappeared down the hall. When he came back a few minutes later, with his white suit hanging on him and his eyes remote in thought, he gave Shephard the least convincing smile he'd seen in thirty years. Shephard had never seen him so dispirited, as if something inside him had slowed. Even his voice was brittle. They agreed—though Wade argued until his arguments made no sense—that he would leave town. „And what do you plan to do, Tommy?“

„I don't know yet. I've got to get to Francis Rubio. Get him out of Santa Ana for a while. Take a vacation, pop. Let your assistant deliver the sermon next week. Your ratings will soar when you get back.“

His father smiled feebly, his eyes still gazing inward, lost on some solitary vision. He brought a .38 snubnose from his coat pocket, and a box of ammunition. „Don't look at me like I'm a helpless old man,“ he said finally. „I can still take care of myself. I think I'll go down to Mexico for a few days. See the hospital site. I'll leave you a note, here on the table, when I leave.“ He stood up, hugged his son, and walked down the hallway toward his bedroom.

„Dad, your toothpaste is in the refrigerator.“

The LaVerda carried him out Laguna Canyon Road, onto Interstate 5, and through Irvine, Tustin, into Santa Ana. The wind continued unabated, casting him from one lane to the next without warning, stinging his face with sand. At Irvine Boulevard he angled to the off ramp, caught the green light, and headed downtown. A tumbleweed, strangely out of context in the city, rolled across the street in front of him and ran up against a chain-link fence. The elm trees that lined Ross Street tossed in the wind while two children on skateboards held out their coats to harness a free ride through the darkness.

Ross Manor was a converted Victorian-style home with a sprawling green lawn studded with empty white chairs. As Shephard pulled his motorcycle to the curb, he noted that two old men were sitting on the wide porch, facing each other, rocking slowly in the porch light. They eyed him silently as he came toward them.

Inside, he faced a large, hotel-style desk, behind which an elderly woman sat knitting. Not far in front of her was a television set with the volume turned up. She looked at him through thick glasses, put down her needles and yarn, and stood up. Her badge said Claire Bailey.

„Miss Bailey, I'm Tom Shephard. I'd like to see Francis Rubio.“

The woman turned down the volume on the TV, and when the music dissipated, Ross Manor lapsed into silence.

„I'm the director,“ she said, pulling a sweater around her thin neck. „Francis Rubio?“

„Please.“

She checked a ledger of some kind. „The former judge is with his attorney right now,“ she said with polite firmness. „He asked me to let them conduct some personal business undisturbed.“

There was a giddy swirl in Shephard’s stomach. Business at nine o’clock?

„Mr. Rubio asked you, or the attorney?” He smiled, praying it didn’t look false, as he scanned the ledger for a room number. Nothing but orange yarn and blue needles; Claire Bailey had set her knitting on the book.

„The attorney,“ she said. „His new attorney, in fact.“

To hell with the Santa Ana police, Shephard thought. He brought out his badge. „Claire, I’m a policeman and I must see Francis immediately. Please, it’s extremely important.“ When she hesitated, he lifted his coat away and exposed the Python. Her eyes widened and she stepped back.

„Two-oh-six.“

Shephard looked to his right, then to his left: two stairways leading up in Victorian symmetry.

„It’s in the middle of floor two,“ she said hurriedly. „Take either one. The room is right in the middle of the hallway.“

Shephard chose the right. His footsteps echoed in the silence of Ross Manor, the click of shoes on wood. Halfway up, he heard a door close. Then footsteps away from his direction, deliberate, unhurried. They found the stairs and began down.

A faded green runner split the hallway in half. The narrow passage was lit by a lamp fastened to the ceiling midway, emitting a dull yellow glow that seemed to come more from the polished wood of the hallway than the bulb. There was a smell of disinfectant and old bedding. Odd numbers on his left and even on his right. Somewhere, a TV droned. Outside 206, he tried the knob and found it locked. Downstairs, a door slammed.

Then a muffled thrashing from inside the room, followed by muted groans, as if someone were screaming from under water.

Shephard pushed off from the wall behind him, aiming his shoulder at the door. He smashed against the old wood, a solid, bone-jarring collision that sent a wide throb of pain through his back and stopped him as decisively as if he had hit cement. The door shuddered and held. He charged again, this time with his other side, and again the thick wood punished him. Inside he could hear a high-pitched popping noise, then a hiss followed by splattering. The muffled groans had turned to thick, choked yelps. Against the wall again, Shephard pushed off and hurled himself again. He hit, rebounded in a shudder of pain, and watched the door swing open slowly before him.

Smoke and water pelted him from inside. Flames ate upward from the bed, growing from the white blanket toward the ceiling. A sprinkler showered the room, the water hissing violently as it streamed down on the fiery bed. He picked up a chair and threw it through the window. Under the flaming cover Shephard saw movement, a stifled struggling that sent sparks popping to the floor. The yelping sounded desperate, abandoned. With one quick movement that sent a puff of heat into his face, Shephard grabbed the end of the bedspread and flung it into the middle of the floor. The covers below, body-shaped, shook and trembled. He gathered them up and caught a glimpse of the man bundled underneath as he threw them down with the bedspread and trampled the heap. The sprinkler began

to do its work. The sparks popped up, the water showered down with a fierce hissing. Shephard stuck his foot into the cooling stream.

When the fire on the floor seemed dead, he moved to the bed and looked down on the man whose quivering legs and arms were tied snugly to the railings with the strings built into his pajamas. The white feet continued to thud against the mattress. His arms were tied in place, but his hands clutched at the side of the bed, the knuckles purple with blood. And above the wide strips of tape that mummified the lower half of his face, two terrified eyes stared upward. Droplets of water splattered onto his head. Shephard moved his hands over the body, and his voice sounded high and foreign as he told the man that he was all right, buddy, chum, you're going to be all right, Mr. Rubio, you're going to be all right. Under his hands, Rubio's withered body was miraculously cool.

Heads appeared in the doorway. Shephard stripped open the pajamas and looked down with almost tearful relief at the unburned chest and stomach of Francis Rubio.

Murmuring from the doorway was a small crowd of old people—one man adjusting his hearing aid, a woman in curlers, the horrified face of Claire Bailey as she struggled to get in. Water pelted down from the sprinkler. Through it all, Rubio's eyes never strayed from Shephard.

Claire Bailey stood beside him. She had already called the fire department and the police, she said. In the quiet that followed, the sprinkler overhead shut off and Claire Bailey started weeping. She helped Shephard peel the tape from Rubio's face. When they lifted the first wide white strip from his mouth, the man's heels began pounding the bed again, his hands opened and closed around nothing, and he bellowed into the silence of Ross Manor.

Shephard eased his way through the people outside the door, looking them in the eyes and telling them that everything was okay now, just a little trouble with Mr. Rubio's new lawyer. One man said that attorneys were always a pain. He broke into a run when he reached the hall, and headed for the stairs. As he clambered down the stairway, two sounds echoed in his ears, even through the din of Rubio's wailing. One was the sound of footsteps going down the stairs when he had first climbed them, the other was the slamming door he had heard as he stood outside room 206. He reached the lobby, panting. On the porch, both of the men had risen from their rockers to stare at the overstuffed chair that had landed, as if dropped from heaven, on the lawn. Shephard ran to the LaVerda and was about to jump onto the seat—the key already in his hand—when he saw the spark plug cables, neatly severed, lying across the leather. He cursed and looked up Ross Street, where less than a block away a convertible red Cadillac and its gray-haired driver lurched around a corner and out of sight.

Chapter 24

The cops were waiting for him when he finally came home that night, as he knew they would be. Benson from Newport Beach and Hudson from Santa Ana.

They stared at him appraisingly as Little Theodore delivered him on the back of his Harley-Davidson.

„Little trouble in Newport I'd like to talk to you about,“ Benson said with a crooked smile. He was short, with a combative face, and looked younger than Shephard.

Hudson was bulky and unshaven, and apparently not a talker. „Ditto in Santa Ana,“ he said, as if it were an effort. „At Ross Manor.“

They came upstairs, surveyed his stripped apartment, and asked their questions. He modified the truth for Benson, saying only that he had waited for Helene Lang to meet him, then gone upstairs to find the door open, and let himself in.

It was news to Benson that her name wasn't Dorothy Edmond. He made a note of this, then sat stroking Cal. „If the door was open when you found her, how come it was locked when we got there?“ he asked.

„Just thinking of you,“ Shephard said. „Didn't want anybody tampering with your scene.“

Benson seemed to ponder this for a moment. „The next time you want to help me, stay the hell out of Newport, okay?“

„Ditto in Santa Ana,“ Hudson managed again.

After an hour of questions, Benson and Hudson closed their notebooks as if on cue, took a last look around the inhospitable apartment, and left.

Later that night, as he studied the face of Azul Mercante in the pale light of his living room, Shephard could feel something foreign inside himself, a barely recognizable emotion, like an unwatered seed only now beginning to grow. He considered Mercante's haughty smile, the superiority in his eyes, the way he had forced himself into Shephard's own home and tried to drag his mother down. Images flickered through his mind. Looking at the sketch, Shephard saw in the man everything he had learned to despise: arrogance, violence, recklessness, and a belief—most difficult of all for Shephard to understand—that everything is legitimized by one's own passion. He recognized the crude emotion growing inside him. It was rage.

And he realized, as he listened to the sound of someone coming up his stairway, that Azul Mercante had yet to understand the full rage of revenge. That rage must have been written on his face when he opened the door and beheld the windswept beauty of the young woman in front of him.

„Hi, Tom,“ she said finally. „You look like hell.“ Jane handed him the Identikit he'd given her. „You said this was an excuse to see me again. Well, now it's mine to see you. I've never seen this guy before.“

He stepped aside to let her in. „This is it.“

„Your apartment... well...“ She looked around at the bleak living room. Shephard watched her, wondering at the perfect match between the blue of her eyes and the blue of her blouse. Really, he thought, is she any of my business? Then she brought her lips to his mouth, and they stood there so long, wrapped silently together, that Cal finally came in from the patio to investigate. „He's cute,“ Jane said.

„If you think Cal's cute, you need a drink. If I had some wine I'd offer you a glass, if I had a glass. It'll have to be vodka. Rocks or neat?“

„Rocks. It’s a blazer tonight again.“

„So you’re thawing out? No more fires on August nights?“

„Guess so.“

They sat on the floor, Cal working his way between them in sly jealousy. He seemed taken with the guest and panted up close to her face; a charmer in all respects, Shephard thought. Cal had never been shy with the ladies.

„You were right about animals being easy to love,“ she said. „And safe. Dad and Becky, you and Cal, Buster and I.“ She smiled and stroked Cal’s head. The dog wiggled appreciatively, then snuck in a sloppy kiss.

„You asked for it,“ Shephard said. „Get away, Cal. She’s not yours.“ But Cal had teamed up, and he turned to Shephard with a look of immunity.

„Sorry about the other night. I didn’t mean to come off like the ice bitch. Make me another drink, would you? Then I’ll try to explain myself.“

She lay back and talked to the ceiling, Shephard beside her. Her first love, she said, had been in high school, and she still thought of the boy, who was now somewhere up north and married. He had proposed to her the night they graduated and she had refused out of principle. And it was the right thing to do, she said, because the boy had found a girl to marry not long after, and Jane had fallen in love with an older man her second year out of school. She was working as a waitress in New Orleans, had gone there on a whim, with a friend. Charlie. It was easy to fall for his dark good looks and his quiet attentiveness. „Besides, he wouldn’t come around all the time,“ she said. „You know how it is when you can’t always have what you want. So I loved him all the more.“

But Charlie was a philanderer—the more she suspected it, the more she wanted him—and he finally left her in a bitter Southern winter, with nothing but syphilis as a goodbye. „I was young, dumb,“ she said, tilting the vodka to her lips. „But I wised up a little that winter.“

She came back to California. She was twenty-one, broke, and didn’t have an idea of what to do with herself. Shephard tried to picture her, stepping off the bus with her bags, a California beauty returned to the motherland. Charlie blew it, he thought. If he ever ran across him he would tell him so, and perhaps break his nose.

„I was pretty low,“ Jane was saying, “but as soon as I met Raymond, that all changed. He was a year younger than I was, a pretty, pretty boy. Strong face, a good heart, full of art. He wanted to be a painter. Met him here in town, at the Festival. We got an apartment and moved in together, got engaged, planned everything for the wedding. Two days before the big one, Ray just disappeared. He left a little note saying he couldn’t do it, had to be free to find himself, or something. I really loved him. I still see him around, but he gave up the art and starting dealing cocaine. Makes a lot of money, too. Don’t bust him, Shephard. He’s an alright guy. I guess.“

„Can I break his nose?“

She slapped him gently on the arm, then turned to face him. „After that, I just said fuck it, Tom. I traveled Europe and South America, a bit of the East. I did what I wanted, when I wanted. I took some men, mostly the ones who were most sincere about me, and spit ‘em back up fast as I could. It was a way to get free, you know, a way not to fall. I kept it up for a couple of years after I got back.

That's how I learned about that cold something inside of me—that thing I can use if I need to—and I made an art form out of it. Then I just quit. I'd proved whatever the point was and I wasn't very happy. I realized the one thing I'd always loved, even at the worst times, were the beasts. Like him." Jane rubbed Cal's belly. „So I enrolled at UCI in biology, and I'm going on to veterinary when I get out. To tell you the truth, I haven't really felt much of anything for a long time. Then along comes this lanky detective who won't take the hard line for an answer. You spoiled the whole program, Tom." She ran her fingers through his hair, gently across the stitches.

„Well, you're a couple of years ahead of me in the pain and heartache school. Though I've learned a few lessons, I guess." Shephard tipped back his vodka, mostly water by now.

„Tell me about them."

„No. Some other time. Enough for tonight."

„All that make you think I'm not exactly the woman you had at Diver's Cove?"

„No, Jane. It just makes me want to take you in the bedroom and love you for a long slow time."

„Would you do that now? Please?"

Two hours later they were still there, Jane resting peacefully with her dark hair spread against a pillow, Shephard staring at the clock. Their lovemaking had been desperate, almost frightening to him, and mixed with the haunting face of Azul Mercante, which invaded the room each time he closed his eyes. It had left him overloaded with possibilities, premonitions. The alternating current of love and hatred was a voltage he could scarcely stand.

„Time won't stop just because you stare at a clock, Tom."

Shephard ran his hand over her forehead, through her hair. „Sorry."

„You want to tell me now, just what's going on?"

He lay back and started at the beginning, the summer of bad luck at the Surfside. Burton and Hope, Joe and Helene, Tim and Margie, Wade and Colleen. Azul Mercante. Jane leaned against the wall, drawing the sheet over herself, listening silently through the rest of his story: the Bibles, the cobalt and cadmium, Mercante's transfer from Folsom and release from Lompoc. When Shephard finished, Jane was looking at the clock too. „So Rubio is hidden, and Wade? Where's your father?"

„On Isla Arenillas by now. Joe sent him down on his jet."

She turned to Shephard and kissed him, then settled her head on his chest. „You know, Tom, I've got one more question to add to all this. All those bills that dad ran up when mom had the cancer? The forty thousand? He never paid them. There's not a single canceled check to the hospital for all those years. And he kept canceled checks too, *all* of them."

„Maybe the insurance covered it."

„He didn't have any. He'd always lecture me on getting good insurance, because of how much that treatment cost him."

Shephard added this riddle to the bagful that already seemed to be weighing down his mind. Take a number, he thought, stand in line. „What year was it she first started treatment?"

„Nineteen fifty-one."

Of course, he thought. When else?

Just before two in the morning, the phone rang. Jane flinched at the sound. Shephard pulled his robe from the bathroom door and lit a cigarette on his way to the living room. The voice that greeted him was shaky, the music in the background was new wave.

„Tom Shephard?“

He recognized the voice, but couldn't place the agitated, nasal tone. „Speaking, chum.“

„This is Ricky Hyams. At *Valentine's*, you know?“

„Rick, buddy. Sounds like a rockin' scene down there.“

„Tom, uh, I think there's...“ The phone was lowered. Shephard heard two men talking quickly, some decision being reached. Then Hyams was back. „Tom, I think there's something here you should see. In regard to, uh, what we talked about last week.“

„What is it, Ricky? And why should I see it when I've got a lovely woman in my bed?“ Shephard heard the muffled movements of Jane in his bedroom, then the closing of his bathroom door.

„I can't talk. But come here, I, uh, think you should come here right away if I were you.“ It struck Shephard that Hyams was drunk, high, or both. „I'll meet you outside the front door, okay?“

The wind had dissipated, leaving the city clean. A sparse trail of taillights glittered ahead of him down Coast Highway like the red scales on a winding snake. The oncoming headlights bore into his eyes with a new intensity.

The gay corner of town bustled with people, men arm-in-arm filling the crosswalk at Crest Street, and the liquor store seemingly crammed with bodies. A white convertible slowed in front of him as the driver considered a young hitchhiker. Shephard swerved around it onto the narrow Crest Street cul-de-sac and parked the Mustang along a red curb.

The door to *Valentine's* was hidden by a crowd of men waiting to get in. They sprawled around the entrance, some dancing to the music that was loud even outside the bar. Ricky Hyams broke away from the jam and waited at the bottom of the steps. Behind him was a large man, dressed in full leather regalia, who nodded officiously at Shephard and parted the bodies as they made their way to the door.

Inside, the *Valentine's* lobby was a cramped stampede of men, bunched, talking, laughing, drinking—an animated cast. Hyams nodded and chatted briefly with his constituency, guiding Shephard by the arm until they broke through the knotted bodies and into a short hallway marked by a DO NOT ENTER sign. The music was so loud Shephard could feel it in his bones. It receded to a series of muffled thuds when Hyams closed the door to his office after them. He had looked at Shephard once, and said nothing. When he sat down and lit a cigarette, Shephard noted the way it trembled in his hand. Ricky Hyams, Shephard thought, looked dead in the eyes.

„He was here,“ he said finally. „The man in the papers. I think it was him.“ He looked up at Shephard as if he expected to be hit. „It wasn't until, uh, just a few hours ago that I realized it might be him. Then, again, Tommy, it might not be, so if it isn't don't get down on me too hard about tonight, but better than not calling

at all, isn't it?" He looked down at the blotter on his desk. „Oh hell.“ The bottle of gin that he took out of a drawer was a pint, and still half-full. „Been at this bottle all night,“ he said, holding it in front of his face. „I don't drink very often.“

„When did you see him?“

Hyams gulped, but not much gin seemed to disappear. „First time last week. Monday, I think it was. Off and on since then. But he's gone now. Left late tonight with a suitcase, and took a taxi. I know because I can see the courtyard from my apartment.“

„He had a room here?“

„Checked in Monday afternoon. Older guy with gray hair and beard, and blue eyes that you don't feel good looking at.“ Hyams attacked the bottle again, slurping. He lit another cigarette even though the first one was half alive. „Shit. Dammit to hell. Tom, you're not the first one interested in this guy. Monday night, a man showed up at the desk and asked to see me alone. He said he was interested in getting a key to the apartment that John Dixon had just rented. Dixon is your man, Tom.“ Hyams scanned the room, as if looking for something he had lost. „That isn't such an unusual request around here. Our clients tend to become familiar with each other rather quickly, and sometimes, uh, well, a room is a room, right?“

„So you gave him a key?“

„He insisted on leaving me a hundred for my graciousness, as he put it. And he said that due to some rather tender circumstances, he'd appreciate it if I forgot his face.“ Hyams drew sharply on his cigarette, then flicked his fingernails against the bottle. „I didn't think much of it until this envelope arrived on Wednesday.“

From the bottom drawer of his desk, Ricky produced a plain white envelope with his name typewritten across it. He handed it to Shephard with a woeful look on his face.

„When I opened it, I knew that something wasn't right.“

Shephard lifted the flap and drew out five one-thousand-dollar bills. They were so new they stuck together.

„How do you know it came from...?“

„Russell Dulak, that's what his name is. Tom, around here you get used to a certain kind of man. I thought at first that Dulak might have been, uh, finding himself sexually. Coming out, as they say. But the hundred was strange, and the thousands, well, I just knew they were from him. No doubt. And the way he started coming and going around Dixon's place, well, it wasn't a personal kind of thing. I thought drugs, and I don't like big drugs, but I wasn't sure. Dulak came late at night, parked on the red where you did—I, uh, saw you from my apartment. And he only came when Dixon wasn't there. He knew because he'd call and ask me. That's how I knew the money was from him, too.“

„What kind of car?“

„Dark Porsche Carrera. Beautiful car.“

„What does Dulak look like?“

Hyams sighed and drank again from the gin. Shephard wondered what else was making his eyes gape. „Big guy. Dark hair and brown eyes. Always wore real nice clothes, I noticed.“

Bruce Harmon, Shephard thought, always right on the scene. Waving money at Hyams like he'd waved it at Jimmy and Dot Hylkama. So he *had* found Hodges-Steinhelper-Dixon-Mercante first, and not even bothered to call. Somehow, Shephard wasn't surprised.

„Tom,“ Hyams continued, staring down at the blotter again. „I think I did something wrong. So I called you. I was scared. When Dulak brought the suitcase and Dixon left in the taxi, I figured they'd be out of my place for a while. It's a good place here. You might not understand it, but there's a lot of good things here for a lot of people. I don't want it, uh, fucked up.“

„What kind of car did Dixon drive?“

„Red caddy convertible. Nice one.“

Shephard studied the man in front of him, and saw something sincere in the haggard young face. „You knew it was the man in the Identikit sketch I showed you Saturday, didn't you?“

Hyams downed the bottle in one gulp. „Dulak said I could keep the money, and my life, by saying and doing nothing. Russ. Shit, I knew it was wrong.“

„And Dixon left here with the suitcase Dulak brought?“

„I'm sure it was the same one.“

„Let's see his room, Ricky.“

Hyams rose, swayed, steadied himself against Shephard's shoulder, then led him back down the hallway and through Valentine's dense lobby.

The apartments were clustered around a small courtyard behind the club. In the center stood a planter filled with banana trees, their fronds lacerated by the recent wind. Hyams took him to the second story, up a cement staircase that was swaying by the time they reached the top. The railing was littered with beer cans. The doors of several dilapidated apartments were open and couples kissed, laughed, spilled from the rooms. At the last door on the left, Hyams stopped and fumbled for the key. Mercante knew the out-of-the-way places, Shephard thought. He had hidden himself in town like only a man who had once lived there could.

The reek of chemicals hit him as he stepped inside and turned on the light switch beside the door.

The shock that rocked his body as he looked at the huge painting in the middle of the room rattled Shephard clear to his fingertips. Smiling at him from the canvas, revealed in all her golden youth and beauty, a beauty that hurt him to look at, was his mother, Colleen.

„Dixon's a painter,“ Hyams offered. „I could see him through the window, working on her. Pretty, isn't she?“

Shephard's heart was beating in his ears. „Close the door, Ricky, would you?“ he heard himself ask. „And don't touch anything, please.“

He stepped away from the canvas and surveyed the rest of the small room. It was chaotic: tubes of paint—Winsor & Newtons, he noticed—lay strewn on the dirty carpet; dishes were littered on the floor and couch; magazines and newspapers had been discarded in one corner, and now the pile reached nearly a foot high. Other paintings hung on the shabby walls, discordantly, as if thrown there without regard to balance or order. A violent seascape, a still-life that emitted a jittery anxiety, and a painting that arrested Shephard's attention immediately. A self-portrait.

„Pretty, uh, riveting stuff, isn't it?“

Shephard studied the sallow face in the portrait. Mercante had chopped his own face into green and yellow bevels from which his eyes arose narrowed and grim, like those of a viper about to strike. He might act like a god, Shephard thought, but he sees himself as a serpent.

In the kitchen, tossed beneath the cheapish table, Shephard found a pair of cowboy boots, the right one cloven at the heel. Sitting between the salt and pepper shakers on the table was a roll—barely used by the looks of it—of white surgical tape. Beside it was a Bible, open to Revelation.

The page had been kept by a brightly colored ticket envelope for AeroMexico, which contained no ticket. The date, scrawled by hand on the cover, was *August 31*. So, he's traveling by air now, Shephard thought. The gate number was 42, the flight number 217, and whoever made the reservation had preferred—he read the words with a mirthless laugh—non-smoking. Shephard's insides twisted.

„Is there a phone in this rathole?“

Hyams pointed to the couch. Shephard dug out the phone from under a dirty pillow and dialed Los Angeles.

The AeroMexico counter at International was still open, but the ticketing agent mournfully told Shephard that Flight 217—L.A. to Cozumel—left at 10:15. He asked what time the next flight departed.

„That will be nine-fifty this morning,“ she said. „Arriving Cozumel at seven P.M. May I reserve you a seat?“

Shephard took the reservation, hung up, and tried to find an earlier flight. Six phone calls later he had come up with nothing.

Then he thought of Marty Odette, who owed him one. Shephard dialed again. A song by the Rolling Stones echoed from the background of the Sportsplace when Odette answered the phone.

„Marty, buddy, this is Tom Shephard. I'm coming by in ten minutes and I need your help. Close the bar if you have to, you're flying to Isla Arenillas.“

Chapter 25

„What I like about the Lear is the velocity,“ Marty yelled as the jet careened down the dark runway. The scream of the engines rose to a soprano whine, the main wheels broke loose, and Shephard was pushed into his seat as the nose lifted into the air and the runway lights rapidly fell away below him. „Louder'n hell, but that's the price you pay for speed.“

The Learjet angled upward and banked south toward Mexico. When Odette had climbed to thirty thousand feet, he left the jet in Shephard's control and disappeared into the passenger cabin. Shephard grasped the yoke and held course by doing nothing. A moment later Odette returned with two heavy Scotch and sodas, light on the soda. He worked his way back into the tiny seat, strapped the headphones on, and reclaimed the controls from Shephard.

„This ain't exactly legal, but that gun under your coat ain't either, Shephard. We'll ditch it under the seat when we go through Customs in Veracruz. They probably won't even look. The Mexicans don't care much what we bring down, as long as we got some dollars with us.“ Marty sipped his drink and settled into the seat. Shephard gazed out the window at the dull glow of San Diego to the west, the blackness of the California desert in front of them. „Well, now that we're comfortable, what the hell are we gonna do in Isla Arenillas? It means Island of Fine Sand, you know. And the airport there won't accommodate this baby.“

„You're going to drop me in Cozumel, spend the afternoon, turn around, and come home. I'm going on to Isla Arenillas for a date with an old ... acquaintance.“ Odette studied Shephard with his gambler's deadpan. „That's the version you give back home, if anybody asks. It's all I can tell you now, Marty.“

Odette turned his attention to the instrument panel. „Do what you got to, Shephard. Being a betting man, I'll give you even odds down there. Yucatan isn't California. You run into the law and you might not ever get out. You run into something that isn't the law, and, well, there's plenty of jungle to fertilize with gringos.“

Shephard sipped the Scotch and listened to the hypnotic crackle of voices on the radio. He sat back, running all the possibilities through his mind, coming up with nothing. How, he thought. How did Mercante find out Wade had left for Isla Arenillas? Was it Harmon? And if it was Harmon, how had he found out, and so quickly? An hour later he dozed off, his head resting on his jacket, his dream visions returning incessantly to the golden-haired woman in the portrait.

He woke up later with the back of his shirt drenched in sweat and the sick premonition that Mercante had lured him out of town on purpose.

Two Customs officials at Veracruz examined their passports and papers, one finally nodding while the other lowered the official stamp. The morning was overcast and humid, smelling of stagnant ocean. The first official stood, cast a disinterested glance at the Lear, then told them to have a good stay in Mexico. Odette had told them they were divers. Shephard reset his watch to match the wall clock, noting that his palms were damp.

Ten minutes later they were high above the turquoise water of the Bay of Campeche, climbing to cruising altitude for the two-hour journey to Cozumel.

„Ought to do some fishing if you have the time,“ Odette offered. „Boats run about twenty bucks an hour down here. White marlin, bluefin, sailfish, wahoo. Some of the best in the world.“

Shephard lit a cigarette and put on his sunglasses, feeling the delirious swirl of exhaustion in his brain. „I'll think about that, Marty.“

Odette gazed out the window, rubbing his tired eyes. „One last offer, Shephard. I'll stay in Cozumel while you do what you do, then bring you back out. I could use a day or two of that fishing myself. What do you say?“

Shephard thought a long moment before answering, his mind filling with visions of arrest, extradition, the foreign bureaucracy led by humorless Mexican federales. „Do that for me, Marty. That would be great.“

„I'll book at *La Ceiba* if they've got room. If not, try the *Cozumel-Caribe*.“

„I'll call you tonight. Thanks, Marty.“

„It's not exactly police business, is it?“

„Oh, mostly.“

He left Odette at the Cozumel airport and found an information booth, where he learned that charter flights to Isla Arenillas left from a number of small airstrips around the city, but not from the main terminal. The woman at the booth suggested the *Hotel Presidente*, which handled the flight bookings. Even inside the airport it was humid, sticky-hot.

„Taxi?“ he asked, seeing none.

„No taxi from airport—the law,“ she said. „The bus goes downtown every fifteen minutes. Catch it right out there by the sign, señor.“

Shephard waited in the vaguely air-conditioned airport, a tiny and still-unfinished cluster of buildings that seemed no more than a temporary intrusion on the jungle. The bus—a Volkswagen van already loaded with passengers—picked him up half an hour later and began its cumbersome trip to downtown Cozumel. It was unbearably hot, even with all the windows down and a large fan whirring from its mount over the rearview mirror. A picture of the Virgin Mary dangled from the roof. The passengers were all Americans, drained of energy by the long flight from the mainland, waving hands or newspapers in front of their faces to break the wet heat.

„I can see why the prices drop thirty percent in summer,“ a Bermuda-shorted man joked. All he got from his wife was a disgruntled „Yeah.“ „Where you staying?“ he asked Shephard. Behind his sunglasses, the man looked like a shark.

„The island. Arenillas.“

The man noted that Shephard was traveling alone. „Hear it’s nice,“ he said with a minor grin.

The *Presidente* was the third stop. Shephard got off, tipped the driver, and refused help with his suitcase, which he had packed hastily and poorly in the five minutes he’d spent at home before picking up Odette. He thought of the tenderness in Jane’s voice as she said good-bye. He suddenly wondered if he’d see her again.

The one-way ticket on the seaplane to Isla Arenillas cost thirteen dollars. Back outside, in the sweltering heat, he flagged a cab. An hour later—it was nearly one o’clock—the rickety seaplane groaned off a dirt airstrip on the outskirts of the city, overloaded with gleeful tourists. Most of them had brought their diving gear. Some wore only swimsuits, sandals, and T-shirts. A pretty young woman dug into her purse, applied lipstick, and smiled at Shephard. Her boyfriend had his face to the window, enumerating the sights from above. An hour later Shephard saw the island in the distance, a tiny strip of jungle green outlined in talc-white sand. The water surrounding it was a pale and unrippled blue, *azul* in Spanish, he thought, like the eyes of his enemy. The plane bumped down on a small runway.

The smell of Isla Arenillas was one that Shephard had never experienced before: a muggy, humid-sweet mixture of ocean and vegetation, sea and jungle. The airstrip had been cut from the dense foliage, which crept nearly to the edge of the runway and looked as if it could reclaim the thin landing area in a weekend.

He climbed off the plane, lugging his suitcase behind. Above him, cirrus clouds flattened high in the sky and a flock of seagulls stirred and cackled. A stand of banana trees, short and green, was clustered at the far end of the strip. Shephard followed the tourists toward a path leading into the jungle, turning briefly to see

the pilot, beer in hand, trudging toward a dilapidated cantina on the end of the strip. The pathway was soon engulfed in green. Shephard moved his suitcase from one sweaty hand to another and listened to the musical riot of the jungle birds hidden around him. He stopped to light a cigarette and watched a pair of bright monarch butterflies winging silently against the undergrowth. The tobacco—a Mexican brand he'd bought in Veracruz—tasted black and dank, like the humid air. As he picked up his suitcase, a dark iguana lumbered across the path ahead of him, unhurried.

The pathway widened, left the jungle, and opened onto a neat dirt road that swung to the right. Ahead of him, he could see that both sides were spotted with hotels and restaurants, with many of the guests drinking outside under palapas. Beyond the hotels, the ocean sparkled blue and lazy. Walking past the tables of a restaurant called Tortuga, Shephard added the aroma of boiling shrimp to the smells that, like the heat, seemed intensified to the point of unreality. It occurred to him that of all the people on Isla Arenillas, he was the only one still wearing a coat, lugging a suitcase, or moving faster than one had to. And, he was sure, the only one carrying a .357 magnum in his suitcase. Two girls sped past him on motor scooters, each somehow balancing a bottle of beer on the handlebars. „Hey, gringo,“ one yelled back at him, „lose your load.“

Wade had not specified a hotel. His note said only that he would check in under the name Frank Seely, if Shephard needed to reach him. What a surprise this will be, he thought, praying that Mercante hadn't surprised him first. The AeroMexico flight had arrived at six o'clock, just under five hours ago. Surely, he reasoned, it would take Mercante all of that to locate Wade, make his plans, and wait for night to carry them out. Longer maybe. Without knowing that Frank Seely was the man he was looking for, Mercante would have to loiter around the town in hopes of spotting him. The unnerving thought that Mercante could be sitting in one of the outdoor restaurants, watching him as he walked into the hotel, haunted Shephard as he pushed into the mercifully air-conditioned lobby of the Rocamar.

No Señor Seely, they told him. And no Señor Mercante, very sorry. The desk clerk offered him a cancelation, but Shephard declined. He bought a can of Tecate beer from the cantina and a Panama hat from the gift shop before heading back out into the sweltering afternoon. Outside he took off his coat and draped it over his arm, feeling for a moment as though he had arrived in paradise.

He worked his way down one side of the main avenue, enquiring at the hotels after Señores Seely and Mercante. When he had exhausted the possibilities and found himself facing a pen fenced off from the ocean and filled with huge sea turtles, he crossed the street and worked the other side.

At the *Mesón del Marquez*, Shephard found that Frank Seely had checked in the night before.

The porter had snatched his suitcase away and was heading toward the hallway before Shephard could protest. He fished some change from his pocket as he followed the man down the hall to room 26, which was ground floor, facing the main street. The porter set down the suitcase and smiled, not counting the coins that he slid into a pocket in his shirt. A moment later, looking haggard and scared, Wade opened the door, smiled, and stood back as worry overcame the smile.

„Tommy, what are you doing here? Are you okay?“ Shephard saw that his father had been lying on the bed, reading the Bible. The look of control, compassion, still hadn't returned to his face.

„He knows you're here, pops. He flew down last night, from L.A. You've got bad security leaks.“

Shephard called room service for a bottle of Scotch and ice, which was brought ten minutes later by the same eager man who had carried his bag. He pushed the cart into the room with some ceremony, arranged the ice tub on the desk beside the window, and presented Shephard with a bottle and a bill. When the door closed behind him, Shephard made sure it was locked, poured himself a stiff drink, and told his father about the near death of Francis Rubio and the grim room at Valentine's. Wade sat on the bed, listening intently, looking out the window with newfound anxiety.

„So?“ he said finally. „What do you propose to do?“

„You're going out the way I came in,“ Shephard said.

„No I'm not, son. That's something I can't consider. He's crazy. You'll need all the help you can get.“

Shephard drank from the Scotch, then put his face in front of the air conditioner. „This is the way I see it. He's looking for you, one man alone in a hotel room. This is a little town. Word gets around who's where, what they're doing. If he senses anything wrong, he'll never show himself. Point two, pop: you get mixed up in this now, it's going to be real hard on you. Even if everything goes like I hope it goes, there's going to be an arrest, extradition, publicity. Look real bad for you stateside, but bad down here, too. Who's going to want your hospital here if you're mixed up with some killer?“ He stood at the window and looked out at the street, saw a fishing boat easing into dock in the shimmering distance.

Wade hadn't moved. „You might need me, Tommy. Another body can be a help.“

„Another body is what Azul wants,“ Shephard said quietly. „This is what I've learned to do, pop. You taught me some of it yourself. You had a chance at him thirty years ago. This one is mine.“

Wade rose from the bed and slowly paced the floor, his head down. „You're remembering your mother,“ he said.

„Aren't you?“

„It's too late for hatred, son.“

„It's too late for a sermon.“ Shephard sighed. „I'm sorry.“ He picked up the telephone and called La Ceiba.

„You're playing the dark notes, after all.“

A moment later, Shephard was put through to Marty, who was disappointed that his fishing trip would have to be canceled.

„Pop. You're going back to Cozumel on the seaplane. You're going to wear my clothes and sunglasses, and carry my bag. Here, wear this hat, too. If Mercante hasn't seen either of us yet, it might help.“

Half an hour later, they stood facing each other in the small room, Shephard buried in his father's white linen suit, Wade squeezed into his son's clothes. Shephard helped his father pack the rest of his clothes into his own suitcase. With the sunglasses in place, the resemblance was close. He looked at Wade. When you go, I'll be here. I'll be the Reverend Wade Shephard.

He called the desk for a taxi back to the airstrip.

Chapter 26

He checked out of the *del Marquez* at four that afternoon, lugging his father's suitcase into the stifling heat of the island. The street was crowded with tourists and vendors. One withered old man approached Shephard with a collection of dried, shellacked sand sharks bobbing from a stick. Shephard bought a very small one, which looked like a goblin dancing on its tail. It satisfied his need for some local talisman. Inside his left coat pocket he felt the sea lion tooth given him by Jane, then slid the dried shark in to give it company. The Indians considered the teeth good luck, he remembered, issuing his own brief prayer that that luck would be with him in the next few hours. He had never thought of himself as superstitious, but the heat, the musical mystery of the language being spoken, and the heavy smells of this tropical Eden all condensed around him as a reminder that he was wholly out of his own context.

His first move was to arrange himself more visibly, and in a place where Mercante would have no trouble trying to kill him.

He strolled past the hotels and shops of the main street, wondering if Mercante had perhaps already seen him and was right now viewing him from some upstairs balcony, beer in hand, planning the logistics of murder. The thought unsettled him still more: he had never pursued a man of such brazen and unfathomable cruelty. He thought again of the cut spark plug cable lying on the seat of his motorcycle, an eloquent reminder that he had arrived late, anticipated poorly, and had been spared by only seconds the ordeal of having to stare into the lifeless face of the Fire Killer's third victim. Shephard stopped suddenly and looked behind him, half expecting to see Mercante trudging a block behind, closing in. But the sidewalk was filled only with tourists.

He registered at the *Serenidad*, which overlooked the beach on the north side of town. He signed in clearly as the Reverend Wade Shephard and requested an upstairs room. The bellboy was a cheerful man with the high cheekbones and subtly upturned eyes of the native Indians. His name was Cantil.

„Cantil, isn't that a snake?“ Shephard asked as they headed for his room.

„Yes. Only a name for me. From when I was small.“

„Were you like a snake?“

Cantil set down the bag and opened the door to room 58. It opened with a stale, mildewed puff. „Very quiet,“ he said. „Why Cantil, I don't know.“

Shephard gave the man a dollar, asking for a bucket of ice and two extra pillows. „For my back, chum,“ he said. „Gets sore in this heat.“

He unpacked the suitcase carefully, hanging up the extra trousers and shirts, which were heavily wrinkled from the hasty switch with his father. The Colt Python .357, wrapped in a bath towel with two extra cylinders, he slipped under the bed. He noted the layout of the room: the door opened to a small hallway, with a large closet on the right. To the left of the closet, a doorway opened to a bathing

area, and behind that a toilet. Five steps from the doorway the main room began, a neat square with a single queen-sized bed to the left, a dresser opposite, and a small table and chairs placed in front of the window that overlooked the street. He drew back the curtains and looked down. The foot traffic below was minimal, with most of the shops and hotels a hundred yards toward the center of the town. To his right, he could see a stand of banana trees whose trunks vanished into the dense green of the jungle. Beyond the trees the water, the sand, the mainland.

„Señor Shephard?“ Cantil’s voice outside the door. Shephard opened it and he came in.

„Call me Wade,“ he said. „I like that better.“

The bellboy put the ice on the dresser and offered Shephard the two extra pillows. „For your back,“ he said.

Shephard stood close to him now, and spoke slowly. „I’m very interested,“ he said as he found another dollar, „in any visitors that I may have. If you can let me know of anyone asking about my room number here, or of anyone looking for Reverend Wade Shephard, I would appreciate it very much. If you are asked, say only that I am an *older* man. I would need to know, by phone, immediately.“

Cantil understood perfectly. „I’ll call you fast, Señor Wade, if anyone comes here for you. The snake sees all things in his hotel.“ He smiled, thanked Shephard again for the tip, and quietly disappeared, leaving the pillows on the bed.

Shephard sat in front of the air conditioner and smoked. Positioned in the far corner of the room, he could see down the street, which by seven was still filled with pedestrians and an occasional motor scooter. He studied again the Identikit sketch of Azul Mercante, placing it on the table in front of him, imagining what he was doing, where he was staying, what plans he had made for Wade, the object of his revenge. When the evening came, announced only by a slow darkening to the east, he ordered dinner from room service. The steak picado arrived an hour later, just as the sun was streaking the sky in orange, dripping its color into the water. He ate silently and drank a light Scotch.

Jane answered on the first ring. „Are you okay, Tommy? Is Wade okay? Did you find Azul?“

He let her breathless rush play itself out. „I’m fine. Wade’s heading back to the States. No Azul, though, not yet. I miss you, Jane.“

„I miss you too, but don’t expect me to admit it.“ She paused, then spoke more quietly: „Tommy, you know the cardboard file cabinets where dad kept all his financial stuff? Well, they’re gone. I left them in his living room, and went back to clean them out for good, but they’re not there. And your friend who drives the dark blue Porsche was outside your place when I fed Cal this morning. I’m a little scared.“

Shephard felt the adrenaline coursing through his veins like fuel. He closed his eyes and tried to quiet his breathing. „Jane, listen to me. I’m going to send a man over to stay with you. He’s big and he’s scary, but you can trust him. Stay home until he comes—it should be an hour at the most. He’ll know what to do.“ Though his mind was reeling, Shephard tried to bring some assurance to his voice. If Harmon hurts her, he thought, I’ll kill him.

„I love you,“ he said.

„I love you,“ she said. Both at the same time.

He called Little Theodore and made arrangements, then dialed Louise's Malibu number.

„Lou? This is Tom.“

„Where are you? I can hardly hear you.“

„Far away. Look, I just wanted to tell you that ... well, everything between us is okay, at my end. I've been sitting here thinking, and thought you should know that. If we don't get to see each other again, I at least want you to understand there's no hard feelings, Lou.“

„I really don't think we *should* see each other. It's just too hard for you ... for both of us.“

Shephard grinned: same old Louise, he thought.

„Tom, are you drunk again?“

„I'll call you sometime. 'Night, Lou.“

Just after nine, Shephard placed his dishes outside the door, which he left unlocked. He arranged the extra pillows lengthwise, molded the thin covers into legs, formed a dark shirt into a head. With the bedspread pulled up and the lights out he could see the man asleep there—the Reverend Wade Shephard, perhaps—conked out after a hot day.

Shephard brought the Python from under the bed and clicked the loaded cylinder into place, then put the second cylinder in his pocket. He unstrung two yards of dental floss from its container and tied one end to the pull chain of the light over the table. To the other end he tied a pencil, which he set on the floor beside him. The light flicked on as he pulled, then off again. He backed into the farthest corner of the room, his shoulders resting against the cool wall, the Python in one hand and the pencil in the other, and waited.

With his eyes closed in the darkness, his mind flickered with fatigued visions of the last week, and when Jane's image came he tried to hold it still to admire her beauty. He saw her bending back in ecstasy in the water of Diver's Cove; he saw her warm and silent in the bed beside him while he stared at the alarm clock; he saw her the first day he'd met her standing in the waders. Intermittently, another face began to appear beside Jane's, but it never materialized fully, remaining only half-formed, eclipsed by the raw energy that was Jane Algernon. It was only then that Shephard realized the fundamental change that had taken place inside him, that his heart was no longer a mourner for the woman who had left him, but a celebrant of the one he had found. For a moment the future—whatever it was and wherever it would be—seemed to overflow with possibilities of tenderness and love. He wondered if it was only the end of loneliness, an interruption of it. Among the images of Jane was the last he had seen of her, lying in his bed kissing him with gentle possessiveness, saying she would be with him. Then telling him again something that he had not heard in many years, words that seemed to have fallen from his own experience like extinct and useless birds: I love you.

If I die tonight in Mexico, it will be with you, he thought.

Just as he had done as a young boy, he released a flock of telepathic birds in the direction of California, trusting them to find her and sing the love that he would never be able to phrase himself.

Stiff and sore, his stomach queasy with fear and love, he stood, stretched, paced the room. It was nearly eleven. He slid open the window over the now-empty street

and inhaled the clean night aroma of the ocean. With the air conditioner turned off, the only sounds were of an occasional scooter on the street and the muffled voices in other rooms.

Just before three in the morning, Shephard strapped on his shoulder holster and slid the Python into its place. He removed the extra pillows from the bed and untied the string from the pull chain. Locking the door behind him, he headed downstairs to the Serenidad lobby. The deskman was reading a magazine.

„Messages for Wade Shephard?“

„No, señor,“ he said, checking the box for room 58. „No messages for you.“

„How many hotels are there on Isla Arenillas?“

The desk man, whose badge said Aguilar, shrugged as if the question were too demanding for such a late hour. „Many.“

„Exactly how many?“ Shephard brought out a five-dollar bill and placed it on the desk. Aguilar grinned.

„I will tell you.“ He opened a drawer and removed a bright orange pamphlet, which he gave to Shephard. It was a listing of island hotels, complete with addresses and phone numbers. He counted twelve.

„Is this up to date?“ Shephard asked. „Current?“

„Oh, it is the most up to date,“ Aguilar said with a nod. „Only place not listed is Hotel *Cora*, which is no open any more. Closed two years ago but they are soon to build it again. All others you will find on this.“ He reached out and pinched the pamphlet between his thumb and forefinger, shaking it quickly.

„Where is Cantil?“

The deskman looked disappointed. „Across the water. None of us live on the island.“

Shephard turned for the door.

„Señor, con permiso, but the night life on Isla Arenillas is ... minimal.“

„Just some fresh air,“ he said.

Among hotel night clerks there is a universal reluctance to expend energy past midnight. Shephard encountered one sleepy deskman after another, all of whom eyed him as a nuisance rather than a potential customer, none of whom had any guests registered as Hodges, Steinhelper, Dixon, or Mercante. He made each clerk double-check the last name, using up whatever patience they had at that hour of the morning. In the lobby of the impressive *Presidente Caribe*, he was met as he left by a stout, steely-eyed security guard who took him aside for a terse interview. Shephard produced his passport and room key, explaining mournfully that he had had a terrible fight with his fiancée but loved her very much. Untouched, the guard watched him through the glass as he headed back down the curving entryway.

By four-thirty, he had gone through every hotel in the pamphlet except the *La Palapa*. The lobby of the hotel was engulfed in banana trees and illuminated only by soft neon light, which flickered onto the young face beneath it.

„Buenos dias,“ Shephard said, exhausting his Spanish. The young man nodded and put down the magazine. Shephard ran through his litany of names once again, and once again he was answered only by the slowly shaking head of the clerk. He explained that he was looking for his father, an older man with bright blue eyes who was a wealthy eccentric given to changing names and hotels on a

moment's notice. He had arrived sometime yesterday—probably early morning—but had neglected to give him the name of his hotel. And now, desperate that the old man had become lost or worse, he had taken to the island on foot and failed to find his father at any of the dozen hotels. Shephard offered the man a cigarette, which he accepted with a smile.

„Very problem,“ he said. „Isla Arenillas not very big. Oh, five miles and two miles, but the jungle is very dark at night. Your father walk far?“

„He might. But I think he would want some place dry to sleep. I don't think he would sleep ... under the stars.“

The desk clerk examined the cigarette and nodded with concern. „Possible that if he is a little, you say, loco?“

„Yes, a little loco maybe.“

„Possible if he walked to other side of island to Hotel *Cora* and got lost on his way back. Hotel *Cora* closed two years, but it is soon to be built again,“ he noted proudly. „Possible he is lost in the jungle. Hotel is very dark at night.“

„There is nothing on the other side except the *Cora*?“ Shephard asked.

„Only where the new hospital will be. Jungle is gone there now. New hospital will be Seesters of Mercy. Built by loco man of God with many pesos. Dollars really. He is American, Reverend Chephard.“

Shephard considered Mercante's penchant for sliding in and out of derelict hotels and apartments, his talent for picking lairs away from—but somehow in the very midst of—where someone would look for him. It wasn't beyond possibility that he would hide in the *Cora*, and its closeness to the Sisters of Mercy made all the more sense. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more it fit into Mercante's twisted logic. And if Mercante was there, perhaps he would be sleeping, an easy mark for a morning visitor.

„How do I get to the *Cora*? I want to go there.“

„Oh, señor. You must wait until light. Long walk, three miles now. Very dark and the path is full of iguanas and many cucarachas.“ The clerk held up two forefingers about three inches apart. Some cockroaches, Shephard thought.

„I can't wait. The poor man could be wandering that path right now, very terrified. Comprende?“

The clerk sighed and rose from his stool, tapping across the lobby in his hard shoes. Outside, he led Shephard past the first row of rooms, the porch lights of which swirled with moths and outsized winged beetles. Translucent lizards clung to the walls, darting intermittently. He stopped at the end of the cement sidewalk, as if going any further would offer him a personal risk. The clearing to which he pointed seemed large and passable enough.

„Here the path is wide, but farther away it will be small,“ the man said gravely. „About a half of mile from here, it will go to the right and to the left, and you go to the right. At the end you will be on the beach again, and the *Cora* is left, on a hill over the water. I don't think she has her lights because it is very expensive here. If your father is on the pathway, you will hear him because the jungle is quiet except for the monkeys and some pigs but they will run away. If you find a wild pig and babies, you should run first. They can be very, very muy peligroso. Comprende, señor?“

„Oh, yes. Thank you. I have a lucky sea lion’s tooth.“ Shephard produced the tooth, which shone dully in the lights of the porches.

The footing was soft and moist. Shephard felt his heels sinking as he moved into the clearing and past the first cluster of banana trees. He stopped in the darkness for a last look at the light of the hotel, then located the moon, which was a full quarter now and clear in the eastern sky. He could see the pathway winding ahead, a shade darker than the trees that crouched at its borders. Another thirty yards, around a gentle right-hand bend that brought him under a bower of some sort—the smell was of honeysuckle—he stopped again and realized that even in so short a distance the jungle had consumed him fully. It seemed to hump around him in rounded forms that looked ready to uncoil. A dark shape cut across the pathway ahead of him, dragging a reptilian tail into the vegetation. He moved to the other side and continued, ducking low again under the banana leaves, using the moist trunks for balance where the trees threatened to choke off the path. Holy Christ, he thought, his mind filling with visions of fat tarantulas dropping like rain from the trees.

He lit a cigarette and began scuffing his shoes, slapping the leaves that reached out from the foliage. Halfway to the other side of the island—what he guessed was halfway, at least—he stopped dead in front of a huge iguana poised athwart the pathway in front of him. While Shephard choked his fear back down, he waited for the beast to move, but it didn’t so much as twitch.

He bluffed forward a step, muttering a curse. Another step toward it—he was now within charging distance, Shephard guessed—the animal proved to be nothing more than a branch. He kicked it to be sure, picked it up, and brushed the damp earth from one end. Continuing on his way, he smacked the plants and trees around him like a city dweller whose lantern had blown out in the woods. Five minutes later the pathway forked and he bore right, quickening his pace.

The trail narrowed. He used his stick to part the fronds and began to hum a song that kept changing into other songs. At a small clearing he stopped and tried to find the moon again, but the tangled jungle over him offered only darkness. He noticed that the sounds—the piping of night birds, the occasional chatter of monkeys—always diminished around him, resuming only when he had moved on. He filled this portable silence with the whacking of his branch and a muttering threat to the jungle as it encroached onto his slim passageway.

A fat shape with tiny legs shot across the path ahead of him, followed by three more of the same, but smaller. *Muy peligroso*, he thought, very dangerous, the wild pigs. In the silence he heard them cracking through the jungle floor, a shuffle, a snort, then nothing.

Just as the jungle had choked the path into nothingness, he broke through a wall of fragrant foliage and saw the silver water of the Caribbean sparkling ahead. He threw the branch toward it with a silent blessing and watched it thud onto the powder-white sand. And just as the desk clerk had said, the dark shape of the *Hotel Cora* stood profiled against the sky on a hill overlooking the sea, a quarter mile to the west. It was completely dark, recognizable only by its angular symmetry against the blue-black sky.

Shephard followed the perimeter of the jungle, which zigzagged along a series of peaceful coves. The sand was soft underfoot, and the air was tinged with the clean and reassuring smell of ocean.

The outline of the Hotel *Cora* grew larger as he rounded a small lagoon. Behind him he could hear the busy chatter of the jungle, and in front the ocean against the shore. He stopped for a moment to look behind him and studied the series of tiny footprints that trailed off into the darkness from which he had come. The far side of the lagoon ended in an outcropping of dark rocks, which in the pale moonlight he saw was alive with iguanas, loafing in and out of each other's shadows. No wonder they eat them, he thought, big as pheasants.

He cautiously rounded the rocks, looking up when he reached a dilapidated boardwalk that had once served as an entrance to the *Cora*. The hotel stood above him, large and decrepit, the sagging posture of the unused. Against the main wall, which was now covered by foliage nearly to the center, the words HOTEL CORA were written in graceful wrought-iron letters. One of the wooden double doors was all but torn away, left dangling by a disfigured hinge. An iguana pulled itself across the porch, then dragged its dark weight up the decaying flanks of the colonnade. Shephard could hear its claws finding their way through the rotted wood. He studied the three floors of darkened windows, only a few still with glass. Two years, he thought, may as well be two centuries in the jungle. The glass of an upper-story window, the one farthest from the entrance and nearest to the water, seemed for an instant to move.

Shephard backed away from the boardwalk and stepped down onto the sand. He kept near the front of the building, squinting at the window, now with a copper glow behind it, now with an orange flicker.

Candlelight.

And a moment later the silhouette of a man at the window, looking down at the sea.

Chapter 27

He watched the orange spot of a cigarette rise, brighten, trace downward again. A moment later, the man moved away.

Shephard worked his way back to the hotel porch, whose boards sagged pliantly underfoot. The iguana twisted around the colonnade as he passed it, keeping to the deepest shadows. He ducked through the broken door of the lobby and stepped inside, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the greater darkness of the once-splendid Hotel *Cora*. The lobby smelled of rotted wood and mildew. Out of the blackness, shapes began to solidify: the desk was to his right; two columns rose ahead of him; behind them a wide set of stairs swept upward from the lobby floor to the upper stories. Its balustrade gaped with holes, and some of the pillars still lay scattered on the floor where age, or vandals, had dumped them.

As Shephard's eyes strained in the darkness he saw that the shapes were blurred and rounded, and a moment later he realized that everything in the lobby,

from the walls to the strangely lumpy desk to the drooping chandelier above him, was covered with a carpet of jungle moss. He crouched and ran his fingers along the floor: the moist springiness of sphagnum gave way to cool tile. A rat squeaked, scampering across the moss in front of him.

He padded his way to the stairs and tentatively tried the first step. It was stout and resilient. Good, he thought, concrete or stone. He rose a step at a time, careful to test each plank before putting down his weight. High as the chandelier now, he stopped and looked down over the moss-draped lobby below him. Above the entryway door, a broken window gave him a view of the Caribbean, which lay flat and unperturbed to the east. The moon hovered low over the horizon, like a last beacon for travelers at the end of the world.

The stairway widened, easing onto the second floor. He stopped at the head of the stairs, unsure of how to go around the gaping hole in front of him. Below, he could see the door through which he had come twisted obscenely out and hanging by the stubborn hinge. Finally, he stepped across, his foot hitting the solid plank of the next step. Pushing off the mossy handrail, he heaved himself over the hole and onto the stairway, teetering momentarily when his full weight hit the other side. His shirt and jacket were soaked through, and his own smell was as strong as the smell of decay around him. The holster scraped against his wet ribcage, leather on soggy cloth.

As he took the last steps upward, his hand on the balustrade for balance, Shephard felt his stomach beginning to weaken as the anger that had brought him this far began to disappear. He stopped, listened to the shallow quickness of his breathing, heard his heart thumping in his ears. The darkness worried him. He considered settling onto the stairway to sleep until daylight, and finishing what he had come to do in the clean light of morning. Would Mercante come peacefully? Did he have the gun? Was he alone? Shephard conjured visions of his mother, her golden hair shifting as she played tennis, her smile as she held her son in her arms on the Surfside beach. Then he saw Hope Creeley again, and Algernon's head blighted by the sharp rock as he lay by the stables, and Jane's grieving face as she spoke of him in his living room the day after. He thought of his father on the witness stand, his long jumps from the pier at night.

Everything, Shephard thought, had its seeds in the man he had come to find. He stepped from the stairway onto the third floor and carefully began making his way to the outside balcony that would take him to the room at the far end.

With his back to the building, Shephard moved onto the balcony and stepped past the window of the first room. Lizards scattered over the railing as he moved, quicker and more agitated with the nearness of morning. Far to the east, he could see the first mellowing of the black, a fading of stars, the moon giving up its crisp outline.

Two rooms beyond, the window at the end still glowed. He opened his left palm against the wall for support and brought the Python from its holster with his right. Revolver in hand, he could feel the old terror creeping back into him—Pico Boulevard in the rain, Morris Mumford on the wet grass—and he wondered if when the time came, he would be able to make the gun obey his trembling fingers. *Too-Long Tom, Too-Long Tom.* With his back flattened against the building, Shephard edged to the last window, waited, then looked in.

The man sitting at a table, his face turned downward to a book, was Azul Mercante. Two candles threw a burnished orange light onto his old and wrinkled face. He turned a page of the book—Shephard saw it was a Bible—yawned, then looked at his wristwatch.

Keeping close to the wall, Shephard crept back to the balcony entrance and turned into the hallway, breathing rapidly.

With the rooms to his right, he stepped carefully across the moss-heavy floor, past the first three doors, over a small crevice to the last. The hallway was narrow; he gauged that two yards' running start was all he would have. He heard the blood rushing in his head. What if the door were as stout as Rubio's? Directly in front of it now, he moved his back to the wall opposite. Christ, he thought, won't the pounding stop so I can think; and he shoved off the wall, charged across the hallway, lowered his shoulder into the soft door, and crashed through. Splinters showered his head as the wood shattered. Light. But no movement. Only the glow of candlelight and the calm and hateful stare of Azul Mercante.

Shephard had the man's face just over the front sight of his pistol. He was surprised how familiar it looked, how well he knew the haughty eyes, the superior smirk, the wide forehead and dangling gray hair.

„I'm on target, asshole. Don't even blink.“

Mercante was standing, his hands flat on the table in front of him. He was thin, and shorter than Shephard had imagined. His shirt looked new. From the stare in the man's eyes, Shephard seemed to have made no impression whatsoever; they considered, then dismissed him. The full madness of the man didn't hit Shephard until Mercante finally spoke.

„You are disturbing the work of the Lord,“ he said. „But, please, sit down.“

„I'm a cop. You're under arrest for the murders of Tim Algernon and Hope Creeley. And the attempted murder of Francis Rubio.“ Shephard's voice sounded shrill to him. He tried to lower it when he spoke again. „You're coming back to the States with me. You're going on trial again.“

Mercante sat down, carefully sliding his chair back under him. He poured a glass of wine from a bottle on the table and held it out. Shephard stepped forward and slapped it away, resting the barrel of his revolver against Mercante's head as he worked his hand over the old man's body. The derringer was in a shirt pocket. Shephard eased it up and out, keeping Mercante in the sight of his Python as he backed away.

„You're Tom Shephard,“ he said. „I used to hold you in my arms when you were just this big.“ Mercante smiled and stretched his hands. „I consider it one of the great ironies of my life that you have come to take me back.“

„It'll be one of the big pleasures of mine, bud. You're the only man I've ever hated.“

Mercante shook his head and motioned again for him to sit. Shephard lowered the gun to Mercante's chest, his arm growing tired.

„That gun must be getting heavy. Sit down across from me, Tommy. What can an old man do to you now? We shouldn't be walking around this old hotel in the dark. When it's light again, I'll go with you, agreed? Besides, since you're going to take me back, there are a few things I want you to know about me.“ Mercante brought a fresh wineglass from a table tray. He poured, and Shephard noted that

Mercante's hand was steadier than his own. With his foot, he pulled back the chair and eased himself down into it. Mercante held up the bottle and Shephard shook his head. „So, you want me to go back to prison? Do you know what a living hell that can be?“

„If you want to talk, hell, let's talk Hope Creeley's eyelids.“

Mercante rolled his eyes and drank again. „The woman was a liar and a cheat. Her punishment was terrible but brief. And Tim, too. Such a cowardly man, always. In his living room that night he tried to pay me money to let him live. Can you imagine?“

„I saw where you put it. Why didn't you just take it?“ Shephard's hand was quivering now. Did Mercante notice? He lowered the gun butt to the table, its barrel still pointed at Mercante's chest.

„That would have been wrong. And unnecessary. The Lord has provided me with all I need for my revenge. I've never done anything in my life for money. It is a filthy and corrupting commodity. I don't need it. I am protected by Him. I've walked through your town, unseen. I've driven the car He sent to me. I've left my voice on Hope's answering machine. You see... I've simply been above your rules.“

„You changed a few, too, didn't you? While you were working in the Folsom Records section?“

Mercante smiled proudly. „Eighteen months to turn Manny Soto's official records into mine, and mine into his. A miracle.“

Through the window behind Mercante, Shephard could see the first gray of morning. „And the airline ticket? Don't tell me the Lord sent that to you personally, chum.“

„Oh, literally He didn't. He used the form of a man, a man I don't even know, to aid me. He provides for me. I do not question, I only accept gratefully.“ He glanced down at the open book in front of him. „It says to do so in many places.“

„Well, He just provided you with me. I don't think you'll be too grateful when you're making your last walk to the gas chamber.“

Mercante studied Shephard with his bright blue eyes. „That will never happen. You must be thirty-two years old now. You weighed six pounds and four ounces when you were born. Colleen was very proud of you.“ Shephard felt a stony hatred at the mention of her name. „In fact, your birth kept Colleen and me from marrying. She was reluctant to leave your father because of you. I understood. Here, look at this.“ Mercante unclipped a chain from around his neck and swung it gently across the table to Shephard, who gathered it up with his left hand. The pendant was a deep blue stone framed in gold. „The rock is lapis, which Colleen said reminded her of my eyes. The inscription on the back, of course, is hers.“

Shephard set the pistol on the table beside him, watching Mercante as he brought the pendant close. Mercante folded his hands. The inscription said: *So much for so many, so little for us. Love, C.* Shephard threw it back.

„And here, look at these. All from Colleen. I've kept them with me since the day I received them. Older than you are, Tommy.“ Mercante slowly unfolded his hands and sorted out an envelope from the papers stacked beside the Bible. He slid one down the table.

It was a letter in a woman's handwriting. The paper was yellowed and limp with age; the blue ink had turned to purple. Shephard read the salutation: „My Dearest

Lovely Azul.“ He again felt the blood rushing to his ears; his eyes stung with the pressure.

„This is shit,“ he said. „You made it all up, amigo. Bought the necklace yourself and wrote the letters to yourself. You tried to rape her and you killed her when she wouldn't submit. You're crazy, cheap, and stupid. Didn't work on Rubio. It won't work on me.“

Mercante shrugged, holding out his hand. Shephard stuffed the letter back into the envelope and threw it across the table.

„You have your father's temper,“ Mercante said finally. „I could have used those letters in court, but that would have been a desecration of everything we were together. Besides, the Honorable Rubio was corrupt and ignorant and little could have changed that. You saved him?“

„I saved him.“

„He really is a very inconsequential man. I pity his uselessness as I pity your father's. I searched for him all day yesterday, and the Lord kept him from me. I came here to be alone. It's good that you don't believe me about your mother. In the absence of truth, it is healthy to nurture illusions.“

Shephard saw that the sky outside had reached a pale blue. The water was nearly the same color and the sand was beginning to regain its white, powdery softness. But inside, he felt a darkness descending, as if the night had left the sky and settled into him.

„The *truth* is you killed a woman. My mother. The *illusion* is that she loved you. You can take that with you to your deathbed,“ Shephard said.

Mercante studied him for a long moment, and the look on his face was one of pity. „We loved each other very much,“ he said, slowly brushing away the love letters to uncover a .45 caliber pistol. It lay on the table, inches from the old man's fingers. „Now, everything is fair again, as it should be.“ Mercante lowered his hand to the table.

The roaring in Shephard's ears as he looked at Mercante's pistol mounted to a whine that made the man's next words almost impossible to hear.

„...not going back with you ... suppose I'll need to go and find Wade ... can't do it with you around, Tommy...“

The roar inside was so loud now that Shephard felt tears coming to his eyes. Then it stopped abruptly, leaving only a tight and brittle silence.

Mercante's hand flashed forward behind the candle flame. Shephard reached for the Python as he pushed off from the chair. He watched his own fingers straining for his gun—how long can it take to get there, he wondered—and he could see Mercante moving too, then the Colt was in his hand and jolting his arm twice while orange flames shot across the table. Three cracks shattered the silence, one of them bringing a zip of heat to his ribs. He hit the floor on his stomach, the pistol held out before him. Two things reached his senses at once: the acrid sting of gunpowder in the air, and the bottoms of Mercante's feet dangling over the seat of his fallen chair.

It was a long time—an absurdly long time, he remembered later—that he lay there, keeping those unmoving feet in the sights of his gun.

He remembered, too, as he lay in the soft moss of the floor, his fingers finding the little hole in his side, and his thumb finding the larger one behind it. Between

them, he realized, was what little fat he had collected in thirty-two years, and perhaps all of the luck.

And, he remembered finally standing up to the early colors of morning, the rich ocean blue in the background, the room encased in green moss, and the man lying back in the toppled chair, motionless except for the purple on his shirt and the first breeze of the day in his gray hair.

Chapter 28

For the next three days Shephard remained on the Yucatan, explaining and reexplaining his presence on Mexican soil, his pursuit of the American Azul Mercante, the attempted arrest that had ended in gunfire and death. A Cozumel detective named Ruben Cortez received Shephard, exhausted and bleeding, on Monday morning, and drank hot coffee in his sweltering office while Shephard recounted the night's events. When Cortez had made copious notes and finished his fourth cup of coffee, he entrusted Shephard to the care of two uniformed deputies, who drove him to the small infirmary that passed as the city's hospital.

When his turn finally came, Shephard was stretched out on a cool white table, where he was X-rayed, bathed, and after an inexplicable wait of an hour, stitched shut. By then, the city's mayor had arrived to regard Shephard with a curious but unmoved expression. He was particularly interested in how the gringo had entered his country with a gun but no fresh pursuit papers from his department, as was the usual procedure. As Shephard lay on the table and explained the casual methods of the Veracruz federales, his mind constantly wandered north to Jane, her lovely face, her words, „I love you.“ When he finally sat up and felt the tight pinch of the new stitches in his side, he realized that over the last couple of days, few waking moments had not included thoughts of her.

The mayor was satisfied that the federales had done a poor job at Customs, willing as are all minor officials to blame their superiors in government. He turned over the matter to the governor's assistant.

The assistant, a dapper man named Jaime Vogel, arrived an hour later, read Cortez's report, then dropped the papers to the desk with irritation. Shephard looked into his half-Aryan face: high cheekbones and pale eyes, framed by jet black hair that was oiled perfectly into place. Vogel smelled of after-shave.

„No papers of pursuit,“ he began. „No license to carry a firearm in Mexico. And you turn Isla Arenillas into the O.K. Corral. Mr. Shephard, this is quite irregular. Perhaps your Justice Department should know of this.“

Shephard was allowed to call Hannover, who thought at first that it was all a joke. But as the story came out over the static-cluttered lines, Hannover became attentive and businesslike, congratulating Shephard on a job „splendidly handled and executed.“ He hung up in order to contact the U.S. Justice Department „with our end of the story.“ Shephard was freed on his own recognizance for one hour, which he used to walk to the *Presidente*, charge another night's lodging to his sadly overdrawn credit card, and to call Jane. There was no answer.

Justice Department officer Paul Rodriguez arrived late that afternoon. He locked horns with Vogel on official matters—mostly in Spanish—and Vogel seemed to be taking some pride in his stubbornness. When an agreement was reached, Rodriguez, speaking in English, asked Vogel how his sisters were and sent regards to Vogel from someone in the States.

Around eight they crowded into a tiny room behind the jail, where a white-clad assistant uncovered the body of Azul Mercante. Lack of refrigeration had made itself apparent. Rodriguez and Vogel haggled over photographs and dental records, which appeared from the former's fat briefcase. Vogel finally signed the release papers with a flourish, then shook hands all around and excused himself into the streets of Cozumel.

Shephard was back at the hotel just after nine, taking the elevator to his second-floor room. From his window he could see the water surging onto the rough rocks below. He smoked a cigarette on the balcony, where the billowy blue smoke hung in the humid air. The radio in his room played only Dixieland jazz, which he turned off before calling Jane.

She finally answered. She had been outside with Cal, whom with the help of Little Theodore she had relocated to her house on Laguna Canyon Road. „At this point, Cal and Buster are getting to know each other,“ she said.

„When can I get to know you?“

„Please make it soon. Tom, are you all right?“

He told her only that everything had been taken care of, and he would explain later. Then they talked for nearly an hour, about trivial things mostly, with Shephard unwilling to speak of the last days, and Jane respectful of his distance. It was a lovers' talk, he thought later: enthused, aimless, and with a pleasure that would carry over into his dreams.

„Has Harmon been back?“ he asked.

„I don't think so. And Theodore hasn't slept a minute.“

Shephard spent the next day on the beach, drinking Tecate beer with limes, dozing, watching the iguanas basking on the rugged rocks. That night he dined alone in the hotel, which he judged to be very good but overpriced. He called Jane twice and talked too long. As his adrenaline slowly subsided, he began to feel a deep exhaustion setting in, one that a night's sleep would not cure. It was a draining of spirit, a hollowing, a need that he wasn't sure how to fill. He called his father and was happy that he had returned safely, but Wade's voice somehow depressed him. He talked to Louise again, and ran out of things to say.

Late the next morning he flew out on reservations made by Hannover at the department's expense. Coach, but a window seat just the same.

Jane was waiting for him at the terminal, and Little Theodore was with her, grinning through his tangled jungle of beard, sipping a Bloody Mary that seemed miniaturized by his hand. „Aw, ain't that cute,“ he growled as Shephard and Jane kissed. „You stayed down in Mexico one day longer, I was gonna ask this princess to marry me.“

Theodore drove them back to Laguna in a big Cadillac that listed heavily to port when he got behind the wheel. „This runt gives you any trouble, just call Theodore,“ he told Jane as she got out at Shephard's apartment. „Good work, Shephard. I'm glad to hear you shot that sonofabitch.“

Late that night Shephard was lying flat on his back in his apartment, recounting to Jane his trek through the jungle, the moss-encrusted ruins of the Hotel Cora, and the ghostly presence of Azul Mercante. He didn't mention Mercante's story about an affair with Colleen; the words seemed unfit to repeat, unnecessary.

„Well, I guess it's all over now,“ Jane said. „But that hole in your side is awful. And I'd still like to know why Harmon wanted those files of my father's—if it was Harmon who stole them.“

Sal came upstairs with a halibut he'd caught at Moss Street that evening, a joint clenched between his teeth. „Good to have you back, bro,“ he said. „This halibut is the *kind*. Filet it and fry it with a little lemon and butter. The next time you go to Mexico, try an' get a little fishing in, will ya?“ He left a few minutes later with a wink at Shephard and a lewd glance at Jane, who had stretched out on the floor for a nap.

At nine the phone rang and Shephard immediately recognized the voice.

„Tom Shephard, Marla Collins here, from Bruce Harmon's office. Hey, I read in the papers what happened in Mexico, and I thought it might not matter much, but I want to tell you who Bruce has been working for. The rotter fired me yesterday, so I guess I'm getting even. Still interested?“

„Sure. Shoot.“

„He's had one client, and one client only, for the last week and a half. Called off all the others for this one; farmed them out to the other dicks. You might have heard of him, a real dandy from Newport Beach. Owns the Surfside Club. Joe Datilla.“

„Oh sure,“ he said dreamily. „We're old friends.“

„Really?“

„Just an expression. Thanks, Marla, you're a sweetheart.“

When Shephard hung up, his mind was so confused it didn't want to work.

„What's wrong, Tom?“ Jane asked, propping herself up on her elbows. Her skirt hiked up onto her thighs and Shephard felt a distant tug in his guts.

„Everything.“

When Datilla strolled onto the Surfside tennis courts the next morning to play against himself, Shephard was waiting on the bench beside the fence. A cool fog had come over the coast during the night, and Datilla looked surprised when he set down his bucket of balls.

„Hello, Tommy.“ His grin was wide. „Congratulations, young man. You've got a whole city sleeping easier now.“ He offered his hand; Shephard kept his inside the wind-breaker.

„You're in trouble, Joe. You hired Bruce Harmon to find Mercante, and when he did you funneled him cash, a car, and an airline ticket to Mexico to kill my father. Know about all that, don't you?“

Datilla touched his toes with a grunt, then began a series of knee-dips. „Might need a lawyer here, Tom, if you want to continue along those lines. Joking, aren't you?“

Shephard watched Joe's silver hair fall over his tanned forehead as he dipped. The fog made his face damp. „No joke, Joe. One of the things that Helene left me

before she checked out was something from your safe. Plates to the Cadillac Mercante was driving, so we wouldn't spot them. I ran them past Sacramento, twice, and they're yours. A terrified man who works at *Valentine's* told me about Harmon's easy money and little favors. You gave Mink the day off so Harmon could borrow the car without a fuss. A few hours after your jet took my father to Mexico, Harmon delivered a ticket and a suitcase to Mercante. The only people who knew he was going to Isla Arenillas were you and the pilot, and of course Harmon, who's been handling your account exclusively for a week and a half. So go ahead, Joe. Get your lawyers out here if you want to. Personally, I'd be a tad embarrassed at what they'd have to hear."

Shephard stood up and faced Datilla, who had stopped the knee-bends and was now midway through a jumping-jack routine. Shephard lit a cigarette and looked out through the fog. When Datilla spoke again, his voice had an edge.

"Do you know what you're getting into, Shephard?"

"What am I getting into, Joe?"

"Let me tell you something as a friend, Tommy." He continued his jumping jacks and still hadn't lost his breath. "Azul Mercante is dead. He killed Tim and Hope and almost got Frank Rubio. He killed your mother. The guy's a badass, and he got what he deserved. But it's over. You're a bit of a hero, and your father's church gets a hundred grand out of me for that fucking hospital. If you can clear it with Hannover, I'll just sign the rest of the reward money over to you. Hell, I'll do it anyway. Be happy to. Anything beyond that is going to hurt us all. And I mean you, too, Tom, in a bad way." Datilla went from jumping jacks to running in place. "Some things you just have to leave alone."

Shephard considered Datilla's words: he could remember speaking ones just like them to Dr. Zahara, hardly a week ago. Something about deserving to have secrets, like everybody else. The dark notes, he thought. Playing them with a vengeance now, the whole orchestra. He knew that there was no turning back from what he was about to do.

"Nice proposition. But unless you tell me a little more, I'm going to arrest you for conspiracy. Right here in your little club."

"I don't want that."

"Then spill. The cuffs are in my pocket," he lied.

"Stubborn little prick, aren't you? Stubborn like your old man, same righteous cant. It makes me sick. Okay, Shephard, listen up and take your notes carefully." Datilla was breathing quickly now. A thin stream of sweat broke over his face. "I helped Mercante get to Hope Creeley. And I helped him try for your old man, too. Why? Let's just say they both knew things I'd rather they didn't. And Mercante was an easy and convenient way to get that taken care of."

"How did you know he was out of prison?"

"I saw him hitchhiking, of all the damned things. Right down Coast Highway toward Laguna. Couldn't believe my eyes, so I turned around and passed him again. Third time clinched it, Tom. Azul Mercante. Alive and well in his old town. It took Bruce two days to find him, but he still beat you."

Shephard struggled to piece together Helene Lang's account of the death of Burton Creeley. Her story seemed to have been told a century ago; only the heavy smell of her lilac perfume came into his mind.

„You wanted Hope Creeley dead because she knew you had her husband drowned.“

„Wrong, detective. The bitch never even suspected it.“

„Then why?“

„Same reason I wasn't too sad to read about Tim Algernon.“

„Just what was it they knew, Joe?“

Datilla's legs stopped pumping. He put his hands on his hips, breathing deeply, still looking straight at Shephard. „I nudged Hope in a certain direction once, with some pressure, some cash, and a steady stream of phenobarbital. Tim? He needed some money because his wife was sick, and I gave it to him—a lot of it. What they did for me in return was use a little ... imagination. I paid for some imagination to protect a good friend of mine. And I simply didn't want any of that story to get public, Tom. That's what I mean by covering bets.“

„What kind of imagination are you talking about?“ Shephard felt his mind struggling to calibrate what he was hearing against what he thought was true.

„It's called perjury, Tom.“ Datilla picked up his racquet and slashed it through the air in front of Shephard's face. „One last chance to leave, detective. Take it while you can.“

„If I leave now, it's with you, Joe. All the way to the station.“

Datilla slammed the racquet to the ground. „All right boy, you've made yourself a deal. I bought them off to try to help your father. Just like I kicked in another twenty thousand dollars. Those were 1951 dollars.“ Shephard remembered the check that Helene had given him, Datilla to Wade, 1951. „That money made sure that a lab technician would find gunpowder on Mercante's skin, when in reality there wasn't any, Tim took the stand and said Azul made passes at his wife. Imagination. Hope told the court he tried to rape her, and God knows Mercante did make a pass at her one night. But in her state of mind she didn't know how to take it, so I told her it was an open and shut case of attempted rape. Tim and Hope were insurance against Mercante, even though we already had his ass framed to the wall. You stupid prick, Mercante didn't shoot Colleen. *Wade* did.“

For a moment Shephard felt as if his insides were scrambling to get out.

„That's right, Shephard. Wade barged in on Colleen and Mercante, going at it in the living room. They were having quite a torrid little thing, you know. So Wade, drunk as usual back then, draws his gun and fires, and she jumps in the way. Mercante stands there like a dope while Wade falls on his wife—he couldn't believe he'd missed, the dumb shit—then he picks up Wade's gun. For a minute he held it to your dad's head—Wade told me this—then he lost his nerve and ran for it. Too bad. Azul's prints were on the gun, and a little money was all it took to make the lab tech report berium and antimony from the wax test.“

Like a man deep in the woods just realizing he is lost, Shephard felt panic. He stumbled ahead with the most obvious question of all. „So what you say is true. So it's not. Why did you want him dead? What's he got on you?“

Datilla paced the courtside. He stopped a few yards away, looking through the fog toward the Surfside A Dock. „Wade earned that money,“ he said finally. Shephard could scarcely hear the words. But when Datilla turned back to him they came loud, bitter, and clear: „He did me a favor once, a business favor. He

gave Burton Creeley a chilly ride from the waters of Laguna to the Newport Channel. He was a cop then. It was easy. Used a 1950 Chevy to do it.“

Shephard watched Datilla return to his racket, sweat dripping from his face, and heard the wicked swish of the graphite cutting the air again. The sound was somehow far away. „That’s what he’s got on me. Burton and me. So I wanted rid of him, too. I hate his hypocrisy; I hate his righteous generosity. I hate any man who’d shoot a woman like Colleen, accident or not. But more important, like I told you, I don’t take chances. I cover my bets. I didn’t want Wade to get confessional about things. He’s got that in him. To spill it all in the name of Cod. To purify himself, or some vague notion like that. Go ahead, Tommy Shephard, take me downtown if you want. But you’ll be taking Wade, too, because when I start talking I won’t quit until his name is so foul he’d be laughed off any pulpit on earth.

„You see this? See all this?“ Datilla held out his racquet, sweeping it across the Surfside, its apartments and restaurants, lounges and docks, across the bay in the distance, smothered in fog. „I built it all, covering the bets, and I’ll cover them until I die. Mercante did it all. I just gave him a little help. Listen, you came through it clean. So did Wade, and so can I. Think of the thousands of sick little souls he can save with his new hospital. Look to the future and get your ass out of the past. *You’re* betting the hundred now to get fifty. And I promise you one thing, Shephard“—Datilla stepped forward and pressed the end of the racquet into Shephard’s chest—„If I go down, Wade goes down, too. It’s as simple as that.“

He stooped for his bucket and took it to the far end of the court. Lost in the fog, his voice seemed to come from nowhere, Shephard thought, or maybe from everywhere.

„I’ll be right here, Tom. Don’t worry. Think about a hundred grand of my money in your pocket, and the same for those folks south of the border. Everybody’s happy now, and getting happier. I’m a little more secure. Join the club, Tom. Everybody profits. The hawks always eat the sparrows—Wade told me that.“ Shephard heard the muffled pop of a tennis ball through the fog. Then Datilla’s voice again, strangely distant: „Pretty funny, isn’t it? You still there, Tom? Wade puts the wrong guy in jail to save his own ass, and when he gets out, you shoot him. Hell, with a little luck, Azul could have been your father.“

Chapter 29

Shephard spent the next hours wandering his city, a lanky figure with a stiff walk, scarcely aware of the life that bustled around him. He stopped for a beer at Marty Odette’s *Sportsplace*, a cup of coffee at the *Hotel Laguna*, and an ice cream, which he gazed at momentarily, then gave to a boy on a skateboard.

He walked until his legs were weary and his mind wanted to give up. By afternoon the thoughts that were wrenching him had blurred and all but lost meaning, but Shephard still felt no closer to a just decision. When he looked behind him he saw a sky swirling with the ghosts of the past; when he looked

forward he saw where they would surely land. To take down Datilla would bring those ghosts to rest on his father, on himself, even on Jane. And what good would there be in it, besides the downfall of Datilla, a man who had once saved his father from shame, then tried to take his life, and now was offering to pick up the tab for everybody's damages?

Shephard's hatred was gone, spent with his bullets in the Hotel *Cora*. His sense of forgiveness was bankrupt, his sense of betrayal complete. When he looked inside himself he saw no signs, heard no counsel, received no guidance from his own unparticipating heart.

Dr. Zahara changed an appointment to accommodate him. She studied him quietly from the depths of her big chair. They smoked. Shephard was aware of her green eyes prying into him.

„There's something I should do,“ he said finally. „Something that the law says should be done. Must be done. But if I do it, I'm not sure it will make any difference, and some people I love very much are going to get hurt. One of those—a woman I'm in love with—is innocent. The other is my father.“

A long silence followed. Dr. Zahara lifted the telephone and asked her receptionist to reschedule the next appointment also. When she was finished, she brushed back her black hair, then settled still farther into the shadows of her chair. „I'd like you to explain.“

When he had finished, Shephard could hear the traffic outside, thickening toward rush hour. Throughout his story, he had noticed that Zahara made no notes. She tapped her pen on the desk and turned her green eyes on him. „So, to get Joe, you must sacrifice the career and public standing of your father. How would the arrest affect Jane? I'm not sure you explained that, Tom.“

„Tim Algernon perjured himself for money. To pay for his wife's cancer treatment. Jane and Tim weren't very close at the end of his life. She seems to have made a peace with him that I don't want to shatter. He's all the family she ... had.“

„I can appreciate that. Would such a detail be likely to arise from the arrest of Joe Datilla? Tim's perjury?“

Shephard thought it over, trying the angles. „It's possible. Joe will play dirty.“

„Then we're back to those secrets you wanted to keep, aren't we? This time to protect a woman you love, rather than yourself.“

„I guess we are.“

The silence that followed was a long one.

„There's a voice in there somewhere,“ she said, „trying to be heard. Let it come to you. Go somewhere quiet if you can. I'll tell you just one thing. When you consider all the people you may hurt through your actions, don't forget to include yourself. You're responsible for you as much as for your father, even Jane. Don't sacrifice yourself. It might be easy, but it would be wrong.“

„I'll try to find that quiet place.“

„When you first came here, it was for post-shooting trauma. Strange, Tom, but that's one thing we haven't talked about. Have you ... come to terms with Morris Mumford? With Mercante?“

Shephard considered her words. „I left them both in Mexico,“ he said finally. „At the Hotel *Cora*.“

In the end, as always, it was instinct that took him forward.

Late that evening he found his father in the garden, tending the roses that had been ravaged by the last wind. Shephard came quietly through the living room and into the kitchen, watching through the glass patio door as Wade touched a yellow rose and tried to catch the petals that drifted off and floated to his feet. Wade turned and smiled as Shephard slid back the door. The Reverend Wade Shephard, he thought, all smiles.

„Tommy, I thought you'd sleep a week.“ He peeled off his garden gloves and hugged his son, then pushed away and glanced at his side. „How is it?“

„Just a little stiff. Fine.“

Shephard sat down at the patio table in the shade of a large umbrella. The sunset was accumulating high in the west, a wispy, cirrus-streaked tableau that promised reds and blacks. Wade brought lemonade and two glasses.

„To God's own sunset,“ he toasted. „And your good work. Salute.“

„Salute.“

They exchanged not-very-happy smiles. From across the table, Wade seemed to read his thoughts, or at least some of them. He sighed and folded his hands.

„I know how you feel, son. When I was just a little older than you, I shot a man. He would have pulled his trigger first if I'd let him, but even then I felt like my heart had broken when it was over. You'll get over it. You will.“

Shephard tested the waters: „Some things you don't ever get over, do you?“

His father sipped from his glass and looked out over the Pacific. Testing his own, Shephard thought. The burden of three decades showed on Wade's face, in the creases around his eyes, the droop of his mouth, in the hollow, inward expression.

„Some things, no.“

„I think you tried, though. Miracle bricks, you called them. Those regrets that build up inside and grow into something good.“ Wade smiled shyly. He loves it when someone remembers his sermons.

„Ah, you remembered,“ he said. „We all have our miracle bricks. Azul Mercante is now yours.“

For a brief moment Shephard felt the roar returning to his ears, the same one that surrounded him before he'd pulled the trigger at the Hotel Cora, the one that whined through his brain only to vanish and leave him with that awful moment of silence. He listened now to the same nothingness. Maybe this is it, he thought, Dr. Zahara's quiet place. As if from far away, he heard himself speaking.

„I know he didn't kill her. I know that she and Mercante were lovers.“ Shephard forced himself to look at something other than his father, choosing a red rose at random. He heard Wade's glass lift from the table, a gulp, the sound of glass on wood. When Wade spoke again his voice was grainy and soft, as if it belonged to a much older man.

„You're the only person on earth I'm ashamed to have know that.“ After a long pause he spoke again. „Do you understand what I mean?“ Shephard's silence answered for itself. „I mean that I know I have sinned. And I don't mean against God, but against another man. Every day of my life I've thought about confessing that, about telling everyone the truth. Sometimes when I'm home alone at night.

Sometimes Sunday mornings on the pulpit. But I couldn't do it, Tom. I couldn't let you see that happen." His voice was soft and distant, as if coming from under the earth.

"Well, it happened, pop." Shephard looked at his father's quivering face, then to the glistening Pacific beyond.

"I knew about them for quite some time," Wade began. "A month maybe. I couldn't confront her with it. It's ... one of my flaws not to be able to confront people with things. I hoped it would end. I tried to improve myself. But when it just kept going and going, I gave up and drank instead." Shephard watched his father study the glass in his hand, recollecting perhaps the days when it was filled with bourbon and not lemonade.

"I remember one day I asked a friend on patrol to go by the house and see if his car was there. She was leaving then, so he followed her to a hotel where they met. And the next day I had her followed, too, and this time they went to his studio and they made love on the patio outside under the trees. I don't know what all my friend saw, but that was all he told me. Then, I decided it was enough and I couldn't go on any more. I was going to tell her I loved her. Tell her she could go with him if she wanted. I wanted her to be happy, truly. I think only a young man can love so much.

"So I drank a lot that morning when I was on patrol because the liquor made it all seem unreal and almost tolerable, and I drove here, to this house, and I came up the walkway. I remember it was a hot day and clear and I could smell the eucalyptus and the bourbon mixed together. Something inside me just gave out. I remember thinking it would feel good to have it over with, so we could go our separate ways and maybe be happy again with other people. So I walked through the door and there they were, right in there, in my living room. Up under her dress and I saw the underwear at her ankles and her eyes closed and his arm down there and him kissing her neck. She was groaning, I can remember that too."

Wade's eyes were pools and his face sagged as if it was being pulled by invisible strings. He was staring out at the water.

"We were friends, you know, Mercante and I. Tennis partners at the Surfside. We drank and made jokes. He was a fine painter, an energetic, funny little man. Your mother admired him very much. She started painting herself, you know.

"But when I saw them against the wall in the living room, I felt so outside them, so violated and betrayed. So foolish. And the look on his face when he saw me wasn't humiliation or fear, but triumph. He looked at me like I was a fool to let this happen and a dunce to be there to witness it. So ... so I pulled my gun and shot him." Wade's face succumbed; it shattered. "But she was there instead... Good Christ; she was there instead."

In the long silence that followed, Shephard searched for something to say. Dr. Zahara's words came back again. Sometimes when we lose ourselves, we find ourselves, too. When Wade turned to look at him, his face was glazed, his eyes wide, as if in amazement.

"And I lay there on top of her for a long time. I heard Mercante pick up the gun and I felt him holding it to the back of my head. I hoped he would do it. Then he dropped it and ran out the door. Colleen was ... not breathing any more. And I breathed into her for a long time but nothing happened. So I stood up and went to

the phone to call the watch commander. To tell the watch commander that I had just shot my wife but it was an accident. And I dialed and got him and I said, John, John, my wife's been killed. Colleen is dead. And he said, good God how did it happen, and I said she was shot. Her lover shot her. Azul Mercante shot her and I watched him do it. And it was then, Tommy, that I knew what it meant to sin, to kill someone you love and make someone else pay for it. It was so easy. So easy to back out. Joe loaned me a little money for a favor and that was that. Later, a few days later I think it was, Joe called on me to return the favor and I took a dead man in my car to Newport Beach. It just got deeper and deeper."

Shephard looked at his father again, the picture of a man holding himself together by sheer willpower. Everything about him seemed ready to dissolve.

"Every day I thought about changing it. Setting Mercante free. Telling. Confessing. And years later, when I was finished wishing I could die, I thought the next best thing was to help someone else live better. And I prayed and prayed and God asked me to act on his behalf. I felt that He asked me. I wanted it. I wanted to do something I could feel good about, finally. When I heard Azul died in prison, all I could do was double my prayers for him." His father looked up, and Shephard held his gaze. "That's why I understand forgiveness," he said. "Because the hardest thing I ever did was to try to forgive myself. And when I had done as much of that as I could, I started trying to make up for it all. I think everything decent I've ever done since that day was for Colleen. I think maybe ... she was my God." Wade's voice trailed off to nothing, a whisper against the background surge of the sea.

"It was Datilla who hired Harmon, pop. They gave Mercante a car and money. He sent him to Mexico to find you. He wanted you dead."

It was apparent from the vacant, infant-like expression on his father's face that Wade didn't understand.

"Joe told me he was afraid you might make that confession someday. He was afraid he'd finally have to pay for Burton Creeley. He helped Mercante get Hope."

"Joe did?"

"He did. It's conspiracy, pop. Conspiracy to commit murder. Do you understand what that means?"

In his confusion, the reverend was a cop for a moment. "More than one person planning, arranging, or intending to bring about the—"

"Not that, pop. Do you understand what it means to you? If I take Joe for conspiracy?"

Wade leaned forward, as if the news to come should be told in secret. Later, Shephard remembered thinking that it was at this instant his father finally broke. Wade slowly shook his head. The evening breeze stirred his father's hair, much as the breeze on Isla Arenillas had stirred Mercante's.

"It means that if Joe goes for conspiracy, he's going to take you with him. Everything you just told me. Colleen, Burton in your car. Everything." Shephard heard his own voice trembling, and he fought to control the heaving of his heart. And then, in a moment of clarity that all of his previous thoughts had failed to bring to him, Shephard knew what he should do.

No, he thought. Never. I can't do that to him.

Wade stood up and put his gloves back on. Behind him, the sun had nearly touched the horizon, and the island of Catalina lay balanced like a gray body on the rim of the ocean. The water danced in crimson. It will be better this way, Shephard thought, as his father moved toward the rose bushes. It has to end somewhere, why not here, while something remains.

„What are you going to do?“ Wade asked. He had picked up a pair of pruning shears and was nudging them into a thick bush near the center. „Come here, son. Come here.“ There was a new tone to his voice, a tone that Shephard hadn't heard in years. Ten, he wondered? Twenty? „Tommy. Get the other gloves. In the garage, far wall.“ As Shephard walked off to the garage, he recognized the difference. It fit with the walls of the house, the flowers, the same carpet and wallpaper he had always known, the smell of his father's breakfasts cooking on Sunday mornings. It wasn't Wade the lawman; it wasn't Wade the man of God.

He got the gloves off the wall and returned to the rose hedge. Wade's head was angled down at a bush that he seemed to be inspecting in some minute detail.

I can let him be, Shephard thought. After all this, I can let him be.

But the feeling inside him was not relief, only surrender, and it was the first time he could remember ever giving up on something he truly cared about. The thought of Datilla going free brought a sick lump to his throat.

„Put the gloves on, Tom, and go through these bushes after the dead branches. The wind was pretty hard on them this time. All in all, roses are pretty hardy flowers, but sixty miles per hour off the desert is just too much. The little branches didn't make it. The big ones are okay.“

Sure, Shephard thought. I know that voice.

Then Wade had turned away and was working silently, pruning the limbs, tossing the outcasts into a neat pile on the lawn. Shephard looked out and watched the last sliver of sun dunk behind the island. Wade turned and stared at him.

„What are you going to do, Tommy?“

Shephard could not answer the question. He fiddled idly with a branch.

„I ran a little experiment on these roses years ago,“ Wade said as he clipped. „When I planted them. The ones to your left I just stuck in the ground that was here when your mother and I bought the house. Then I went to the nursery and found out the proper way to plant roses. Got mulch, vitamins, a book about it, the whole shot. The ones over there I planted with all the knowledge of just how to do it. Well, when they grew up and started giving us flowers, guess what? The ones on the left grew better. The flowers weren't any bigger and there weren't any more of them, but they were shaped better. They were tighter, brighter, more believable.“ He stood back and made a show of studying the roses on the two sides. „So much for the mulch, I said. And from then on I just stuck them in the ground without the additives and let them go. Careful to keep the pests away, of course.“

He shot his son a smile, one that Shephard hadn't seen in years, one that went with the voice. Not the cop, not the reverend, but just the man, and the father. Uncluttered, unforced. Believable.

„Tommy, if you don't take Joe, I'll be deeply ashamed of what I raised. You wouldn't for a minute entertain that idea, would you? Because when you've done

that, I can take myself and plant me in some real soil. I think it's time for that. It's not too late for me to quit living the lie, but it's much too early for you to start. You have my blessing."

After a brief time in which Shephard decided to let a half-dead branch stay on the bush, he felt his heart settle and a new balance spreading inside. He thought of Jane. At the cove again, tonight.

"Thank you," he said.

They worked after dark amidst silence and small talk, and when the roses were in order, Shephard went home.

Chapter 30

The moon appeared an hour later, low on the horizon, dangling strings of light over the water at Diver's Cove. Shephard and Jane crossed the sand barefoot and worked their way north past the tidepools, which shone up at them like mirrors. As they walked toward the cave, the waves that lapped at Shephard's feet seemed to nibble away at everything that had happened to him in the last few days, just as they had done the first time he walked the shore with Jane. A week ago, he wondered, or a century? The memories seemed to be inching out of him: the three shots cracking through the early morning in the *Hotel Cora*; Datilla's bitter confession; Wade's enfeebled, then rejuvenating voice. Even before they found the cave and stripped naked in the glow of the flashlight, he could feel relief and forgetfulness pouring in.

The stitches in his side brought him sharply back to reality.

"Ouch," Jane said, running her fingers over them for the hundredth time. "Sure you want to do this?"

"This is where I got to know you, chum. I'll never get tired of that."

This time they undressed each other, eagerly. She came close and put her arms gently around him.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Let's talk later," he said, wondering about Tim. Would it do any good to tell her?

They waded together through the rocks, and when they were knee-deep in the rolling waves, they dove under. The first wave thumped him as he went under it, stinging his side. He came up and saw Jane pulling through the water ahead of him. Another wave, another thump, but he was closer to her now and each time he brought up his head for air he could hear her laughing.

Silver shoulders, silver arms ahead in the moonlight. When he came up even with her, she was still laughing, but it didn't seem to be the right time to ask why. Later, he thought.

And the farther out they swam, the less things back on shore seemed to matter: absurdly, what was ahead of them was suddenly more important than what was behind, although he knew that it was just the Indicator rocks, the Inside Indicator coming up not far ahead and somewhere behind it the Outside Indicator where

Jane said all real lovers go. They passed the first rock side by side and neither of them stopped to pay it any attention.

Good God, he thought, she laughs so well it's like music, or even better; must be hard when you swim.

It was all he could do to keep up, right then left, a sting in his side with each stroke. Saltwater must be good for gunshot, he thought, or maybe that was just an old wives' tale. No need to tell her about Tim, at least not tonight. Then they were even again and he kept up, right then left, right then left, heading for the Outside Indicator.

Epilogue

Joe Datilla and Bruce Harmon were arrested for conspiracy to commit murder. Harmon turned state's witness, and Datilla skipped his considerable bail but was arrested again in the border town of Calexico. He was found guilty and sentenced to thirty years in prison for his part in the death of Hope Creeley and the assault on Francis Rubio.

Before Datilla's trial began, Wade Shephard publicly confessed the truth about the death of his wife, Colleen. Tom tried to watch this confession on television, but he could not. The district attorney chose not to reopen the case. The Reverend Shephard turned over leadership of the Church of New Life to his young and earnest assistant. Taking his personal savings with him to Isla Arenillas, he opened a small infirmary, effective and growing daily, but considerably more humble than the hospital he had envisioned.

Jane Algernon returned for her last year of school, looking to a career in veterinary medicine. She released Buster to the ocean when she had diagnosed and cured the infection that beached him in the first place. Cal stood at the rocks, barking.

Tom Shephard quit the department and opened his own office on Coast Highway, near Diver's Cove. He is engaged to Jane, and a wedding is planned for next spring on Isla Arenillas.

Business is good. To the people who keep track of such things, he is known as a competent and reasonably priced private detective.

*** End of PART III ***

