

POSTWAR Dinosaur Blues



Darrell Bain

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-----**Postwar**
Dinosaur Blues

by Darrell Bain

-----**Humor**

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Dedication

This one is for Will Stafford, a close and dear friend whom I've only met electronically. Will is an authentic warrior, a loving husband and father and also a very funny fellow. One of these days we're going to have to get

together and tell some more war stories and maybe do another book besides Toppers, that book of tall tales we've already published. **Acknowledgements**

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Chapter One

The little brunette stewardess in the green miniskirt eyed the army sergeant sitting in the aisle seat of the 727 bound from Seattle to Dallas. She took in the five stripes he wore and thought he appeared rather young for the rank, but then she saw the overseas bars on the sleeve of his winter class A uniform. A quick glimpse at his chest showed a triple row of ribbons on his left breast. A little older than he looks, she thought, and just back from 'Nam; probably, with money burning a hole in his pocket. Good looking, too, with that dark hair and those dreamy brown eyes.

“Would you like something to drink, Sergeant?” she asked, leaning forward slightly and smiling more than a little slightly. She had a week's leave coming with nothing on her agenda and the sergeant looked interesting. Besides, she was getting a little tired of the crowd the other stews ran with. They seemed to consist mostly of airline pilots, whom she was tired of, or shallow characters in gold necklaces and leisure suits, with the pockets of their suits usually filled with dope of one variety or another. A military man might be a welcome change of pace, she thought, even if her friends did consider them dour and too restrained for their tastes

Sgt. James Williard scrutinized the legs beneath the green miniskirt and let his gaze travel up over the rest of the stew's body. Her matching green top was well filled out. He had a hard time getting his eyes to travel up to her cap of wavy dark hair and a lightly freckled face with full lips and pert nose. Nice, he thought. "I'm not a sergeant."

The stew raised her brows. "You couldn't prove it by the way you're dressed."

Williard smiled, with a hint of regret behind it. "I just got discharged. I'm on my way back home." What he didn't say was that until six months ago, he had been a lieutenant, courtesy of a combat

commission. Then the war wound down and he found the army was overstaffed with medical service officers. Reluctantly, he accepted continued service at his old rank but soon tired of the peacetime army and decided to try civilian life for a while, though at first he had been uncertain of what that would entail. Now he thought he knew; that is, if his brother's plans worked out. Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't. Jason was the wildest of the three Williard brothers. Compared to him, Williard thought he and Jerry were boy scouts, a contention no one else who knew them would believe.

“You say you're going home. Do you

live in Dallas?”

“Yup. You got some rum?”

“Sure. Be right back,” the stew said. She put a little extra wiggle to her behind as she departed. After his years in ‘Nam, Williard appreciated the wiggle. The rum would go down nice, too, he thought. After 36 hours spent tramping around through intermittent rain at the out processing center in Seattle he was more than ready for a drink. One of the last stops had been the clothing and tailoring shop where his well-worn fatigues had been exchanged for dress greens. The army insisted newly discharged personnel leave the base looking like an advertisement for a recruiting poster,

ignoring the fact that most of the soldiers would rather have been boiled in oil than wear a uniform out into the world. He glanced at the empty seat beside him where a winter dress coat lay, also bedecked with ribbons and overseas bars and stripes.

Williard was unimpressed. By rights, the coat should have sported lieutenant's bars rather than sergeant's insignia. He was still pissed at the army over that. The only token on either of the garments he was really proud of was the combat medic's badge, earned during the Tet offensive when the Medical Dispensary he was in charge of was almost overrun. That action had also gotten him a purple

heart, his combat commission and a brand new appreciation of what it was like to go without booze and women for extended periods of time. Hence, his interest in the stew and her cargo.

“Here you are,” the stew said, bending over to deposit a two-ounce bottle of airline light Bacardi and a plastic glass of ice on his tray. She leaned far enough forward to give him a brief glimpse of what lay beneath her blouse.

“What the fuck—I mean what the hell is this? I ain't going to drink no rum without no Coke.” Whoops!

Have to start watching my language, he thought. Obscenities came out as easily

in the field as spit from a baby, mostly at the way the army usually fucked up operations.

“Oh, sorry about that,” the stew said. “Be right back again.” Hearing the ex-sergeant talk added zest to her errand. He had spoken in pure Redneck, her favorite language when it came from the right person. Williard hardly thought about his grammar. He could speak perfectly good English when he chose, but right now, he didn't feel like bothering. All he wanted was to get outside of a few of those little bottles of rum and inside a set of civilian clothes. Or inside the stew, whichever came first.

“Here you are,” she said, setting down two plastic glasses of coke and another of the miniature bottles of Bacardi light.

“Thanks.”

“The extra one is on me,” she prompted.

Williard grinned, accepting the gambit.

“Right. My name's Jim.”

“Hi. I'm Terry, as in Very.”

“Interested, it seems. Me, too. Do you have any clothes at your place?”

“Like, to wear?”

“Or unwear. This uniform don't suit me

no more.”

More redneck talk, and his grin was infectious. “I think you look handsome in it. Were you in Vietnam?”

“Yeah, but I didn't look so handsome in dirty fatigues. And this f—this uniform is going to be hot in Dallas. I want to get out of it.”

“I think I can safely say I can help you out there. Wait on me after we deplane. I've got to get busy now.”

“Don't get too busy to keep the rum coming.”

“You got it, Sarge.” Terry said. She

winked and left. While she was tending to other passengers, she found herself wondering whether or not the sergeant was married. The thought surprised her. Usually she didn't worry about it one way or another, taking her fun where she found it. Suddenly she wondered whether she was getting old, or at least old enough to start at least thinking of settling down. Sarge. Sergeant. Williard mused to himself at the honorifics and reminisced over his years in the army as he methodically began lining up empty little Bacardi bottles. Eight years as a medic, three years in 'Nam, Service schools where he learned his art, including the last one, advanced medical laboratory training, a demanding year-

long course that had earned him his last stripe and a profession that might be useful in civilian life. He had quite a lot of money on his person, but none saved. Marriage and a recent divorce had seen to that. Sooner or later, he knew he would have to go to work somewhere, doing something. It would be a new experience; he had enlisted right after high school and never held a job at anything other than throwing a paper route after school. He wasn't particularly looking forward to job hunting, but then perhaps he wouldn't have to if the expedition his brother Jason was talking about panned out. It sounded wild, but he didn't think it could be much worse than some of the escapades he and his two

younger brothers had gotten themselves into during the war. Or before the war, for that matter. Sometimes he thought all three of them must have inherited genes from a pirate ancestor of some sort. They were never really satisfied with the mundane affairs of everyday life like home and school and family. I could always go to college, he mused. The G.I. Bill had been passed, and it paid pretty good. Combine that with a part time job and he could make it easily, especially now that he was single. But school had always bored him. He was much more intrigued with Jason's idea; it sounded like the adventure of a lifetime. Both of his brothers would be coming home very soon, too. He had talked to Jason, his

next younger brother, over the phone in Seattle. Jason said he was getting a medical discharge from Bethesda Medical center in a day or two, a result of a shattered knee when he bailed out of his F-4 Phantom after being hit on one of the last bombing runs over Hanoi. Jerry, his youngest brother, was hanging it up after one four-year stint in the Navy. He had run a river patrol boat in the Mekong Delta after tiring of routine destroyer duty. He claimed that captaining a patrol boat in the Meking Delta was more dangerous than ground combat or flying jets in the war, a contention disputed by both his older brothers. Whatever, Jason had told him in his last letter that Jerry had gotten tired of dodging bullets and

intended to find an easier way to make a living. The same as me, Williard thought. I'm just not sure what I want to do in life. On the other hand, his idea of what he wanted to do with Terry, as in Very, were as clear as a freshly-polished windowpane. Thinking of that added a pleasant overture to the buzz from the rum he was consuming. After a while he dozed, then woke when his ears popped as the plane descended. Good as her word, Terry joined him after only a few minutes of waiting in the departure lounge. Now she was dressed in hip-hugging jeans and a white blouse tied in front with its tails, exposing a creamy white midriff.

“You forgot your coat.”

“Fuckit. You don't need an overcoat in Dallas in April. Where's the nearest lounge?”

“I thought we were going to my place?”

“We are, but I want to take some rum with me.”

“They don't sell package liquor in the lounges,” Terry said.

“No problem, I'll carry it inside me.”

The stewardess wondered what she was getting into. Was he an alcoholic? Two quick matching doubles later, she

decided that if he was, it was catching. He poured the rum down as casually as a ten-year-old drinking lemonade while assuming with a disconcerting simplicity that she wanted to do the same.

“Is rum all you ever drink?” she asked, as he ordered one more double for the road.

“No, I drink beer, scotch, bourbon and wine, but not all at the same time. Ready?”

“You forgot your hat.”

“Fuckit. Civilians don't wear hats.” Williard was feeling his oats. He slid an arm around his companion as they left

the lounge. “Which way to the taxis?”

“Don't you have any luggage?”

“Just this,” Williard said, hefting a small satchel. “I left my car and clothes with my sister. They'll still be there if she hasn't given them away at a garage sale. She's prone to that. One time she sold Larry's dental cabinet from when he first started practicing.”

“Who's Larry?”

“My brother-in-law.”

“Did he get mad?”

“No, he got even. He ran off for a week

with his dental assistant.”

“Did your sister get mad?”

“No, she was so busy spending her garage sale money she never missed him.”

“What did she buy?”

“More stuff for garage sales, probably. Larry is the brokest dentist in Dallas, I bet. Hey, here's the cabs.”

Williard opened the door of the first one in line and politely handed Terry inside. The action pleased her; she wasn't used to it any more. He paused before getting in himself in order to remove his jacket.

He dropped it on the sidewalk.

“You had better slow down or you'll spoil all my fun,” Terry said.

“If I slow down, I'll spoil my own,” Williard said, tossing his belt with the polished brass buckle out the window as the cab pulled away. No more scrubbing tarnish off belt buckles and collar brass.

“At least keep your shirt and pants on. I don't think I have anything to replace them that will fit.”

“I'll keep my pants on,” Williard promised, unbuttoning his shirt. What the hell, he thought, it will save time later. He draped the shirt out of the window,

let it billow in the wind for a moment, then let it go. Terry slid over close to him just in case he changed his mind and decided to rid himself of his trousers. Williard grinned and snuggled up. So much for the army. It had been an adventure, as Jason would say, but it was time to move on. Or in. He felt a surge in his groin as Terry brushed against him when she leaned forward to give the cabby her address and he forgot about any other adventure, other than the present one.

Terry was beginning to doubt the wisdom of picking out the former sergeant for a fling. He was acting rather manic. She needn't have worried.

Williard did sometimes act a little crazy when he got outside of too much rum, but right now he was simply reacting to the sense of release he felt at being free from the ordered existence of military life, plus a delayed exuberance at having been shot at and lived, unlike others he had known who hadn't been near so lucky. As she leaned back, he put his arm around her. She thought he was going to kiss her, but instead he stared at her chest as if he were just now noticing the difference between male and female.

“Be damned,” he said.

“What's wrong? Don't you like what you see?”

“I just noticed.”

Now what? Had he already forgotten his first scrutiny of her body? And what was the ‘be damned’ for?

Unless he was blind, he certainly had no reason to complain. Just to reassure herself, she glanced down at her chest. They were still there. She looked back up. “They usually get noticed sooner than this.”

“They?”

“These.”

“There's only one of them.”

“What?” This was getting ridiculous.

“Unless there's another one behind that one, but that wouldn't make any sense.”

“You're not making any sense.”

“Neither are you. I still don't see but one name tag.”

“Oh.” For the first time in years, Terry blushed.

“Yeah, I just noticed. You really are Very Terry.”

“It's Terry Very, but sometimes my friends do call me Very Terry when I get interested in something. They say I have

a one-track mind.”

Williard grinned. “I can see why. You are Very Terry, Terry Very. I like you.” This time he did kiss her. After that, she decided that she liked him, too. He was nice. Crazy, but nice. Later, in bed, she decided he was even better than nice, especially the way he gently and thoroughly fondled and nuzzled her, even after he was sated. She liked the attention, even though she was already happily dazed. His hands moved over her breasts, caressing them as if he were petting a pair of sleepy kittens.

“Do you like them?” she asked.

“Sure. Especially the other one.”

“Which other one? You've got your hands on both of them.”

“So I do. I meant the one that holds the name tag.”

“You're crazy.”

“Wait til you meet my brothers.”

“You mean there's more than one of you?”

“Yeah. Two more. They're getting discharged, too.”

“What are you all going to do now?”

Williard rolled over onto his back. “You

know, that's a problem. There's the G.I. bill. We could go to school, but none of us ever cared much for that.”

“Why not?”

“Too dull. What ever happens in school?”

“You could go back in the army.”

“Naw. The war is over. The army wouldn't be any fun anymore.”

Terry sat up in bed. “You thought Vietnam was fun?”

Williard shrugged. “Sometimes. At any rate, it beat going to work in a grocery

store or selling shoes. Don't worry, though. Jumpin' Jase has something planned for when we all get home. He's the real adventurer."

"Jumping Jase? You mean Jumping Jack?"

"No, Jumping Jase. That's Jason, my brother."

"What did he do in the war?"

"He bailed out of airplanes, mostly. That's why they called him Jumpin' Jase."

"Oh. He was a paratrooper."

“No, he flew an F-4 with the Marines.”

“Is that the planes he jumped out of?”

“Yup.”

Terry had seen pictures of the swept wing fighter plane on television. She couldn't imagine why anyone would want to parachute from one. “I don't get it,” she said. “Why would he jump out of a jet airplane?”

“Most of the time they were on fire, but sometimes they were just broke.”

“Oh,” Terry said, finally understanding. “He got shot down.”

“Mostly, except one time he was flying along the beach on the way back from a mission.”

“What happened then?”

“There was a bunch of nurses in bikinis. He ran out of fuel he went back so many times to look and had to ditch in the ocean.”

“I bet the marines got mad at him for that one.”

“Yeah, but he was so good at making crispy critters they gave him another plane.”

Terry had heard the term. It referred to

burned corpses. She shuddered and changed the subject. “How about your other brother?”

“That's Jerry. He was in the Navy, so mostly he just drove boats and drank rum.”

“What did you do?”

“Treated troops for the clap, mostly.”

“No, really, what did you do.”

“Sometimes I handed out Band-Aids.”

Terry finally caught on, remembering the caduceus on the brass of his uniform. “Nut. You were a medic, weren't you?”

“That's what I said.”

“In a roundabout way. I bet you saw a lot of action, didn't you?”

“How would I know? I was drunk most of the time.”

Terry saw that he didn't want to talk about it. She hadn't recognized the combat medic's badge on his uniform, but suspected that he had been involved in some fighting. “Never mind. What is it your brother is thinking about doing?”

“Chasing dinosaurs in the Congo, so he says.”

Terry sat bolt upright in the bed.

“Dinosaurs? You mean like searching for skeletons?”

“Nope. Live ones.”

Terry stared down at him. He appeared to be perfectly serious. “You’re not serious, are you?”

Williard yawned before answering. It had been almost two days since he had had any sleep. “I guess it really depends on my brother. When I talked to him a couple of days ago, he sounded convinced that there might still be some live ones left in the Congo. Or one, anyway.”

“Golly, that sounds exciting,” Terry

said.

“Anything Jason does is usually exciting. This should be no exception.” He yawned again.

“Sleepy?”

“Yeah. You can put your name tag back on now. G'night.”

“Night,” Terry murmured. She lay back down, thinking that if today was any indication, then the rest of the week with Williard might be something to behold.

Chapter Two

Terry slowed her car, a little tan Ford Falcon, then parked in front of the house Williard indicated. It was a gray brick two story with a small front lawn in Oak Cliff, the southern suburb of Dallas. “Thanks for the lift,” Williard said. “I’ll call you this evening, soon as I get sorted out.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Terry said. “What are we going to do?”

“Anything except dance.”

“Don’t you like to dance?”

“Only horizontally. Tell you what, let's find someplace that doesn't cater to hippies and we'll go out to eat. Or maybe Larry will take us out if Jeannie hasn't gotten rid of their car at a garage sale.”

“Sounds good to me.” She kissed him quickly, enjoying the tickle of his mustache. Williard got out of the car and stood for a moment on the sidewalk, breathing in the cool morning air. It helped clear the residual rum from his head, but he was willing to bet Jeannie would have something even better on hand. She liked to drink, too. He shivered as he walked to the door. He was clad only in a pair of cast off

trousers Terry had found for him and a tee shirt. His army pants had been left behind in her wastebasket. Jeannie Wilson pushed open the door after only one ring.

“Jim! Where have you been? We were expecting you to come in last night.” She grabbed her brother and bussed him almost as thoroughly as Terry had.

“I did come in last night. Very, so to speak.”

Jeannie blinked. Sometimes her brother's humor escaped her.

“Well, get yourself inside before you freeze to death. Where are your

clothes?”

“Still here, if you haven't put them out at a garage sale.”

“I meant your other clothes. Never mind, I don't want to know. Anyway, I haven't sold any of your things; I wouldn't do that to you. They're still in the spare closet where you left them.”

“Bless you. How about a drink while I change?”

Jeannie grinned. Other than having black hair rather than dark brown, she had the same facial characteristics as Williard and her other two younger brothers. She was a handsome woman, even though a

few strands of gray hair were beginning to creep in amongst the black. She led him into the den, the family gathering place. "Larry stocked up on rum when we heard you were on the way," she said over her shoulder as Williard departed for one of the spare bedrooms. She hummed to herself, as she set out a bottle and glasses, glad that the war was over and her brothers had returned safely. Williard returned a few minutes later clad in jeans, boots and a soft old blue shirt that had been washed oftener than his brother had bailed out of airplanes. He made a beeline to the counter in the den where Larry kept his bar. Jeannie had the makings ready. He tilted the Bacardi bottle into a tall glass,

added ice and coke and stretched his body out in Larry's easy chair.

“Don't get too comfortable,” Jeannie said. “Larry's going to be back pretty quick.”

“Isn't he working today?”

“I called him while you were changing. He's taking the day off.”

“Can he afford it?”

“No, but he's doing it anyway.”

“You must of just had a garage sale,” Williard said. He scanned the den to see what was new since the last time he had

been there. Almost everything was except the chair he was sitting in.

“Only a little one. Would you believe I made over three hundred dollars?”

“What did it cost you to restock?”

“Nothing, except a few things I really needed.”

Williard figured she had probably spent a couple of thousand dollars replacing items she had gotten tired of, but decided not to tease her about it just yet. Or not much, anyway. “If I had known, I could have given you a brand new uniform to sell.”

“Why would you sell your uniform?”

“Because I'm not in the army anymore. I was discharged yesterday morning.”

Jeannie looked perplexed. Williard had been in the army since he was eighteen. “I thought you were making a career out of it. What happened?”

Williard shrugged. “The hippies shut down the war. The army don't need me no more, or so they said.”

“Maybe I could join up in your place. I could use the money.” The voice came from around the corner, at the front entrance. Larry Wilson, Williard's brother-in-law, followed his comment

into the room. He was carrying three cases of Coors beer.

Williard jumped up from the easy chair. “Hey, Larry! Looks like you're planning on enjoying your day off!”

Larry grinned from beneath witty blue eyes and natural silver-white hair. “Damn right. That's what I told my banker when I got the loan to buy this beer. Good to see you, Jim.”

“I thought you said he wasn't going to loan you any more money?” Jeannie said.

“I fixed him up with Monica for the day and he changed his mind.” Monica was

his dental assistant, a buxom girl with a demure, religious disposition when sober but a carnal appetite after a drink or two.

“That's too bad,” Williard said. “I was going to fix her up with Jason. He was planning on showing her some new positions he discovered when he took a nurse up for a spin.”

“No wonder he loses so many planes,” Larry said. “Hey, wait! Is he on the way home, too?”

“He should get in today if he doesn't try to talk the airline pilot into letting him do the flying,” Williard said.

“Otherwise, check the news for plane crashes.”

Larry quickly went to his liquor cabinet behind the bar in the den where they were gathered and looked inside to make sure there was plenty of rum. “Just checking,” he said. “Ever since you guys taught your sister to like rum, it's hard to keep stocked up.”

“I don't drink much except when I'm planning garage sales,” Jeannie said virtuously.

“That's what I said. By the way, do I have any clothes left I can change into?”

“You could use a change,” Williard

commented. Larry was dressed in a salmon-colored leisure suit with a purple shirt and white tie.

“Don't knock it. This is the only set of clothes I own that Jeannie can't sell. I've pulled so many price tags off them that my fingernails won't grow any more unless they have glue sticking to them.”

“I wish some money would stick to them,” Jeannie said.

“That's what Monica says. I'm always behind on her salary.”

“What does she say about that?” Williard asked.

“Nothing. I just feed her a couple of drinks and introduce her to the nearest banker.”

“Maybe you should introduce her to the accountant at the country club,” Jeannie said. “We're behind on our dues again.”

“Bankers come first,” Larry said, cracking his first Coors of the day.

“But I wanted to take Jim and Jason out tonight.”

“No problem. Just have another garage sale this weekend. We've still got some furniture left.”

Jeannie and Williard both grinned. Larry

was the most happy-go-lucky man either had ever met. He never worried about business, finances or much else for that matter—except his supply of Coors.

“O.K., let's plan on it,” Jeannie said.

“Plan on what?” A new voice came from the entrance and Jason Williard limped into the den, favoring his injured knee. He looked remarkably like his brother, right down to the finely shaped nose and neatly trimmed mustache. He was also dressed in boots and jeans, but was wearing a white western shirt rather than blue.

“Jason!” Jeannie yelled and ran to hug her other brother. He braced himself

with the cane the medical center had insisted he take with him when he was discharged.

“Easy, sis,” Jason said. “I still can't walk too good on one leg.”

Jeannie held her brother with a hand on each shoulder. “You're hurt!”

“I ain't hurt near as much as those two gomers that was in the MIGS. Them poor bastards are probably up there in Vietnam Heaven right now trying to explain to Ho Chi Minh how come they missed and I didn't.”

* * * *

“So how come you had to bail out?” Larry asked, but it was with a smile.

“A SAM got me while I was tending to them. Never mind, where's the rum? I ain't had a drink since I got off the plane.”

Williard already had one ready for him. He handed it to him and watched it disappear. “Which plane was that?” he asked slyly. In ‘Nam, Jason had been known to fly more often than not with either a hangover or a load on, although neither seemed to affect his prowess.

“The one the candyass airline pilot was driving. One of the stews let me into the cockpit and he wouldn't even take the

drink I brought him.”

“Some people got no sense of humor,” Williard said, gazing fondly at his brother. They had managed to see one another several times in Vietnam and even when not in contact, Williard had kept his brother flying on a couple of occasions by trading favors to ensure his blood alcohol tests came back negative. He thought it was going to be hard on all of them to adjust to civilian life unless they came up with something better to do than get a job or go to school.

“Has anyone heard when Jerry is coming in?” Jason asked, easing himself down on the couch beside Williard, who had given up the easy chair to Larry. It was

the one piece of furniture in the house which had never been exposed to a garage sale, mainly because Larry always took it to work with him when Jeannie got the urge.

“He's probably losing his separation pay in Vegas right now,” Williard said. Their youngest brother was occasionally a psychically lucky gambler, but he never knew when to quit, especially when he mixed rum and gambling. Jerry was the one who had induced the preference for rum into the family, soon after getting his navy commission. Ever since reading *Treasure Island* as a child, he thought sailors always drank rum and did his best to live up to expectations.

“I hope he doesn't want another loan,” Larry said. “Monica will do good to even get me some more credit.”

“Who's Monica?” Jason asked. Unlike Williard, he had never met her.

“Larry's dental assistant,” Williard said. “I was going to fix you up with her tonight, but Larry palmed her off on a banker.”

“They will probably be at the club tonight,” Larry said.

“He's fixed up,” Williard said.

“Damn right,” Jason agreed. “The day I can't beat a banker's time, I'll hang it up

and get married again.”

All three brothers had gotten divorced during the war. The main cause was that they had each insisted on taking their R & R in places other than Hawaii, where more mortal men usually met their wives and families. It hadn't helped that each had promptly volunteered for further duty in Vietnam after their initial tours. They were all natural adventurers, though Jason tended to go a little further in the direction of natural than anyone else they knew.

“Sorry I don't have another dental assistant, Jim,” Larry said to Williard.

“You don't need another one,” Jeannie

said darkly. She suspected Larry and Monica had taken off together the week after she sold his antique dental cabinet for seven hundred dollars, but by the time she was finished restocking the house, he was already back.

“It's all right, I'm taken care of,” Williard said.

“Already?”

“It was a Very quick affair.”

“What's her name?” Jason asked.

“Very,” Williard said.

“Veri? That's a pretty name,” Jeannie

said.

“Yeah, she's Very Terry.”

“Terry is her last name?”

“No, Very,” Williard said.

“I thought that was her first name.”

“Terry is her first name.”

“I don't get it,” Jeannie said.

“I do,” Larry smirked.

“So do I,” Jason said. “I hope Monica is Very, too.”

“Just share your rum with her,” Larry said.

“Oh.” Jeannie finally caught on. “Well, I can be Very, too, when I want to.”

“I wish you wanted to more often.”

“Try coming home for lunch more often.”

“I can't; that's when I talk to bankers.”

“I need to talk to a banker,” Jason said.

“What for?” Williard asked. He wondered if his brother was broke already. It was possible. Jason thought the government minted money just so he

could spend it.

Jason poured himself another drink and looked serious. "It's that idea I was telling you about, Jim. I'm convinced the story is true, but it's going to take a lot of money to prove it."

Jeannie's eyes brightened. "I could have a garage sale, if that would help."

Larry gripped the armrests of his chair in a protective gesture.

"Thanks, Sis. I'll keep it in mind."

"What mind?" A voice from the entrance bellowed. Jerry Williard, still wearing his Navy uniform and a wide grin,

entered and scanned the room, searching for the rum.

“Jerry!” Jeannie cried, running to hug her brother. He plucked the drink she was carrying out of her hand and drained it while accepting her embrace.

“Hey, brother!” Williard cried. He felt his pulse increase now that all three of them were together. He wondered if the country club would be able to handle them all.

Chapter Three

Larry shook one of Jerry's hands while he poured a drink for him with the other. He was grinning hugely. It was a rare occasion when all of Jeannie's brothers were home together and it always called for a celebration. He loved celebrating, especially with the Williard brothers; Jeannie was likely to be more Very than otherwise when they were around and feeding her rum.

Williard eyed Jerry's uniform. "I thought you were getting discharged."

"I did, but I left my civvies on the ship."

“How come?”

“I owed the captain some money and he confiscated them.”

“That wasn't very nice of him,” Jeannie said.

“Fuckit if he can't take a joke. Anyone got some civvies I can borrow, or has Jeannie sold them all?”

“I wouldn't do that,” Jeannie said.

“Especially since I kept everyone's things at the office until yesterday,” Larry said. Jeannie shot daggers at him, then was abruptly distracted by a pretty, dark haired face peering around the

entrance to the den. There was a hint of sadness in her eyes, but she was smiling.

“Can I come in?”

Jerry looked over his shoulder from where he was pouring another drink to take with him while he changed, fearful that his brothers would wipe out the supply while he was gone. He grinned. “Oh. I almost forgot. Come on in, Donna.”

The young woman entered hesitantly. She was wearing a short, expensive-looking red dress and high heels.

“This is Donna,” he announced. “She followed me home. Can I keep her?”

“Damn straight,” Larry said, admiring her legs.

“Are you Very, Donna?” Williard asked.

“Very?”

“Looks Very to me,” Jason said, producing the shit-eating grin he was famous for.

“Almost as Very as Terry,” Williard said.

“Who's Terry?” Jerry asked.

“Terry belongs to Jim. Monica is my date for tonight,” Jason said.

“You haven't got her yet,” Larry said. In a way, he was hoping he wouldn't. He owed the banker he had fixed her up with quite a lot of money. On the other hand, Bankers in Dallas were as plentiful as touchdowns by the Dallas Cowboys. I can always find another one, he thought.

“Leave it to me,” Jason said confidently.

“I don't understand all this.” Donna gave Jerry a bewildered look.

“I told you I had some crazy brothers. Have a drink and get acquainted while I change. Just don't let Jason talk you into going flying with him.”

“Which one of you is Jason?” Donna asked, looking back and forth between the two remaining brothers. She was amazed at their remarkable resemblance to Jerry.

“I am,” Williard said, handing her a drink.

“Don't listen to him,” Jason said, placing a drink in her other hand. “I'm Jason.”

“How about me?” Larry asked.

“You stay out of this,” Jeannie said.
“You're already taken.”

“Tonight?” Larry answered hopefully.

“If you're good,” Jeannie said. The rum was beginning to give her a buzz.

“Who wants to be good?” Jerry asked, coming back into the room. He was wearing jeans and boots and a bright red western shirt.

“I do,” Larry said.

“I don't,” Williard and Jason said in unison.

“You couldn't if you tried,” Jerry said.
“Donna, have you met everyone yet?”

“I think, except I have your brothers mixed up. Which one is which?”

“That one's Jim and that one's Jerry,” Jerry said, pointing at his brothers.

“I'm Jim,” Jason said.

“I'm Jason,” Jim said.

Donna burst out laughing. “I give up. You're all crazy. Nice, but crazy.” She tilted one of her drinks to her mouth then moved over close to Jerry before she got him mixed up with the other two Williards.

“They come by it naturally. I married into it,” Larry said, nuzzling Jeannie's neck.

“Later,” Jeannie said. “What time are

we going to the club?”

“No time like the present,” Williard said. “Let me call Very Terry and get her on the way here.” He went into the living room to get away from the noise to place his call.

“Is there really a Very Terry?” Donna asked.

“Also a Very Monica. You'll meet her at the club,” Jason said confidently.

“I just thought of something,” Jeannie said. “This is Friday night. The club will require jackets and ties.”

“You sold all my ties,” Larry said.

“You can wear your leisure suit. That's acceptable.”

“I ain't wearing no tie,” Jason said.

“Me neither,” Williard agreed, returning from his call. He had always hated ties.

“Don't sweat it,” Larry said. “I'll tell them you're all war heroes just back from the front.”

“There wasn't no front in ‘Nam,” Williard said.

“No back, either,” Jerry said.

“Are you really war heroes?” Donna asked.

“Damn straight,” Jason told her with a straight face. “If it hadn't been for the hippies we would of won the war all by ourselves.”

“I believe it.”

“You're my kind of people,” Williard said. “Where did you meet Jerry?”

“On the plane here. I was with my husband.”

“Where is he now?” Williard asked, looking admiringly at his youngest brother. Talk about a difficult pickup.

Donna shrugged. “Back with his hippie friends, probably.”

“You were married to a hippie?” Jason asked. His face wrinkled in a frown.

“Yeah. My mistake. I thought he was just a drug dealer until he spit on Jerry's uniform.”

“Is he still alive?” Williard asked.

Jerry rubbed his right hand. “Yeah, but he doesn't have as many teeth as he used to.”

“Send him to me,” Larry broke in. “I need the money.”

“He's not going to have any left after my lawyer finishes with him,” Donna said. “My brother was a POW. You should

have seen him when he got back.”

“You poor thing,” Jeannie said. “Do you have a place to stay yet?”

“Jerry said I could stay with him.”

“Where are you staying, Jerry?” Jeannie asked.

“Here, where else?”

“Can Terry stay, too?” Williard asked.

“Is she homeless, too?”

“No, but I am.”

“I'm going to need another loan,” Larry

said.

“Ask for a big one and I'll let you invest in my dinosaur expedition,” Jason said.

“Dinosaurs?” Larry looked confounded at the suggestion.

“Dinosaurs!” Jerry exclaimed. He swigged some rum.

“Yeah. It's a way to avoid having to go to work.” Jason flashed the mysterious, anticipatory grin he was famous for, as if guiding a smart bomb into a Viet Cong Bunker.

“I'd go for that,” Larry said. “Not that I have enough patients to bother with

anyway.”

“OK, so tell us about this project, brother,” Williard said. “I sure ain't looking forward to joining the rat race.”

Jason appeared to be ready to let the cat out of the bag when the doorbell rang.

“That must be Terry,” Williard said. “I'll get it.”

Terry was dressed in white trousers and blouse with a green belt snugged about her slim waist. Her rich, dark hair curled down to the collar of her blouse. She melted into Williard's arms when he opened the door. He enjoyed the embrace, thinking that someone like her

was a good reason for having spent so much time fighting the war. Or anything else, he amended, stepping back to admire her.

“Hi,” Terry said. “You’re making me feel Very again.”

“Me, too. Come on in, I’ve got a surprise for you.” He led her around the corner and into the den. “Hey folks, here she is. Terry, as in Very.”

“Hi, Terry, I’m Donna, also Very,” Donna said. She grinned as she saw Terry blink and try to focus her eyes on Williard’s almost identical brothers.

“You didn’t tell me you were triplets,”

Terry said.

“We're not. That's Jason and that's Jerry,” Williard said.

“I'm Jason,” Jerry said, causing Terry to blink. She thought sure Jim had called him Jerry.

“I'm Jim,” Jason piped up, confusing her further until she got the idea that this was a game the brothers must play.

“You're all crazy.”

“It runs in the family. I'm Larry,” Larry said.

“My brothers like to mix people up,”

Jeannie told her. "Don't mind them."

"I don't mind at all, they all look alike anyway. Hi guys."

"Have some rum," Jerry offered. He couldn't bear seeing anyone without a drink in their hand, preferably one from the Bacardi distillery.

"Why not?" Terry agreed, taking the proffered drink while Jerry poured himself another one. Looking at Williard's brothers and the other laughing people in the room, she felt as if she were just taking off on her first flight. It had been too long since she had had a really great leave. This one promised to be something to write home

about, properly censored.

“We were just talking about dinosaurs,” Williard said, pulling her down beside him.

“You really were serious, weren't you? I thought you were just kidding me.”

“I was,” Jason said.

“I meant Jim,” Terry said.

“I'm Jim,” Jerry said.

“I'm Jerry,” Jason said.

“I'm Jason,” Williard said, “but never mind. Whoever you are, tell us about this

f—this so-called dinosaur.”

Jason stretched his stiff leg out to get it more comfortable and checked to make sure his glass was full. For once, he looked serious. “I got the story a while back from a friend of mine that worked as a mercenary when there was all that fighting in the Congo, after they got their independence and split into two countries, Zaire and the Congo. For years, the Pygmies who inhabit the jungles there have been telling stories of this mysterious creature which is supposed to live in and around Lake Tele. That's a lake, about four or five miles across and God knows how deep, surrounded by swamps and unexplored

rain forests in what they call The Republic of the Congo now. They refer to it as Mokele Mbembe, the creature that's bigger than an elephant and swims in the lake. I spent most of my time while I was recuperating at Bethesda putting together information from my friend and his sources in Africa. I'm convinced now that there's enough truth to the stories to make it worthwhile to go looking. All we need is some money to finance the expedition.”

“How much money are we talking about?” Williard asked. The idea sounded intriguing. Trust Jason to come up with something like this.

“Not much. A hundred, hundred fifty

ought to do it. That includes weapons, supplies, Pygmy guides and enough to either buy or rent a plane, preferably an amphibian so we could fly directly to the lake. It would be a good idea to hire a copilot, too, just in case I got hurt and couldn't fly us back out.”

Williard smiled to himself. Jason might concede the possibility of getting hurt on an adventure, but never entertained the idea that he could possibly be killed. During the war he had flown his fighter as if he were invulnerable, though he sometimes blamed his aircraft for getting in the way of dense metal or missiles.

“I've got a pilot's license,” Terry

remarked, then felt her heart jump around in her chest. Good God, what am I thinking of, she asked herself. Here I spend one night with a guy and the next thing I know I'm volunteering to copilot a plane to Africa so he and his brothers can go looking for a dinosaur. I must be crazy.

“You must be crazy,” Jerry said. He had the romantic idea that women should wait faithfully at home while their men were off on adventures, which was one reason his wife had divorced him. She had waited faithfully for almost four years while he spent his leaves sporting with hookers in Hong Kong, Australia and the Philippines.

“Be sure and bring your parachute,” Williard said, only half kidding. When Jason got in a plane, you never knew what would happen.

“Oh, yeah. You said he was called Jumpin’ Jase.”

“Not without reason,” Williard commented. “Are you really volunteering to come along on this jaunt, supposing we can raise the money to finance it?” He looked at her with new interest. His ex-wife thought anything more adventurous than Christmas shopping at a mall was grounds for divorce and had proved it after he volunteered for the third time for Vietnam.

“It sounds like fun,” Terry temporized, conjuring up a romantic fantasy of making love in the depths of a rain forest. And she did have a pilot's license, though she had never used it much after the airlines all refused to let her into their pilot training programs. That still rankled her.

“Oh, it will be,” Jason assured her.

“Won't it be sort of dangerous, Jason?” Jeannie asked, with a worried look on her face. She had confidence in her brothers' abilities, but this idea was more bizarre than anything else they had ever gotten into.

“Nah. Besides the dinosaur, all we have to worry about is funguses, foot worms, elephantiasis, crocodiles, elephants, gorillas and wild Pygmies. Of course we will be in unexplored territory, so there might be a few other things I don't know about.”

Mention of Pygmies caught Williard's attention. “Why should we have to worry about Pygmies? We'll be armed, won't we?”

“Didn't I mention that the Pygmies living around Lake Tele have never been contacted? And that they worship Mokele Mbembe like a God or something? They may not appreciate us going after it. Besides, don't take them

lightly. Them little fuckers hunt elephants with nothing but machetes.”

“How the hell do they do that?” Williard asked.

Jason grinned. “They run alongside them and grab onto a leg, then use their machete to hamstring them. Sometimes they even live through it.”

Williard grinned back “Fuckit. Ten thousand Viet Cong couldn't kill me. Why should I worry about Pygmies?”

Terry had been taking in the conversation, glancing back and forth from brother to brother. She felt a surge of excitement rising inside, making her

dizzy. Or maybe it was the rum doing that, but she still felt a compelling urge to join the expedition if it indeed took place. She didn't know whether it was a result of her attraction to Williard or dissatisfaction at the shallow sort of life she had been living, tangling with self-important airline pilots and other men she felt no respect for. She heard herself say firmly, "I want to go."

"You got a winner there, brother," Jason said.

"I knew she was Very, but not this Very," Williard agreed, trying to conceal his deeper feelings with humor. He examined them silently and found that he was thinking of Terry as a woman he

might like to spend a good bit of time with, but he felt a sense of apprehension along with the thought. He felt the same way about his ex-wife originally, and that hadn't worked out. He decided to try to keep the relationship with Terry more sexual than serious. If last night was any indication, it shouldn't be a problem.

“Now that we've got that settled, let's all have another drink and head for the club,” Larry said. “We can talk about dinosaurs there as well as here.”

“Who's going to drive?” Jeannie asked, looking at the seriously depleted bar.

“Let Jason handle it,” Williard said. “If he can fly drunk, he can drive drunk.”

“I can aim better with a couple of drinks.”

“What, the plane or the bombs?” Jerry asked.

“Fuckit, either one. Cars, too, for that matter.”

“Are you sure you can drive?” Jeannie asked. “I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt.”

“Ten thousand North Vietnamese couldn't kill me. I sure ain't going to go down in a stupid car. Come on, brothers, grab your Verys and let's go find Monica. I'm hungry.”

Terry and Donna exchanged tickled glances, wondering how the other woman would take the brothers. Williard's Cougar and Terry's Falcon were both too small to carry them all, leaving Jeannie's big Oldsmobile as the best option. Jeannie did so much shopping that she needed a big car. The back seat was crowded with Williard and Jerry and Terry and Donna, but no one minded except Larry, who would have made it five if Jeannie hadn't yanked him away and placed him in front. Jason drove a car the same way he flew a jet fighter when he was a little under the weather. He simply imagined that he was lining up the yellow landing ball when coming in on an aircraft

carrier and aimed down the middle of the street while Jeannie gave him directions to the country club. It was located only a few blocks from their starting point, hardly giving Jason time to get his imaginary yellow ball lined up before they were there. He drove past the tail end of the golf course, swung around the pool area and into the parking lot.

The Oldsmobile looked lonely and out of place amidst ranks of Cadillacs and Lincolns and Stingrays and Thunderbirds. Larry had never gotten far enough in front of Jeannie's garage sales to buy a car more fitting for a Dentist than the Oldsmobile The Williard

brothers had always been long on ambition and short on cash, somewhat similar to his own circumstances. He led his coterie from the parking lot to the club entrance, an arch of conservative, gray-speckled brick set over imitation Mexican tile. The doorman took one look at what was following him and held up his hand in horror.

Chapter Four

“Hey, you cowboys can't come in here dressed like that! Where do you think you are, anyway?” The doorman's face held an expression of outrage, as if Larry was leading a gang of welfare recipients inside.

“It's all right, George,” Larry said. “These guys are war heroes.”

“I don't give a damn. They can't come in,” the doorman said.

Jason stepped forward and eyed the man as if he were an object in his gunsights. He turned to Williard.

“Looks like a North Vietnamese to me. I've killed a lot of them.”

“I think he's a Viet Cong. I shot a lot of them little fuckers, but looks like I missed one,” Williard said. He turned to Jerry.

“I think he's a Hippie. I hate Hippies. They made us lose the war. I've been waiting to get my hands on one.”

“I left my submachine gun back at the barracks,” Jason said.

“Never mind, I brought my bayonet,” Williard said, feeling around suggestively in his back pocket.

“Let me at him, I'll use my bare hands,” Jerry growled.

The entranceway was suddenly, miraculously, empty. Larry led the way inside, past the bar and into the spacious dining room, ignoring curious glances from a scattering of onlookers. It was still early and the dining room was only half full, so they had their choice of tables, each already set with shining silverware on crisp white tablecloths.

“Hi Larry. Did you bring the entertainment tonight?” One of Larry's doctor friends called, thinking that he had perhaps been recruited to bring in a country and western band for the evening.

“You got that right,” Larry said. “Just wait til they get going.”

“You behave now,” Jeannie said to the brothers, knowing that they probably wouldn't. She loved going out with them whenever they were home, especially Williard. He was the most intellectual of the bunch, the nearest to her age, and usually managed to hang on to at least a little of his own money rather than asking her or Larry for loans when they were there.

Larry looked around the room. His blue eyes suddenly twinkled like a cat with a mouse in its paws. He touched Jason on the shoulder and directed his gaze in the

direction he pointed. “Hey, there's Monica already. See? She's the one with the fat guy over there.”

Jason spotted Monica immediately, sitting at a corner table with a corpulent, Italian looking man dressed in an expensive blue suit. She had longish blond hair, a beautiful face and a prominent bosom, half exposed over the bodice of a pale yellow dress. In fact, she looked like a Playboy Bunny with her clothes on.

“I'm in love,” Jason said. “Wait here, folks. I won't be but a moment.”

Larry plucked a drink from a passing waiter's tray, ignoring his protests. He

handed it to Jason. “Here, you better take this. That scrooge she's with probably hasn't bought her but one yet.”

“What's his name. I don't like to kill civilians unless I know them.”

“Mario Marciano. He's worth a fortune, but all I've ever been able to borrow from him is beer money.”

Beer money to Larry was anything which added up to five figures or more.

“Marciano. Sounds like a Mafia name.”

“He could be,” Larry said seriously, suddenly remembering rumors he had heard about the banker and wondering

again if he should have mentioned Monica to Jason at all. What if Marciano decided to call in his loans?

“Well, the Mafia's not all bad. Hell, if they had put them in charge of the war instead of those wimps in the white house, we would of won it in a walk. They would of just put out a contract on Uncle Ho and it would have all been over with. Save us a couple of seats.” Jason took a look at the drink he was holding. Good. It was rum. He headed toward the blonde apparition. Behind him, Williard watched as he approached the table where Monica and the banker sat, wishing he could overhear the conversation. Jason walked up to the

table and stood there a moment until both Monica and Marciano looked up to see who was there. “Hey Sweet Thing. How would you like to go chase dinosaurs with me?” Jason said. That got her attention. She took time to finish the drink in front of her before answering, in the meantime moving her eyes over the handsome stranger in the jeans and white shirt. The first drink had already lowered her inhibitions. She put her glass back down and said, “That, I believe, is the finest pick up line I have ever heard. Who are you? You look just like someone I know.”

“That's probably my brother, but he's not me. I'm Jumpin' Jason Williard, scourge

of North Vietnam and parts of the South. Here, have another drink and let's go join your boss.”

Now she recognized him, or thought she did, except that the last time she had been out with him, his name had been James Williard. But maybe Jim did have a brother. Confused, she took the rum mix Jason was offering, forgetting that she had promised herself she would be good tonight. “This is really against my religion,” she said, swallowing half of the glass of rum and coke. “Dinosaurs, you said?”

“Yeah, just as soon as I get some financing arranged.”

“Sounds like fun,” Monica said, feeling her hormones meld with the alcohol in her system. Besides, the cowboy was a hell of a lot better looking than the banker.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Marciano said belligerently. “Shove off, cowboy. Get back to the band or wherever the hell you belong.”

Jason looked down at the fat man from his solidly muscled 185 pound body. “My CO called me a cowboy once. You know what happened to him?”

“No, and I don't give a fuck. Shove off if you know what's good for you.”

“I dared him to follow me into Hanoi the first time we went in. He spent the next five years eating fish heads and rice.” Jason didn't mention that he had finagled his erstwhile CO into following him into a situation slightly off the designated flight pattern, a cluster of SAM sites, intending to either make a man of him or get them both killed. He hated wimps.

“You're a hero,” Monica said. She had a weakness for heroes, especially after her second drink, which she was just finishing.

“Heroes are a Goddamned dime a dozen,” Marciano said, but a little of the belligerence was going out of his voice. The broad shouldered cowboy didn't

look to be backing off at all.

“You shouldn't take God's name in vain,” Monica said.

“Goddamn right he shouldn't,” Jason said. “Especially if he don't know nothing about heroes. He wouldn't last ten minutes in the Congo with the dinosaurs.”

“You're going to the Congo? Oh, how romantic. When do we leave?” Monica was already picturing herself and the stranger ensconced in a tent and making love to the sounds of the rain forest, with native drums beating in the background.

“Just as soon as Larry finds us a decent

banker,” Jason said, taking her hand.

“Hey, just a Goddamned minute!” Marciano shouted. He attempted to get to his feet, but suddenly found his head being pushed down into his bowl of soup. He breathed in involuntarily and came up spewing consommé. By the time he finished wiping his face, he saw his erstwhile date already being seated at Larry Wilson's table. He started in that direction, then stopped as his senses suddenly blurred. He was seeing triple, apparently. There was not one, but three cowboys at the table. He shook his massive, leonine head. There were still three of them. Could Wilson, that bankrupt dentist who owed him so much

money have hired some protection to avoid repaying his debts? He saw them all laughing as Monica seated herself and felt blood suffusing his jowls. Maybe a broken kneecap would teach the cowboy to mind his manners. And, on further thought, a broken kneecap might do the dentist a little good, too. And in public, right here in the club. He turned the other way, toward an alcove of phones reserved for members. He dialed a number, spoke briefly, then went back to his seat. While he waited, he wondered. Cowboys chasing dinosaurs? What was Texas coming to? Maybe he should move back to New York. Williard smiled as Jason seated Monica, then put an arm around her

shoulder and began whispering in her ear. Monica stared befuddled at the look-alike brothers. "That sounds nice," she said to his whispered suggestion, "but which one of you should I do it with? You all look the same."

"Do it with me," Jerry said.

"Do it with me," Williard echoed. Confusing strangers was one of their favorite games.

"Me, too," Larry said,

"I'll do you," Jeannie said, "whatever it is."

Monica started on her third drink, the

killer for her. Her face lit up agreeably. "I'll do it with everyone while we're chasing dinosaurs. When do we leave for the Congo?"

Larry leaned in her direction. "Do we have to go that far?"

"You're already too far," Jeannie said, dragging him back.

"Are you going to the Congo, too?" Terry asked, wondering what was going on now. Well, Jim had said his brothers were a little crazy and this night seemed to be proving it. They were fun, though.

"Sure. We're going to chase dinosaurs," Monica said.

“One of my flights got diverted to the Congo once,” Terry mentioned, “but all I saw out the window was a bunch of Africans with guns.”

“Are you a pilot, too? I love flying,” Monica said to Terry, squeezing Jason's knee with one hand and starting her fourth drink with the other.

“You're flying, all right,” Jeannie said, pushing Larry's tongue back in his mouth. Monica really was beautiful.

“We'll all fly,” Jason said. “Just as soon as we get some financing, that is. How about that banker Monica was with, Larry? Do you think he would be interested?”

Larry sneaked a look at Marciano. He was glowering in their direction. "He's interested all right, but I don't think it's Dinosaurs he's thinking of. Maybe I should go to the Congo with you."

"You may have to," Williard said. He pointed to Marciano's table, where the banker was talking in a low voice to huge man in a black suit who had just appeared. He had crumpled ears and a scar over one brow. Marciano pointed to their table and gave them a thick lipped, malignant smile. The hulk headed their way.

"Uh oh," Jason said. "I think I annoyed that banker."

“You want me to take care of your light work?” Jerry said.

“He's not that light,” Williard said, noticing a suspicious bulge to the hulk's jacket.

“God, he's huge,” Donna said. “Maybe we better call the bouncer.”

“Country clubs don't have bouncers, they have accountants,” Larry said.

“They're worse than bouncers, always wanting money,” Jeannie said, oblivious to the threat. She had switched from rum to wine, which made her even more amorous, and was rubbing Larry's thigh under the table.

“I think we've already found your dinosaur, Jason,” Terry said. “All he needs is scales.”

“Maybe he just wants a drink,” Monica said, getting to her feet as the giant neared their table. He bumped up against her prominent front, which barely cleared his belly. Confused, he looked down and momentarily lost his sense of mission. He reached up a pair of huge paws to remove the obstacle blocking his path.

“Have a drink,” Jerry said, taking Monica's glass and shoving it into the monster's hand. It looked no bigger than a shot glass there.

“Thanks, bub. Now I need Doc Wilson and whichever of youse guys is called Jumping Jack to stand up.” The hulk's accent was pure Bronx.

“I'm Jumpin' Jase,” Jerry said. The thug turned to him, grinning.

Williard tapped his shoulder. “I'm Jumpin Jase.”

“Huh? How come there's two of youse?” He looked the other way while Jason sneaked up behind him.

“Don't listen to them, I'm Jumpin Jase, and you're not the dinosaur I'm looking for,” Jason said.

“Oh, shucks,” Monica said, and started to sit back down.

“Not so fast, babe,” the brute said. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out an automatic pistol big enough to shoot mammoths with. He pointed it at Monica. “Youse tell me which one of these guys is which before youse sit down.”

“Eek!” Monica said. She jerked her hands high over her head in surrender. Unfortunately, this caused the top of her dress to fail in its primary mission. Her breasts popped free and swayed provocatively in front of Marciano's minion. He promptly forgot his mission for the second time. While he was

mesmerized, Jerry plucked his drink back, emptied all but the ice cubes into his mouth so as not to waste good rum, then reached out and pulled the hulk's shirt collar loose with two fingers and emptied the ice inside.

“Yikes!” he yelled, waving his gun in a circle as he clawed at his shirt, where the ice was sliding over his belly.

Larry and Donna and Terry flinched in turn as the pointed weapon traversed the circle, each expecting it to go off in their face. None of the brothers seemed the least concerned. Each was very familiar with firearms and noticed that the safety of the pistol was still on. Monica was

scared and befuddled, and Jeannie was still playing with Larry's thigh and didn't notice anything. For once Larry didn't respond. He was scared stiff all over.

The ice trickled down and stopped at the hulk's belt line. He waved his gun with one hand and began trying to unbutton his shirt with the other. His huge fingers fumbled with the little buttons. He looked down to get a better perspective. While he was looking, Williard chopped up with one hand and down with the other, neatly sandwiching the gunman's wrist. The weapon popped free, arcing toward the ceiling. Jason plucked it from the air as easily as an Old West gunslinger giving a twirling

demonstration, and shoved the barrel under its owner's nose. "Recognize this?" he said.

"Gug," the weaponless thug said. "Don't shoot!"

"OK," Jason said. "Just follow me. Be right back, folks." He stuck the barrel of the mortar-sized pistol against the man's ear and guided him over to where Marciano was still sitting, looking as if the federal reserve had just dropped interest rates to zero.

"Does this belong to you?" Jason said, twisting the barrel of the pistol around in crushed ear tissue, trying to find the opening.

“I never saw him before in my life!” Marciano cried.

“That's OK, you can get acquainted outside. Come along.” Jason and the two men disappeared through a side door to sounds of weak applause from the other diners. Some thought they had been watching part of the entertainment, but most were uncertain what had happened. A moment later Jason strolled back inside, still carrying the pistol. He sat down and put it in the middle of the table.

“God, that's a big gun,” Donna said. “My ex never carries one that big, even when he's dealing.”

“Maybe we could use it for dinosaurs,” Terry giggled. She could still feel her heart racing, but the laughter bubbled out anyway, like the eruption of a cold mountain stream.

“Good idea,” Jason said. “I doubt that thug ugly will be needing it any more. I made him and that wimpy banker jump in the deep end of the pool.”

“What does that have to do with it?” Larry asked, fearful that he might rearm himself and make another appearance.

“He said he couldn't swim,” Jason said smugly. He looked around and saw every member and their guests staring in their direction. “Hey, what's everyone

looking at? The fun's already over.”

“Monica, did you forget something?” Jeannie said, giving up on Larry for the moment. Monica looked down at her bare chest. “Oh. Darn thing, I always have trouble keeping it up.” She tugged the top of the dress back over her breasts.

“You didn't have to say anything,” Larry said to Jeannie.

“Yes I did. Here comes the manager.”

The club manager had thought first of calling the police, then decided that the club didn't need that kind of publicity. He would just oust Wilson and his

rowdy party, whoever they were, especially since none of them were wearing ties.

“All right Doctor Wilson, you and your party are going to have to leave. Not only that, I'm going to bar you from the club until you get your dues up to date.”

“We can't leave yet,” Williard said. “We haven't finished talking about the dinosaur expedition. Besides that, we haven't even eaten.”

“You're not—” The club manager was interrupted by George, the doorman, who had come in to see what the ruckus was about. When he saw the angry look on the manager's face, he hurried over as

quickly as he could and whispered in his ear. The manager's face suddenly paled and beads of sweat popped out on his forehead.

“Would you folks like steak or lobster?” he asked, in a quavering voice.

“We'll all have Lobster, since it's on the house,” Larry said, sensing an opportunity for a free meal.

“And bring us a few bottles of rum and some coke and ice,” Jerry suggested.

“We don't allow bottles at the—”

“What did you say?” Jason asked, half rising to his feet and feeling around

suggestively in the vicinity of the hogleg on the table.

“I said, how many bottles do you want?”

“That's what I thought you said. Hey, Larry, country clubs are great places to go out to. I think I'll find one to join soon as we catch the dinosaur.”

The manager hurried away, hoping the cowboy got gobbled up by a dinosaur before he picked his club to join.

Chapter Five

They were all still at the club, just reaching the teeth-picking stage and polishing off the last bottle of Bacardi. The dining room had filled up with doctors and dentists and bankers and stock brokers and their guests, but the Wilson party sat in lordly splendor, with a circle of empty tables around them. The late arrivals had been discretely warned that Doctor Wilson was consorting with ferocious, unstable combat veterans just back from Vietnam who had already sent the doorman into a gibbering panic and nearly drowned a banker and his companion who annoyed them. They were able to discuss Jason's

dinosaurs without being overheard, which was just the way Jason wanted it. He didn't want to have some rich doctor who could afford to finance an expedition to steal his idea. Williard had listened to Jason's exposition through a fine lobster dinner garnished with rum. Now he cracked the last delicious claw, dipped the succulent meat into his rum and coke and popped it into his mouth. He summed up the conversation. "So, we find some financing, buy or rent a plane, and head for the Congo. We form an expedition, go in and get pictures and evidence, then sell it for a zillion dollars. Does that cover it?"

"You got it, brother," Jason said. He

plucked at Monica's's top, which was on the verge of slipping into dangerous territory again. "Hell, we may can even get Hollywood interested, and if they're not, I bet there's scientists who would pay a bundle to see pictures of a real dinosaur. Money is the real problem, though."

"Maybe I could invest in a poker game," Jerry said.

"We need money, not debts," Williard said, reminding his younger brother that the only time he had ever seen him come away winner from a poker game was the time he passed out while he was still winning.

“Sounds like we need a banker to me,” Larry said.

“We already owe every banker in Oak Cliff,” Jeannie reminded him. “Why don't we just have a garage sale?” Her eyes lit up at the thought.

“I think a banker is the better idea,” Williard said. Even supposing Jeannie could raise whatever Jason thought it would cost, an unlikely proposition, she would have it spent on refurnishing the house before they could turn around.

“Me, too,” Larry agreed, though he didn't know any banker right off hand that he didn't already owe money to.

“Are you wanting to go, too?” Williard asked. Hell, he thought, I'm not even sure I want to go yet, although it sounded a hell of a lot better than having to go to work, probably for some draft dodging hippie who had protested the war on the one hand and profiteered from it on the other from the booming war time economy.

“Well, Monica said she was going. Why not me?”

While Williard considered, and Jeannie looked aghast at the idea, Jason spoke up. “Sorry, Larry. I think you better stick with Dentistry. Besides, Jeannie is a hell of a lot better looking than those Pygmy African women.”

“I should hope so,” Jeannie said.

“Pygmies? What do they have to do with it?” Monica asked.

“Didn't I mention? The dinosaur is supposed to be guarded by a tribe of Pygmies.”

“Well, I'm better looking than a Pygmy, too,” Terry remarked, as if that proved something. The faces around the table were beginning to blur from all the rum Williard had been feeding her.

“You sure are,” Larry agreed, talking over Jeannie's shoulder. She was nuzzling his chest and suggesting that

they try making love in his easy chair when they got home, thinking that idea would get his eyes off Monica, Donna and Terry and back on her. It didn't; he was afraid she would slap a price tag on it while he wasn't looking. When he thought about it some more, though, he decided doing was better than watching. "I think we ought to leave now."

"Why? It's only midnight," Jason said.

"I've got my reasons." Jeannie's nuzzling was progressing in the direction of his waist and Larry figured in a few more minutes Jeannie might forget where she was and disappear under the table.

"Suits me," Williard said. "I think Terry

is feeling Very again, anyway.”

“Me, too,” Donna said.

“Let's go,” Jerry urged. He wanted to check out Donna's Very.

Jason stood up and waved to the other diners. “Bye, folks. It's been fun!”

“Don't forget your dinosaur gun,” Williard reminded him.

“Oh yeah. Marciano's little messenger might have managed to climb out of the pool by now.” Jason plucked the pistol off the table and stuck it into his waistband.

That remark gave Williard an idea he was just drunk enough to act on. "Let's go see," he said. He led the party, somewhat unsteadily, in the direction of the pool, where they found a dripping Marciano just finishing resuscitation on his enforcer. When he saw who was approaching, he wavered unsteadily to his feet. His partner sat up groggily, coughing water.

"Just who we wanted to see, a banker. We want to apply for a loan," Williard said. He reached out a gentlemanly hand and helped the wet giant to his feet.

"Yeah, just a small one," Jason said, catching on and following his brother's lead. He twirled the oversized pistol by

the trigger guard.

“Only a hundred thousand,” Jerry said, going along with his brothers.

“Don't forget the plane.” Jason gestured with the pistol, causing the banker to cringe.

“Oh, yeah. Better make that a hundred fifty.” Williard patted Marciano on the shoulder. Terry stared at her companion as if he had suddenly turned into a magician. If he pulled this off, she decided that henceforth she would believe in fairies, ghosts and that diamonds really were a girl's best friend.

“You crazy bastards, we almost drowned,” Marciano croaked. “Mugsy here can't swim.”

Williard dismissed the danger. “Water never hurt no one, so long as it's got rum mixed with it. How about that loan?”

“I'll loan you crazy cowboys money when hell freezes over. That goes for you, too, Wilson.”

Jason looked at Williard and shrugged regretfully. “Too bad. Back to the pool with you.” He placed a hand on Marciano's chest and shoved, tipping him backwards.

“Yahhh!” Marciano went off into the

deep end of the pool again. His head broke water a moment later. He spewed foam and started to swim away. Jason waved him back with the dinosaur gun. He turned with alacrity and swam back in their direction until he could grab hold of the edge. "You next, big boy."

Jason pointed his weapon at the goon.

"Fuck that shit," Mugsy said, coughing up some more water. He reached down to his ankle and pulled his reserve weapon from the holster there. He shook water from inside the barrel, then knelt down in front of Marciano and stuck it between his eyebrows. Marciano stared cross-eyed at the barrel of the weapon. "Don't shoot!" he cried, and flung both

hands in the air. Immediately, he sank beneath the surface. A second later he clawed his way back up to the edge of the pool. The pistol was still pointing at him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Marciano screamed. “You work for me, not them!”

“Not any more,” Mugsy said, looking fearfully past Marciano's dripping head at the deep water.

“Damned if I'm going to get drowned just because youse is a cheapskate. Youse loan dese guys some money, you hear?”

“All right, all right. I'll loan them some goddamned money tomorrow. Just let me out of this fucking cold water.”

“Tonight,” Mugsy insisted. “I'm going back to da Big Apple foist thing in da morning. I don't like Texas no more.”

“Tonight, then,” Marciano shivered. Mugsy stretched out one hand to help him out of the pool, and kept the other one, with the pistol, pointing between his eyes.

“Remember, it was all your idea,” Williard said to Marciano, once he was back on dry land. “You're investing in a surefire proposition. It's not every day a banker gets to finance a dinosaur

expedition.”

“You fucking guys are crazy!”

“What did you say?” Jason stopped twirling his pistol.

“I said it's a great opportunity.”

“That's what I thought you said. Let's get to the bank. Mugsy, why don't you go along with Mr. Marciano and we'll follow right along behind. If I remember, Larry said the bank was right on the edge of the river. Be careful, we wouldn't want you to fall in, would we?”

Mugsy shivered, shaking droplets of water from his suit. He had almost

drowned once as a child and was deathly afraid of water. He grabbed Marciano by the collar and began marching him toward the parking lot. He looked back over his shoulder to be sure the Texans were following. He hoped the river wasn't too close to Marciano's bank. Just the thought of it terrified him. He vowed that if he ever came back to Texas, he would learn to swim first.

“Good idea you had, brother,” Jason said.

“Yeah,” Jerry agreed. “Shit, I haven't had so much fun since we closed down the officer's club that time in Chu Lai.”

“You should have been with us when we

stole the Colonel's customized Jeep," Williard said. Monica had draped herself all over Jason, hoping the loan wouldn't take long, so that she could get him off to herself. Terry and Donna were looking at the brothers with awe. Terry decided right then that she would take a leave of absence if the banker really did give them the loan. She didn't care whether they found a dinosaur or not, she just wanted to see what the wild Williards would pull off next. Donna decided that she was glad she had left her hippie husband. Drug dealing was an exotic profession, but chasing dinosaurs had that beat a mile. Then she thought of something and her smile faded. Larry was fending off Jeannie and trying to

count the dollar signs that kept popping up in his mind.

* * * *

“We'll wait here,” Jeannie said, when Jason pulled the Oldsmobile into the parking lot of the bank. She leaned against Larry and put her arms around him.

“OK. Come on Verrys,” Williard said, deciding to give Larry a break. The wine and rum Jeannie had mixed together had made her forget all about garage sales.

The night watchman stared at the wet banker, his giant companion and what appeared to be triplet brothers trailed by

exotic female accomplices when they came into the lobby.

“Don't mind us,” Williard said. “We're just here for a loan.”

“At this hour?”

“It's an emergency,” Marciano said weakly.

“Yeah. If we don't get some money right quick, the dinosaur might be gone before we get there.”

“Dinosaur? What dinosaur?”

“The one that lives in the Congo.”

“You're crazy!”

“Just open the goddamned elevator before I have to go swimming again,” Marciano said.

“Yeah. Youse open up right now,” Mugsy said, looking past the lobby toward where the wide, deep Trinity river flowed under the bridge, dividing Oak Cliff from northern Dallas. He shuddered. The bank guard stared up at the sheer height, width and battered face and ears of Mugsy and decided it was no business of his if a wet banker wanted to make a loan to triplet cowboys in the middle of the night. On second thought, he decided it was probably a hallucination from the joint he had just

finished smoking. That was a more logical explanation. He inserted his key into the elevator lock.

“One forty nine, one fifty. There. Now sign these papers.” Marciano had gotten over his fright and was barely concealing his ire. He shoved the loan form across the table where he had counted out the money, hoping no one would notice the payment date he had filled in.

Williard was smarter than that, even with a hefty potion of rum inside. “Better change that date. Leave it open, just in case that dinosaur doesn't cooperate. Oh, I almost forgot. You better add another

ten or so for Doctor Wilson.”

Marciano started to protest, then saw the look on Mugsy's face. He erased the date, and added another ten thousand dollars, wondering how he was going to explain the loan to the Boss of Bosses in New York when he got wind of it.

“Thanks, you've been swell,” Williard said, when he was finished “I'm going to recommend all my friends to you in the future.”

“Mine, too,” Jason said.

“Next time I get in a poker game I'll come see you,” Jerry said.

Marciano glared impotently at the brothers. “Don't do me any favors. Fucking dinosaurs, my ass.”

Chapter Six

Larry disengaged from Jeannie when he saw his brothers-in-law coming out of the bank. It took some persuasion since Jeannie was less than cooperative. “Down, girl. Wait til we get home.”

“Yeah, Sis, your dress looks like it tried to escape while we were gone,” Williard grinned.

“It's probably scared of her next garage sale.” Larry was hurriedly tucking his shirt back in his trousers.

“Did you get the loan?”

Williard hefted the bulging briefcase he had appropriated from Marciano's desk. "No problem. Maybe we ought to recruit Mugsy. He seems to have a way with bankers."

"Nope. He would probably go catatonic when he saw the lake, let alone the dinosaur," Jason said.

"Then let's head for home," Jerry suggested.

"Yeah, I have to go to work tonight—I mean tomorrow," Larry said, leering at Jeannie.

"Do I have to go?" Monica asked, trying to crawl into Jason's lap as he got

behind the wheel.

“If you want to get paid, you do.”

“You mean you're going to pay me for a change?”

“Absolutely, just as soon as we get another patient.”

“I have something better than that for you,” Williard said. He reached into the briefcase and pulled out a bundle of hundreds. “Marciano decided you probably needed another loan.” He handed Larry the money.

“All right!”

“Let's go home,” Jeannie said, moving in on Larry again.

“On the way.” Jason visualized the yellow carrier landing ball, took off over the curb and began driving erratically down the sidewalk. He laughed wildly. “Whoops! The landing officer must be drunk!” He steered the Olds back onto the street and headed more or less south, back toward Oak Cliff and home.

* * * *

When Williard woke up the next morning, the first thing he saw was the briefcase sitting on the bedside table. He shook his head, then immediately

regretted the action. He eased himself into a sitting position. The briefcase was still there. Unless he had dreamed the whole thing, it contained a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, enough to finance Jason's crazy idea of hunting a dinosaur in the Congo. Or was it crazy? Maybe there was a dinosaur hidden away in darkest Africa. And even if there wasn't, it sounded like a better deal than going back to school or going to work in a Hospital somewhere. The only thing which worried him was that the whole proposition was going too fast, seeming to take on a life of its own. He tried remembering all the conversations and events which had taken place the day before, but attempting to sort them out

made his head hurt even worse.

Beside him, a Very naked Terry stirred. She rolled over onto her back and covered her eyes with one hand. The motion caused her lovely breasts to move in interesting directions before they found their center of gravity, but Williard's head hurt too much for him to appreciate it. She peered at him with bloodshot eyes from between two fingers. "What happened? Did we have a car wreck?"

"Not that I remember, but then I don't remember everything."

"Did we find the dinosaur?"

“We haven't started looking yet. At least I don't think we have. Gawd, my head. This reminds me of the morning after a jungle juice party.”

“What's a jungle juice party? Never mind, I don't want to know. Do you have any aspirin?”

“I've got something better than that, if I can make myself move.”

“Tell me where it is and I'll move. I haven't felt this bad since the morning after high school graduation.

“Look in my bag in the closet. There's a bottle of pills there in an unmarked bottle. Bring something to drink with it.”

Williard watched Terry crawl painfully from the bed and creep carefully to the closet, walking as if the carpet were covered with broken glass. Despite his excruciating hangover, he felt his body stir at the sight of her naked figure. He held a dim picture in his mind of some enthusiastic gymnastics after they had gotten back last night, but even more, he remembered how well she had adapted to the whole unlikely episode of the previous night. Most women he knew would have called for the little men in white coats long before the evening was done, but she not only kept pace with him and his brothers, but had actually seemed to enjoy herself.

Terry found the bottle of pills in his bag after some squinting, which made her eyes hurt. She brought the pills and a glass of water from the bathroom.

Williard took the bottle, but eyed the water with distaste. "I was hoping you would find something stronger than water," he said.

Terry shuddered. "God, don't tell me you want to start drinking again."

"This here medicine goes better with hair of the dog," He had brought the pills back from his last duty assignment. They contained Aspirin, Tylenol and caffeine, combined with a strong leavening of codeine and phenobarbital, the best cure

he had ever found for a hangover. He opened the bottle and tilted it to his mouth.

“I think you're supposed to take them, not drink them,” Terry giggled through her pain. Didn't he ever let up?

“It's a cinch you never had any of Dum-Dum's jungle juice,” Williard said. Dum-Dum had been his pharmacist when he ran a dispensary during one of his tours in Vietnam. Dum-Dum was constantly experimenting with jungle juice, made from grain alcohol, fruit juice, Phenobarbital syrup, beer and several other ingredients. He claimed he was trying to achieve the potency of the white lightning he was used to drinking

in the mountains of West Virginia before he got drafted.

“All right, if you're sure they'll help.” Terry took the bottle from Williard's hand and shook out several pills. She took hers with water.

“Give them a few minutes to work, then we'll go see if anyone else is still alive.”

While they waited for the pills to take effect, Williard considered the girl laying beside him with her eyes closed. Fun aside, he was beginning to really like her, and not just for her looks. She seemed to possess a more thoughtful spontaneity than the two women his brothers had hooked up with, not that she

hadn't gone along with the wild exuberance of the previous days' reunion, but he knew she had joined the fun with concealed reservations, willing to party but thinking in terms of a more solid relationship if she liked what she found. Donna and Monica, on the other hand, were the type, he knew, who couldn't think past the next man or the next party. He doubted that they would consider quitting their jobs and taking off to the Congo once they sobered up and thought it over.

Terry opened her eyes. "I think the pills are starting to work. Did we really do every thing I think we did last night?" Dinosaurs. Mafia bankers. A gigantic

thug the Williard brothers had handled as easily as putting a baby back in its playpen. They were awesome.

Williard pointed to the briefcase and grinned. "Sometimes we get carried away, but it usually works out. Or at least it has so far. If you feel like it now, let's go see if there's anything left to drink in the house."

A few minutes earlier, the thought of another drink would have sent her reeling to the bathroom, but now it didn't seem like such a bad idea. Suddenly she remembered Williard's lovemaking after they had gone to bed the previous night. Or morning, as it was. She sighed, then stretched. "If we keep on like we have

the last two days, I'm liable to decide to hang around for a while. If I can stand it, that is, and if Jeannie will let me stay.”

“No problem there, though we may wind up sleeping on the floor if she sells the bed at a garage sale.”

He reached out a hand and helped her upright. “Come on. Let's go get breakfast.”

“I thought you wanted a drink?”

Williard grinned. “That's what I said.”

The others were already up, after a fashion, and congregated in the den. Jerry was sitting on one of the barstools

with his head in one hand and the other one occupied with a bottle of rum which he was trying unsuccessfully to open. Jason was sprawled on the couch with Monica. Neither of them looked as if they'd had much sleep. Donna was missing and Larry was ensconced in his easy chair, eyeing a Bloody Mary as if it were a curative potion too awful-tasting to drink. Jeannie was shakily trying to get some coffee going, but kept missing the basket with the scoop. Coffee grounds were scattered around the percolator like piles of misplaced brown sand.

“Good morning, everybody.” Williard said cheerfully. His pills were already

working wonders.

“Gawd, my head,” Jerry moaned.

“Gawd, my stomach,” Larry said.

“Gawd, this is worse than getting shot down,” Jason vowed.

“Look, fellows,” Williard said, holding up the pill bottle he had thoughtfully brought along. His brothers rushed him like linebackers after a quarterback. They remembered the times in Vietnam when Williard had rescued them from horrible death with his pills.

“What's that?” Larry asked without much interest. He took a sip of his Bloody

Mary as gingerly as if it contained cobra venom.

“Something to make you feel better,” Williard said.

“I'll have a couple of dozen, then.”

Williard rescued the bottle from his brothers and passed out pills to Larry, Monica and Jeannie, then led Terry over to the bar and opened the bottle of rum Jerry had been struggling with. He poured cold tomato juice into two glasses, added generous dollops of liquor and handed one of the drinks to Terry. She drank as enthusiastically as Williard, standing by the bar with his arm around her waist. A pleasant glow

began to work its way through her body, then on into her mind as the alcohol supplemented the codeine she had taken. Dinosaurs again began to seem like a fine idea. Presently, the others began to come back to life.

“What was that stuff?” Larry asked.

“Nothing much. Just a little aspirin, Tylenol, caffeine, phenobarbital and codeine.”

“Be damned. I can prescribe that. Why didn't I ever think of it?”

“I just discovered it accidentally, myself but if you can prescribe it, I'll take a thousand or so with us when we go to

the Congo.”

“Won't the pharmacist get suspicious?” Jeannie asked. She was sitting in Larry's lap, a satisfied glow on her face despite the residual effects of mixing rum and wine.

“I'll tell him Jim has a hell of a toothache. Say, did we really talk Mario into giving us some money last night?”

“Mugsy was very convincing,” Williard confirmed.

Jason laughed. “He sure was. I never saw anyone so afraid of water.”

“Can I get paid now?” Monica asked.

“Just as soon as I get up the energy to go back to the bedroom,” Larry agreed, finally remembering the bundle of money Williard had handed him last night.

“Good,” Monica said. “I’ll go open the office. Maybe we’ll have some patients today.”

“I don’t think I could look at a patient right now. Why don’t you go open the office, Monica? I’ll stop by later.”

“All right, Doctor Wilson,” Monica said. She was back to her normal self. She shook hands with Jason and left, leaving him with a bewildered look on his face.

“What's wrong with her? Last night she was bouncier than a shark in a rowboat full of sailors.”

“She's sober this morning,” Larry explained.

“Oh well. I was sober once, too.”

Williard scanned the faces around the room. “Where's Donna?”

“She said she had to go see her lawyer,” Jerry said. He didn't look too unhappy at her absense. Williard figured that after sobering up, she might have decided that drug dealing was safer than hanging around with Williards.

“I'm glad I didn't marry into a normal family,” Larry said.

“My brothers are normal,” Jeannie said.

“So is a hurricane. Never mind, I'm not complaining. Where I came from, the most exciting thing that ever happened was a square dance. Come on Jason, tell us some more about the dinosaur.”

Jason replenished his drink, then brought a thick folder from his room and sat back down. He opened the folder and began passing around maps and sheets of foolscap and vague excerpts from newspapers, some of them decades old. “My friend gathered all this data after he came back from working over there, but

part of it comes from conversations with tribesmen and old colonists who are familiar with the story. None of the old folks really believe the tales, but I've checked and rechecked and can't find any inconsistencies. If there's not a dinosaur there, there's sure as hell something the Pygmies are concealing.”

Chapter Seven

With Terry sitting beside him and looking on with real interest, Williard examined the legends on the maps Jason had provided. It was easy, since the author had drawn them according to military specifications. Lake Tele, where the dinosaur purportedly lived, appeared to be bounded by swamps to the south and east, hills to the north and a swampy river, labeled Ndok River to the west. The whole area was labeled Rain Forest. He didn't like what he saw. "Brother, it looks to me like this would be a hell of a place to get lost in. I had enough of jungles in 'Nam."

Jason grinned. “At least you knew what to expect there. This place is totally unexplored, but don't worry; we'll fly in to Lake Tele if at all possible.”

“That's what I was afraid of. What if you suddenly decide to dump another airplane?”

Jason shrugged. “I've lived through crashes before.”

“Yeah, but we haven't.”

“I think we ought to take our chances with a plane,” Terry remarked, after Williard explained the topographical marks to her.

“It couldn't be much worse than the Mekong Delta,” Jerry said.

Jason shook his head. “It's worse, believe me. My friend told me that the heat and humidity and parasites are so bad that his troops went without clothes most of the time.”

Larry eyed Terry's trim figure on the couch beside Jason. “Maybe I will go along, after all.”

“I think we'd better stay here,” Jeannie said, seeing where Larry's gaze was resting.

“I think you'd better, too,” Jason said. “The way I hear it, there's still lots of

fighting in the area between various tribes. Some of them are backed by the CIA and some by the Russians. Practically every male in the region carries weapons and they don't give much of a shit who they shoot at. We might get caught up in some fighting or get captured by Pygmies, or not be able to land on the lake and have to go overland. I don't really expect this to be as easy as it sounds.”

Williard felt his heart skip a couple of beats. He remembered combat very well. It sounded to him as if they should go well armed and well provisioned and with several contingency plans in case the expedition ran into unexpected

trouble. Well, whatever happened, he was bringing it on himself by not going out and looking for an honest job. Terry was another matter, though. She couldn't possibly understand what they might be getting into. He turned to her and said, "Terry, honey, are you sure you want to get involved with this scheme? It could get awfully dangerous."

"I'm a pilot, I know how to shoot a gun, and I've been backpacking out west. I want to go." Or at least I think I do, she told herself. Williard had called her 'honey'. It was the first real endearment she had heard from him. And he seemed genuinely concerned for her safety. Maybe there was more to him than a

frenetic combat veteran looking for adventure and easy money. She hoped so, anyway. Maybe he just needed to find a woman who wasn't a shrinking violet like Donna or an airhead like Monica. Williard shrugged and patted her thigh. If she wanted to go, why not? She was fun and seemed to have a little more on the ball than most women.

“What's all the rest of the money for?” Larry asked. He was hoping there might be a little left over to add to his boodle.

“If you think the bureaucrats are slow in this country, wait til we get to Africa. According to my sources, every piece of paper over there has a price tag on it. You either pay or grow a long gray

beard waiting for things like airport clearances and so forth. Plus, we'll be needing to avoid customs inspections and the like."

"Why avoid customs? Are we going to be smuggling?" Terry asked.

"They frown on weapons being brought into most of the countries there, even though they're already all armed to the teeth from the cold war, but I'm damned sure not going to face Mokele Mbembe with my bare hands, not to mention gorillas and crocodiles and them little pygmies and their machetes," Jason said.

Williard could go along with that, but he had another question. "You said we'd fly

into Lake Tele. How do you know there's even a place to land?"

Jason looked smug. "I've already told you I can't guarantee we can land on the lake, though from what the maps show I don't think it will be a problem. We'll buy an amphibian, big enough for four or five passengers and our cargo. It only has to have enough range to get across the Atlantic to Africa, or if not, we can refuel in the Caribbean. After that, we'll hop down to the coast of Africa and pick a spot as close to Lake Tele as we can, probably Brazzaville. That's a city down south of the lake. We'll land there and find an interpreter who can speak the Pygmy language, then make the final hop

right to the lake.”

“All that sounds great, brother, but are you sure you can buy us a good enough plane for only twenty thousand?”

For the first time Jason looked less than certain. “I'll admit it won't be anything just off the assembly line, but there's still lots of old World War II planes around you can get cheap and I can do any repairs it might need before we take off.”

“Hmm.” Williard said. He knew his brother had been a jet aircraft mechanic in the marines before going to flight school, but he wasn't certain that carried over to thirty-year-old propeller aircraft.

Oh well, he thought, get a hunch, bet a bunch. Lose your ass, sleep in the grass. It's still better than going to work.

“Don't worry, Jim. If a plane flew once, I can get it into the air again,” Jason said.

“For how long, though? That's what I'm worried about.”

“Long enough to get there and back. Let's move on. We need to get our list of supplies drawn up and get them bought. You guys can do that while I look around for a plane.”

“Have we decided who all's going yet?” Williard asked. Terry placed a

possessive hand on his knee. He patted it reassuringly.

“I think Donna was having second thoughts this morning,” Jerry said.

“Monica won't go unless you load her up with liquor first,” Larry said.

“So that just leaves us and Terry.” Williard squeezed her hand. This would be a new one for him, taking a woman along on an adventure. He hoped his protective instinct wouldn't get in the way of business. Jason nodded agreement. “OK, that's settled. Now for weapons.”

“I'll get those,” Williard volunteered.

“M-16's?”

“Yeah, guess we better. We all know how to handle them. And some automatic pistols and an elephant gun.”

“What in hell do we need an elephant gun for?”

Jason gave one of his famous grins. “Elephants. What else? Or would you rather hunt them the way the Pygmies do?”

“OK, one elephant gun.”

“I thought you guys were so brave. Why don't you do it like the Pygmies do?” Terry asked, straining to keep a straight

face.

Jason was wrongfooted. He looked startled for a moment, then grinned. “Fuckit, if we run across a mad elephant, I'll tackle it barehanded.”

Williard thought that he might even do it, considering the way he flew over North Vietnam during the war, as if he were invulnerable, never mind what happened to his planes. What chance would an elephant have? And come to think of it, he sort of felt the same way. Hell, with enough rum, I might tackle an elephant myself!

* * * *

That afternoon, Jason borrowed Jeannie's car and left to check out newspaper ads for airplanes, or failing there, to drive around to some of the smaller airports near Dallas and Ft. Worth to see what he could scare up. Williard took Jerry with him in his Cougar, leaving Terry to follow in her car, then let Jerry have his car when they arrived at Terry's apartment. He was to go around to Army surplus stores and begin buying supplies.

“I can't believe I'm really doing this,” Terry said, as she began packing a suitcase.

“I can't, either,” Williard grinned. “Of all the crazy things we've ever gotten

mixed up in, this has to be the weirdest.”

Terry selected some of her older underwear and dropped it into the suitcase. “I just thought: what if we get over there and find out all those stories about dinosaurs were just something made up by the Pygmies to scare people away from their homeland?”

Williard thought a bit before answering. “The worst that can happen if we come up empty is that we're broke again, and we'll have had a good time. Life is too short to worry about the future.”

Terry added jeans and tops. “I sort of felt the same way, after the airlines refused to hire me just because I'm a

woman. I thought being a stew would be just a little flying and adventures and lots of parties, but it wasn't quite that way. There's more work than most people know to being a stew and lately even the partying has begun to pall. It was beginning to seem like I was on a merry-go-round.”

Williard grinned. “You couldn't prove it by last night.”

She dimpled. “You guys renewed my faith in men. I thought all that was left were draft dodgers, hippies, stock brokers and preachers, not to mention a bunch of dull military types, and then you and your brothers turn up, like a gang of pirates let loose in Sunday

School. I could hardly believe it when that goon made Marciano give you all that money.”

“I think Mugsy might be regretting his actions if he really did go back to New York. The Mafia doesn't like turncoats.”

“Do you really think he belongs to the Mafia?” Terry vaguely remembered some talk about the banker being associated with the underworld, but she had been having so much fun at the time that it hadn't really registered.

“Probably, and Marciano as well.”

Terry began emptying drawers and medicine cabinets in the bathroom. She

thought of all the stories she had read about the shadowy underworld organization and abruptly stopped what she was doing. "What about us? Won't they try to get the money back when the big boss hears how we got it?"

Williard had been a little uneasy about that matter himself, but he hadn't mentioned it to anyone. He shrugged nonchalantly. "Don't worry, we'll be gone by then, and when we get back, we'll be too famous for them to bother us."

Terry turned back to her packing, working a little more rapidly than she had been. If the Mafia did decide to come after them, she didn't want to be

the one delaying their getaway!

Chapter Eight

Don Falino, Boss of Bosses, often referred to as "Godfather", ran his underworld empire from New York, but his tentacles extended everywhere, encompassing a network of shady banks and businesses where he hid his money and an even shadier network of hirelings and hangers-on who kept him informed of happenings on the frontiers of his territory. This network extended even into such mundane places as a country club in Oak Cliff and to the airline terminals his drug dealers used. One of his dirty businesses was Marciano's bank and one of his dealers happened to be Donna's now-estranged husband, the

one with the wired-up jaw and missing teeth, courtesy of Jerry Williard. Falino was a conscientious executive. He went to work even on Saturday mornings, getting to his Manhattan office while most New Yorkers were still in bed. Now he sat in an oversized, luxuriously padded office chair behind a desk big enough to play tennis on. He had just finished reading his morning summary, prepared for him by Emilio Grazino, his underboss. He was not pleased with what he read. It was even worse than what the phone calls he had received at home suggested. His thick sensuous lips curled downward in distaste and his grizzled eyebrows grew furrows deep enough to plant corn in. He touched a

button on the desk.

“Grazino.”

“Yeah, boss.”

“Get in here. Now.”

Grazino had known he would be summoned. He had been waiting. He was thin and sinewy, with a face pinched into a permanent pruneey frown. He hurried from the alcove outside the office, where he had been waiting, and into the Don's presence. When he saw the Don's face, he expected immediate orders to let contracts out on numerous unfortunates mentioned in the report. The Don surprised him.

“This is unbelievable,” Falino said.

“Yeah, Boss.”

“I would never have believed anyone could get the best of Mugsy.” Mugsy was the Don's chief enforcer. Just the sight of him was usually sufficient to sway recalcitrants. He had sent him to Dallas to help Marciano intimidate his “customers” while his bank was being taken over.

“Yeah, Boss. You want a contract on him?”

“No, I want him picked up at the airport and brought here. He's on the 10:07 Pan Am flight coming in this morning.”

“OK, Boss.” Grazino didn't question how Don Falino had gathered that piece of information. He knew he had many other sources besides himself.

Falino looked down at his notes, then back up. “Now this other problem. According to the report here, one of those rednecks who doused Mugsy in the pool was also responsible for breaking Franko's jaw when his screwy wife came on to him at the airport terminal in Dallas.”

“You want him brought in, too?”

“No, you fool! I want a contract on him, but first I want to know what happened to the money he was carrying. It's gone.

Have a couple of the boys cover the hospital where he's laid up and pick him up when he's discharged. In the meantime, track down his wife. Find out if she took the stash and whether or not those cowboys got their hands on it.”

“OK, Boss. What about Marciano?”

“We'll let him stew a bit until I send Mugsy back.”

“You're letting Mugsy off, Boss?”
Grazino couldn't believe what he was hearing. Not only had Mugsy been bested, he had left Dallas with his work unfinished, apparently intending to desert the organization. The most liberal punishment for such a crime was

dismemberment and a cement collar. Falino sighed. Grazino was good at carrying out orders, but he wasn't capable of seeing the big picture.

“I'm not letting him off. I'm sending him back to do the job properly. Don't you understand? We've been humiliated. If word gets out that three cowboys and a bankrupt dentist can take down Mugsy and rob one of our banks of a hundred fifty G's, we'll not only lose Dallas to the Southern Mob but the other families will laugh us out of the city.”

“Oh, I get it. Don't worry, Boss, I'll have Mugsy here in no time. Uh, can I ask you a question, Boss?”

“Make it quick. I got other matters to tend to.”

“What happens if Mugsy don't want to go back to Dallas?”

“I'll reason with him.”

Grazino shivered. He knew how the Don reasoned. He hurried off on his errands, hoping he would never be put in a position to be “reasoned” with!

* * * *

When Donna left Larry and Jeannie's home early Saturday morning, it wasn't to go see her attorney, despite what she had told Jerry. She had suddenly

remembered that they had never picked up their luggage. Franko had only checked one item, but that happened to be a suitcase containing more money than she had ever seen in her life, part of the proceeds from his biggest drug deal ever, which he was supposed to have delivered to a contact in Dallas. She had gotten so swept up with the charismatic naval officer and his brothers that she had forgotten it until the next morning; picking up the baggage was something Franko normally did, but of course he had been carried off to the hospital with a broken jaw, and Jerry had hustled her away before the airport security police arrived. She knew if the money didn't get to whatever bank had been designated to

receive it, some Italian personage of Mugsy's ilk would be around asking why, and if Franko couldn't produce it, they would come looking for her, since she was the one who normally carried the baggage tags.

On the way to the airport, she worried herself into a state of near paralysis by wondering if the suitcase would still be there. What did the airport authorities do with unclaimed luggage? If they didn't hold it, she knew she would be in more trouble than she could possibly handle. That is, if she slowed down long enough to let Franko's superiors catch her. The thought of having to run for her life suddenly made an idea pop into her

head, an idea so daring she had to pull off the freeway to stop and gather her wits. What if the money was there, and what if she didn't carry it to Franko, but simply kept it for herself and disappeared? She hated to think what would happen to Franko, but that would be his problem. Over the last year, she had become thoroughly disillusioned with him. A few little small deals, made, as he said, to simply keep their own supply of pot and cocaine at reasonable levels, had turned into larger and larger ones. And as the deals got bigger, he had grown increasingly flaky, mainly because he couldn't keep his nose and mouth out of his own product. Donna didn't mind a little hit or snort every now

and then, but that was all Franko seemed to care about any more. When she threatened to leave him, he told her she couldn't; she knew too much. The situation had become a quandary, an increasingly worrisome one, but now, if the money were still at the terminal, she had a way out. She could fly off somewhere and live in luxury for a long, long time. Maybe Jerry would like to go with her. He was fun. She wondered if he would, rather than going off on some wild expedition looking for a dinosaur that almost certainly didn't exist. After a while, she got herself under control and pulled back onto the freeway, still undecided.

* * * *

At the airport, the unclaimed suitcase had finally been removed from the carousel and set aside until someone found time to take it to the baggage master. It was still sitting there when Jerry stopped by the airport to pick up his own unclaimed bag. After punching Donna's husband, he had decided that discretion was the better part of valor and it would be best to return later and claim it. He checked first with the baggage master, who could find no record of it.

“We've been swamped,” the baggage master told him. “Check down by the carousel. Maybe it's still there.”

“OK,” Jerry agreed, wondering whether it was worth the trouble. All his bag contained was some shaving gear and uniforms, and he certainly wasn't going to be wearing them any more. He almost decided to just forget it, but thought that since he was already there, it wouldn't hurt to look. Jeannie could always use the uniforms for one of her garage sales. He went down the escalator to the baggage section. Most flights for the day had already come and gone; the big room was nearly empty. He wandered around, looking here and there, and finally spotted the generic-looking little suitcase, leaning against a wall. He picked it up and looked around for

someone to take his baggage tag. When he couldn't spot any uniforms, he shrugged and walked out of the baggage room, onto the up escalator and out to the parking lot. He tossed the bag into the trunk of Williard's Cougar and drove away. Meanwhile, another bag, almost exactly identical to his, was making a misdirected trip to Boston.

* * * *

“But it must be here somewhere!” Donna wailed.

“I'm sorry, ma'am. So far as I can tell, your bag never arrived here. The best I can do is put a tracer on it for you and see if we can track it down. In the

meantime, there's some forms there if you want to file a claim.” He pointed to a little table visible through the open door of his office, with two straight-backed chairs next to it. The table contained a stack of claim forms and pencils. “Just be sure to list everything you can remember that was in the bag.”

That'll be the day, Donna thought to herself. I can just see me filling out that form. Contents: Five hundred thousand dollars in used hundred dollar bills. Her hands trembled as she returned the baggage stub to her purse. She tried to smile. “I'll wait and see if it turns up somewhere. No use filling out a claim until we're sure it's lost.”

“Sure thing, Lady. Just leave your phone number so we can get in touch with you.”

“I'll have to call you back. I'm not sure where I'll be yet.” What an understatement. She knew where she would be if the money didn't turn up: sleeping with the fishes. In the meantime, she wasn't about to go back to their apartment. Franko might be out of the hospital and back there by now. Just as she reached her car and was unlocking the door, she spotted two dark, swarthy men in checkered suits getting out of a car two lanes over. She gasped and ducked inside the car, hoping they hadn't seen her. One of the men she knew very

well: he was Franko's bag man. They were already onto her! She ducked down below the steering wheel. She stayed hidden until she thought they would have had time to get well away from her, then drove off, with her hands trembling on the steering wheel and sweat popping out on her forehead like a neophyte toastmaster who had forgotten his speech. She knew for sure now that she couldn't return to her apartment. Even if Franko was still in the hospital, someone would be watching it.

As she drove, she thought momentarily of going to the police and asking for protection, then discarded the idea almost immediately. All that would

accomplish would be to get her arrested. After getting onto the freeway, she drove back to north Dallas and stopped at the first bar she found. It was well into the evening before she came back outside. She found a motel along the north freeway and checked in under a fictitious name. By that time she had decided what to do. She would go back to Oak Cliff in the morning and ask the Williard brothers if she could go along on their expedition. If the Congo wasn't far enough away for safety, nowhere would be.

Chapter Nine

Mugsy was escorted into Don Falino's office by the two button men who had collared him at the airport. He was already resigned to the thought that he would probably be sleeping with the fishes before nightfall. He just wondered why he was being brought in to see the Don before the execution. This was such an unusual occurrence that he decided he would take the opportunity to plead for mercy, not from the death he knew was imminent but from a watery grave. Just the thought of his recent near-drowning by those crazy cowboys sent a wave of horror racing up and down his spine. Anything but water. He would ask to be

buried in the New Jersey wilderness among the remains of former friends and enemies. Surely the Don would allow him that small request. He avoided the Don's eyes and glanced at Grazino, the underboss. Could he appeal to him, maybe?

“Well, Mugsy, I understand you had a little trouble in Dallas,” Don Falino began. “Is that right?”

Mugsy was startled by the gentle, bantering tone of the Don's voice, but he wasn't fooled into thinking he was going to get off. He answered simply, “I'm sorry, Godfather.”

“In fact, you had more than a little

trouble, the way I hear it.”

“Yes, Godfather.”

The Don stood up behind his desk and leaned forward, with his palms spread out flat on its surface. The bantering tone of his voice changed into an ominous rumbling. “In fact, you let a redneck ignorant cowboy take your piece away from you.”

“They wuz three of them, Godfather. Dey confused me and grabbed it while I wasn't looking.”

“And then they marched you out to the swimming pool and tossed you and Marciano into it like a daddy playing

with his kids. And then—” Now the voice was a roar, “—and then, you stuck your spare piece in Marciano's nose and forced him to give away a hundred and fifty G's!! Do you know what that will do to my reputation if it ever gets out? Do you, you oversized, sorry excuse for a hit man! My five year old son could have done better with a cap pistol!”

“I couldn't help it, Godfather,” Mugsy wailed. “They was going to drown me!”

Falino remained standing, staring holes through Mugsy until he got his breath back. “So, they were going to drown you, huh? Come with me. I'll show you what drowning is.” He turned away, opened a door behind his desk and

walked into another room. Mugsy followed tentatively, urged on by the two button men poking him behind each ear with the barrels of their pistols.

Falino allowed Mugsy to enter, then shut the door in the face of the two other men. He was going to show Mugsy something very few others had seen and lived to tell about. Falino loved tropical fish. The secretive door opened up into suite of rooms containing numerous small, and several medium-sized, aquariums. They were bright with a splendid array of exotic many-colored fishes, ranging from tiny minnow-like creatures up to ones a foot or more in length, swimming contentedly among the bubbles from the

oxygenators.

“How do you like them Mugsy? Aren't they pretty?” The Godfather's voice softened, like a little girl telling someone about her dolls.

“Sure, Godfather.” Mugsy's voice was already beginning to tremble in the presence of so much water.

“Then you'll love my real pet,” Falino said happily, like a school boy getting ready to display his prize animal at the state fair. “You'll love Snow White.” He opened the door to the last room in the suite. Inside was a huge aquarium, completely enclosed on top except for one man-sized hatch. He took Mugsy by

the elbow and pulled him close to the glass walls. A six-foot long great white shark moved languidly from the far side of the aquarium and began circling under the hatch.

“Isn't he a beauty?” Falino said lovingly. “See how he swims around under the hatch there? He thinks I have his dinner ready.” He paused, then reflected, “I like to watch him feed. It's always interesting to see if his dinner will drown first or die from blood loss while he's still trying to breathe water.” He turned away from the circling shark to check Mugsy's reaction.

Mugsy's eyes turned up in his head and he collapsed in a dead faint. He came

back to his senses sputtering, from a pitcher of water emptied over his upturned face. He sat up and stared through the glass wall of the aquarium at the shark swimming around and around under the hatch.. He stuck his hands out and made pushing motions, as if he thought the shark was about to slide through the glass and swim through the air to him. “No, No! Please, Godfather, not that! Anything but that!” He began skittering backwards, away from the shark aquarium.

“Get up,” Falino ordered.

Mugsy got to his knees, but that was all he could manage. There was no strength

left in his body. His mind gibbered to itself like a berserk hyena.

“Have I got your attention now?” Falino said.

“Please Godfather, don't put me in that tank,” Mugsy pleaded. The thought was a horror beyond his worst nightmare.

Falino seemed to consider. He rubbed his massive chin, hitched at his trousers and tapped on the wall of the aquarium to attract his pet's attention. It swam slowly by, jagged teeth gleaming whitely from its gaping maw. Finally he spoke. “Well, perhaps I can find something else for Snow White here to eat today. However—” He glared sternly at

Mugsy, “—you have been made a fool of. I have been made a fool of. This must be corrected.”

Grateful tears dripped from Mugsy's eyes. “Anything, Godfather. I'll do anything!”

“Good. I knew you would. Now let's go back and see Mr. Grazino.” Mugsy nearly knocked the Godfather over clawing his way through the door.

“Now then,” Falino sat back down behind his massive desk. “Here is the plan: you will go back to Dallas with Mr. Grazino and several soldiers of his choice. There, you, and that Marciano banker guy, with Mr. Grazino's help,

will collect those three cowboys and their girlfriends, especially Franko's widow, and bring them back here. You and Mr. Marciano will bring back all of the money you were so eager to see him loan them. You will also bring back the money Franko was carrying. His widow will be happy to tell you where it is, I'm sure."

"Yes, Godfather, I'll make sure of that."

Grazino's wrinkled face got a puzzled look on it. He hadn't even let the contract out on Franko yet and here he was talking about his woman being a widow. "When did Franko get it?" he asked. Don Falino checked his watch then his lips parted in a rubbery grin. "Two hours

from now.” He turned back to Mugsy, thought for a moment, then said, “On second thought, once you recover Franko's money, there is no need to return his woman. Make her be missing.”

“Yes, Godfather.”

“Do whatever it takes. If they have left Dallas, follow them wherever they go. Make sure Marciano accompanies you. If word of your first failure ever gets out, it must appear that both of you have redeemed yourselves.”

“Yes, Godfather, thank you, I understand.”

“Be sure you do. And Mugsy?”

“Yes, Godfather?”

Falino reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a replica of the huge pistol Mugsy had been carrying before he had been relieved of it at the country club. He handed it to Mugsy.

“Don't let them get the drop on you again. That would make me very unhappy.”

Mugsy grimaced but accepted the weapon. “I won't, Godfather.”

“Good. Now be gone. I'll be watching.”

“Yes Godfather.” Mugsy knew he would be watching, if not personally, then by

keeping very close tabs on his mission. He felt his huge muscles come back to life. This time he would sap the cowboys first and ask questions later. He didn't dare even think about what failure would mean.

* * * *

Williard dropped Terry off at Jeannie's doorstep and took her car. He drove south on US 69 a few miles, to a sporting goods store he knew of, and drove around until he found a parking spot near the entrance. He went inside, got behind a large shopping cart and strolled back to the firearms section. A tall clerk wearing a straggly beard and long hair was behind the counter. "Can I

help you, sir?”

“Yup. I need three civilian versions of the M-16, three .45 automatic pistols, one .32 automatic pistol and an elephant gun.”

“An elephant gun?”

“Yup.” Williard produced his Texas driver's license.

“Sir, we don't carry elephant guns.” The clerk glanced around nervously, obviously thinking he had a nut case on his hands. A couple of other customers had overheard the request and were staring curiously at Williard.

“Well, give me the largest caliber rifle you have then. I'll also want four clips for each weapon and 500

rounds of ammo for each. Plus holsters for the pistols and slings for the rifles.”

The clerk refused to look at Williard's identification. “Sir, I think I need to call my supervisor.”

Williard took in the beard and long hair. “Bud, the last fucking draft-dodging hippie what didn't take care of me when I asked him politely had to have a new asshole grafted on.” He pulled out a thick wad of bills and placed them on the counter with his driver's license on top. “Now start filling this here cart

before I kick your ass all the way up to Canada where you belong.” He bared his teeth in a hideous smile resembling nothing so much as a mad hyena.

One of the customers, an obvious veteran, laughed. “Hey man, why chase him to Canada? Why don't we just turn him inside out and see what his liver looks like?”

“No point to it,” Williard said. “I already know it's yellow.”

“Why don't we just shave his face and stick a weenie in it so folks will know what he does in his spare time?” another customer suggested.

That portion of the clerk's face not covered by hair turned red. He suddenly remembered that his supervisor was a Korean vet who was just looking for an excuse to fire him. "Never mind, Sir. I'll have to get some of the stuff from the stockroom. Please wait here."

"Don't be too long, bud. I got a date with a dinosaur."

The clerk was back very shortly, but he had to return several times to the stockroom. By the time he was finished, the shopping cart was loaded top and bottom. He added up the tickets. "That will be two thousand, two hundred dollars and seventy six cents, plus tax."

Before paying, Williard examined the heavy-duty rifle the clerk had produced. It held a .56 caliber slug in each of two barrels. Jason would have to be satisfied with that. He checked the rifles to make sure they would be able to convert them from semiautomatic to automatic fire, and the boxes of ammunition to be certain it was all the proper caliber. Satisfied, he let the clerk sort through his wad of cash and deduct the total. He started to push the overloaded cart. It would barely move, even after putting his shoulder into the effort.

“Here, let me help,” the friendly veteran said. He moved in beside Williard and between the two of them, they got the

cart moving.

“Appreciate the help,” Williard said.

“Glad I was handy. I hate hippies. Say, what was that about a dinosaur?”

“Me and my brothers are going looking for one in Africa.”

The veteran eyed Williard speculatively as they pushed the cart through the exit and out to Terry's car. He assisted Williard in loading his armory into Terry's little Falcon, no mean feat, then shook hands with him. He smiled. “I wish you could take that clerk along and feed him to it.”

Williard grinned. “Now why didn't I think of that?”

Chapter Ten

Williard was back home at Jeannie's, and had the weapons unpacked and scattered over the carpet of the den. He sipped at a rum and coke while he examined each in turn, then filled a clip and inserted it in each and checked the action to be sure he had done the conversion right, before setting them aside. Jeannie stared cautiously at the pile of weapons as if they constituted the ingredients of a smoking volcano about to explode. Williard glanced up at her occasionally and grinned happily, like a child opening Christmas packages. Terry sat in Larry's easy chair, getting the feel of the .38 automatic pistol Williard had

bought for her. She felt a wellspring of growing admiration for him. He had not even questioned her ability to shoot, but had simply handed the pistol to her as if it were nothing more dangerous than a mood ring. Williard looked over at her, caught her eye and winked, as she oiled the belt and holster that went with it. Suddenly it dawned on him that she was in Larry's favorite chair.

“Where did Larry get off to?”

“Monica called. She told him he had a cash patient for a change,” Jeannie said.

“Wow. Business must be picking up,” Williard said.

“It sure is,” Jerry agreed, stepping down into the den and heading for the bar. He mixed up a huge potion of rum and coke to compensate for what he had missed while out shopping. “I’ve got your Cougar loaded to the gunwales with all them supplies. Where do we put them?”

“Hell, just leave them there for now,” Williard said. “If I know Jason, he’s already found us a plane. If he has, we can haul them to it tomorrow and save loading and unloading the car.”

“Speak of the devil,” Jeannie said.

Jason stepped into the den. His face was split in a huge grin and flushed with the rum he had consumed during the day. He

mixed a drink only slightly smaller than Jerry's and leaned back against the bar.

“We've got us a plane,” he announced.

Terry's eyes lit up. “Already? What kind?”

“I found an old Albatross in good shape.”

“What in hell is an Albatross?” Williard asked.

“It's a seaplane, but it comes with retractable wheels so it can land anywhere. I should have it ready to go in a week or two.”

“What's wrong with it?”

“Not much, just an engine with loose valves and an oil leak, a bent propeller which causes a vibration in the left wing, a broken latch on the cargo door which caused it to fly open when I took it for a spin and a short wave radio with a faulty antenna. The navigation system is fine except the compass points west instead of north, the sextant has a cracked lens and only half the gauges on the instrument panel work. The barometer and air speed indicators are off a little, but I can compensate for them so long as I can see outside and don't mistake the cracks in the canopy for a road or a river. It's a good old bird.”

Williard and Jerry eyed each other from across the room. They could see that Jason had already fallen in love with the old warbird and it would do no good to complain.

“You said a couple of weeks to get it in shape, then you said the cargo door flew open while you were flying it. What's the deal?” Williard asked.

“I didn't say I took it up; I said I took it for a spin. I just taxied around the runways to make sure it would run. Don't worry, though. It will fly, so long as you know how to compensate for those few little gripes. In fact, we can start loading our gear into it any time. I can work around it while I'm making the repairs.”

“So, if we really wanted to, we could leave Dallas now?” Williard was still thinking of Marciano's Mafia connections and wondering whether they would send a replacement for Mugsy.

“Sure. We'd just have to stop occasionally to patch it up. Why?”

“Just in case,” Williard said. No use speaking up and borrowing trouble. “Where do you have it parked?”

“Hangered,” Jason corrected. “Not very far from here, actually. It's at that little field in Lancaster, south of here.”

Williard knew where Lancaster was.

“Great. Why don't you and Jerry help me finish inspecting these weapons and we'll load them up and run them over in the morning. Jerry already has the other gear in my car.”

“Sounds good to me.” Jason picked up the heavy rifle and worked the action. Williard saw his eyes light up. He loved weapons, from thousand pound bombs to machine guns, and on down to more personal armaments like pistols and rifles and grenades. He smoothed his hands over the stock of the double-barreled monster gun as if he were touching the smooth skin of a woman's thigh. “Man,” he sighed, “this beauty ought to take care of Mokele Mbembe if

it turns out to be unfriendly.”

“If it doesn't, it will damn sure let him know we ain't Pygmies,” Williard said. Jason reluctantly set the huge rifle aside. “I got something else while I was buying the plane.” He pulled a worn book with black binding from his hip pocket.

“What's that?”

“It's a log book what states that I've spent enough hours flying the plane under instruction to qualify as pilot. The logbook cost an extra thousand, but it will save a lot of time otherwise spent complying with them fucking FAA regulations. As if I couldn't fly anything with wings on it already.”

“So how much did all this cost?”

“Twenty two for the plane, a thousand for the log book and I kicked in another thousand for a few buckets of spare parts and some tools.”

“I have a feeling we're going to need them.” Williard said.

* * * *

Later that evening, the brothers had the weapons stowed, partly in Terry's Falcon and partly in Jeannie's Oldsmobile. The Olds was also loaded with the luggage they intended to take, while Jason's Cougar still held all the paraphernalia Jerry had picked up. The

weapons were left uncrated; Jason had suggested that they be wrapped in oilskins and hidden in the Albatross' pontoons as a precaution against customs inspectors not amenable to increasing their wealth. That suited Williard. It was the one facet of the trip to Africa and on to the Congo that he was worried about.

When Larry arrived, exuberant from treating a patient who actually paid in cash, the party began. Or more accurately, it continued. Jeannie, Terry and her brothers had all been spicing their work with rum concoctions Jerry kept inventing. Larry had thoughtfully brought Monica along, which raised Jason's spirits and lowered Jeannie's,

especially after Monica finished consuming her second drink. Whenever Jason wasn't watching her, she eyed Larry with a liquid, predatory gaze. She was exuberant too, having been paid all of her back salary.

“Too bad Donna isn't here,” Williard said to Jerry. “We'd have our three Verys together. Terry was feeling very Very again, warmed by rum and anticipation of another night with Williard. In a way, she hoped it would take several weeks for Jason to get his plane ready. There wouldn't be much room for privacy after they started. If she had known about one of their escapades at Chu Lai with some handy nurses when

all three of them had managed to get together there, she wouldn't have worried about it. The brothers had caused a riot at the officer's club, absconded with the nurses in a borrowed jeep, outwitted the MP's chasing them, and wound up back at Jason's hooch where all three of them and their companions spent the night together in a single room.

“Yeah, she must of run off with her lawyer,” Jerry complained. “Oh well, I'll look around tomorrow and see what comes along.”

“I don't like to come alone,” Monica piped up. Her eyes were beginning to glaze and the top of her blouse was

threatening to overflow. She ran the tip of her tongue over her flushed lips in a suggestive motion.

“Better alone than with someone else I know,” Jeannie said, wondering to herself if she could somehow manage to feed Monica a couple of strong drinks right before takeoff and entice her into departing with her brothers.

Terry couldn't help herself. Whatever Jerry was feeding them, it did nothing to stifle inhibitions. She laughed. Jeannie glared at her and kept a tight grip on Larry's arm.

“Sorry, Jeannie,” Terry apologized.

“Why were you laughing?”

“I was just thinking: if some of my feminist friends spent some time around here it would set the movement back a hundred years.”

Jason guffawed and pulled Monica into his lap to prevent her from heading across the room to Larry. “I knew a feminist once.”

“What happened to her?”

He laughed again. “I talked her into joining the marines and she wound up marrying a colonel.”

“What happened to the colonel?”

“He volunteered for permanent duty in Nam and got his ass shot off.”

“Is there a moral there?”

“Yeah. Femmies are bad for your health.” He swigged from his glass and whispered in Monica's ear. Monica listened attentively, then opened her mouth in surprise. “Really? I better have another drink.”

“What did you say to her?” Jeannie asked.

“I said dentists practice oral hygiene so much it carries over.”

Jeannie blushed. “I think I need another

drink. She let loose of Larry long enough to snatch at her wine bottle and top off her rum with it.

“Jason is dead right,” Larry said.

“Hush,” Jeannie said.

Monica started to get up from Jason's lap. “But most dentists don't have mustaches,” Jason countered.

“So they don't,” Monica said. She sat back down.

Williard was feeling the effects of Jerry's drinks. He felt around to make sure Terry was still beside him.

“I think it's bedtime,” he said.

“Candy ass,” Jason jeered.

“Nope, I just think we're going to continue the party elsewhere.” Williard stood up, wobbled over to the bar and deftly plucked a new pitcher of the frothy brew Jerry had just completed mixing from his hand.

“Come along, Terry. Let's get Very.”

Terry followed him into their room and began undressing. She laughed and said, “You guys are crazier than vampires at a blood bank convention. How come you haven't all gotten locked away somewhere?”

Williard laughed as he fell into bed.
“Who would dare? We'd make all the
other patients look normal.”

Chapter Eleven

Donna left her motel room Sunday morning to find some breakfast. There was a pancake house right next to the motel, near enough to walk rather than drive. As she got to the entrance, she suddenly lost her appetite. The Dallas morning news was displayed in a rack with the headlines facing up. Near the top, a side column announced:

**HOSPITAL
PATIENT SHOT TO
DEATH AFTER**

DISCHARGE

Yesterday evening, Franko Labruzzo, admitted to Good Shepherd

Hospital the previous day for a broken jaw, was found dead only three hours after leaving the hospital. A police spokesman said that Labruzzo had refused to comment on how his injury had occurred.

The spokesman said Labruzzo died of multiple gunshot wounds. There

were no witnesses and the investigation is said to be continuing. Police disclosed that Labruzzo had one arrest

on his record for drug possession and speculation is that...

Donna felt a wave of fright sweep over her. She had ceased feeling anything for Franko long ago, but she knew his death would affect her directly. They would come looking for her next, trying to trace the missing money. She stood indecisively by the entrance to the pancake house for a moment then ran back to the motel. Inside her room, she began hastily throwing what few possessions she had into the bag she had picked up at an Eckard's on the way to the motel the previous day. A change of underwear and some toilet articles was about all it amounted to. She left a few

minutes later and headed south, toward Oak Cliff and the Williard brothers.

On the way, she tried to decide whether asking to go with them to the Congo might endanger Jerry or any of the others. She reviewed in her mind all the events she could remember since encountering Jerry at the airline terminal. She didn't think there was any way Franko could have fingered Jerry. He had knocked him cold then hustled them both out of the terminal. So far as Franko knew, he was just another hated serviceman. Then she remembered Marciano and his enforcer, the giant thug named Mugsy. He could certainly identify her and associate her with the

Williards. Oh shit, she thought. No, wait. Mugsy had left town and Marciano had been too far away at the club to recognize her again, and at the bank, he had hardly taken his eyes off the gun Mugsy was pointing at him. And, she thought, even if the Williards think differently, at least I can warn them. None of them would associate the headline with her ex-husband. She had never even told Jerry his name! She looked into her rearview mirror to make sure she wasn't being followed, then sped up, pushing the little Thunderbird she drove past the speed limit and beyond. She was on US 69 South, nearing the exit she remembered Jerry had taken to get to his sister's house,

when she passed a large black Chevrolet sedan containing four men in dark suits. Odd, she thought, they're all wearing hats.

* * * *

“Hey!” Mugsy yelled. “Follow dat little Thunderboid. That's da broad dat was at the country club wit the sailor!”

“What sailor?” Marciano asked. He had never expected to see Mugsy again, much less be driving with him, two other enforcers, and Don Falino's Underboss himself. They were on their way to Doctor Wilson's home, where he fully expected to see Wilson and his three crazy cowboys cough up his money first

then their lives later.

“Da cowboy sailor. Da one dat smushed Franko's jaw den made off wit da loot!” The more excited Mugsy became, the heavier became his Bronx accent.

“Are you sure?” Grazino asked.

Mugsy remembered his confusion at the country club, but he had gotten a good look at her later at the bank. “Dat's da one all right!”

“Catch up with that car, then block it off,” Grazino said to the driver. “We'll take care of her first.”

Marciano blanched. He would rather

have stayed home and let the professionals take care of the job, but the Godfather's orders had been explicit: he had to redeem himself or else. He didn't even want to think about what the 'or else' might entail.

The sedan swerved into the same lane as the Thunderbird and sped up. Donna pulled off at the Loop 12 bypass, slowed and began looking for street signs. She spotted the one she wanted and turned right, into the residential neighborhood where Doctor Wilson lived. She had gone no more than two blocks when a black sedan zoomed past her, then pulled in front and put on the brakes. Donna swerved to avoid the sedan before she

realized it was after her. Her car jumped the curb, glanced off a light post and turned end-for-end. Dazed, she looked past the shards of the windshield and saw the giant form of Mugsy getting out of the sedan. I'm dead! she thought, but an adrenaline surge grabbed at her vitals and impelled her from the car. She started to run. Her high heels caught in the grass between the sidewalk and the curb and she fell headlong to the ground, banging her head on the sidewalk. She got back to her knees, but was too disoriented to go any further.

* * * *

Williard was seated beside Terry in her Falcon, leading the three car convoy to

the little airport near Lancaster. Jason was following with Jeannie's Oldsmobile and Jerry brought up the rear in Williard's Cougar. They were nearing Loop twelve, driving on a long, straight sparsely populated street when he saw a large black sedan, coming from the opposite direction, scream around a smaller car then brake suddenly, blocking the narrow street. The littler car tried to pass but didn't make it. It veered into a light pole then skidded and stalled. Terry stamped hard on the brakes, pulling to a halt thirty yards from the sedan. Williard was thrown forward, banging his head on the dash.

Terry saw a woman jump from the little

vehicle and try to run. She glanced at the sedan, then screamed,

“Jim, look! That's Mugsy getting out of that car!”

Williard tried to focus his blurred vision. Even though he couldn't see very well through the spots in front of his eyes, there was little problem recognizing Mugsy's profile. No one else could be that huge and still be walking the streets instead of performing in a circus sideshow. He saw another man getting out of the opposite door and thought it was Marciano, though he couldn't be sure. He shook the spots away, leaving no doubt. It was Mugsy and Marciano. Both held handguns and

were pointing them off to the side toward what looked like a vintage Thunderbird with a crumpled fender and a broken windshield. Terry, unhurt by the sudden stop, had already taken in the scene ahead. She could hardly believe what she was seeing. She screamed again. "Jim, that's Donna up there! Do something, they're going to kill her!"

Williard's combat reflexes hadn't deserted him. He didn't know if Mugsy and Marciano were planning to kill Donna or not, but his reaction was immediate. He twisted in his seat and reached back for one of the loose rifles. He quickly chambered a round from the clip and flung himself from the car.

“Stay down!” he shouted at Terry.

Grazino was watching Mugsy and Marciano moving toward Donna, gauging their performance for a later report to Don Falino, when he saw a row of cars braking ahead of him. He saw a mustached man in jeans and boots jump from the car immediately in front of them. He moved so fast it was hard to tell whether he was carrying a rifle or a broomstick in his hands, but Grazino wasn't about to take any chances. He drew his weapon from beneath his jacket and warned his henchmen in the back seat.

“Ahead of us. Take that cowboy out.” As his soldiers drew their weapons and

piled outside, a car behind that one suddenly accelerated, jumped the curb, and swept toward them. Jason's finely-honed fighter pilot's reflexes had taken in the situation immediately. He saw his brother jump from the Falcon with a rifle in his hand at the same time he spotted Mugsy and Marciano off to the side, pointing pistols at the woman from the wrecked Thunderbird. He was almost certain it was Donna. He stomped on the accelerator and swerved violently to the right in order to miss the Falcon, then jerked the steering wheel hard the other way, just as Grazino's soldiers cleared the sedan. The hood of the heavy Oldsmobile plowed into the sedan door and tore it off, then caught Grazino's man

squarely in the chest, knocking him backward. He felt the wheels bump, then bump again as they passed over the body. The other soldier made the fatal mistake of glancing to the side as Jason passed, giving Williard time to level his rifle. He had converted it to automatic fire the night before. He squeezed the trigger and emptied half a clip across the middle of the dark suited man, from his left hip to his right shoulder, before the goon was fully turned back to face him. The bullets flung the man backwards as if he had been smashed with a giant fly swatter.

Mugsy heard the rattle of Williard's rifle, like a string of giant firecrackers

going off. He whirled from where he had been stalking the Thunderbird and was just in time to see one of Grazino's men taken out by a screeching, swerving car, driven as adeptly as a race car at the Daytona Five Hundred, then saw the other soldier falling backwards, stitched with enough bullets to kill an elephant. "It's them goddamned cowboys again!" he wailed to Marciano, wondering in a split-second of fear whether he would rather face them or the Godfather's shark-infested aquarium. The cowboys won, just barely. He fired his massive pistol twice, the shots booming and echoing like thunder. He missed both times, never having practiced on a range. All his work had always been close up,

usually a shot to the back of the head. He saw the cowboy swing the rifle toward him and ducked reflexively, just in time for the speeding Oldsmobile to clip him in the side and fling him into some hedges bordering the sidewalk. Marciano never got off a shot. As soon as he heard Mugsy yell that the cowboys were back, he ducked behind the wrecked Thunderbird, then crawled underneath it like a bear going into hibernation. Grazino saw what was happening and ducked beneath the steering wheel of the sedan. Goddamn, he cursed to himself, who would have expected a bunch of dumb fucking cowboys to be packing that kind of heat? Or to react so quickly? He held his

pistol in one sweaty hand and fumbled for his radio phone with the other, hoping they wouldn't come in after him before his backup car arrived. Jason stood the Oldsmobile on its nose, then backed up fast enough to leave smoking tread marks on the pavement. He screeched to a halt by Donna. He opened the door of the Olds and yanked her inside, across his lap, then made a U-turn using the sidewalks on both sides of the street and raced back the other way.

Jerry was unarmed and helpless, but he didn't hesitate. He pulled forward to the rear of Terry's falcon and jumped out, ducking low, then ran to one of the rear doors and yanked it open. He grabbed

the first weapon he saw, one of the .45 automatics. He spotted Marciano's feet sticking from beneath the Thunderbird and began sniping at them. A terrified yell came from beneath the wrecked car and the feet disappeared.

Williard watched Jason rescue Donna while he kept his eyes open for more opponents. As the Olds barreled back and stopped beside him he saw that Jason was unhurt, though still weaponless. He heard a shot from the Falcon and jerked his head in that direction. Terry hadn't stayed down. She had found the pistol he had bought for her and was aiming shots at the cluster of hedges where Mugsy had gone to

ground. The branches shook with movement as her target burrowed among the trunks, trying to get something denser than leaves between himself and the whining bullets.

“Let's get out of here before the cops come!” Williard yelled at his brothers.

“Follow me!” Jason yelled back. He went to the sidewalks again to reverse directions and blasted off like a Cape Canaveral rocket. Donna, now in the passenger's seat, stared at him in total shock. He took time to reach over and pat her leg. “Relax, babe. All in a day's work.”

Donna didn't answer. She gave a huge

sigh and slipped into blessed unconsciousness.

Chapter Twelve

Williard had no idea where Jason was heading now, but he trusted his brother. He flung his rifle into the back seat and followed, checking the rearview mirror to make sure Jerry was behind them. Once they hit the loop, he thought they were safe, at least for the time being. He doubted that would last, though, not with Mugsy and Marciano still on the loose. "Damn! I thought we had seen the last of them," he muttered to himself.

Beside him, Terry began reloading her pistol. She fumbled with the bullets and dropped several to the floorboard because her hands were shaking so

badly. What am I doing here? she thought. “What am I doing here?” she asked aloud. “Jim, we almost got killed!”

Williard took his eyes away from the road long enough to grin at her. “Not a chance,” he said lightly.

“Them guys were amateurs. If we hadn't had you girls along, we would of took time to stuff their little popguns up their asses and make them squeeze the triggers.” Inside, he wasn't nearly as unconcerned as he pretended to be. There was a fine tremor to his hands and his voice was louder and harsher than it usually was, a post combat reaction he was entirely familiar with, but what

really bothered him was the memory of Terry aiming and firing her .38 like a female cop at the target range. She hadn't listened when he told her to take cover like a woman should have.

“Why didn't you get down when I told you to? You could have got your pretty ass shot off.”

Terry resented his question and the tone of his voice. “I was trying to help,” she said shakily, though that hadn't been in her thoughts at the time. She had been scared that Williard was going to die and the pistol had popped into her hands like magic. She wondered why that thought terrified her so much. She and

the others had been in as great a danger.

“Well, remember next time. We must have pissed off Mugsy and Marciano worse than Landry losing the Superbowl.” Enough to almost get us killed, he thought.

“Don't tell me this is going to happen again,” Terry said. “I couldn't stand—” Her voice broke and she turned pale, as a vivid vision of bullets chewing into the midsection of one of the men flashed through her mind. “Oh, God, Jim, I just thought. We killed some men. We'll be arrested!” Abruptly, she began to cry.

Williard turned off the loop onto US 69, still following Jason. He reached over

and curled his arm around Terry. "Relax, doll. I think being arrested is the least of our problems, so long as we do something about Donna before the cops trace her car. What I'm really worried about is Mugsy's gang coming after us again. Damn, I wonder what induced him to tackle us after we ate his lunch the other night? I really thought we had him buffaloed."

"Evidently you were wrong."

"Well, fuckit. We'll be watching from now on." Ahead, Jason exited US 69 and turned east on a farm to market road. He was close enough to see that he and Donna were involved in an animated conversation. He hoped they were

figuring out a plan, because he sure didn't have one. Terry started to calm down and began remembering how they had become involved in the gunfight. "Jim, why on earth were those thugs chasing Donna? I would have thought it was us they would be after."

Williard shrugged. "Why wonder? I think Jason is heading for the airport at Lancaster. When we get there we'll just damn well ask her!"

* * * *

Grazino considered himself fortunate that the street where the disastrous encounter with the cowboys had taken place was sparsely populated and that

the inhabitants of the few homes along the street were gone, probably to church. His back-up car arrived a few minutes later, but by the time Mugsy and Marciano had crawled from cover, their opponents were long gone and he had no idea where. He would have to call Don Falino and get his help in tracking them down, but there was one thing he could do in the meantime, to make sure that the next time they met he would be holding all the aces. He, Mugsy and Marciano crawled into the back seat of the backup car, leaving the sedan stranded in the middle of the street. Two of its tires were flat from errant bullets. He gave the driver and his companion directions and instructions. A few minutes later

they pulled into driveway of Jeannie's home. Larry was just preparing to take Monica back home when the doorbell rang. He picked up his Coors, to make sure it didn't run off somewhere while he was occupied, and went to answer the door. He pulled it open and found himself staring at the chest of the oversized thug his brothers-in-law had disposed of so neatly at the country club. Marciano was right behind him, and he in turn was backed up by two more men wearing dark suits and dark hats with the brims pulled low.

“Uh Oh,” Larry said.

Mugsy didn't bother with a gun. He plucked the beer from Larry's hand and

crushed it into a little wad of dripping foil, using only his fingers. Then he picked Larry up by the elbows, turned him around and grabbed him by the collar and seat of his pants. He lifted him off the ground and carried him inside. The others followed along behind.

Jeannie's first sight of Larry made her think that he had suddenly learned the art of levitation. He floated through the air two feet off the ground, apparently leading the way for the giant behind him, his banker and two other men she didn't recognize.

Mugsy dropped Larry to the floor.

“Uh, Jeannie, I think we have visitors,” Larry said, as inadequate a statement as he had ever uttered.

“Would you gentlemen like something to drink?” Jeannie said. Then it dawned on her who she was looking at: Marciano and his strongman, with help.

Marciano circled around Mugsy and looked down at Larry. “All right, Wilson, where's the money?”

“I gave it to Monica,” Larry said quickly. “I hadn't paid her for a while.”

“What? You owed that dingbat broad a hundred and fifty thousand dollars? No wonder you're always in debt, paying

her that kind of salary. Where is she?”

“Here I am,” Monica said, coming out of the bathroom when she heard her name mentioned. “Are we ready to go?”

“Not yet,” Grazino said, coming into the room. “I need to use your phone. Where is it?”

“In the den, if Jeannie hasn't sold it,” Larry said, getting to his feet while keeping a wary eye on Mugsy.

“Why would she sell your phone?” Grazino couldn't keep from asking.

“It's just her nature.”

“Never mind. Marciano, you and Mugsy collect the money that daffy dentist owes us, then find out where the cowboys are heading. Watch the broads. I gotta call the Godfather.” Grazino went into the den and called a special number in New York. Don Falino answered almost immediately.

“Boss?”

“Yeah? What's your problem?”

Grazino gulped at the ominous overtone in Falino's voice, but he had no choice. “Godfather, I need some more help. Them cowboys and the other two broads got away while we was tied up with Franko's widow.”

“Well, at least you got her. Did she tell you where that 500 G's was?”

“Uh, the cowboys sort of intervened. She's with them now.”

Grazino heard a splash over the phone and shuddered. The Don must be playing with Snow White, he thought. The splashing sounds ceased and he heard the Don again, his voice sounding like a hangman telling his victim to hold still while he got the noose adjusted. “Are you telling me you let that whole redneck gang get away from you, even with Succi and Paulo to help?”

“Succi and Paulo are dead. Godfather, we couldn't help it. Those cowboys are

meaner than a stiffed whore and they're packing more heat than a gang of Mexican bandits. They shot Succi and ran over Paulo with an Oldsmobile.”

“So they all got away, huh? Snow White is going to love this.”

“Oh no, Boss, no! We've got the dentist and his wife and one of the broads right here.”

There was a pause, then Falino said, “Bring them near the phone so I can listen.”

Grazino yelled for Mugsy and Marciano to hustle their captives into the den. While he waited, Falino told him the

questions to ask. As soon as the three of them were near the phone, being held with their arms behind their backs, he began, starting with Larry.

“Who are those fucking cowboys you've been hanging out with?”

“They're his wife's brothers,” Marciano volunteered. Grazino glared at him and he shrank into his five hundred dollar suit as if it had suddenly grown three sizes too large.

“Is that right?”

“Of course it's right,” Larry said. “Do you think I'd hang around with them if they weren't relatives?”

“Don't talk about my brothers like that,” Jeannie said harshly. “They're just as nice as they can be.”

“Shut up, broad,” Grazino said, but he thought the dentist's remark proved that he was smarter than his wife. “Never mind how nice they are. I only wish I had some soldiers as nice as them. Where were they headed when they left here?”

“To the Congo. They're going to hunt for a Dinosaur,” Larry said.

Grazino heard the Don's exclamation of disbelief. “Don't give me that shit. Tell me where they are right now while you still got both kneecaps.”

“That's really what they said they wanted the money for,” Marciano dared to speak out. “As crazy as they are, they might even be serious.”

“They are,” Larry said. “In fact, they bought a plane yesterday to go in.” He hadn't wanted to say that, but he was fearful of Jeannie's safety.

“I was going to go, but I changed my mind,” Monica said. “I don't think there's any churches to go to in the Congo.”

“Churches?” Grazino was becoming as confused as a New York cab driver riding the subway.

“Yes. That's where the money Larry paid

me is. I mailed it to some churches.”

“Why the fuck would you do that, Lady?”

Monica blushed. “After what I did with Jason when we left the country club the other night, I felt the need for contrition.”

“You dingbat, I should never have gone out with you in the first place,” Marciano complained.

“Shut up,” Grazino ordered. “Lady, tell me you didn't send that whole half-million dollars to a church.”

“Half-million? Larry didn't owe me that much. I only gave them the ten thousand

he paid me.”

Grazino turned to Larry. “All right, you daffy dentist, what did you do with the rest of it?”

“I gave it to Jeannie's brothers, but it was only a hundred and fifty thousand, not a half million. Honest.”

Larry was wishing there had been a half million.

Grazino stared at him. He was good at reading expressions, especially when the person he was looking at had the barrel of a gun poking him in the kidney. He put the phone back to his ear.

“Boss?”

“I'm listening.”

Grazino could hear splashing sounds again. “I think Franko's broad must still have the money, her and the cowboys. What do we do now?” He hoped the Godfather didn't suggest they all come to his aquarium for dinner.

Falino had listened to the conversation with growing agitation. If Grazino hadn't been serving as his underboss for so many years he would have just hung up and let contracts on the whole bunch. As it was, he believed everything, except the story about the Congo and the dinosaur. He figured the cowboys had

probably infiltrated Franko's operation, turned his wife and were probably headed for Mexico or Columbia to parlay their money into more with a big buy of narcotics. Else why the airplane? Well, they wouldn't get away with it. He gave his orders slowly so that there would be no misunderstanding.

“Grazino, I'm going to contact Dallas and get you a few more soldiers, but that's all, understand? You do the job with those and Mugsy and Marciano. I'll find out where the cowboys have their plane and send word with the additional help. If they have left the country, I want them followed, no matter where they go, to the ends of the earth if that's where

they're headed. Then I want them taken care of. You hear? If they ever show up on the streets again Snow White is going to be one very happy shark. Understand?"

"Yes, Godfather. What do you want me to do with this dentist and the two broads?"

More splashing sounds came over the phone. Grazino avoided his captive's eyes, expecting the worst, but Falino was smarter than that.

"Take them with you. Those rednecks might not play so rough once they know you're holding their family."

“Yes, Godfather.” Grazino heard the click of the receiver being hung up.

* * * *

Don Falino put the special phone away and gazed at Snow White, swimming hungrily just below the hatch. Too bad. If it weren't necessary for those cowboys to be eliminated in order to save face, he could grow to like them. They had style.

Chapter Thirteen

Williard's hunch that Jason had been heading for the Lancaster Airport was right on the money. He followed behind and pulled up beside him, next to the single large hanger the airfield sported. Jerry parked next to him a few seconds later. Williard knew something was wrong when Jason didn't stop to speak, but ran through the wide entrance of the hanger and disappeared into its cavernous interior.

“Something's sure got a bug up his ass,” Jerry said to Williard as he pointed to his retreating brother's back, but he didn't try to follow. Instead, he headed

for Jason's vehicle where Donna still sat inside, huddled into a small mass with her arms curled around her chest.

Williard remembered seeing Jason and Donna engaged in spirited conversation while he was following them, and suspected Donna had the answer to why Jason had run inside so fast, as if he had just been shot down and was going through escape and evasion protocol. He joined Jerry as he opened the door to the car. Donna piled out and fell into Jerry's arms.

“Easy, babe, you're safe now,” he said.

“No I'm not and neither are the rest of you!” Donna cried.

“You're OK, now. We took care of the bad guys,” Williard assured her. “But why were they chasing you? It's us they should have been after.” He still didn't understand that part of the puzzle.

“Oh, God! They think I have the money Franko was carrying from his last drug deal.”

“Franko? Who's he?”

“My ex husband. He was shot to death last night. They couldn't find the money so now they must think I have it!”

“You mean Mugsy and Marciano? Hell, we can handle them. In fact, I doubt if they'll ever come within a hundred miles

of us again, especially since they're sort of short of help now,” Jerry said.

“You don't understand! Franko was in with the Mafia. Now they will think you're involved. They'll send more men and track us down and kill every one of us!” She buried her head against Jerry's breast and began to sob uncontrollably.

Williard met Jerry's eyes over the top of Donna's disordered black hair. No wonder Jason was in such a hurry. From inside the hanger came the roar of an airplane engine being revved up. A few seconds later another joined it, sounding different, as if it were struggling to stay up. Williard watched as the massive hanger doors slowly trundled up and out

of the way. The engine noises grew louder and Jason's plane slowly emerged.

Williard was appalled. The massive old Albatross, designed during WWII as a sub hunter and to ferry supplies around Pacific islands too small to have landing strips, looked as if it had been through a battle, then stored away for thirty years in an attic. He thought it might have once been painted blue, but the color had faded to a pallid shade of gray, and the paint was peeling and hanging in tatterdemalion rags. Rust spots and carelessly applied patches were showing through what paint remained. The canopy was cracked and splintered,

though it was hard to tell how badly through the thick layer of imbedded dirt. One engine was vibrating and spewing fine droplets of oil into the prop wash where they mingled with clouds of smoke. In fact, the whole wing on that side of the plane was shaking and rattling as if it were trying to take off in a different direction. One of the tires visible beneath the wings was almost flat and he could see threads showing through bald spots on the other. The forward points of both of the pontoons were crumpled from hitting coral reefs. One of the wing flaps dropped suddenly into a vertical position as something from inside made a popping sound. The plane came to a halt beside their cars.

When it stopped, the cargo door was jarred open and hung askew, like an old barn door which had been kicked open by a horse.

Jason fed a beat-up aluminum ladder through the cabin door and climbed down, leaving the plane idling erratically. He ran over to where his brothers and the girls were staring at the Albatross as if they were standing around a pileup on the Interstate.

“Ain't she a beauty?”

No one answered him.

“Haw! I can see you're speechless with admiration, but we ain't got no time to

waste. Them gomers after Donna are gonna be looking for us as soon as they get some reinforcements. We need to be gone from here.”

“You really want us to take off with you in that antique junkheap?” Williard said.

“Don't knock it. I took it out yesterday, didn't I?”

“Yeah, but you said it needed some repairs.” Williard didn't mind his brother crashing airplanes; he always managed to live through it, but this was ridiculous.

“I can take care of what few little problems its got wrong with it after we

get airborne and what I can't fix now can be done when we land again.”

“Or crash again,” Williard said.

“Whatever. Come on, let's get loaded before the bad guys catch up with us. I don't like to kill more than one man a day; it gets me irritated and makes it hard to concentrate on flying.”

“We wouldn't want that,” Williard said.

“Come on Jerry, lets get the cars unloaded. You girls can help with the lighter stuff.”

The loading went slower than Williard would have liked. He and Jerry had to do the bulk of the work while Jason

made hasty repairs on the cargo door and tinkered with the faulty engine. Their effort was compounded by having to climb the old carpenter's ladder up to the bay with their burdens; the regular ramp was missing.

Williard finished cleaning out the back seat of his Cougar and opened the trunk. He carried several loads up the ladder before uncovering the suitcase Jerry had tossed into the trunk.

“What's this?” He asked his brother.

“Nothing important, just some old uniforms. You can leave it there for Jeannie when she and Larry pick up the cars. They might go good with one of her

garage sales,” Jerry said. Williard dropped the suitcase back in the trunk.

“No, on second thought, bring it along. If this jaunt winds up like it's starting out, I might have to use the uniforms to impersonate an officer and steal a boat for us to get back home in.”

Williard picked the suitcase back up, took it into the plane and shoved it into a compartment out of sight. That was the last item. He wiggled his way through the cargo bay to the cockpit hatch. The door to it was sprung so he didn't have to worry about pulling it open. Terry was already seated beside Jason in the copilot's seat. She was wiggling uncomfortably from a broken seat spring

poking her in the buttocks.

“We're all loaded!” he called up to them.

“Great. Looks like we made it in time. Y'all find a seat back there and we'll get our asses out of here.”

“Where are we headed?”

“Fucked if I know, I haven't had time to figure it out. If I remember right, though, Africa is east of here. We'll head thataway then south.”

“What are we going to do with Donna? She doesn't have a passport!” Williard thought of that item at the last minute.

Terry always carried hers as an international stewardess, and he and his brothers still had theirs from a European vacation with their parents shortly before the war, but Donna had never traveled outside the country.

“Shit, Jim, we ain't got the range to go all the way to Africa without refueling. We'll drop her off when we stop to refuel and finish fixing this old bird up.”

Donna had been listening. She grabbed onto Jerry as if he represented the only life jacket on a sinking ship. “Please don't leave me! I'm scared.”

“We'll give you some money to buy a new identity and get lost,” Williard said,

a sudden decision. It was the least they could do for her.

“You don't know those guys like I do,” Donna warned. “They can find anyone, anywhere, once they make up their mind to do it. I want to stay with you.”

“Fuckit, let her come,” Jason said. “We can always hide her in the pontoon with the weapons. Speaking of which, did you leave a couple of rifles loose?”

“Yeah, they're handy,” Williard said. “Why?”

Jason was squinting through the cracked and dirty glass of the canopy. “Because I see a couple of more black sedans

coming down the road.”

Chapter Fourteen

Grazino knew Don Falino's connections extended into areas he wasn't even aware of, but even he was surprised when he stopped at Marciano's bank and picked up the extra soldiers assigned to him. The first thing one of them said was, "We just got the word. Our contracts are at the Lancaster airport right now."

"Good. We better hurry, though, before they take off."

"No need to hurry. New York said their plane wasn't in shape to fly yet. In fact, the word is, it might never get off the

ground.”

The fact that the Don had funneled his information through the new hit men rather than to him via his car radio said volumes. Don Falino no longer wished to speak with him personally, and wouldn't unless and until he succeeded in his mission. The Don never liked to maintain amiable relations with anyone who was a potential candidate for Snow White's menu.

“You guys ain't met them cowboys we're after. Get your ass in gear right now. One of you come with me to drive.” While the driver headed south, Grazino made Larry and Jeannie and Monica curl up in the back seat where they couldn't

be seen. As soon as they were under way, he checked out one of the submachine guns the new men had brought along. Even if the Don hadn't wanted to speak to him, he had evidently taken him at his word when he mentioned that the cowboys were meaner than junkyard dogs and armed to the teeth. At least they could confront them on an equal basis now, and he had them outnumbered besides.

* * * *

“Hold tight, we're hauling ass,” Jason announced over the intercom, one of the few working instruments inside the plane. He gauged the distance to the

approaching sedan and chose a runway going in the opposite direction.

The tower controller's voice came to Jason through his headphone, barely audible over the roar of the engines as he revved them up and taxied away from the hanger. "Albatross, you're going the wrong way. I have a crop duster coming in on runway two. Besides, you haven't given me your flight plan yet. Steer back to runway one and hold."

"Sorry, tower, the steering gear just went out and we're flying VFR so we don't need no flight plan. If you really want one, though, we're headed southeast to somewhere at some kind of altitude."

“That's the craziest flight plan I ever heard of.”

“You should of seen my last one. I had two MIGS and a shit can full of SAMS on my ass. Now clear that crop duster out of my way before he gets fragged.”

“Fragged? Are you armed?”

“No, but my wife is. She's in that first sedan behind us.” The more danger Jason was in, the wilder his explanations. He hoped the tower operator stayed put and didn't try to check out his story.

“Oh shit! She's driving onto the runway.

What's wrong with her?"

"She's just pissed because I'm behind on my alimony."

Grazino saw the old plane taxiing away from the hanger and guessed it must belong to his quarry. "Speed up!" He shouted to his driver. "Catch them before they get away!"

"We're driving on a fucking runway! What if we meet a plane trying to land?"

"I'd rather crash head on into a plane than face Snow White if we lose them fuckers. Speed up, I said!"

The driver didn't understand the

reference to Snow White, but he pushed down hard on the accelerator. Grazino chambered a round into the submachine gun and punched Mugsy and Marciano. "Load up. We're going to shoot them bastards down!"

The old albatross lumbered down the runway, tilted to one side by its flat tire. Its engines roared like a wounded lion and it gained speed like a lazy turtle on a long trip. Jason took a quick glance in the side mirror and saw that the first sedan had pulled onto the runway and was chasing them. The distance began to narrow swiftly. He thumbed the intercom switch. "Hey brothers! I need some action back there or we're going to get

caught! Give Mugsy something to remember us by!”

Williard tore his seat belt loose from the lopsided web seat he was sitting in. He grabbed a rifle and tossed it to Jerry, then plucked one from its alcove for himself.

“How the fuck can we see to shoot?” Jerry asked, chambering a round.

“Break a window,” Williard said, the only solution he could think of. He followed up on his suggestion by smashing a window on his side of the aisle with his rifle butt and worming his head and shoulders through it, using contortions he didn't know he was

capable of to bring the rifle through the window with him. Wind from the whirling props nearly pulled him on through. He reached back and held on by one hand and braced the butt plate of the rifle against his elbow with the other. Before he could get positioned to aim, a series of slugs stitched a path through the horizontal stabilizer. He emptied a full clip in the direction of the sedan at the same time he heard Jerry's weapon go into action, firing spaced rounds, three at a time. The bouncing plane, nearing takeoff speed, spoiled Williard's aim. He saw a line of dusty puffs appear to the left of the sedan and cursed himself for shooting off the whole clip at once. As he was pulling himself back far

enough to reload without being sucked out the window he saw one of the tires on the sedan suddenly collapse. It swerved and skidded sideways just as the Albatross finally shook itself free of the earth, flying as easily as a crippled bumblebee overloaded with pollen. Williard pulled himself the rest of the way inside. "Nice shooting, brother," he said to Jerry.

"Nice, hell. I couldn't see a fucking thing through all the smoke from that screwed up engine. I just shot and said shit." He reached up and wiped oil from his hair.

Williard grinned at him. "Like I always said, if you're lucky, you don't need to be good. Why don't you take care of your

girl while I check on Jason and Terry?”

Jerry looked around. Donna had fainted. Her torso lolled this way and that while her lower body was still restrained by the seat belt.

Williard left him to administer first aid while he gripped any handy stanchion he could find in order to walk uphill. The plane was still ascending, albeit slowly and laboriously. When he got to the cockpit, he looked up inside and saw Terry with both hands on the yoke and her feet frantically working the rudder pedals like a flamingo dancer with a hotfoot. Jason had stripped his shirt off and was wrapping a handkerchief

around his upper arm.

Terry glanced at Jason and caught Williard in her peripheral vision. “Jim, help me! I don't know how to fly this crazy plane!”

“Well, I sure as hell don't,” Williard said, more concerned with his brother than Terry's piloting. After all, they were in the air and flying, which was more than he had expected after catching his first sight of the plane. “Jason, what's wrong? Did you get hit?”

“Just a scratch. I had worse mosquito bites in ‘Nam. Hold on a minute longer, Terry, and I'll take over.”

He knotted the handkerchief and pulled it tight with his teeth and one hand. A spot of blood soaked through the cloth but didn't seem to be expanding.

Terry screamed and jerked violently at the yoke, stamping her foot on one of the floor pedals at the same time. The plane twisted sideways and went into a left roll, diving downward. Williard was flung sideways, and careened off the cockpit paneling and into Jason's lap, preventing him from getting to his set of controls.

“Left rudder! Pull the yoke!” Jason shouted at Terry.

Williard saw a terrified grimace on her

face as she complied. The plane completed the roll, upside down then back upright. Williard was jounced from Jason's lap, bounced against the cockpit ceiling, then dropped back down, this time landing in Terry's lap. Shit! he thought, Jumpin' Jase is going to lose another one! He began preparing himself mentally for the crash.

Jason grabbed control of the still diving plane just in time to pull forward on the yoke and bring them out of the dive. The plane skimmed a herd of cattle being worked by a rancher in a jeep. The cows scattered in all directions and the rancher shook his fist at the retreating plane. Williard looked out of the cockpit

window and saw they were gaining altitude again. He removed himself from Terry's lap and breathed a sigh of relief. "What happened? Did the plane get shot up while we were taking off?"

Jason looked at him and grinned like a quarterback who had just faked a pass and run the ball in for a touchdown. "Nah, I don't think we caught any damage to speak of. I bet there's a crop duster behind us that just shit his pants, though."

Chapter Fifteen

While the Albatross staggered on southeastward, Grazino took Mugsy to the tower with him and left the others to change the tire on the sedan. He left Mugsy waiting in reserve while he went in to talk to the operator alone. "Where was that beatup old wreck that just took off headed?" he asked.

"He said he was going southeast somewhere. Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of the man flying it. Don't you know where he's planning to land?"

"If I have my way, he's going to land at

the nearest military field and be taken into custody. And if you were the person driving that car on the runway, I'm going to have you arrested," the operator said. He was a big man, from West Texas, who not only operated the tower, but owned the field as well.

"No you're not," Grazino said. "And you're not going to call the military, either."

The big Texan eyed the thin, prune faced man. He was not impressed. "Oh yeah? Says who?"

Mugsy heard the challenge to his underboss and lumbered into the room.

“Says him,” Grazino said.

“You know, I think he's right,” the airport owner said.

“I thought you would agree. Now find out where he's headed.”

The operator looked apprehensively at Mugsy's hulking frame. “Sir, I'm sorry, he just didn't say, except that he was going southeast. All I can do is send a general wire and have all the landing fields in that direction be on the lookout for them. What should I say?”

“Just tell them to notify you, that's all, unless he files a flight plan for his next takeoff. If he does, get that information.”

“Yes, sir. It might be several hours before I know anything.”

“We'll wait,” Grazino said. He left Mugsy with the owner/operator to keep him honest, while he returned to the sedan and used his radio phone in order to divert one of the drug-carrying planes the family owned to the Lancaster field. The Godfather had ordered him to follow the cowboys ‘to the ends of the earth’ if necessary, and he was beginning to suspect that might be where they were headed.

* * * *

Williard gritted his teeth as the ancient Albatross gyrated through the air. Jason

had told him he had decided where their next stop should be and he was trying to get turned south instead of east . The Albatross gradually changed its bearing, making strange noises and dipping up and down and rolling from side to side as if they were on one of the scary rides at the Texas State Fair. Actually, being in the plane was even scarier. He could look out one of the broken windows and see the engine on that side losing a huge stream of black, oily smoke, and the vibration he had noticed when they first got airborne was steadily getting worse. When he could stand it no longer, he crawled forward and peered into the cockpit. Jason was shouting instructions and observations to Terry in order to

teach her quickly how to fly the Albatross. Terry was holding the yoke in a death grip, because if she didn't, it kept shaking loose from her hands. He saw that part of the wavering flight was being caused by Jason telling Terry to turn or push or pull the yoke or rudder pedals to raise and lower wing and ailerons. Jason seemed totally unconcerned, apparently confident that the plane would get them to wherever he was heading. He hoped that confidence was justified. They had already been in the air several hours longer than he thought was possible at first sight of the plane.

Just as Williard was deciding that he should relax and trust Jason's acumen,

the smoking engine quit. He grabbed a handhold, as the plane tilted then stood back upright when Jason grabbed the controls and corrected the tilt with the tail flaps. Williard shouted, "Hey Jase!"

Jason looked over his shoulder. Williard saw that he was still maintaining his usual grin, but he had seen it larger before. "Better get back and strap in, Jim. Tell the others, too."

Williard hesitated. "Are we going down?"

"Hell, yes, but don't worry. We're almost where I wanted us to be. If I can keep us in the air just a little bit longer, we can glide in."

“Do you think you can?”

“Does the Pope shit in the woods? Go strap in.”

Williard decided that this was no time to bother his brother and there was nothing he could do to help, anyway. He went back to the cargo bay and woke up Jerry and Donna, who had been dozing with their heads together.

“What's up?” Jerry said.

“Everything but this here airplane. I think it's going down.”

“All of a sudden I don't think the delta was so dangerous after all. Shit, if my

boat sank, at least I could swim to shore.”

“Yeah. You think we ought to break out the parachutes?”

“Might not be a bad idea,” Jerry said. “Where did you pack them?”

“Me? I thought you loaded them.”

“I never saw them after I parked the Olds,” He looked puzzled. “Funny, they were right on top.”

“Was Jeannie around when you parked?”

“Come to think of it, yes. Want to bet

what she has as the prize item at her next garage sale?”

“No, I can guess,” Williard said. “You should have gone ahead and given her those uniforms of yours to sell. They would have made her happy.” He cinched his seat belt tighter.

“Are we in trouble?” Donna asked sleepily.

“Do we look worried?” Williard said.

“Yes.”

“Then we're in trouble.”

The Albatross began a precipitous

decline, causing them to brace their feet on packing crates in front of the seats. Williard looked out through his broken window. Below, he could see nothing but water. Jason hadn't told them exactly where they were bound, other than that it was an island he knew of. He hoped they were somewhere close to it and if not, then he prayed that neither of the pontoons had any bullet holes in them. He doubted that the two life rafts stowed in the plane were still seaworthy. The plane kept dropping lower, until it looked as if the ocean were only a few hundred feet below them. So much for the Congo, he thought. Just then, a line of breakers washing over reefs came into view. In the distance, he could make out

the sprawl of a scrubby jungle fronted by a narrow beach. He thought Jason was going to try to make it to there, where there would surely be room to land in the lagoon. Instead, he tilted the still descending plane, then leveled out on a course that headed over the jungle canopy.

Williard held his breath as the plane lost more altitude. So far as he could see, there was nothing in sight but trees, not even a lake where the seaplane might safely land. What was Jason thinking of? Abruptly, the other engine began to cough. Williard checked his watch, not that he thought that would help any, but he saw that they had now been flying so

long that they must surely be low on fuel. The remaining engine coughed once more and quit completely. A forest of trees blurred past, seemingly only scant feet beneath the plane, then with the abruptness of a movie suddenly changing scenery, the trees were whizzing past at eye level. He braced himself for the inevitable crash.

With both engines dead, the silence inside the plane was eerie, like the deadness inside a haunted house just before the ghost jumps into sight. Jason's sudden shout was all the more startling for that. "Yahoo!

Goddamn, we made it! Fuck Mugsy and all his fucking sisters!"

The plane hit the ground with a solid bump and a loud banging noise as one of the tires blew out, the one which wasn't already flat. That was probably a good thing, since it kept the plane on an even keel. A torrent of sparks flew past the window amidst a horrible screeching sound, like a thousand fingernails scraping across a blackboard, then a moment later the sparks disappeared and clods of dirt and coral dust began flying by. A minute later the plane came to a jarring, bone rattling halt, stopped by something Williard couldn't see from his vantage point. He let out his pent up breath. Jason popped out of the cockpit, followed by Terry. Her face was

drained of color and her knees were wobbly. She grinned weakly at Williard.

“We're here,” Jason said brightly.

“Where's here?” Williard said.

“The Cayman Islands, I hope.”

“You hope? Don't you know?”

“Give me a break, Jim. With half the instruments out and the radio only working part of the time, I had to fudge a bunch of figures to get us anywhere.”

“Sorry,” Williard said. “The Cayman Islands. Don't think I've heard of them.”

“Not many people have, yet. I just knew about them from a friend that got kicked out of the Marines and came down here. He opened up a little business.”

“What kind of business?”

“Oh, just a little smuggling from his airfield—that's where I think we are—and maybe a little money laundering here and there.”

“Is that all?”

“No, last I heard, he's dealing a little in drugs, too. That's why he built a landing field here.”

Williard heard a thump behind him and

looked around. Donna had fainted again.

Chapter Sixteen

“What's wrong with her?” Jason said, as Jerry bent to fan Donna's face.

“I think she's about had enough of drug dealers,” Williard said.

“Good, then let her sleep. C'mon, let's get out and see if we're on Little Cayman Island or not.”

“Little Cayman?”

“Yeah. There's three islands in the group; Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. I landed on Grand Cayman once, back when our squadron

was on a training mission out of Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.”

“Are we near Cuba?”

“Yeah, south of it. Why do you think your girl friend was so white-faced when we landed? We were having so many problems with that engine and getting so low on fuel that I had to skirt Cuba pretty close to make it here.”

“What does that have to do with her being white?”

Jason gave his brother one of his famous grins. “There were a couple of MIGS hanging around just daring me to violate their territory. Shit, I wish I had been

flying an F-4, then I would have, just for kicks.”

While they were talking, Jason had unscrewed the jerry-rigged cargo door latch. The door swung open to a moonlit darkness. A scruffy looking man in shorts and sandals stood in the shadows near the open bay, cradling an UZI submachine guns in his arms.

Jason peered into the darkness. “Fred, put that popgun up before you hurt someone with it.”

A tall, cadaverous looking man with shaggy hair stepped closer. His teeth flashed white in the moonlight.

“Be goddamn, if it ain't Jumpin' Jase himself. Hey man, how come you landed instead of bailing out?” He lowered his weapon.

“My sister sold our parachutes, or we might have. How you making it Fred?”

“Can't complain up til now.”

“What's going on?”

“Jump down and I'll tell you, if you brought some rum, that is.” He grinned.

“We got more rum on board than we do water.”

“That figures.”

Williard took the hint. He opened one of the tied-down crates and produced a bottle. He and Terry followed Jason down the ladder where Jason introduced them to his friend. Jerry decided to stay inside and take care of Donna, who was just regaining consciousness, just in case someone wanted to see her passport, though from the conversation, he thought it rather unlikely at this point. They were led to a small ramshackle shed lit by a rusty hurricane lamp and furnished with a battered desk and several palm cane chairs. Once drinks were mixed from a case of warm cokes, Jason expounded on their problems without waiting to hear what Fred's were.

“We need to stay here long enough for me to make some repairs,” he said.

“From the looks of that crate you're flying, you need more than repairs; you need a whole new plane.”

“Nah, there's just a few little problems. It won't take more than a week or so to get it ready to go on. Can you put us up that long?”

Fred rubbed several days growth of whiskers on his chin, then took a hefty swig of his drink. “Ordinarily, it would be no problem, Jase. In fact it still isn't but I don't know if I can give you a week.”

“Why not?” He couldn't believe his old friend, whom he had once taken a SAM up the ass for, would turn him down.

“I don't own this strip any more. The big boys just bought me out. Or gave me orders to sell, to put it more accurately. The Caymans are where they're starting to transship drugs from South America and hide their money now, and they want this airfield because it's on Little Cayman instead of Grand Cayman where customs is.”

“Shit,” Jason said. “Well, how long do we have?”

“There's a seaplane with a load supposed to be here in three or four days

with the money for the field and my planes. They suggested I take the money and retire somewhere far away. I'll have some of my boys give you a hand til then, but you better be ready to go when I give the word, whether you're finished or not. They might think you're going to try to compete with them.”

“Where are these guys from?” Williard asked.

“The financing is coming from one of the families in New York, I think, but they're going to be operating out of Dallas. Why?”

“Just wondering,” Williard said. He didn't think it politic to mention that they

were being chased by operatives from New York, and hoped the new owners of Fred's airfield weren't from the same family, but he suspected they would be if the way the expedition had turned out so far was any indication. Fred eyed the three of them speculatively. "Jase, if I'm not prying, just how in hell did you wind up here?"

Last I heard you were still seeing how fast the marines could replace F-4's for you."

"The bean counters took over after the war. They said I was costing the government too much money. Anyway, I'm glad we got here now rather than next week like I planned. We might of

flown right into some deep shit.”

“Deeper shit, you mean,” Williard said.

“Yeah. Fred, we don't really want to cause any problems. All we're doing is going hunting for a dinosaur.”

Fred swigged more rum. “Haw. Now I've heard it all. Never mind, I don't want to know. Well, not much we can do until daylight. Let's have some more rum.”

“Is there anyplace here to get a bath?” Terry asked. She wiped her brow, feeling the greasy residue of sweat which had dried on her skin.

“We don't have much fresh water, but there's a lagoon and a little beach forward of where your plane stopped.” He produced a flashlight. “Look for the trail just to the side of the left wing. It's about a hundred yards.”

“Go on with her, Jim,” Jason said. “You may as well have a little fun before we get to work tomorrow. Fred and I will stay here and I'll fill him in on what we need for the plane.”

“OK, see you in the morning.”

An hour later, Williard and Terry were drying off in the sea breeze on a tarpaulin they had brought from the plane. The sand had provided a soft

enough place to make love after a swim in the lagoon and now Williard was leaning on one elbow and admiring Terry's naked body. With her wavy brown hair slicked straight with water, she looked to him like a shadowed sea sprite contemplating whether to stay on land with her lover or return to the sea.

“It's beautiful here,” Terry said. “I've always wanted to make love on a beach.”

“Glad I could help,” Williard said. He reached out and ran his hand over her softly resilient breasts. Finding Terry is the best part of being out of the army, he thought. If it wasn't for the constant worry of her getting hurt, he would have

been completely satisfied, regardless of the danger they had been through and what they still faced, especially if the Mafia hadn't given up on them.

“Mmm. Do that some more. After flying that banged-up old plane with Jason, I need all the relaxation I can get. I thought we would never make it down in one piece.”

“That's what you get for trying to do a man's work.”

“Are you complaining?” Terry said sharply. Damn his dreamy eyes, he still must be thinking of me as some little southern shrinking violet. It irritated her.

“No, not really,” Williard said hastily. “In fact, you did great. You must have or Jason would have kicked you out of the cockpit. He can't stand incompetent pilots.”

Terry relented. “I was scared, I'll have to admit. I don't know how your brother has managed to stay alive all these years if I can believe all the stories.”

“You haven't heard half of them yet. He was a legend in Vietnam, but don't you try to fly like he does. I don't know of anyone else who could get away with it.”

“I can believe that. Nevertheless, it's nice to have a little responsibility in a

plane instead of handing out drinks and serving meals. If we get back alive, I don't think I'll ever be able to go back to stewardess work.”

Williard felt his heart jump inside his chest. He gathered her in his arms. “Don't worry about getting back alive.” he laughed, as he hugged her. “Hell, the way it's going, we better worry about just getting there.”

Instantly, he was sorry he had uttered that statement. Women shouldn't have to worry about things like that.

“I'm not worried. We've managed so far, haven't we?” The warmth of his body was chasing away thoughts of danger

again. She felt a swell of emotion sweep over her, a desire to get as close to him as possible. She tugged him over her, wishing he felt the same way and hoping that he would, sooner or later.

* * * *

“They left the mainland and headed for Cuba, that's all I know,” the tower operator said to Grazino.

“They couldn't be headed for Cuba. That's where them damn Commies live. Those red bastards are the ones that took over all our gambling operations back in the sixties when that fucking Castro came to power.”

“I'm sorry, that's the best I could do.” The operator yawned. It had been a long, long vigilance, talking to other operators, asking about sightings or radio transmissions from the shaky old Albatross which had surprised him by even getting into the air.

“Cuba isn't possible. What's near there?”

“If they went north of Cuba, the Bahamas. If they went south, there's the Cayman Islands.”

“All right, check them both out. We'll wait.”

Wearily, the operator turned back to his short wave radio and began making

more inquiries, pausing just long enough to give landing instructions to a huge amphibian he had never seen before. It was the plane Grazino had requested, landing after dumping its load. He knew the Godfather wouldn't be happy about that, but he would be far less happy if he failed to catch up with the cowboys. Thinking of catching up to them brought up another problem. Regardless of whether they had gone north or south of Cuba, they were going to wind up someplace where passports were necessary. The Godfather would probably feed them all piecemeal to Snow White if they got arrested for failing to anticipate a minor matter like that. He left Mugsy to watch while he

went back to the cars, the one with the flat tire having been dragged hastily off the runway earlier. There, he led his men, and Larry, Jeannie and Monica out to the plane and inside.

“Are we going flying?” Jeannie asked. “I always wanted to fly somewhere, but Larry could never afford it.”

“Shut up, Broad,” Grazino said. He was getting tired of her acting as if they were on a vacation trip.

“See if I ever invite you to a garage sale,” Jeannie said.

“Shut up. No, don't shut up. Just give me your driver's licenses so I can get some

passports forged for you.”

“Where are we going?” Larry asked.

“You shut up, too. We're going wherever your crazy brothers-in-law are going.”

“Oh good, I always wanted to go to Africa,” Jeannie said.

Grazino turned away in disgust. “Crazy broad. Snow White is going to love you.”

“Snow White? Are we going to Disneyland first?”

Grazino wondered if a fat lip would shut her up. He thought about it, then dropped

the idea while he gave instructions to two of his men. One he sent to have passports forged, the other to load up on food and water and other supplies. Africa! If he didn't catch the cowboys soon, he might have to search a whole continent for them! He headed back to the tower and saw Mugsy coming toward him in a lumbering run.

“I found them! They're in the Cayman Islands!”

“How the hell did you do that?”

“When that cowboy in the tower said they wuz headed for Cuba, I called a hit man I know there what's still connected to the mainland. He had just heard about

some Cuban fighters chasing a old airplane away from the shoreline. They went south and the radar followed them in.”

Grazino was amazed. He hadn't expected that much initiative from Mugsy. Snow White must really have him working his brain. “Good. Soon as we get our passports and supplies, we'll catch them. That old plane they're flying can't keep up with this baby.” He pointed to the sleek amphibian waiting to take off. It was Mugsy's first close up look at the plane. He saw the pontoons and suddenly realized that they would be flying over water. “Do I have to go?”

Grazino stared at him like a recalcitrant

child. “Unless you would rather be escorted back to Snow White, you do.”

Mugsy looked resigned. “Mudder told me I ought to loin to swim, but I wouldn't listen; I wanted to play wit guns. Does that plane have life rafts?”

“It has everything, including a machine gun in the nose.”

Mugsy brightened up a little, but not much. He would never admit it to the underboss but he was scared of the three cowboys. He wondered if even a machine gun would be enough to stop them.

Chapter Seventeen

Williard spent the next day and night on the beach, returning only occasionally for food or drink, after Jason assured him that Fred would provide all the help needed for repairs. Jerry and Donna left the plane and joined them. Donna refused to leave the beach after she got there. The UZI-toting mechanics and pilots scared her. Jerry stayed with her, trying to cheer her up.

“Relax, babe, these guys are friends. Besides, how would anyone else know we're here?”

“They'll find us,” Donna warned.

“One look at you girls and they'll forget all about us,” Jerry said. The little beach was so isolated that they had all stripped down to briefs.

“That's what I'm afraid of,” Donna said. She rolled over on her stomach, in the same position that Terry was laying. Going topless had given them both sunburns in sensitive places. Williard sat up on the tarpaulin and sipped at his warm drink, wishing there was an ice machine somewhere, but this end of Little Cayman didn't even have electricity or phone lines, which, he supposed, was why Fred had located his field here. The distance from Grand Cayman allowed planes to come in

under the radar blanket of the commercial field there. Fred had also told them that custom inspectors made themselves scarce for only nominal sums of money and almost certainly wouldn't be around to bother them before they left. If they ever got out of the shadow of the Mafia, Williard thought this might be a good place to return to. They could maybe run a diving boat with Jerry's experience and if the old Albatross made it to Africa and back, it would do for charters until they could afford something better. He had gotten so used to free and easy dealings in war time Vietnam that he doubted he would ever be satisfied with a regular job. And Terry was nice. Maybe she would stay

with him for a while, even if he didn't intend to ever join the rat race. She would probably expect him to eventually, though. Most women did, sooner or later. Oh well, maybe the expedition would pay off and make them so much money she would be content to just retire to a beach such as this one for a while. Williard's idyllic thoughts were interrupted by Jason's shout. "Jim! Jerry! Get your asses back! We got trouble!"

Oh shit, Williard thought. "Here we go again."

He climbed into his pants and shirt and waited impatiently while the girls got their clothes back on. Once Jason had gotten their attention, he had begun

running back toward the little airfield, not waiting to tell them what the trouble was.

When they emerged from the cover of the palm trees, he saw that the Albatross was pulled up to the tanker Fred used for refueling. Jason was running around the plane, checking it out for takeoff. Williard told the girls to get aboard while he and Jerry stopped Jason for a moment. “What's happened now?”

“We got lucky, that's what happened. See that little plane over there, the one that just came in?”

“Yeah.” Williard remembered it buzzing the beach, the pilot evidently enchanted

at the sight of the two topless beauties cavorting in the surf.

“Well, it just came in from Dallas. The pilot said the operator told him there was a big seaplane there waiting to take off for the Caymans. I wouldn't have thought much about it except that he had this story about seeing the biggest man outside of a circus get on the plane. That has to be Mugsy. Goddamnit, they found us again. Sooner or later they're going to piss me off.”

Williard wasn't worried about that. He was concerned with the state of repairs to the Albatross. “Are we ready to fly?”

“No, but we're going to anyway. I got

that engine wired up so it works, that's the main thing. You guys get inside and hang some safety belts from those broke windows. You might have to use them again."

"I thought you had got them fixed."

"I've got the glass, we just ain't had time to put it in yet. That might be a good thing if we don't get off the ground before they get here."

Williard climbed the ladder into the cargo bay. Jason had promised to get a stairwell built, but obviously that had been wishful thinking. He began attaching webbing to stanchions by the broken window while Jerry got out their

rifles. Once he thought he had enough straps to hold them in place in case Jason flew the way he usually did, he hung his rifle near the window and went back to get the heavy express rifle and a handful of shells from stowage. He pulled it out and inserted a shell into both barrels. If it came to shooting at a plane chasing them, he wanted something that would do more damage than an M-16. As he turned away, a sound came from behind the crate. "Meow," it said.

"Who said meow?"

"I didn't," Jerry said.

"I didn't either," Donna said.

“Then who did?” Williard asked. He knew it wasn't Terry. She was already up in the cockpit, doing what she knew how of the preflight check.

“Meow,” the sound came again. A black cat jumped from behind a crate onto the top of it. It sat down and began licking a paw and rubbing it across its face.

“Goddamn,” Williard cursed. “That's all we need, a black cat. Where in hell did it come from?”

“Never mind where it came from, let's get it the hell out of here,” Jerry said.

“Shoo, cat,” Williard said.

“Meow,” the cat said, then began purring.

“Get out of here,” Jerry said.

“I can't, I'm the pilot,” Jason said, eyeing his new passenger while coming into the bay and pulling the ladder up behind him. He pulled the cargo door closed.

“Wait, we got a black cat in here!” Williard shouted.

“No time,” Jason said. “It can just take its chances with the rest of us.” He ran for the cockpit. A moment later, first one engine then the other fired up and began revving.

Williard stared at the cat, which seemed totally unconcerned. It jumped down from the crate and walked regally over to where Donna had already strapped herself in. It paused, looked up at her, then jumped into her lap. It turned around twice, then curled up and purred even louder than before.

“This expedition just keeps on getting crazier and crazier,” Williard complained. “What in hell are we going to do if it gets scared and starts bouncing around in here?”

“I'll hold onto it,” Donna said. She scratched behind its ears and made little motherly sounds at it. Williard shrugged and sat down, since there was nothing

else he could think of to do. Jason had already begun taxiing away from the tanker before he remembered that he could have stuffed the cat out through one of the broken windows, but it was too late now. The engines roared as Jason applied all the power he could in order to get the old war bird off the ground before he ran out of runway. It lifted off and Williard heard a swishing sound from beneath him as the landing gear brushed the tops of the palm trees at the end of the runway. He wondered if Jason ever did anything simple when he was at the controls of a plane.

* * * *

Grazino was looking out the window as the seaplane made its approach to the drug dealer's field on Little Cayman. It had taken so long to get the passports and supplies that he wasn't really expecting to catch up with the cowboys here, and he was thinking that maybe he could get a little rest while they refueled and found out which direction they had gone. He was utterly surprised to see the battered old Albatross just lumbering into the air. For a moment he thought it wouldn't make it, but then it gained just enough altitude to clear the trees at the edge of the runway. Or almost. Palm leaves and branches fluttered from its landing gear as it dipped a wing and began turning east. He thumbed the

intercom switch by his seat.

“Pilot! That plane that just took off! It's the one we're after. Get it!”

“Roger, I'll try,” the pilot said, “but we're almost out of fuel.” The seaplane roared as he fed power to the engines and passed over the field, climbing for altitude.

* * * *

“Hey brothers! Look alive back there. We got company!” Jason called over the intercom. Williard groaned and poked the barrel of the express rifle out the window. He hoped his aim would be better this time than when he had shot at

the sedan back in Lancaster, but he didn't hold out much hope. Firing from a plane at a moving target wasn't something he was familiar with. He peered past the barrel of the rifle, trying to spot the other plane. There was nothing visible except blue sky and fluffy white clouds in front of them. He swept his vision backwards, just in time to see a neat set of holes stitch a pattern across the tip of the wing. He flinched. Those holes looked bigger than anything made by the submachine gun which had hit them last time!

“Goddamn, they got a machine gun on us!” Jason shouted. “Hold on, I'm going to get on their tail!”

The Albatross suddenly stood on its tail,

shaking and shuddering. Williard felt his senses spin as Jason applied full power and continued up and up and over into a barrel roll the old plane had never been designed for. From somewhere far away he heard the squall of a cat with its dignity affronted. That's all we need, he thought dizzily, a cat loose inside while we're being machine gunned. If the bullets don't get us, it will probably claw us to death. He looked out over the vibrating wing, seemingly trying to shake itself loose from the rest of the plane, then below it at the pursuing seaplane trying to duplicate Jason's maneuver. It was a poor match; that pilot had never been in a dogfight before. From the other side of the bay, he heard the stutter of

Jerry's rifle emptying a clip. It had no visible effect. He took careful aim with his heavy rifle and began to squeeze the trigger. A bundle of squalling black fur landed on his shoulder and dug its claws in. He cursed as it threw his aim off just as he squeezed both triggers. The double recoil knocked him backwards and stunned his upper body. He yanked at the cat's tail, trying to get it loose while he reloaded, but he knew that he had already missed his best chance.

Chapter Eighteen

“Goddamn, you got him!” Jason's exuberant voice called. Williard let the cat be and peered out the window again. Below him, the seaplane was just curving out of sight, trailing smoke from its bottom and glass from a shattered canopy.

Grazino had been holding onto the arms of his seat, thinking that at last he had the cowboys where he wanted them when a missile suddenly shattered the window nearest him. The head of the man who was seated beside him exploded like a dropped pumpkin, showering him with blood and bits of brain and bone. He

jerked away from the shattered tissue and saw a huge hole miraculously appear in the floor across the aisle, spraying bits of carpet and insulation into the air. A scream came over the intercom. The plane shook itself like a wet dog, then leveled out and began curving around, back toward the islands. “Where in hell are you going!” Grazino shouted.

“Home!” the Pilot shouted back. “My copilot has a hole through his chest bigger than the Long Island tunnel and I'm losing my hydraulics! Goddamnit, I thought you told me them guys didn't have anything bigger than rifles on board!”

Grazino didn't answer. If it were possible, he would just have given up. Every time he thought he had the cowboys, they managed to wriggle free by doing something different. If this kept up, he might as well just jump in the tank with Snow White and get it over with.

“That must have been their elephant gun,” Larry said. “Are you sure you want to keep chasing them?”

Why don't we just go back to Oak Cliff and start over?”

Grazino glared at him. “One more word out of you and I'll throw you over a cliff. And tell that playboy bunny there to stop praying. I'm beginning to think someone

is listening. Elephant guns in an airplane. Who could figure?"

"Give her a couple of drinks and she'll stop praying," Larry said. "As a matter of fact, I could use a Coors myself, if you've got one handy."

Grazino buried his face in his hands. If the Godfather hadn't ordered him specifically to take the dentist and the two women along as hostages, he would have just dumped them into the ocean. Maybe he still would, on the way to Africa, which appeared to be their next destination. As soon as the plane was repaired, that is.

Monica left off her praying. "Did I hear

someone mention a drink?"

"How about some wine?" Jeannie said, looking away from the headless body slumped next to Grazino. She couldn't make herself believe it was real.

"Is it all right?" Mugsy asked. He was sorely in need of something to bolster his courage.

"Hell, yes. As soon as we land give everyone something. I think we all need it."

"Thanks," Larry said.

"Don't mention it," Grazino said. As soon as the plane landed, he intended to

get drunk as a Lord.

* * * *

When Williard reported the damage to the wing, Jason left Terry at the controls for a moment as he came back to the bay to get a better vantage point in order to assess the damage. It didn't appear serious, other than adding a few more whistling noises to the ones already present from the still unrepaired windows. "We're OK, looks like," he said. "That was some nice shooting Jim. Aren't you glad we brought that elephant gun along?"

"It was the cat that did it," Williard confessed. He looked around and saw

that it was once again ensconced in Donna's lap, acting as if a WWI dogfight was all in a day's work.

“The cat? How the hell did a cat fire a rifle?”

“It didn't. It just jumped on my shoulder right as I fired. Otherwise, I would have missed completely.”

Jason looked at the cat, again purring and using a paw and its tongue to smooth its fur out. “Well, hell, I'll never say black cats bring bad luck again. I took them guys by surprise with that barrel roll, but there's no way we could have done it again. They would have shot us down for sure. Where did the cat come

from, anyway?”

“Damned if I know, but I'm glad he came aboard.”

“Well, break out a carton of C-Rats and give him something to eat.”

“I hate to do that to an innocent little cat,” Williard said.

“Sorry, he'll just have to suffer along with the rest of us. That's all Jerry bought.”

Donna petted the cat, causing it to begin purring louder. She looked up. “What shall we name him?”

“Hell, call him Stowaway. I've heard everything now. Imagine, a cat shooting down an airplane.” Jason shook his head in wonder. The Albatross wobbled, then got back on an even keel then wobbled again.

“Whoops, I'd better get back up front. Looks like that rudder pedal came loose again.”

The black cat, whose name quickly became Stowaway as Jason had suggested, didn't seem to mind the C-Rations. It ate hungrily, but picked most of the ham out of the portion of ham and lima beans first. After that, it jumped back into Donna's lap and went to sleep. Williard watched Donna cooing to the

cat even while it was dead to the world. She seemed enthralled with it. He hoped it would get her mind off drug dealers and onto something more constructive. He wished he could get his mind off them!

A couple of hours later, he got up and went forward to the cockpit, unable to sleep for the noise. The open windows seemed to funnel all the sound from the engines and whistling wind directly into the bay. He climbed up inside and stood behind Terry, putting both hands on her shoulders. “How's it going?”

She twisted her head around to look up at him. “You would do better asking

where we're going.”

“Now, now,” Jason soothed. “We'll get there. I've almost got these broken instruments figured out.”

“Where are we going?” Williard asked.

“I'm not sure yet. I'd like to make Brazzaville in the Congo in one jump, but I don't know if we have enough fuel yet. Otherwise, we'll have to stop at one of the Verde Islands off the horn of Africa, or maybe even on the horn itself. It will be a couple of hours yet before I decide.”

“It would be nice if we could make the Congo in one jump,” Williard said.

“Yeah. I'm getting damned tired of having to dodge bullets every time we take off. At least dinosaurs don't pack weapons. Or I hope they don't,” he amended.

“I'd be glad to face a dinosaur for a change,” Williard said.

“Me, too,” Terry agreed. “How's the cat?”

“Happy as a bug in a rug. We named him Stowaway.”

“Speaking of stowaways, we still haven't figured out what to do about Donna.”

“I thought we were going to hide her in a pontoon with the weapons.”

“I did, too, but there wasn't time to get them rigged. I hope we have enough money left for bribes.”

“I didn't know we were running that short,” Williard said.

“I gave Fred twenty for the repairs and for letting us land. That leaves us about seventy or eighty. From what I hear, it might take that and then some to keep the plane from being impounded and us out of jail.”

“Too bad we really don't have that half-million Donna's husband lost,” Terry

said wistfully.

“If we had that, we wouldn't of had to come here in the first place,” Williard said.

“Yeah, but think of the fun we would have missed,” Jason said.

“There is that,” Williard agreed.

“You're both crazier than hooty owls,” Terry said. “I don't think I'll ever be able to go back to a nice sane life again.”

“Great,” Williard said.

She stuck her tongue out at him and he went back to the bay. Jerry and Donna

and the cat were all asleep, apparently not as bothered by the noise as he was. He sat back down and strapped in as a safety precaution, then spent several hours listening to the deep bass thrum of the engines and shrill whistling of air past the broken windows. Presently he dozed and had a nightmare. He dreamed that he was married again and had a time-clock punching job. He struggled with the dream, woke briefly, then went back to sleep.

* * * *

Hours later, Jason again ventured back to the bay. He shook Williard awake. Jerry and Donna had already awoken from their snooze and were using a bit of

webbing to play with Stowaway, dragging it on the deck, then holding it up and swinging it back and forth while he attacked it with enthusiasm more suited to a wily mouse than a bit of inanimate webbed string.

“What's up now?” Williard asked sleepily.

“Good news for a change. We're not hauling near as much cargo as this bird was designed for. We're going to make Brazzaville if I can find it.”

“Great. Good luck.”

“I'll need it. The compass and directional indicator have gone down.

All I have left is the airspeed indicator, clock and our last bearing.”

“Where are we now?”

“We should be getting near the coast of Africa, down near the equator if my figures are right. I got Jerry to take a sighting with that old sextant a while ago, not that it helped that much.”

“I see land, Jason,” Terry's voice came over the intercom, the one instrument which had worked consistently from the beginning.

“Be there in a sec,” Jason said. “Hey, that cat must of changed our luck. Give him some more C-Rats.”

“Maybe we should let him navigate,” Williard joked.

Jason bent and plucked the cat from Donna's lap. It looked up at him from his cradled arms and yawned.

“I'll take him up front, just in case,” Jason said with a laugh. He disappeared up the stairwell with Stowaway

“Here's our fighting cat,” Jason said to Terry. “Play with him a while.” He deposited Stowaway in her lap. He knew that Terry was tired and worried and had brought the cat into the cockpit to see if it would take her mind off the fact that they were getting low on fuel and he still didn't know exactly where

they were. Once he was strapped back in, he reached over to her side of the instrument panel and flicked the directional finder switch again to see it would come to life. The dial remained motionless. Stowaway, sitting in Terry's lap, reached out an inquisitive paw to the same switch. He batted it and the dial wavered, then began flicking back and forth.

Jason stared at the cat as if it had just grown wings. "Be damned," he said. He turned the radio up and began scanning the band lengths, hunting for a station he could identify. Presently, he picked up a beacon from Brazzaville, as if Stowaway had worked his magic on the

radio, too. “Be damned,” he said again.

“We were way off course. I swear, this is the first time I ever heard of a cat helping anyone fly.” He worked the rudder pedals and turned the yoke. A second later, both instruments went down again. Terry laughed. “Maybe we should let him hunt down the dinosaur for us.”

“After this performance, I'm willing. That is, if we make out all right when we land.”

Chapter Nineteen

By the time Grazino recovered from his hangover, he was in better spirits. Using a gun pointed at Jeannie's head, he forced Larry to reveal as much information as he knew. "Lake Tele is where they're heading, after they get to the Congo," he said. "I don't have any idea whether they will stop at Brazzaville first or not. They may decide to do without an interpreter and just go directly there."

"Why do they need an interpreter?"

"Lake Tele is supposedly controlled by some Pygmy tribes. He was wanting to

find one who was willing to go with them for liaison in case the ones at the lake gave them trouble.”

“Pygmies and dinosaurs. Jesus Christ, now I've heard it all. I shoulda become a priest like my mother wanted me to.”

“It's still not too late,” Monica said. She was into her religious mode again and feeling frustrated besides. Jeannie had kept her out of Larry's reach and Grazino had forbidden any of his followers from acceding to the appetites which swept over her while she was drinking the night before. He was afraid one of them might fall for the beautiful woman and was taking no chances. On the other hand, her praying was getting on his

nerves.

“I don't know whether to keep you drunk or sober,” Grazino said.

“She's more fun drunk,” Larry said, wishing he had some of Williard's hangover pills.

“Shut up, both of you. Mugsy, go outside and see how much longer the repairs and fueling will take.”

Mugsy returned a few minutes later. “They say just a few more hours, boss. I talked to the pilot. He says we've got twice the speed they do once we start flying again. It won't take long to chase them down.”

Grazino checked his watch. "It better not. If we delay much longer they might be there and gone before we catch up with them. My aching head. I'm going back to sleep. Wake me up when we're ready to take off."

* * * *

Jason took time to reach over and pet Stowaway occasionally while he made the approach to Brazzaville. He had taken the time to call back to Williard and tell him to distribute their remaining money among them all. He wanted everyone to have it handy immediately upon landing. Now, with the radio out again, his main concern was to avoid getting shot down by whichever

quarreling faction was controlling Brazzaville. He assumed that both of them possessed missiles and AA guns supplied by the CIA or KGB. Just in case someone from the ground had him in visual sight, he began waggling the wings in a surrender motion, hoping that if that were so it would make them hold off until they were grounded. Even after getting the correct bearing with Stowaway's help, he still had to circle the general area once or twice before finally spotting the city, then had to circle it in turn to find the airfield. He made it, just barely, coming in on fumes and little else.

A decrepit looking jeep, armed with a

machine gun, pulled onto the runway and trained the weapon on their aircraft. He followed the jeep into a parking area, killed the engines before they could die from lack of fuel, then quickly drug Terry from the cockpit and sent Donna forward to hide there. He cranked open the cargo door and found a squad of black soldiers facing him, wearing various colored shorts and little else. He could understand why. The heat and humidity wafted into the plane like a cloud of invisible smoke, sucking away the breath and producing an immediate film of sweat and a feeling of not being able to get enough air into their lungs. The soldiers' weapons, he saw immediately, were old M-14's rather

than Kalishnakoffs. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Come down,” the lead soldier said, speaking with a British accent, but perfectly understandable. He was wearing a sleeveless jacket in addition to shorts and tarnished captain's bars were attached to the epaulets. Jason extended the aluminum ladder and climbed down, pockets filled with money.

“You are under arrest,” the Captain said.

“What for, Captain?”

“Unauthorized entry.”

“Sorry, Captain, our radio wasn't working.”

“That is not a permissible excuse. You are still under arrest.”

Jason felt in his pocket and pulled a roll of bills up just far enough to let the Captain see it. “Perhaps we could discuss the matter?”

The captain lowered his weapon the tiniest bit. “Perhaps. How many aboard your plane?”

“Only two others. We all have American passports.”

“Provided by the CIA, I'm sure. What

cargo are you carrying?”

Jason fanned his face. “Could we discuss this somewhere out of the heat?”

“No. What cargo?”

“Well, we got mostly jungle supplies for an expedition we're planning. With permission, of course.” He reached into his other pocket and let the bills there come into view.

“An expedition, you say. To where, might I ask?”

Jason wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. He could imagine what it must be like in the cargo bay.

“We want to fly from here to Lake Tele.”

The Captain's speech lost a little of its proper British accent. “You are a brave man. Very few ever venture into that area. Even fewer come back.” The captain smiled to himself. He had been eyeing the edge of the bills in Jason's pocket with concealed avarice, but was undecided about how much to let the Americans get away with. He had his superiors to consider. Now he quit worrying. So far as he knew, there had never been anyone who started toward Lake Tele and came back, other than Pygmies. He thought of the company of British troops in the late 1800's who had

thought to explore that area. They had never been heard from again.

“We'll take the risk,” Jason said.

“If we allow it. I'll come aboard now.” He motioned his soldiers to wait, then waved the barrel of his rifle at Jason. “After you.”

While Jason was occupied outside, Williard and Jerry had been getting their weapons out of sight and their money handy. Jason preceded the soldier into the bay, then held out a hand to help him up the ladder since one of his hands was still holding his rifle. Once inside, the captain stood up and looked around curiously. He had noticed the hastily

repaired bullet holes in the wing and stabilizer and wondered what they had been up to.

“Good afternoon gentlemen. And lady,” he added. “I am Captain N'koto. Let me see. There are four of you. There will be landing fees and entrance payments. And I will need to see your passports.” He tried very hard to conceal his startlement at seeing two replicas of the pilot. Bad Juju! Among some tribes, even twins were considered bad luck and were usually disposed of at birth. Best to get these people away from here in a hurry!

“Certainly,” Jason pulled out his document and handing it over, along with ten hundred-dollar bills.

“The others, also,” N’Koto said, pocketing the money. It was more than he had anticipated. Williard and his brother followed Jason’s lead. The captain tucked that money away, too.

“Now, if I may, I will need to see your cargo. Open all the crates and hatches, please.”

“Is that necessary?” Jason asked, forking over another sheaf of bills.

“I’m afraid so,” the captain said, his ebony face wrinkling in a frown. Williard and Jason had taken the precaution of placing stacks of bills on top of the weapons. N’Koto pocketed

each stack and closed the crates and hatches back up. "No weapons, I see," he said pleasantly. "What's in this suitcase?"

"Just some of my old uniforms," Jerry said. "You can have them if you want."

"No thanks, I would have no use for them. Now the cockpit, please."

Williard hoped Donna was well hidden behind the seats and that the captain would only look around. He needn't have worried. When N'Koto opened the doorway, Stowaway stuck his head in his face.

"Meow?" he said.

Bad, bad Juju! There was no way he was going to climb into the cockpit with a black cat! He slammed the door in Stowaway's face. There was no way these foreigners would ever return from Lake Tele!

“I think that will be all,” N'Koto said. “I will take the pilot with me so that he may make arrangements for your expedition. The rest of you may wait in the shade of the plane if you like. A donation to my soldiers would be helpful should you like something to drink, or chairs to sit in while you are waiting.”

“Right,” Williard said, hoping they wouldn't run out of money before they

got off the ground again. They still needed to refuel and hire an interpreter. However, Donna still had her money and he and Jerry had been left with a bit. He wished again for that missing half-million dollars. While Jason was off with the expensively cooperative captain, Williard and Jerry spent the afternoon and on into the night sitting beside the plane, swatting flies and intermittently peeling off bills to send for cool drinks. Each time, it was a hundred, since neither of them had anything smaller and no change was ever returned. Williard thought that only a sudden rainstorm which came up during the hottest part of the day saved Donna and Stowaway from suffocating inside

the metal interior of the Albatross ... but there was nothing they could do about it, other than go inside once in a while with a drink and come out with it empty. He wondered if it was Stowaway's sudden appearance when the captain had opened the cockpit door which had anything to do with him not inspecting there. If so, the cat had saved them again. No telling how much money it would have taken to cover up her lack of a passport. Just the refueling, which was accomplished right before dusk, cost four thousand dollars and left them digging at the bottoms of their pockets.

Finally, well after midnight, headlight beams appeared, coming back to the

apparently idle field. No other plane had landed, nor had he spotted any waiting to take off. There was only the surrounding jungle and the suburbs of Brazzaville seen through a haze of dust beyond where an unpaved road cut through the jungle. And the flies, of course. They were much worse than Texas deer flies or mosquitoes, biting with a ferocity worse than fire ants. No matter how much slapping they did nor how many they killed, swarms more replaced them. Oddly, the soldiers were not bothered. They ignored the flies landing on them and crawling over their bare torsos and faces, as if whatever damage they might do was something they were accustomed to living with.

Jason jumped out of the jeep, accompanied by the captain and what Williard at first took for a chimpanzee in the darkness. As they neared, though, he saw his first Pygmy. The little man was not much more than four feet tall. He was clad only in a brief loincloth and carried a bare bladed machete almost as long as he was tall. He strode forward confidently, taking two or three steps to Jason's one until he was close. Then he stopped abruptly. He gazed back and forth from brother to brother, each in turn. His face was expressionless, a black mask.

“Bad Juju,” he said, and spat on the ground.

Chapter Twenty

“Bring me a bottle of rum, quick,” Jason ordered. “The hundred proof.”

Jerry swung up into the bay, not bothering with the ladder. He disappeared inside and a moment later tossed an unopened bottle out to Jason. Jason caught the bottle, uncapped it and offered it to the Pygmy, who had been starting to turn away. He reached up and took it, sniffed, then tilted it to his mouth and made gurgling noises.

“Gawd,” Jerry said as he watched the Pygmy's bobbing Adam's apple. “Even I couldn't do that.”

“Not even a mix to go with it,” Williard said with true admiration in his voice.

“Bad Juju,” The Pygmy said again, finally coming up for air. “Not as good as Palm Wine. Me N'waji. Me go. Mokele Mbembe eat you all same.”

“Cheerful bastard, ain't he?” Jason said. “I promised him a case of rum to go with us and interpret.”

“How much money?” Williard said.

“That's the funny part. He said he doesn't want any money, just the booze. He's not planning on coming back. Says he doesn't like civilization.”

“Bad Juju,” N'Waji repeated for the third time. “Two case rum now.”

“You got it sport,” Jason said. “We'll take off at daylight.”

“I wish you luck,” the captain said. He gathered his soldiers and they drove away. He knew he would never see the Americans again. In fact, even if they should by some miracle return from Lake Tele, he wouldn't be around anyway. He patted his bulging pockets. Now he could afford that farm he had been wanting, and perhaps an extra wife or two.

* * * *

Another rainstorm cooled the plane off enough so that they could stay inside rather than out with the bugs. Terry improvised a screen over the broken windows to keep them out, and Stowaway quickly snapped up the few which had sneaked inside out of the air, catching them as expertly as a trout jumping from the water after an incautious dragon fly. The heat hadn't seemed to bother him, but Donna was nearly prostrate with heat exhaustion. Williard broke out the first aid kit and used some salt tablets to mix an electrolyte drink for her, then made her down it all, even when she blanched at the taste. N'Waji squatted on the floor and stared at the seated Americans,

laughing inside. How they dressed!

Presently he began to feel sorry for them. He got up and went over to Williard. He tugged at his shirt, then his jeans. "No good for jungle. Hot, hot." He wiped his face in pantomime, even though there was no moisture there.

Williard watched the demonstration. "You know, I think he's got a good idea. We would be better off out of these clothes."

"You mean go naked, like that little gnome there?" Terry said.

"He's not exactly naked, just almost. The rest of you can do what you want; I'm

going to get comfortable.” Williard got out a bush knife and cut the legs from a pair of his jeans and the sleeves and tail from a spare shirt. He discarded his boots and slipped on an old pair of tennis shoes. “Now, how do I look?”

“Comfortable,” Terry said. She turned her back on the curious Pygmy and began stripping, then presently started putting back on the altered clothing. His blank, expressionless face disconcerted her.

“No, no! Hot!” N'Waji exclaimed, as she slipped on her bra and reached behind to fasten it.

“What?” Terry turned half around.

“Hot.” He made discarding motions toward the bra.

“He's probably right,” Williard said.

Terry shrugged and dropped the bra to the floor. She slipped on the sleeveless shirt and tied the tails across her middle, leaving the top three buttons undone. She admitted to herself that it was much cooler, even if she were half naked.

N'Waji shrugged to himself. No use trying to tell the foreigners they would be more comfortable still with no tops at all. He supposed it was some sort of taboo with them. Not that it mattered; Mokele Mbembe was going to get them anyway.

The others followed Williard and Terry's example and soon they felt much more comfortable, enough so that they managed to sleep the few hours until daylight, sprawled among the crates and bundles in the bay. Jason woke them shortly after daylight.

“Time to get going, people. This is the last leg.”

Williard removed Terry's arm, which had been curled over his chest. He got to his feet and climbed down the ladder to relieve himself beside the plane. He noticed that the squad of soldiers were back, squatting just off the edge of the runway in a circle around a small fire. The captain and his jeep were not in

sight.

Jason came down to check the outside of the plane before takeoff. He noticed the soldiers looking in their direction, disgruntled expressions on their faces. “Cheerful bunch of bastards over there, ain't they?”

he said.

“At least they're not shooting at us,” Williard said.

“Yeah. You know, I just happened to think: we ain't never took off in this plane yet when someone wasn't shooting at us!”

“It will be a good feeling,” Williard said. “Maybe things will go right from now on.”

“It will be if that little shrimp of a Pygmy has sobered up enough to point us in the right direction. The compass still ain't working right, the radio is out again and I ain't got no idea of how fast or what direction the wind speed is.”

Williard leaned over, picked up a bit of dry dirt from beneath the fuselage and tossed it into the air. It drifted slowly away from them as it fell back to earth. “There you are, brother. Now you know.”

* * * *

After their usual meal of surplus C-Rations, Jason got the engines going, let them idle for a moment, then applied power and began moving down the runway, wondering whether the soldiers would move out of the way or he would have to run over them. There was no other alternative; that was the direction he had to go to get into the air.

The private soldiers were disgusted. Their captain had disappeared and never returned to give them a cut of the loot he had extracted from the white men as he had promised he would. They heard the roar of the Albatross as it began its takeoff run and moved grudgingly out of the way. The old plane managed to lift

off before it got to where they were standing. As it passed overhead, they raised their rifles in frustration and emptied a full clip each at the plane.

“Goddamnit to hell, those fuckers are shooting at us!” Jason yelled, as he saw bullet holes appear in the nose of the plane.

Williard didn't hear Jason's yell, nor did he need to. A row of holes appeared in the side of the plane above one of the windows, peeling the metal and insulation back and impacting into the ceiling. Several more came through the rear wall of the bay and ricocheted off the cargo door, making a sound like nails rattling inside a tin can. He ducked

reflexively, but it was all over by then. He looked over at Terry, who had come back into the cabin for a moment, to see if she were hit. She wasn't, but the color of her face would have done justice to any car wreck victim who had lost half their blood.

“Are you folks OK back there?” Jason called over the intercom.

Williard took a quick glance at Jerry and Donna. “No one back here is hit. How about you?”

“No problem, unless we took some damage to the plane.”

“Don't worry,” Williard answered. “I

don't think there's much more that could go wrong with it anyway.”

“Let's hope not. Well, settle down. We'll be at Lake Tele in a few hours, if I can find it.”

Terry laughed shakily. “If we get shot at one more time, I'm going home.” She untied the tails of her shirt and brushed bits of insulation from her breasts, then refastened it. Williard clucked sympathetically. “Don't give up yet. Look at N'Waji. He's not worried.”

The little Pygmy still held his features as blank as a charcoal drawing. He sat with crossed legs and a half-empty bottle of rum sitting inside them, gripping it with

both hands. Stowaway sat a few feet away, staring at him as if he were an oversized bird. Whenever he tried to sneak closer, N'Waji spat at him and let loose of his bottle long enough to stick out forked fingers toward him.

“If I had a bottle of rum between my legs, I probably wouldn't be worried, either,” Jerry said. “Christ, that little monkey would make a good sailor the way he puts it away.”

N'Waji looked up, understanding enough of what Jerry said to contradict him. “Rum no taste good. Palm Wine good.”

“What in hell is palm wine?”

“You find out, maybe,” N'Waji said.

“I wonder what he means by that?” Williard said.

“Who knows? I just hope he don't drink up all our supply of rum.”

* * * *

Two hours later, Williard was beginning to relax. Apparently the bullet holes in the plane had caused no more problems than the previous ones. If Jason was right, they should be nearing the lake. He reached over and patted Terry's bare thigh. She had remained in the bay after Jason assured her that she wasn't needed up front until he spotted the lake.

“Almost there,” Williard said. Terry smiled at him and covered his hand with her own. Both engines of the Albatross quit at the same time. The cabin lights died.

“Hey folks!” Jason shouted a moment later. Williard could hear concern in his voice.

“What is it this time?” Williard shouted, forgetting that with the engines dead he didn't need to raise his voice.

“Some of those bullets must have got the generator. I ain't got no power at all!”

“Can we make the lake?” Williard said, feeling his gut begin to knot up.

“Hell, no, it ain't even in sight. Strap in tight, we're going down.”

Beside him, Terry felt for his hand, unconsciously seeking a protective talisman. Williard squeezed it, wishing there was something he could do to reassure her, but he couldn't think of a thing except what a shame it was to get so close to their objective, then die in a plane wreck.

Chapter Twenty-one

“Iron bird no more fly,” N'Waji said. He lifted his bottle and took a swig, as if the rum were a protective potion of some kind.

“Midget, you should of known better than to fly with Jumpin’ Jase,” Jerry said, a weak joke to cover his fear of the impending crash. He put his arm around Donna.

“What about us?” Williard said.

“We don't count. No body in the whole family ever had much sense.”

The Albatross fell precipitously. Williard looked out the window and could see nothing but jungle below. He had an uncanny sense of déjà vu, as if the scene being played out was designed to happen over and over. In the distance he saw a tiny glint of water. At first he thought it might be the lake, but as the plane fell faster and faster, he saw that it was merely a smidgen of a stream, barely visible through the canopy of giant trees.

In the cockpit, Jason spotted the same glint of water. He tried the yoke and pedals over and over without any response at all, but like an airline pilot with a full load of passengers, he never

quit trying. He saw that it might be barely possible to make the water, but there was simply no way to avoid the huge trees in his path without power. They loomed closer and closer, growing in his vision like the towers of a cable bridge on a bombing run, but this time he wasn't going to be able to pull out of his dive. Stowaway didn't like the tilt of the cabin nor the death grip of Donna's fingers in the fur of his back. He wriggled loose and began to scamper downhill, as if he were looking for a hole to escape from a worrisome dog. The steep descent caused the latch of the cockpit cabin to come loose and flop open. He jumped up inside and onto Jason's shoulder, but was unable to stop

there. He hit the instrument panel with a thud just hard enough to jar the broken generator cable ends back to where they touched. Lights flickered and blinked for a moment.

That was all Jason needed. Frantically, he worked the rudder pedals and yoke, flipping the Albatross on its side. It passed between two forest giants and he flipped it back upright and went into the fastest stall the old bird was capable of. The nose came up and it pancaked into the stream of muddy water with a huge splash, tilted almost over, then came back upright and plowed through the water until the wings met two trees on each side of the stream at the same time.

They crumpled backwards and the plane jarred to a halt with the bottom of the pontoons ripped out and the nose resting on a muddy bank. Jason's face hit the instrument panel, cutting a gash in his forehead. He sat still for a moment, then wiped at the blood streaming down his face.

“Meow?” Stowaway inquired.

Williard looked out the window, not believing he was still alive. He rubbed his belly where the seat belt had bruised him when the wings of the plane hit the trees. Outside, all he could see was a wall of foliage only a few feet away. He felt a wetness inside his sandals and looked down. Water was seeping into

the cabin, even though the plane seemed to be at rest.

“Are we really alive?” Terry asked, wonder in her voice at the unexpected reprieve.

“Well, it don't look like either hell or heaven outside, so I guess we are. I don't know how, though.”

Jason stepped into the bay, holding a handkerchief to his forehead with one hand and cradling Stowaway in his arm with the other. “This here cat done it,” he announced. “He came bouncing into the cockpit, jumped on my shoulder, then lost his grip and hit the instrument panel hard enough to jar the power back on

right at the last possible minute. I didn't have a prayer of pulling out of the dive, but at least he got us down in one piece.”

“Are you sure we're in one piece?” Williard said, splashing his feet in the layer of water.

“Close enough. Don't worry, we're not going to sink; this stream is too shallow.”

“Can we take off again?”

“Not without wings we can't, even if we had enough room.”

Williard realized what he had missed seeing when he looked outside.

Ordinarily, he should have been able to see a wing of the plane from his window. Now he saw that it was bent backward, like the broken handle of a canteen cup.

“Where did the wings go?” Terry asked.

“Thataway. Well, anybody got any ideas?”

“Yeah,” Jerry said. “Let's send Stowaway to flight school and let him do the flying from now on.”

“Damn good idea if we ever get home. I ain't got a clue where we are.”

“Lake Tele that way,” N'Waji said. He

pointed in a direction visible through the window.

“How far?”

“Me go outside. Me see then.”

Jason unlatched the cargo bay door and extended the ladder for the Pygmy to climb down. An odor of rotting vegetation and stagnant water came in through the open door, mixed with a sultry, stifling heat and raucous bird calls, along with other harsher, unidentifiable sounds.

“Why do we want to go on to Lake Tele now?” Jerry said.

Williard answered that; he had already been considering their options. “We must be at least a couple of hundred miles from Brazzaville and I don't think there's a chance in hell we could find our way back ... nor to anywhere else for that matter. I think our best bet is to let N'Waji lead us on to Lake Tele and see if any of the Pygmies there will guide us to a town somewhere.”

“According to our maps, there ain't no towns nearer than the Congo river,” Jason said.

“Do you think we could make it to one of them on our own?”

Jerry looked outside. He sniffed the fetid

air. “I don't, and I spent a year or two in the Mekong Delta. Jim is right.”

N'Waji climbed back inside and went back to his bottle of rum. He tilted it, then said, “Lake Tele two, three day from here. We go. Mokele Mbembe see you there.”

“He acts like that fucking dinosaur is just waiting on some white meat,” Jason said.

“White, yes. We go now.” He turned around.

“Wait!” Williard said. “Can we go by water?”

“Mebbe part way, but no canoe. No boat.”

“Let's see,” Williard said. He lifted the hatch where the two old life rafts were stowed and pulled the best looking one out, hoping it didn't have any bullet holes in it...

N'Waji stared at the strange contraption. It didn't look like a canoe to him, but he followed Williard and Jason down the steps out of curiosity. For the first time, a flicker of surprise crossed his face when Williard yanked at a cord and the CO2 cartridge hissed like a huge snake. He tried to spot the reptile making the sound, but instead all he saw was a round, flat boat with thick sides take on

form and substance. He forked his fingers at Stowaway, who had climbed down to the bottom step to watch. He thought the black cat must be responsible for the magic, but he wasn't really displeased. With the odd looking canoe, they would be able to carry his payment of rum with no problem. Besides, he thought Mokele Mbembe would probably enjoy the cat as a tidbit either before or after the main course. Jason ran his hands over the old rubber fiber the raft was made from. "It's pretty much dry rotted, but it might carry us a couple of days. Let's start loading up."

* * * *

Grazino was more discouraged than ever. Their plane came into Brazzaville as low on fuel as Jason had been, and they were just in time to see the Albatross survive a volley of M-14 bullets fired by soldiers at the end of the runway as it took to the air. The pilot refused to chase it for fear of running out of fuel. He had to land.

As soon as they came to a halt, the soldiers swarmed around their plane. None of them could speak English, but they were all smiles. He didn't know that they were smiling because now that the captain was gone, they too would have a chance to pocket some bribe money. It took the rest of the day for the soldiers to

find an interpreter while they sweltered on the runway. If they had fuel and had known the way to Lake Tele, he would have just had the whole bunch of soldiers shot and followed the cowboys, but unfortunately, he didn't.

When one of the soldiers finally did return with someone who could speak English, it took another whole day of interminable negotiations to agree on a price for refueling their plane and letting them go. Throughout the whole time, he worried that the cowboys would find whatever they were looking for and be gone by the time they arrived at the lake. He also worried about the elephant gun, or whatever it was, which had shot them

down in the Caymans. He was in a vile temper, but Mugsy had perked up considerably once they left the ocean and reached dry land.

Mugsy was trying to learn something about his quarry, other than the fact that they didn't seem the least bit frightened of the Mafia like they should have been.

“How come your brothers ain't scared of us?” he asked Jeannie.

“They've never been scared of anything,” Jeannie said haughtily.

“Except for you selling everything they own at a garage sale,” Larry said.

“What's a garage sale?” Mugsy asked. He had heard the term a couple of times from her but didn't really understand what it meant.

“That's where you sell things you don't need anymore from your garage,” Jeannie explained.

“I'd like to sell you,” Grazino said.

“You can't sell people, silly.”

“Don't test me, Broad.”

“Stop calling me a broad. I'm a lady.”

“You're crazy, too, just like your daffy husband and that playboy bunny there.

Now shut up, I want to get a little sleep.”

While Grazino was dozing, Jeannie whispered in Mugsy's ear. “Just a few things,” she said. “Just some stuff we don't really need.”

“OK,” Mugsy agreed. He was curious. He went outside and motioned for the soldiers to come over. When Grazino woke back up an hour later, he blinked his eyes in confusion, trying to figure out what was happening. He heard noises, a rapid sing-song chatter coming from outside. His other men were dozing and Mugsy was nowhere in sight. He jumped up and went to the entrance. Outside, Jeannie was holding an UZI by the strap and talking in sign language to one of

several soldiers clustered around her. They jabbered and she shook her head. Mugsy was holding out his suit jacket, hefting it up and down like a prize fish he had just caught. While Grazino stood speechless and paralyzed, Jeannie nodded her head and handed over the UZI in exchange for a wad of the money he had just paid to the soldiers. The soldier grinned and slipped the strap of the UZI over his shoulder.

“What in hell is going on here!” Grazino screamed.

“We're having a garage sale, boss,” Mugsy beamed. He handed his jacket to another soldier and held up some bills.

“Look, I already made three hundred bucks!”

“You goddamned fool, that crazy broad is selling our guns! Get her back in here!”

Mugsy looked at Jeannie. “Hey, Jeannie, you promised not to sell no stuff we need.”

“He made me an offer I couldn't refuse,” Jeannie said. “Besides, there were plenty of these things just laying around and not being used.”

One of his soldiers woke up when Grazino screamed. He felt on the empty seat beside him. “Hey, where's my heat?”

Some crook stole it when I wasn't looking!"

Mugsy shepherded Jeannie back inside. "I got a good price for it," she said. "Here, I only held back ten per cent for my commission." She handed the irate Italian some bills.

"You crazy broad, I swear I'll kill you," Grazino said. "How are we supposed to fight your brothers without any weapons?"

"You should make love, not war," Monica suggested. She had sold her blouse and was wearing only a minuscule bra. She lifted the glass she was carrying and took a drink from it.

“Why didn't you sell your skirt, too?” Larry asked, eyeing the bulge of Monica's breasts overflowing the top of her bra.

“I was just getting ready to when that nasty man started yelling. I'll take it off though, if you want me to.”

“He doesn't want you to,” Jeannie said.

“I wouldn't mind,” Mugsy said.

“You're so sweet,” Monica said. “And so big, too!”

“Sit down, all of you!” Grazino yelled. “And someone get the booze away from that schizophrenic playgirl before she

corrupts the whole lot of you. Jesus Christ, this is worse than a fucking circus.”

Mugsy reluctantly took Monica's drink from her. It was seldom that he got compliments from women, especially from one who could have stepped out of a centerfold even with her clothes on. Grazino cursed and began counting their weapons. Fortunately, Jeannie hadn't sold them all. He had lost two men to the cowboy's thunder weapon in the Caymans; that gave him two extra. It almost left enough. He hoped.

Chapter Twenty-two

“What should we take?” Terry asked, looking around the damp bay of the old Albatross.

“We'll need weapons and ammo, of course, and a change of clothes and food,” Williard said

“Don't forget the movie camera,” Jason said. “After all this, we've just got to get some pictures of the dinosaur.”

“Mokele Mbembe. You see, OK. See good,” N'Waji said. He was looking forward to the encounter; that is, if the white men survived the trek to Lake

Tele.

“Great,” Jason said. “Be sure and bring that elephant gun.”

“What are you planning, hunting it or taking pictures of it?” Terry asked.

“Whichever suits its fancy,” Jason said.

Williard began hauling weapons down the ladder while Jerry and Donna opened hatches and gathered packs and rations and the movie camera as well as the regular one. He was returning from his second load when Jason eyed the growing pile and said, “This is going to be a lot to carry in case we have to walk.”

“We can use my old suitcase,” Jerry said. He opened the hatch where it had been stored and pulled it out. Donna was nearby, gathering some personal items.

“My suitcase! My God, there's my suitcase!”

Jerry turned around to face her. “Your suitcase? What do you mean? This is my suitcase.”

“No it's not, it's mine! That's the one that has the money in it!” Donna was about to go into hysterics.

“Bullshit. All it has in it is some of my old uniforms. See?” He upended it and bundles of hundred dollar bills spilled

onto the wet deck and began soaking up water.

Jerry stared at the money as if Houdini had just jumped out of his suitcase. “Goddamn. Where did all that come from? Did I get in a poker game when I was drunk and don't remember?”

“That's the money Franko was carrying,” Donna insisted. “Omigod! All this time and we've had it right in front of us.”

“But....” Jerry grabbed the airline tag and flipped it over. Sure enough, it carried Donna's name on it. “I will be damned. I guess it is yours, but it sure looks exactly like the one I checked.”

Williard had been taking it all in. He felt a huge ball of mirth swell inside until it finally exploded in braying laughter. “Gawd! All this time and trouble we've spent getting here to make some money and we were carrying a half-million bucks with us all the time! We could of just stayed home and used it to go beachcombing!”

“I could have been in Las Vegas having a good time,” Jerry said.

“I could have bought a decent airplane,” Jason said.

“You couldn't have done any of those things. Franko's bosses would have been after you in a New York minute.” Donna

said.

“Shit,” Williard said. “They’re after us anyway. What difference does it make?”

Donna was wrong footed. “Yes, but....”

Williard waved his hand, suddenly realizing that the half-million dollars in their present circumstances was worth considerably less than an equal amount of insect repellent would have been. “It doesn’t matter right now. If we ever get back to civilization, we’ll worry about it then. It is nice to know we’re not going to go home broke, though.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. “Let’s finish loading and get on our way.”

Fortunately, the life raft was large. It held all of them and their baggage and still rode a few inches above the waterline, though a number of items had to be discarded. By noon, they were on their way, two paddling and two watching for snakes and crocodiles while N'Waji rode in the bow and pointed out directions.

* * * *

Grazino finally got his plane and crew off the ground. He had gotten directions to Lake Tele from the soldiers, who all expressed amazement that they intended to follow the other craft into the dark, unexplored interior of their country without an interpreter or guide. Grazino

thought about it, then discarded the idea. All he wanted was to find the cowboys, kill or capture them and get back to New York. In fact, the soldiers had not been all that certain with their directions until they rounded up a reluctant Pygmy who told them at gun point. That cost Grazino more money and the last of their liquor, but he felt like it was a bargain. By the time they got to the lake, and if the Albatross was still there, he intended to swoop down by surprise and strafe the hell out of them with the nose machine gun, then pick up whatever pieces were left. He was tired of fooling around and thought he might be losing control of the mission. Mugsy had begun making moony eyes at the playgirl. Marciano

had gone into almost a catatonic stupor at all that had happened so far, and his other few men had become sullen and morose over the constant failures.

As they got airborne, he took another look at Larry and Jeannie and shook his head. They were still acting as if they were in the middle of a movie where the hero would emerge triumphant, and the playgirl had gone back to praying, which made him wish he had some more booze. He could feed her a couple of drinks then tie her up and keep her sexy personality in the talk rather than action mode. Or maybe after they finished with the cowboys and found some more booze, he wouldn't tie her up. It might be

fun to just let her go and see what happened.

Grazino's plane passed over the Albatross crash site without seeing it.

* * * *

Williard paused to pick a leech off his chest and continued slogging, pulling the loaded raft through the waist deep muck of a stagnant swamp, so thick and congested with debris that it was impossible to paddle. Jerry was beside him, pouring buckets of sweat, the same as he was. They were surrounded by tall trees, which provided a modicum of shade, but was the worse for hordes of insects under them, which bit, sucked

and stung without let or hindrance. They had to depend on N'Waji, standing at the bow of the raft, to provide directions because of the thick undergrowth rising on numerous bits of relatively dry land. Even if their vision had not been obscured, they would have had to depend on N'Waji. Williard had no more idea of where he was than bird in a microwave. N'Waji balanced easily, his machete in one hand, the ever-present bottle of rum in the other. Occasionally he would stoop and slash at the water. More often than not he was rewarded with coils of dismembered snakes thrashing and stirring up filth from beneath the inches thick surface scum. Jason trailed behind the raft, carrying the

express rifle now rather than his M-16. The day before, a twenty foot crocodile had yawned its big toothy grin only a few yards in front of the raft, then began to sink beneath the surface. N'Waji had yelled and Jason fired, knowing that if the Pygmy shouted, there was something to worry about. His bullets had only angered the croc. It broke the surface and headed for the raft, bloody mouth opened wide. It had almost tipped the raft before he could get enough rounds into it, and even then, it had swam away, wounded but not dead. N'Waji gave him a disgusted look for not killing the crocodile, even with all the vaunted power of his rapid-firing rifle.

They had camped the first night anchored in a sludgy little alcove of the muddy stream, which even then was beginning to widen and turn swampy. All night they had fought the bugs until N'Waji showed them how to rub mud on their bodies, to keep them from being sucked as dry of blood as a vampire's victim after a month long fast. Early the next morning, as they were eating C-Rations, Terry suddenly screamed as if a serial killer had just crawled through her bedroom window. She didn't even attempt to reach for her holstered pistol. Williard nearly jumped out of his skin as he saw what had frightened her. A huge snake, well over twenty feet long and as big around as a small barrel, had dropped

from the overhanging branches and already had a coil wrapped around one of her legs. He drew his .45 with a speed which would have done credit to Wild Bill Hickock and managed to get his other hand on the snakes neck, just below its head. He tried to get the muzzle of his pistol near the head without putting Terry's body in his line of fire. It was like wrestling a fire hose. Jason jumped to help, but it took two head shots and N'Waji's machete to finish it off. Terry trembled for hours afterwards, ashamed of herself but unable to prevent it. She didn't give a damn what feminists thought, she was still scared of snakes. Once underway, progress rapidly slowed to a crawl.

Williard felt as if he had been tugging on the raft for hours, though he had just relinquished his turn as watchman with the big rifle. It didn't matter. Wading through the muck carrying the heavy gun was almost as exhausting as pulling the raft. A harsh rasping roar came from somewhere in front of them, deep toned and menacing. Williard stopped.

“What is it? Jason called.

“Cheetah. Him no like us,” N'Waji said.

“Fine,” Williard said. “I don't like him either. When do we get to the Lions and Gorillas and elephants?”

“Elephants tomorrow, maybe gorilla

tomorrow. Then lake. Then Mokele Mbembe,” N'Waji said.

“Great.” Williard wiped slime from his face and picked off another leech. They stopped at noon for a rest and a drink of water, which was being depleted at an alarming rate. If they didn't hit the lake soon, they would have to trust their halozine tablets. Looking at the green sludge covering the swamp's surface, Williard didn't put much faith in that option. The raft was pulled against a bit of higher ground where huge trees reached for the sun. One of them had fallen recently, leaving a patch of blue sky visible.

“How far to the lake now, N'Waji?”

Williard asked, around a bite of pork and beans which he had just picked a handful of flies from.

“Tomorrow, mebbe. Next day, for sure.”

“At the rate we're going, that should put us less than ten miles from the lake right now,” Williard said.

“It can't come too soon for me,” Donna said wearily. Williard was worried about her. She just wasn't cut out for adventure like Terry seemed to be. She was beginning to get that thousand yard stare he had seen in exhausted infantrymen's eyes.

“What's that noise?” Terry asked,

pausing with a spoonful of beans and flies halfway to her mouth. Oh shit, what now? Williard thought. He listened. In the distance he heard a faint thrum, sounding like a giant mosquito looking for prey. He cocked his head, trying to remember where he had heard the sound before. It was something which reminded him of civilization, seeming to come from ages away and years in the past after only two days in the jungle.

“Goddamn, that's a plane!” Jason shouted.

Now Williard recognized the sound. “It's coming closer! Let's get out to where it can see us!”

Jason cocked his ear. "It will be gone before we could get there. It's coming in low."

The thrumming grew louder and resolved into the whine of propeller engines. Williard looked up and saw it pass only a few hundred feet overhead and off to the side, then disappear behind the tops of the trees. He thought he recognized its profile and Jason confirmed it.

"You know what? Those were the same guys who were after us in the Caymans. They sure don't give up easy, do they?"

"Where do you think they're going?" Jerry said.

Jason made shushing noises. "Be quiet and let me listen."

The sound diminished until Williard could no longer hear it, but Jason still held his head to one side, concentrating like a math professor having to use his brain instead of a computer. Finally he relaxed. "I think they landed. At least they kept dropping until I couldn't hear them any more. You know what that means?"

"They're still after us," Donna said dispiritedly.

"No, it means we're after them now. Think about it. They must of found out somehow where we were headed and

they're going to Lake Tele, too.”

“We better start going the other way,” Donna said.

“Hell, no. That plane is our ticket home! All we have to do is get to the lake before they give up looking for us and capture it. Hell, even if we don't find the dinosaur, we can fly home in style!”

“I'm for it,” Williard agreed. Just the thought of having to trek for weeks through the jungle, even supposing they could talk one of the lake Pygmies into guiding them, made the idea seem like the easiest thing in the world to accomplish.

“Damn right,” Jerry said. “The Delta was a paradise compared to this place.”

“Let's go,” Jason said. “Times a wasting!”

“No need hurry,” N'Waji said. “Mokele Mbembe eat iron bird, too.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Grazino had his pilot circle the lake several times, searching for the Albatross, but it was nowhere to be found. He did spot a cluster of thatched huts built on stilts at the edge of the roughly circular lake and Grazino directed him to land near it, hoping to find out if his quarry's plane had departed or was simply hiding under the thick overhanging canopy around the edges of the lake. He had no fear of Pygmies, armed only with machetes and bow and arrows. If they gave him problems, he would simply shoot a couple until the others got the idea.

The seaplane splashed down lightly and taxied near the village. He took all his men with him, leaving his captives in the plane, which they anchored to the pier with a rope. They couldn't go anywhere since he took the ignition key with him, and anyway, none of them knew how to fly it. Grazino led the way onto the pier, making sure his crew had their guns ready, or at least those which Jeannie hadn't sold to the soldiers back in Brazzaville.

The pier was made of cane poles lashed together with vines, built a few yards out into the lake. It seemed insubstantial, but felt sturdy enough to hold them all. Grazino sent his best men on ahead, then

he, Mugsy and Marciano followed. Grazino shaded his eyes and tried to spot movement in the village. There was nothing, other than a two foot long lizard blinking in the sun and a dead monkey tied to a pole being pecked by ravens. Smoke from a few cook fires rose lazily into the air.

“Sure is quiet, ain't it, boss?” Mugsy said.

“They're scared of us,” Grazino said. “Come on. They'll put in an appearance eventually.” He reholsterd his UZI under his arm, leaving it concealed by his suit coat, which was already beginning to feel as if he were wearing a portable sauna.

The group of men advanced cautiously past the first shack, then more confidently as no menace appeared. Grazino looked into a hut. A piece of meat in the center of a mat was giving off a faint mist of steam as it dried the juice from the broad green leaf it was partially wrapped in. A clay jug sat in the corner of the hut and a few woven mats were scattered in no apparent pattern on the dirt floor.

“Jesus,” Marciano said. “Can you imagine living this way all your life?”

“Shut up,” Grazino said. He was beginning to get nervous. It was too quiet. He walked past a larger hut which

was partially shaded by the thick foliage of a huge tree. He passed it by and went on. A sudden cry came from behind him, then was cut off as if by a knife.

Grazino whirled and saw one of his men being yanked off his feet by a noose around his neck. He clawed at the noose with one hand and drew his gun with the other. An arrow punctured his wrist, and he dropped his weapon and began to gasp and pull at the noose around his throat with both hands. Grazino had no time to see what else was happening. He was knocked to his knees by a weight hitting his head and shoulders, then it felt as if he were being buried by a swarm of fourth grade children with mayhem on

their minds. Little arms and legs grabbed and pulled and tugged at his body until he was stretched out and tied like a calf in a rodeo.

It was all over within a minute or two. None of them even got off a shot. Only Mugsy still stood, looking as confused as a linebacker surrounded by a gang of miniature quarterbacks. Two Pygmies were hanging onto one massive arm, feet dangling two feet off the ground while two others pried his Texas sized pistol from his hand. Once that was accomplished, the two Pygmies who had been hanging onto his arm dropped free. He was surrounded but they made no other move to subdue him. Then, one by

one, each in turn, got down on their little knees and touched their heads to the ground in front of him. After that, they got back to their feet and simply stood staring up at him in awe, as if he were some strange God who had decided to put in an impromptu appearance.

Grazino and the others were dragged to a hut standing off from the others in the village, and thrown inside. They were tied hand and foot, and after that no further attention was paid to them for a long while. Marciano had gone into shock and was totally useless. The other men acted as if they had become objects of a rival family's contract and seemed to expect to be executed at any moment.

One of them was crying, another was praying, and the other two simply gazed blankly into space. Grazino felt as helpless as a worm about to be fed to a bird, but he hadn't quite given up hope. For some reason, Mugsy was still free, or at least not tied up like an insect in a spider's web. Maybe he would think of something. Out on the lake, the seaplane moved idly in the slow current of the tepid water until it was brought up short by its anchor rope. Presently a Pygmy went out and climbed hand-over-hand to the plane. He boosted himself up onto a wing and peered through a cabin window. Inside he saw a man and two women. His little black face split into an anticipatory smile. He descended back

to the rope and again, monkey walked it, this time back to shore.

The crowd of Pygmy men who had surrounded Mugsy had in the meantime urged him out onto the pier. Mugsy was frightened at first, thinking that they intended to imitate the cowboys and throw him into the lake, but he soon gathered from their smiles that they meant him no harm. In fact, it was like they thought of him as something special, something above and beyond ordinary men. He thought it must have to do with his size, and for the first time in his life, he was grateful for the odd body his parents had bequeathed him. As he stood on the pier surrounded by little people

only half his height, more and more of them joined the crowd. A carved wooden cup was forced into his hand. He looked at the murky liquid it contained, then sniffed. A powerful odor of alcohol assaulted his nostrils, melded with the smell of coconut and a hint of crushed green leaves. He looked down at his admirers. They made motions as if he should drink. He raised the cup to his lips and took a sip. It burned his tongue and ravaged his esophagus but the pain lasted only a second, then transmogrified into a delicious warmth that quickly grew and expanded and grabbed onto the frontal lobe of his brain like moray eel sinking its suckers into a pike. Mugsy beamed and nodded his thanks.

There were many more women than men crowding onto the pier and all were clad in the briefest of loincloths. They gibbered happily among themselves and pointed out to the seaplane as if it were another object of adulation. The one who had gone out to inspect the seaplane jabbered to the others for a moment, listened, then jabbered back. He nodded his head and pulled his machete and raised it over the rope.

“No!” Mugsy shouted. He knew something bad was about to happen and Monica was still aboard!

The machete hung poised for a moment like a guillotine about to drop then was slowly lowered. The crowd jabbered

again, clearly displeased. Mugsy wondered how to make them understand. He wrinkled his massive forehead, then an idea popped into his mind like the proverbial light bulb. He bent down and stretched a finger out to touch one of the little women's tiny breasts, then stood up and pointed to the seaplane. He had to repeat the action several times before they got the idea, but then a whole swarm of them grabbed the anchor rope and began pulling the plane back against the pier. As soon as it was close enough, he stepped onto a wing, followed by the Pygmy who had first gone out, and several more who came behind. Mugsy opened the door to the cabin. Larry and Jeannie immediately surged forward,

then stopped suddenly at the plethora of raised machetes. Monica was praying, her usual occupation when not being seduced by demon rum.

“Monica! Come here, I've got something for you,” Mugsy said.

Monica looked up at him over her folded hands. She eyed the cup in his hands. “What is it?”

“Something better than rum.”

Monica's's eyes brightened. Grazino had been stingy with her lately. Just one little sip, she thought, then I'll start praying for rescue again. Mugsy was so nice to think of her. She walked over to him and took

the cup. Anticipating something in the neighborhood of rum and coke, she took a big swallow. For an instant she stood rigid, like a deer caught in the beam of a spotlight, then her eyelids lowered, her lips flushed into a sensuous pout and her body suddenly seemed fuller and more voluptuous than it had been a minute before.

She drained the rest of the cup and put her arm around Mugsy's waist, what she could reach of it. "Let's go somewhere where we can be alone," she said.

"Hey, what about us?" Larry demanded.

Mugsy shrugged. Monica turned for an instant. "I'll pray for you" she said. Once

they were back on the pier, the Pygmy who had first started to cut the anchor rope again raised his machete. The crowd shouted enthusiastically.

“Mokele Mbembe,” he said.

“Mokele Mbembe,” the others echoed.

The machete descended and the rope parted.

The seaplane began to drift slowly in the current, away from shore.

Chapter Twenty-four

When Williard thought he couldn't possibly take another step or exert another ounce of strength on the rope attached to the raft, the green muck they had been wading through for what seemed like the better part of his life finally began to thin out. He stopped with Jason, who was taking his turn on the rope and gasped for breath. When he could talk, he said, "I think this stuff is breaking up a little."

"It should. The lake can't be far now. Goddamn, I hope that plane is still there."

“It better be,” Williard said. “Otherwise, I’m just going to lay down in the water and let whatever comes along first have me for lunch.” He picked several leeches from his abdomen, trying not to think of how many more must be attached to him below the waterline. Against N’Waji’s objections, they had traveled most of the previous night, pausing only a few hours before dawn to rest and eat again. N’Waji looked at the two men in front of the raft. He would be glad to get back home where people acted in a rational manner, but for the life of him, he couldn’t understand what their hurry was. They would only end up in Mokele Mbembe’s stomach that much sooner.

But perhaps they didn't know that was the fate of all outlanders who insisted on challenging his people's homeland, or at least those few who made it this far. He held a certain grudging admiration for these three. They were brave, almost fearless. They had faced the big crocodiles, the snakes and the spotted cats and protected their women like proper men should. One of them had even used the big firestick on the rogue elephant who challenged them for the high ground where they rested during the night, standing fast in the face of its moon-shadowed charge and dropping it with only one shot. He would have respected them more, though, if they had killed the elephant properly, by using

their machetes to hamstring it then hack it to death, but he figured that they just didn't know any better. He hoped they would fight as well and make a good sacrifice for Mokele Mbembe when the time came, as it almost certainly would. The God which lived in the depths of the lake preferred brave men, or so it was said. At any rate, none ever returned to refute the belief.

When Williard was finally able to climb onto the raft and paddle, rather than struggling through the swamp, he felt an enormous sense of relief. The worst was over now. A fight with Mugsy and his boys would be like playing patty cake with a baby in comparison. While he and

Jason used the paddles, Terry and Jerry picked leeches off their lower bodies. Donna refused to touch them. She had about reached her limit, other than caring for Stowaway.

The water they were paddling the raft on deepened and widened and grew clearer, though only by comparison. It still resembled something let loose from an untreated sewage system. Finally, though, a last stand of trees and underbrush was passed and the vista widened out into the calm waters of Lake Tele. They paddled cautiously forward, looking for the seaplane and trying to keep close enough to the edge of the lake to avoid being spotted.

“There!” Jason said. He pointed to a spot about a quarter of the distance around the lake. Williard squinted into the noonday sun. The plane was just barely visible, floating about a third of the way out to the center of the lake. “That’s sure a funny place to park,”

“Iron bird go to feed Mokele Mbembe,” N’Waji said. “Him eat plane and people, too.”

Williard looked at his brother. “You think he knows what he’s talking about?”

Jason shrugged. “Guess we’ll find out. We ain’t got no choice but to try taking it tonight.”

“I wonder where the Pygmies live?”
Jerry said.

“N'Waji will show us after we get the plane,” Jason said.

There was a sudden splash. The brothers whirled around, almost upsetting the raft. N'Waji had dived into the lake and was swimming away. If the outlanders wanted to hurry to their death, that was their business. He was going home.

“Hey, come back!” Williard shouted.

“Please come back,” Terry called.

N'Waji kept swimming. Jerry raised his rifle.

“Fuckit, let him go,” Jason said. “We don't need him no more. We've got a half-million dollars in the raft and that's our transportation home sitting out there. Let's pull back out of sight and rest until it gets dark. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'd have trouble fighting a scared rabbit right now.”

Williard had to agree. Besides, the only way to tackle the seaplane with any hope of success was at night, anyway. He dipped his paddle into the water and began backing up the raft.

* * * *

While Williard and his brothers were sleeping, Grazino and his men had been

fed again, bits of meat and unidentifiable vegetables brought into the hut in a clay pot, along with another containing water. Their feet were still tied together, but the ropes of twisted fiber had been taken from their hands. It was of little consequence. Three Pygmy men, armed with razor sharp machetes, guarded them night and day, making certain that they did not attempt to free their feet. Their previous meals had been brought in by Pygmy women, but this time, along with the women, a male came inside. Mugsy dipped his head and followed him in.

“Mugsy!” Grazino exclaimed, excitement surging within his breast. Maybe they were going to be turned

loose and allowed to walk about like Mugsy was!

“Hi, boss,” Mugsy said. “Sorry I haven't been by sooner, but I've been kind of, uh, occupied.” A dreamy expression crossed his face, highlighted by his eyes, which looked as if they had just been visited by Tinkerbell with her star dust.

“Well, get unoccupied and let us loose.”

“Uh, I'm sorry, boss, but I can't. The Pygmies say you have to stay here until Mokele Mbembe is ready to feed.”

“That goddamn word again. Well, when does this thing, whatever it is, get fed?”

“Mokele Mbembe sleep now. Tonight he feed. Tomorrow he feed.” the male Pygmy said.

“Well, what happens then?”

Mugsy looked guilty and didn't answer.

“You drink Palm wine,” N'Waji said. He was still panting slightly from his long swim.

“And we can be free then?”

“That's what they say, boss. That is, if you drink enough wine.”

“What the hell kind of deal is this? Are they crazy? And speaking of crazy, have

you asked them whether they've seen those nutty cowboys?"

"They go to feed Mokele Mbembe tonight," N'Waji said.

"Jesus, you mean they're still here? Bring on that goddamn palm wine, whatever it is. I'll drink a bushel of it!"

"You wait," N'Waji said. He reached up for Mugsy's hand and tugged at it. "Come, Little Mokele. We go."

Mugsy shrugged apologetically and left with the little man.

"What was that all about?" Marciano said, the first words he had uttered in

two days.

“I don't know, but it sounds like things are looking up,” Grazino said.

* * * *

Williard woke up to the sensation of insects feeding on his face. He brushed at them and sat up. Jason and the girls were still sleeping, but it was almost dark. They had very nearly overslept. He nudged his brothers and the two women. While they were coming awake, he peered out onto the dark waters of the lake, looking for the seaplane. He didn't really expect to spot it since they had pulled behind a little knob of raised mud to rest, but he saw it almost immediately.

It had drifted in their direction, but further out from shore, tugged by the slow circular current of the lake. It was very near to the middle of the lake now.

“Damn, we almost blew it,” Jason said. It was a clear night and the first stars were becoming visible. The moon would not rise until later in the night.

“It's OK,” Jerry said. “I'll be able to find it. If I can't, I've done wasted a whole lot of time in the Navy. Let me back up a few yards and get some reference points so I can sight the stars when they're all out.”

He eased out of the raft and retreated until he had the seaplane lined up with a

row of bushes he tied white strips of his handkerchief to. He stayed there until the stars he was looking for were clearly unmistakable. By that time the seaplane had faded into the darkness, but he would be able to find it now, so long as he had judged the time/drift ratio right. He thought he had, but if not, he was sure he could place them in the general area and spot the plane by the first light of the moon.

“OK, I've got it,” He said when he returned. “We better haul ass. We've got a long way to paddle before the moon comes up.”

“Are you sure you don't want to wait here for us?” Williard said to Terry.

“No. I'd be more frightened here in the dark than I would out on the lake, I don't care if we do get shot at again.”

Donna cradled Stowaway, huddled into herself and didn't answer one way or another. Neither alternative seemed like a good bet to her. All she wanted to do was go home.

“OK, troops, let's go. You can take the safeties off your weapons now. We don't want to make even a little noise when we get close. If we're lucky, they'll all be asleep.”

“Maybe they already are,” Williard said. “I don't see any lights. Don't they

have battery power on a new plane like that?”

“Yeah, I think so. I don't know why they aren't lit, but that's all the better for us. Less chance of being spotted. Come on, let's move.”

Williard and Jason took the paddles, leaving Jerry free to navigate. They eased the raft out into the lake and began digging in, trying to make all the distance they could before the moon rose.

Chapter Twenty-five

That part of the Congo basin which encompassed Lake Tele had been geologically stable for millions upon millions of years, while most of the rest of the globe went through tortured convolutions. Mountain ranges rose and fell, volcanoes erupted and spread lava over vast areas, and ice ages came and went in slow, erratic cycles.

As climate and terrain changed and changed again, ancient animals flourished, evolved and became extinct, but always were replaced by new species. The age of the dinosaurs came and they dominated the earth for untold

millions of years. All species must fail eventually though, as the dinosaurs ultimately did. Only in the Congo did they last, but over epochs, their range grew less and less, their species fewer and fewer until only one kind remained. Over periods of time unimaginable to the mind, this species changed and evolved. It grew smaller, then larger then smaller again, and changed its appearance time after time until finally it bore little resemblance to its forebears. It was carnivorous, then vegetarian, then carnivorous again. As mammals increased in size, so too did it, and it flourished and grew more numerous. But then a climate change, a genetic diversion, some mysterious path of

evolution caused the size of mammals to shrink. The larger ones became extinct, and the descendants of the ancient dinosaurs which had once ruled the earth found it hard to keep themselves fed. They became amphibious, feeding on both land and water, but even that was not sufficient. Their numbers decreased, declined and tapered off into near oblivion, the few which were left dwelling only in the near environs of Lake Tele. Finally, there was only one, born of one egg among many, but destined to be the lone survivor of the clutch. It was grown and fed but was always hungry. Its body was too large to be adequately sustained by such wildlife that lived in the lake and around its

shores. It hungered as it searched for food, growing thinner as its size increased. It also searched for others of its kind, though this was not a conscious thing. It was more like a yearning, a nagging sense of unfulfilled destiny which only a mate could provide. Yet it had no mate, nor did it know what impelled it at certain times of the year to swim avidly through the deep dark waters of the lake, taking food if it found it, but looking for something else, it knew not what. On this night, it rose from the depths at the center of the lake where it had been resting, hoping with its little reptilian mind, larger than that of its ancestors, but still smaller and less developed than a mammal's, that it

would find the object of its lifelong quest. It was that time of the year again. As it rose, nearing the surface, its sleek, fifty-foot long body cut through the water like a stealthy submarine, displacing water as it passed while hardly disturbing it. Near the surface, it began to sense a presence, an object, something larger than anything it had ever encountered before. It also had an odor, similar to the tidbits the shore dwellers occasionally floated out to it on cane rafts, but there was another smell, too, greasy and volatile and immensely attractive. Molecules of gasoline and machine oil and lubricants somehow were impinging on its pheromone receptors and locking into place, sending

urgent messages to its brain. It broke the surface of the water and peered into the darkness with eyes the size of saucers, looking for the source of the heavenly odor. A bulge on the horizon of the lake loomed like an ancestral memory, long forgotten. It stretched its neck and began to swim, leaving a wake behind.

* * * *

“I see it,” Jerry whispered. The first glimmer of the rising moon had caught a metallic surface of the seaplane and reflected it back toward him. “Steer straight on.”

“Any lights?” Jason asked.

“Just reflections. Otherwise, not a glimmer.”

“Great. Maybe this will be easy. Wait up a minute, Jim.”

Williard let his paddle trail in the water, glad of the rest. It had been a long pull.

“OK, here's how we'll work it. We'll ease in next to one of the pontoons and climb up onto the wing. From there on, we'll crawl. There will be a cabin door just to the rear edge of the wing, with a little ledge to walk on. The door opens both in or out. If it's latched on the inside, we'll have to go in hard, shoot the lock off and start spraying bullets as fast as we can. Don't aim low unless you

absolutely have to. A few bullet holes in the cabin walls shouldn't hurt anything, but there's lots of wiring and hydraulic tubing running beneath the floor and we don't want to hurt any of that.”

“What if it's unlatched?”

“Then we'll ease the door open, shine our flashlights in and yell for them to surrender.”

“Who goes first?” Jerry asked.

“Me,” Jason said.

“Uh uh.” Williard said. “You're the pilot. If you get hit, capturing the plane won't do us any good. Unless you can fly

one of those, Terry?”

“I wouldn't want to try it by myself.”

“Then me first, Jerry next and you follow, Jason.”

“Meow,” Stowaway said, as if he agreed with the arrangements.

“One of you girls pet that cat and keep it quiet,” Jason said.

Donna gathered Stowaway into her arms and began stroking him. He purred softly. Williard was getting antsy by the time the raft bumped gently against the pontoon. The moon was halfway above the horizon already. As soon as he was

sure of his footing, he checked his .45 automatic and flashlight. They had agreed on pistols as the best weapons for close work, with Terry backing them up from the raft with a M-16 in case the raid went down the wrong way. Williard gripped the top of the pontoon and hoisted himself up, then shined his flashlight briefly downward to check his footing. He gripped a supporting bar and hoisted himself up onto the wing then crawled a few feet forward to give Jerry and Jason room. As soon as they were behind him, he began inching forward. His outstretched hand touched the body of the cabin and he reached out with his hands to find the step, then eased himself up onto it and felt for the door latch. He

tugged at it gently, trying to be as quiet as possible, but he thought surely anyone inside must be able to hear the roar of his heartbeat. The handle turned under his hand. He got it all the way into the down position, then pulled back gently. The door gave a small creak. He felt along the seam. It was open. He eased it out a little bit further, then raised his hand, the agreed on signal that the door had been unlatched. Jerry touched his shoulder to signal that he and Jason were ready. He stuck a foot into the opening, gripped his automatic with one hand and light with the other. He took a deep breath and kicked the door open, flicking on his flashlight at the same time. He stepped quickly to the side to allow

Jerry and Jason to enter. “Don't move, you're covered!” he yelled.

His brothers were right behind him with flashlights and guns, shouting the same thing. The three beams lit up the cabin. At first Williard thought it was empty, then two pair of hands rose from behind a pair of seats. “We surrender! Don't shoot!”

Williard recognized the voice, but he couldn't believe it was possible. “Larry?”

“Jim! Is that you?” Larry rose into view and squinted into the flashlight beams.

“Goddamn, what are you doing here,

Larry?”

“We were kidnapped,” Larry said.
“Boy, are we glad to see you!”

“We sure are,” Jeannie said, standing up so that she was visible.

Jason and Jerry stared at them as if they had suddenly descended from puppet strings. A nagging thought interrupted Williard's bewilderment. He waved his pistol toward the cockpit, cursing to himself for forgetting that others might be aboard. “Is there anyone else inside?”

“No, Mugsy, Marciano and Mr. Grazino took the keys and left us here, then the

Pygmies cut the anchor rope. We've been drifting ever since," Larry said. "Where's your plane? Gosh, I must have really been sleeping. I didn't even hear you land."

"If you had been very close you would of heard it," Williard said. "Jason crashed another one."

"Oh, golly, and this one doesn't have a key."

"Never mind that. They ain't built the plane I can't hot wire," Jason said. "You can tell us why in hell they kidnapped you while I get busy on it, then we can get the hell out of here."

“What about Monica?” Larry said. “We can't leave her behind.”

“She left us,” Jeannie said.

“Mugsy fed her some kind of drink, that's why. It wasn't her fault,” Larry said.

“What's going on in here?” Terry asked, coming through the cabin door with her rifle slung. She had heard part of the conversation from the raft and realized they were no longer in any danger.

“Help Jim and Jerry figure it out while I get this plane started,” Jason said. He headed for the cockpit, shaking his head. All the worrying and the cautious approach hadn't even been necessary.

Now, though, they had another problem. What to do about Monica? They couldn't leave her behind. Larry and Jeannie tripped over each other trying to explain everything which had happened since the brothers had left Dallas. Williard got the idea that somewhere along the way, Jeannie had managed to conduct a garage sale and almost managed to dispose of their captive's weapons before she was caught. He felt a shiver run through his body when Larry described how he had killed two of Grazino's thugs with the express rifle. What if he had hit one of them instead?

Still in the raft and wondering whether it was safe to come up into the plane,

Donna suddenly noticed a florescent wake headed toward the plane, topped by a long neck and a head with a mouth which opened and closed, opened and closed, displaying a set of pointed teeth each time which would have done credit to the fangs of a saber toothed tiger, except that there were many more of them. “Yiiii!!” she screamed.

“Something's coming!” She scrambled out of the raft, up onto the pontoon and along the wing, and burst into the cabin with her hair flying out behind her.

“What in hell is bothering you now?” Williard said. The plane bumped forward, knocking him off his feet.

“It's a monster!” Donna screamed. “It's attacking us.” The plane shuddered again. Williard ran to the cabin door and hung his body outside, looking back toward the tail of the plane. A long, sinuous neck supported a huge head nosing past the horizontal stabilizer. The mouth opened and a jaw full of teeth sparkled in the moonlight. Williard stared, stupefied at the creature until it raised clawed front legs out of the water and began pulling itself up onto the tail section of the seaplane.

“Oh good God! We've found our fucking dinosaur!” He shouted. He raised his pistol and emptied the clip into the monster. The shots didn't even slow it

down and the express rifle was down in the raft.

“Everybody hang onto something,” he yelled. “Jerry! Get over here and see if you can slow that sumbitch down!” He ran toward the cockpit, feeling at his belt for another clip for the .45. Then he remembered they were all in the raft. He kicked open the cockpit door and barged inside.

“Jason! Your Goddam dinosaur is here and it ain't trying to have its picture made! Get this fucking plane out of here!”

Jason looked up from where he was bent over a tangle of wires, shaving off

insulation of the ones he had cut. "I hear you. Try to slow the sumbitch down until I can get us wired!"

Williard yanked the dinosaur pistol out of Jason's holster and ran back toward the cabin door just as Jerry popped inside to reload. Terry was unslinging her weapon. He grabbed it from her hands as he passed and hung out the door again. The ersatz dinosaur almost bit his head off and he nearly toppled out the door as a rhythmic banging began to shake the plane. He jerked his body back inside, then stuck the rifle outside and emptied the clip back toward the tail section where the dinosaur's weight was beginning to drag it under water. He

stuck his head out the door just far enough to see if he had done any damage. The creature was bleeding from two bullet holes in its shoulder, just below where the neck joined, but it looked as if its heavy scales had absorbed most of the damage. It saw Williard's head and opened its mouth and roared, lunging forward. He flinched and fell backward into the cabin. The deck tilted some more and the rhythmic banging coming from the tail section increased in frequency and power, as if the creature was trying to bodily force some part of its anatomy inside.

“Oh, Goddamn!” Williard yelled from the deck, trying to regain his feet. “I

think that stupid fucking animal is trying to rape the plane!”

Jerry stuck his head outside the cabin and fired off another volley from his pistol. The creature roared again, paying no attention to the bullets. Its one object now was to penetrate the mate it had found and nothing was going to sway it. It thrust with its lower body, causing metal to shriek and tear.

“Jason, hurry!” Williard shouted.

“I need a couple more minutes. Hold it off!”

“We can't! It's trying to fuck the plane!”

Jason didn't answer. He was working as fast as he could, holding his flashlight under his arm and trying to keep from being bounced from his cockpit seat as the dinosaur went into overdrive. It had found a mate and wasn't about to let it go. The plane tilted more and he heard the ripping sound of metal being torn loose.

Below in the raft, Stowaway was being shook and splashed more than he thought any cat should have to put up with. He scrambled around the raft looking for a way out. There was nothing but water all around him. He looked up and saw light shining from the cabin door. He clawed his way up the supporting struts of the

pontoon and jumped onto the wing, then streaked for the open door. The dinosaur saw the cat flashing along the wing and lunged, stretching its neck out to the limit. Stowaway dodged one way, then the other, but he had little room to maneuver. The dinosaur snapped its neck forward again, jaws open. Stowaway saw the lunging head just in time and jumped into the air. The teeth and jaws passed beneath his body and he landed squarely on one of the creature's eyes. He dug his claws into the sensitive surface, searching for a purchase. The huge saurian roared in agony and shook its head. Stowaway was flung into the air. Williard dropped the empty rifle, pulled the huge pistol from his belt and

leaned through the door. This time he didn't intend to flinch, even if it meant he would be grabbed. Someone had to do something or they were all lost. Just as he leaned out, Stowaway came down and landed on his shoulder. He dug his claws in and held on. The dinosaur was screaming and shaking its head as if it had a terminal case of epilepsy. For a moment, it stopped humping the plane, then started to crawl forward again, trying to find the right fit. Williard could see scratch marks from Stowaway's claws crisscrossing one of its eyeballs.

Williard fired the pistol, aiming for the head, hoping for a lucky shot to the eye or brain, but it was impossible to draw a

bead of the weaving head. He continued shooting anyway. Each time he fired, the recoil from the huge pistol nearly tore his hand off. He missed with most of his shots and missed the head with all of them, merely chipping a couple of horned extrusions growing from the creature's head.

“Oh, shit, we're dead,” he said under his breath.

Chapter Twenty-six

Both engines of the seaplane suddenly roared into life. Without waiting for them to warm up, Jason applied full power. The engines screamed in protest and the plane slid from beneath the hormone-charged dinosaur. It roared its frustration and made a last grab. One of its clawed front feet caught the raft and split it down the middle like a ripe melon being cut open. The raft hissed and collapsed, spilling its contents into the water. The seaplane roared away, dragging the remains of the raft and leaving a scattering of debris behind. One of the claws had split Sherry's suitcase full of money. Water surged into

the opening, and as the plane distanced itself from the creature it became waterlogged and sank slowly out of sight.

Jason had to fight with himself to keep his hands and feet from going through the motions which would take them into the air, but he was afraid that the seaplane had been damaged in some way not immediately discernible. Besides, there was Monica. She was an airhead, but there was no way he was going to leave her behind, not when the Pygmies seemed to think the only thing strangers were good for was a spot on the menu for Mokele Mbembe. He adjusted the side mirror and breathed a sigh of relief

when he saw the strange creature still splashing around in the middle of the lake and not attempting to follow them. Within a few minutes it had disappeared from sight. He kept the engines of the seaplane running until they neared the shore, then chopped them off and flicked on the battery powered lights.

“Where are we now?” Williard asked, as Jason came back into the cabin.

“I pulled us up near the shore for now. Larry, where was that Pygmy village located? Do you know?”

“Sorry, I've lost all sense of direction. Say, that dinosaur gave us a ride didn't it?”

“Actually, I think it was trying to ride us. I just hope it got its rocks off and won't bother us no more. I don't guess anybody thought to get any pictures, did they?”

“We did good to get our ass out of there alive,” Williard said. “In fact, I don't think we would have made it if it hadn't been for Stowaway. He got his claws into one of its eyes and diverted it for a moment.”

Jason looked around and saw the cat laying on one of the passenger seats, licking its fur dry. He shook his head, smiling. “Shit, what do we need with a dinosaur when we got you, cat?”

“We don't need it anyway, remember?”

We've still got that suitcase full of money.”

“So we do. We better go down and bring it inside before a gorilla swims out here and starts using it for toilet paper.” He stepped out of the cabin and dropped out of sight. Williard could see from the expression on Jason's face that something was wrong when he came back inside a minute later.

“What's wrong now?”

Jason scuffed the deck with the toe of his tennis shoe. “No one got any pictures, huh?”

Nods of negation answered him.

“Then we're shit out of luck. The money's gone. There ain't nothing left of the raft but rags.”

And there goes the fortune we were going to make, Williard thought. Unless — “We might get lucky and see the dinosaur in daylight,” he said. “If we do, we could take some pictures then, with the telephoto lens so we don't have to get close to it. We could sell them and still make lots of money. After all, that's what we came for, wasn't it?”

“Fine,” Jason said. “Who wants to dive for the camera?”

“Whoops,” Williard said. The movie camera and the Kodak had both been in

the raft. And now that takes care of that.
“Yeah. Well, fuckit. Let's catch a nap
and see if we can find Larry's Pygmy
village in the morning.”

“I hate to mention this,” Jerry said
tentatively.

“What now?”

“Our rifles and ammo were in the raft,
too, not to mention all the rum. Damn, I
don't know which I would rather have
saved.”

“We've still got the rifle I brought up,”
Terry said.

“How many clips did you bring?”

“Well, just the one, now that you mention it.”

Williard felt around on his holster belt. The clip pouches were all bare and he knew his pistol, as well as the one he had taken from his brother, was empty. He looked at Jason. His brother spread his hands, palms up. “You took mine.”

“It's empty, too. Jerry?”

“Sorry. I shot up every round I had,” Jerry said.

“I've still got my .38,” Terry said. She reached down to her hip. “Oh, no! I left it in the raft when I took the rifle!”

“Great. Three useless pistols and an empty rifle to tackle a whole Pygmy village. How many of them were there, Larry?”

“Bunches,” Larry said.

“Well, fuckit,” Jason said. “Let's worry about it in the morning. Maybe things will look better then. Somebody needs to stand watch.”

Williard felt his eyelids drooping and a pervasive exhaustion setting in which had been concealed until now by the adrenaline rush of the encounter with the dinosaur. He doubted if he could stay awake another five minutes.

“You guys did all the work paddling and pulling the raft,” Terry said. “Get some sleep and I'll stand watch.”

Williard looked at her gratefully, then lowered the backrest on one of the soft, luxurious seats the modern seaplane was equipped with. He stretched out and was asleep within seconds.

* * * *

N'Waji had heard Mokele Mbembe's roaring voice during the night and the sounds of the white men's guns. He and the other villagers had been enthralled with the noise of their Deity accepting the sacrifice. Usually they only heard faint screams from the offerings which

they tied to rafts and set adrift. Only N'Waji suspected that the three brave men who all looked alike had somehow survived despite the fact that the others must have heard the sounds of the iron bird coming back to shore. He wondered how they had managed it. Bad Juju! He should have known from their identical appearance and their braveness in the swampy jungle that they were no ordinary men. They couldn't be, not when they kept a cat the same color as the deepest, darkest water of the sacred lake as their companion! Now the others would hold him responsible for bringing them into their midst. What was he going to do?

* * * *

Williard woke up first the next morning. He yawned and rubbed his whiskers, then got up from the reclining seat where he had been sleeping. He felt more refreshed now, as if he had only been lightly mugged rather than beaten with rubber hoses in a Mississippi jail. He prowled into the galley and looked into the pantry. His mouth began to water. Grazino, as he had learned the leader of their pursuers was named, had not stinted on supplies. The shelves were stocked with an assortment of canned and packaged luxury goods fit for any three star beanery. He began pulling out cans and packages. The noise woke the

others up.

“Breakfast, folks. Come see what I found!”

Over a meal of canned shrimp and crabs, rich cling peaches in cinnamon flavored syrup and gourmet ham, they held a conference.

“The thing is, N'Waji must have made it back to the village by now. What is he going to tell them about us?” Jason asked.

“No way to tell,” Williard said. “And what difference does it make? We're going to go in after Monica anyway, aren't we?”

“Yeah, but with as little as we got going for us, it would be nice to know what to expect.”

“I've got a suggestion,” Jerry said.

“Well, don't keep us in suspense. What do you think we ought to do?”

“The same thing you do when you're in a poker game and you don't fill your straight.”

“Fold?”

“No, bluff.”

Jason grinned. “How often do you win when you bluff?”

Jerry shrugged. "Most of the time. Until I get drunk, that is."

Williard laughed. "Fuckit, then. You stay sober and that's what we'll do. Jason?"

Jason shrugged. "Suits me. Get a hunch, bet a bunch. Let's start looking for that village. No, wait. We better take a peek at the outside of this here plane before we get going. That lovesick dinosaur might have tore the tail flaps loose or something."

All three brothers climbed down onto the wings of the seaplane, curious to see what damage the amorous monster might have caused. The horizontal stabilizer and the back third of the fuselage were

dented and scraped, but what really drew their attention was a gaping hole in the fuselage near the waterline. The metal had been punctured and bent inward, as if it had been attacked by a pointed sledge hammer. They stared at the opening in awe.

“Gawd, that sumbitch must have a whanger as big as a whale,” Jason said.

“Will it keep us from flying?” Williard asked.

“It might slow us down a little, but we can climb down from the inside and bend it back. I don't see nothing else wrong, though. If we live long enough to get Monica back, we can fly.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

While Jason got the engines idling and did his preflight check, Williard and Jerry crawled back into the depths of the fuselage behind the cabin, intending to use hammers to bend the metal back into something approximating its original shape. At the last minute, he convinced Jerry to leave it as it was. They could always fix it later, and he felt the germ of an idea trying to form, concerning the hole. When they were all back in the cabin, they went into another huddle.

“The way I see it, we just taxi around the shore of the lake until we find the village, then pull up close and see what

happens,” Jason said.

“Maybe they'll get tired of Monica praying and just give her back without any trouble,” Jeannie said.

“If that's what she's doing,” Larry said.
“What if they give her something to drink?”

“If they do, you stay away from her,” Jeannie said.

“The way I heard it, they ain't got no kind of liquor but some kind of wine they make out of palm trees,”

Jason said.

“That couldn't be too strong,” Larry said.
“Besides, maybe she won't like it. She's gotten used to rum since coming to work for me.”

“So that's what you've been doing on your lunch hour,” Jeannie accused.

“Only with bankers,” Larry said, looking sheepish.

“Never mind,” Williard said. “What do we do after we park by the village?”

“There's a pier there you can tie up to,” Larry said.

“Fine. Then what?”

“Then me and Jim and Jason get out and see if we can fill an inside straight,” Jerry said.

“What about the rest of us?” Terry asked.

“You all stay in the plane. If worst comes to worst, Terry can try to fly you home,” Williard said. He avoided looking at Terry, but he caught a glimmer of a tear beginning to form before he turned away.

“I want to go,” she said.

Williard shook his head. “Not this time. There's nothing you could do to help, even if you did come. Don't worry, we'll

manage, one way or the other.”

“It's the other I'm worried about,” Terry said. “Besides, that little man, N'Waddacallim, will know I'm here if he made it to the village, and they already know Larry and Jeannie are aboard.”

“We'll tell them the dinosaur ate you all,” Jason grinned.

“Well, all right,” Terry agreed, “but I'm going to be in the cockpit watching to see what happens, regardless.”

“That's OK,” Jason said. “Just put the sunflaps over the windshield so they can't see in. Let Stowaway watch, too. If we get in trouble, tickle his chin and see

what happens.” He went forward and got the plane underway, thinking to himself that it was damn lucky the dinosaur hadn't been attracted to the pontoons!

Williard sat beside Terry, holding her hand and squeezing it gently every now and then. Regardless of his nonchalant attitude, he was worried. He wracked his brain, trying to think of some realistic way to get Monica away from the Pygmies rather than just bulling their way into the village and hoping for the best. They had already gone to the well too many times. Sooner or later they were going to come up dry. Presently, the germ of the idea he had thought of earlier grew and he began nursing it

along. It didn't amount to much, but it was better than nothing!

* * * *

At midmorning, the lake was clear, with no iron bird in sight. N'Waji wondered what had happened to it, but then he got involved with other villagers, helping with decanting prodigious portions of Palm Wine from big clay pots into smaller vessels. They were getting ready for the initiation rites of the younger villagers—and the foreign captives would participate, too, like it or not. He smacked his lips as he watched the streams of cloudy green liquid being poured off. He was sampling a bit of the result, checking it for the correct

potency, when he heard the motors of the iron bird once again. He and the other men cocked their heads in the direction of the sound. As soon as it was determined that it was again heading to the village, the others looked to N'Waji for direction. He had assured them that Mokele Mbembe would eat the plane and here it was back again, intact, with at least some survivors. Mugsy heard the engine noises, too, and he knew with absolute certainty who was on the way to the village. N'Waji had already told him that the three rednecks had arrived at the lake after somehow surviving the crash of their plane. A vision of the ubiquitous, unkillable cowboys filled his mind with dread, like a child imagining

a gang of school yard bullies lining up to steal his lunch money. He removed a pod of Pygmy women from his lap and stood up, adjusting his new loincloth. He still felt as if he were naked wearing it, but he had to admit it was a hell of a lot cooler than the dark suit he had discarded. The noise of the seaplane taxiing over the water came nearer. He began to hurry toward the pier where he knew N'Waji would be waiting. He would rather have run the other way, but he knew it would be useless. The cowboys would just find him again. Besides, he had responsibilities now. He was a God, Little Mokele and he would be expected to help solve the impending crisis.

* * * *

Jason nosed the plane gently up against the cane pier and killed the engines, again leaving the power on standby, just in case Terry had to crank them up in a hurry. He stepped back into the cabin and joined his brothers after sending the women forward, out of sight. "Well, let's open her up and see what happens," he said.

Williard unlatched the cabin door and pushed it open. The first thing he saw was N'Waji, directing a gang of Pygmy men as they threaded a fiber rope through an anchor grommet on the fuselage, then held onto the rope, making no attempt to tie the plane down.

“Why don't they tie it up?” Mugsy asked N'Waji.

“Iron bird belong Mokele Mbembe. We take men, then turn loose.” He had decided what to do now.

“Good luck,” Mugsy said. That had been tried before.

Williard heard the familiar voice and stared. “Jesus H.Christ. Is that Mugsy there?”

Jason stepped to his side. “Must be. There ain't no other human in the world that big.”

“I wonder where the rest of them are?”
Jerry said.

“I don't think it matters. See all them little fuckers pointing their bows and arrows at us?”

“Oh. I guess it don't.”

“You come!” N'Waji ordered, motioning for them to climb down from the wing and onto the pier. This time he would float them out to Mokele Mbembe on a raft; that is, if he could convince the villagers to do so. They were already staring at the near identical brothers and mumbling among themselves. He heard them asking each other why they had not been killed at birth as they should have

been. Now it was too late. It was bad juju to kill identical siblings directly if by chance they escaped their fate at birth. Sacrifice to Mokele Mbembe, on the other hand, held no approbation if they failed the Palm Wine test, which he expected them to do. He heard the chattering villagers come to the same conclusion and smiled to himself.

“Tie the plane up first so it don't float away,” Jason said, wondering what the Pygmies were mumbling about.

Mugsy had gained a little confidence when he saw that the cowboys were unarmed. He hitched up his loincloth and said. “Forget about da plane. Youse guys better do what N'Waji says unless youse

want to look like a porcupine.” He pointed confidently at the Pygmies aiming their arrows. Williard stepped forward. Now was the time to test his idea. He spoke directly to N'Waji. “Tie up the plane, you little runt. Can't you see it's pregnant?”

“What you mean?”

“See there?” He pointed to the gaping hole in the fuselage. “Mokele Mbembe mated with the iron bird.”

He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger and moved the forefinger of his other hand in and out of it to emphasize the statement. “Mokele Mbembe wants us to keep his mate.”

N'Waji stared at the hole. His normally blank expression changed to one of awe. He turned to his compatriots and spoke to them in their own language. There was no use trying to get rid of the plane now, not that he wanted to any longer. This latest happening was momentous! He said, "Mokele Mbembe take iron bird for mate. Mokele Mbembe let juju brothers live. Now they drink Palm wine with others." The Pygmy men holding the rope immediately tied it fast to the pier.

"Hey, don't listen ta dem guys! Dey're lying!" Mugsy said indignantly. N'Waji ignored the minor Deity the villagers had adopted in his absence, now named Little Mokele because of his size.

Couldn't he see the evidence, right there in plain sight right? “They stay. They drink Palm wine, too,” he told Mugsy.

Mugsy didn't argue any further. He even managed a grin. The cowboys were still going to lose, one way or another!

Once the plane was secured, Williard stepped down onto the pier, accompanied by Jason and Jerry.

“Jim, you're a scoundrel and the truth ain't in you,” Jason whispered to his brother.

“He's playing poker,” Jerry said.

“Yeah, and that was my last dollar,”

Williard said. "I wonder what Mugsy is grinning about?"

"It must have something to do with that Palm wine," Jason said. "He started grinning soon as it was mentioned."

"Well, hell, we can handle that," Jerry said confidently.

Mugsy overheard the last statement as the Pygmy men surrounded the brothers and began herding them off the pier. He followed along close by. "Youse guys t'ink youse are so smart. Youse just wait!"

"We will," Williard assured him. "You sure look cute in that little tutu, Mugsy."

Have you gone native?"

"Yeah, and I'm married, too" Mugsy said smugly, but he blushed anyway.

"Really? I didn't know they came in your size in these parts." Williard wondered what Mugsy was talking about as they were shepherded into an open area in front of a large thatched structure, much bigger than any of the others. It wasn't very far from the pier and the seaplane was still clearly visible, floating at the end of its tether with the nose pointed in their direction. At least Terry would be able to see what developed.

"Youse guys are the ones that better be thinking about size. If youse even get that

far.”

Williard shrugged. The big man was making no sense.

Chapter Twenty-eight

In the area in front of the thatched building, the Pygmy men began seating themselves in a wide circle on the bare earth. In a moment, a horde of little Pygmy women came out of the building, each bearing a large clay jug. They set one beside each man. Other little women carried wooden cups and they placed one beside each jug. When they were finished, there were nine vacant spaces with jugs and cups but no occupants.

“You sit down,” N'Waji ordered, pointing at the empty spokes of the circle.

“Might as well,” Jerry said. “Looks like we're going to get us something to drink. About time, if you ask me.”

Williard seated himself. It was no use arguing. Several of the little men still had arrows held loosely with their bows, pointed in their direction. At least his idea had saved the plane, though. Now they just had to figure out how to get back to it with Monica.

Jason sat down with his brothers. “I wonder where Mugsy is going?”

It didn't take long to find out. He returned in a moment, bringing Grazino, Marciano and the other four men, guarded closely by more Pygmies

carrying machetes. Williard thought they looked slightly the worse for wear, and they weren't speaking to Mugsy.

“Hey, guys,” Jason said brightly, waving to them as they were forced into a seated position in the other vacant spots.

Grazino stared at the three brothers as if they had just strolled in from Central Park. He had thought they were long gone. “What are you crazy bastards doing here?”

Williard hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “We just stopped in to rescue your plane. What are you doing here?”

“You answer first.” Grazino said.

“Haven't you heard? We've been looking for a dinosaur.”

Disgusted, Grazino turned his head away. Finally, he was facing the noisome cowboys he had been chasing for a week and couldn't do a damn thing about it. Well, maybe Mugsy would get tired of his barbie doll before long and decide to wrestle a dozen or two Pygmies for a chance to go home. It was possible. There was his plane, no more than thirty or forty yards away. Even if Mugsy continued acting like an idiot, there still might be a chance to make a break for the seaplane. If it was successful, he swore and be damned that he would just leave the cowboys sitting

where they were and fly off and leave them to the mercy of the Pygmies. That would be as good as a hit any day. N'Waji stood up and clapped his hands. It was a signal for the Pygmy women to come out of the thatched building again. Williard was astounded. They filed out of the big hut in a stream as thick as a column of army ants and almost as numerous. Their faces were not expressionless, but rather had a countenance resembling that of insurance salesmen at a convention eyeing the hookers. He wondered what was going on.

Jason nudged him and said in a low voice. "Hey, look, there's Monica!"

It was easy to spot his brother's erstwhile girlfriend. Her pale skin stood out like an albino in a black church's congregation. Besides, she was dressed as the Pygmy women were, in a loincloth and nothing else. Her overlarge, pink nipples swayed provocatively as she came into sight. No wonder Larry's bankers loaned him so much money! She seated herself by Mugsy, at a distance from the Pygmy women. After wiggling around on the ground to get comfortable, she folded her hands in prayer, avoiding their gaze as if they had become rabid atheists since leaving Dallas. Mugsy circled her waist with one huge arm.

“Shit, I think they've both gone native,”

Williard said. "Monica won't even look at us."

"Whatever. You know, I think something weird is going on here," Jason said.

"Me, too," Jerry agreed. "Nobody's drinking."

As if Jerry had given a signal, N'Waji clapped his hands again, getting everyone's attention, even Grazino's dispirited helpers. He spoke for a couple of minutes in his own language, then faced the whites and interpreted. "We all drink Palm wine. Must finish jug by time sun go to sleep. All who no finish go on raft tonight. Feed Mokele Mbembe."

“What happens to the ones who do finish?” Williard called out, hoping that drinking all the Pam wine would result in them being freed.

“You finish, you marry Pygmy woman, stay here. Many women, not so much men,” N'Waji said.

“Uh oh,” Williard said. He noticed that the Pygmy men in the circle were all young looking, as nearly as he could tell through the tattoos covering their bodies. They were smaller, anyway. “You know what, brothers? We're taking part in an initiation rite of some kind, or maybe a manhood test! The losers get fed to the dinosaur, the winners get to marry. No wonder those little black sexpots have

been giving us the eye.”

Jerry laughed. “Sexpots, my ass. I've seen prettier girls at an Old Maids Convention. I'd rather get fed to the dinosaur.”

“That might be what happens,” Williard said, remembering how N'Waji sucked up rum as if it were soda pop.

“What's wrong, Jim? Shit, we can out drink these little fuckers. They don't weigh half what we do.”

Williard thought about it. “I'm not so sure. Remember how N'Waji guzzled that rum, straight from the bottle? We might lose.”

Jerry's anticipatory smile faded. He looked around the circle again at the little women. They had tiny sagging breasts, squat little legs and lines of blue tattoo scars covering their arms and faces. "I still think I'd rather have the dinosaur eat me, but I ain't giving up. Maybe once they're all drunk or hung over, we can make a break for the plane."

Jason felt in his pocket. He had one bottle of the hangover remedy Larry had prescribed for him that hadn't gone down with the raft. If they survived the contest, it might come in handy to speed their recovery, ahead of the Pygmies.

Jason grinned hugely, ignoring the

implications of the contest, as if were on the tail of a MIG in his F-4

and getting ready to fire a sidewinder up its exhaust pipe. If he couldn't out drink a bunch of Pygmies, he swore he would never go to a Tail Hook convention again.

Grazino could hardly believe what he was hearing. He began to wish that he had just jumped into the tank with Snow White and gotten it over with. He had never been much of a drinking man. Marciano took in the circle of tattooed black faces, distinguishable from men only by their tiny sagging breasts. It was easy to see why they sagged. Most of the

women were nursing babies not much larger than three week old pups. If he managed to survive, but had to marry one of those ugly little women and live in a grass hut with no plumbing, he decided that he would simply fall on his bank card and end it all. Grazino's soldiers perked up a bit. They had been expecting that they would be placed in a pot of boiling water, cooked to perfection, then eaten. Marrying a Pygmy woman didn't seem like that bad of an alternative. And wine couldn't be that strong; it shouldn't be a problem to drink all of what was in the clay jug.

N'Waji clapped his hands once more and pointed to the sun. "We begin now."

Chapter Twenty-nine

Williard poured a cup of the green Palm Wine into the wooden cup. He eyed the cloudy mixture with distaste, remembering one time in Vietnam when he was in the field and had nothing to drink. He had paid a Vietnamese woman ten American dollars to bring him some liquor, but had not specified what kind. She returned with a half gallon jug of a mixture thick with sediment and containing a large root which had so many root hairs growing from it that it looked as if were covered with fuzz. Against his better judgment he had drank the muddy liquor and woke the next morning with the mother of all

hangovers, one so bad that he had climbed up onto a bunker and waved his arms, hoping that a Viet Cong soldier would shoot him and put him out of his misery. This stuff looked even worse. He put the cup to his mouth and barely sipped. His tongue immediately went numb and he felt the tartar being dissolved from his teeth. He swallowed and his epiglottis shrank from the potion as if it were composed of arsenic and rattlesnake venom, allowing it to pass down his throat and into his stomach, where a bonfire started and flared up as if being fed with gasoline. He gasped for breath, thinking he was about to die, but then mercifully, the bonfire went out, his epiglottis grew back to normal size and

his tongue recovered its taste buds. His body tingled and a pleasant warmth engulfed his brain.

“Watch out for that first dose,” he said, and took a larger swallow. It was too late. Jerry was less cautious and downed half of the contents of his cup in one huge swallow. His face turned a fiery red and his chest heaved. Mucous shot from his nose and his eyes poured water like twin drinking fountains. His hair stood up and his toes curled up like grubworms. When he came back to earth he stared blankly for a moment then grinned like a Saint Bernard sampling its own brandy.

“Gawd!” he said and drank the other

half.

Jason tried to imagine he was at a Tail Hook convention and chugged down a whole cup the first go round. His eyes popped out and he fell over backward. His whole body quivered and shook as if he were having the worst malaria attack on record. He beat the ground with his feet and flung his arms around like a berserk windmill. When he resumed breathing, he sat up and looked around like the first creature to ever crawl up out of the sea. Presently his famous grin spread across his face. "Goddamn, we don't need no dinosaur or no suitcase full of money. All we have to do is steal the recipe for this stuff and

we could sell it for a fortune. If anybody except us could get through the first drink, that is.”

One of Grazino's men had been watching the brothers. He poured some of the exotic liquor into his cup and pretended to drink, then brought the cup down and surreptitiously emptied it onto the ground between his crossed legs. Immediately, four or five Pygmy women who were watching swarmed over him. Before he could react, he was bound hand and foot. They carried him out of the circle and began tying him to a cane raft. When they had him securely bound, they took him to the pier and set him adrift. The other men swallowed the

lumps in their throats and began drinking, making horrible faces.

“Don't try to cheat and pour any of it out,” Williard warned.

“Why would I want to do that?” Jerry said. “This stuff is better than rum!” He refilled his cup.

“I wish I could take some of it to a Tail Hook convention,” Jason said. “Man, we wouldn't have to rip the broads' clothes off. A few drinks of this and we could just stare through them!”

Grazino had been watching the action. He sighed and began taking very small sips of the Palm Wine. Presently the

taste became bearable, then palatable, then better tasting than the red Chablis he occasionally drank. At least I won't get tied to a raft, he thought. Williard watched the sun and the level of wine remaining in his jug, wanting to make sure the former dropped below the horizon before the latter. It was a peculiar brew. Once the attitude adjustment was completed, it slid down the throat as easily as a cold Coors on a hot July afternoon. On the other hand, the effects piled up as rapidly as clouds from the leading edge of a Texas thunderstorm. He felt his mind expand until it seemed to encompass whole galaxies and his body felt as if it were shrinking down to the size of a pinpoint

in space. He stared at the sun, mesmerized by its beauty until his eyes began to burn and water. He shook his head and wiped away tears. He looked to each side at his brothers. They were acting like automatons, raising their cups, putting them down, filling them again and raising them back up, each of them staring blankly into space as if their minds had deserted them, leaving only instinctive reflexes behind. He pounded first one then the other on the thigh, hard enough to raise welts. Jason blinked first. “Where am I?”

“You're back on earth. Help me wake Jerry up.”

Jason blinked again then reached over

Williard's shoulder and grabbed Jerry by the hair and shook him savagely.

“Huh?” Jerry said.

“Take it easy,” Williard warned. “This damn stuff is stronger than one ninety Jamaican dark. Drink slower and watch the sun.”

“OK. Gawd, I was somewhere down in the center of the earth.”

“I was flying to the moon,” Jason said.

“Now we know why there are so few Pygmy men,” Williard said. As he spoke, two of the tiny youngsters collapsed, spilling their cups.

Immediately, they were tied up and carried to the lake, then tied to rafts and pushed into the water.

The brothers continued drinking, but watched each other carefully. As the sun sank lower, Williard saw three more Pygmies collapse. One of them spilled his cup of wine as he fell over and joined the others floating in the lake. The other two were left where they fell.

“If you spill any of it, you're gone,” Williard observed. “If you just pass out, they must leave you til the sun goes down in case you wake up in time to finish off your jug.”

“Let's make damn sure we don't spill

none, then,” Jason said. His voice was muffled, as if his tongue was coated with syrup.

“Not me. I ain’ gonna marry no damn Pygmy, neither,” Jerry mumbled. He made a heroic effort and managed to stiffen his back before his vertebrae melted.

“Look at Grazino,” Williard said. “He’s gone.”

Grazino had gotten to enjoy the taste of the Palm wine too much and indulged too quickly. He had fallen over on his side and was snoring gently, but apparently had not spilled any of his liquor because he was being left alone.

“Yeah, I shee ‘im. Looka Monica,” Jason said.

Williard squinted and focused his vision, glad of something to distract him. Monica was crawling all over Mugsy, as if he were a small mountain she intended to conquer. Mugsy took a sip of wine from his cup and set it down in order to leave both hands free to paw her.

“Shee looks ‘appy. I wonder if shee even wantsa be reshcued,” Jerry said.

“Wash—I mean watch the sun, Jerry.”

“Don’ need to, I’m finishsed,” Jerry said. He put his empty cup on the ground beside him and picked up his clay jug

with both hands. He raised it to his mouth and caught the last few drops on his tongue.

“Shee?” He dropped the jug into his lap and nodded off, still sitting upright.

“Me, too,” Jason said. He looked around with bleary eyes, wondering if now would be the time to make a break. While he was considering their chances, his eyelids dropped, his mouth sagged and he slumped forward and began to snore.

Williard thought going to sleep sounded like a fine idea. He poured the last of his Palm Wine into his cup and looked around for the sun. Where was it?

Finally he spotted two of them, almost below the horizon. Only the faint arcs still showed. Two suns? He blinked, trying to focus. That only made it worse. The two became four, but they were hard to make out. Only the bare rims were visible now. He looked away, thinking that there was something he had to do but the task eluded him. Across the circle from him, N'Waji unfolded his squat little legs and started to get up. He wobbled half way to his feet then got his legs tangled and sat back down. He untangled his legs, moving with elaborate precision and again started to rise. N'Waji! The sun! Williard tilted his cup and gulped down the last of his wine, just seconds before N'Waji finally

got straightened out and clapped his hands.

He watched disinterestedly as several Pygmies were dragged off, along with Grazino and his last cohorts. Marciano had somehow lasted through the rite, but he didn't appear to be very happy about it. He wondered if Terry was still watching, and that was the last thing he remembered until the next morning.

Chapter Thirty

Terry watched the proceedings through the sun-blinded windshield of the seaplane until it got too dark to see. She had no idea what was going on, other than that occasionally a securely-bound body was set adrift on a raft. She made a decision that if the same thing happened to any of the Williards she would try to start the seaplane and rescue them. Other than that, she didn't know what to do except try to keep her eyes open in case there was something she could do to help. She was very sleepy, having stood watch the night before. At last, darkness closed in and she dozed off in the pilot's chair.

* * * *

Williard didn't know how a two ton truck had managed to make it through the swampy Congo jungles to Lake Tele, but he knew one must have because it had run over him. He twitched a few muscles, trying to determine how many of his bones were broken. Surprisingly, they all seemed to be intact, though all two hundred and something of them ached as if a raging cancer had spread through his body overnight and finally come to rest in his skull. His mouth felt as if it were filled with noxious paste and his eyes burned like lumps of charcoal in an outdoor grill.

He heard a moan from beside him. He

turned over slowly, like a log in a brackish pond.

“Oh Gawd, I must of crashed another plane,” Jason said feebly.

“I think someone blew up my boat with me in it,” Jerry said from his other side.

“I think I'm dead,” Williard said, feeling around his body for wounds. His hand touched his pocket and felt the outline of the bottle of hangover pills. He sat up, fell back over and sat up again while his fingers dug into his pocket, trying to get the bottle loose. Finally it came free and he held it up to the light to see if it was real.

“Is that what I think it is?” Jerry said hoarsely. He coughed and spat out a wad of green gunk.

“It better be, or I'm going to go drown myself,” Jason said.

“Somebody find some water,” Williard pleaded, unscrewing the lid.

“Hey, here's some!” Jerry shouted, then grabbed his head.

Williard looked around for the water and finally found it directly in front of him in one of the ubiquitous wooden cups. Several little Pygmy women were just completing a circuit of the circle of prostate men, now minus a number of

bodies. Apparently they knew what the first thing the men would be looking for when they woke up.

Williard shook a handful of the pills into his trembling hand and tossed them into his mouth, then gulped them down with the cup of water. He handed the remainder of the pills to Jason and Jerry and lay back down to wait for them to take effect.

The pills dissolved quickly and presently he felt well enough to sit up. Jerry and Jason were blinking in the early morning sunlight like insects spreading dewed wings out to dry. He checked his pulse and found that his heart was still beating.

“You just saved my life, Jim,” Jason said. “Gawd! I never want to look at a palm tree again.”

“I never want to look at a Pygmy again,” Jerry said.

“They're sure looking at us,” Williard said. A number of little women were primping in front of the big thatched hut and eyeing the brothers like so many slabs of prime rib. One of them was watching Marciano, who was still immobile. The remainder were pointing and laughing at the young Pygmy men who were sitting and laying in disarray, holding heads and stomachs. Several were vomiting up green bile.

“I wonder which ones plan on marrying us?” Williard said.

“Oh, shit, I forgot about that,” Jerry said.

“I don't think N'Waji has,” Williard said.

N'Waji had imbibed along with the initiates, even though it hadn't been required of him. He heard the brothers talking and got slowly to his feet. He looked as if he had shrunk several sizes overnight and his forehead was so wrinkled with pain that it looked as if a new row of tattoos had been added to it. He slowly crossed the circle toward the brothers. They got up to meet him. N'Waji stopped in front of them, the halt

sending a sudden jolt of pain through his head.

“What's the matter, runt? You don't look like you feel very good,” Jason grinned.

“Yeah, you're a candy ass. Imagine, letting a little wine give you a hangover,” Jerry jeered.

“What's wrong with you, anyway?” Williard said. He danced a little jig in front of N'Waji, rubbing it in. A codeine and Phenobarbital euphoria had his body buzzing.

N'Waji stared up at the three alert, cheerful brothers, deciding that life wasn't fair. How could they possibly be

feeling so good? It must be more of their juju. Well, he already knew they were unusual. This just strengthened the case. At least they wouldn't be a drag on the economy. They would carry their own weight, unlike the other useless white man who had somehow lasted through the rites and was even now sitting up with his head in his hands, crying out his agony for all to hear. N'Waji decided that the first thing he would do with him was to send him out on a hunt and see how he made out trying to hamstring an elephant with a machete. In the meantime, these three were recovered so well that it was time for them to be inducted into the tribe. The women were already getting impatient.

“You feel good, now. You marry now.” He pointed to three smiling little women who were tittering and making suggestive motions with their hands.

“Uh oh,” Jason said.

“I ain't marrying no Pygmy,” Jerry said emphatically.

Several Pygmies materialized beside N'Waji, machetes handy. “You marry now!” he said loudly, wincing at the sound of his own voice.

Williard's mind raced. How were they going to get out of this one? He looked around in desperation and the seaplane came into his view. A thought formed,

fired instantly into his mind by codeine-laced blood rushing through his body. He pointed to the seaplane. "Mokele Mbembe's mate is pregnant now. We have to take her home to have her baby."

N'Waji cocked his ear and looked at the silent seaplane. "No. Him mate no say so. You marry, stay here."

Oh well, I tried, Williard thought. He hoped Terry would be able to fly the plane and get the others home at least.

* * * *

Terry was still asleep inside the seaplane. She slumbered deeply while Stowaway prowled the cabin. He was

trying to find a way out, but the door was closed. He sat for a while, then jumped up into Terry's lap, hoping to wake her up. She moved slightly, mumbled something from a dream then was still again. Stowaway was bored. He saw a little green light on the instrument panel and pawed at it to see if maybe there was a mouse behind it.. Something clicked and it changed from green to red. Curious, he reached out again. His claws hooked a toggle just below the light. Annoyed, he jerked his paw back. The toggle switch moved and the red light began flashing. He blinked and slapped at it to see what would happen next.

* * * *

“I'm telling you, Mokele Mbembe's mate won't like this,” Williard insisted, pointing again at the seaplane, trying again to convince N'Waji that the dinosaur's mate wanted them to leave.

“She no talk, she like. She talk, she no like,” N'Waji said. He watched the iron bird, Mokele Mbembe's new mate, for a sign. She was silent.

“She's going to talk!” Williard yelled. He was hoping Terry was awake and watching, but nothing happened.

“Come!” N'Waji ordered.

“Wait!” Williard waved his hands in circles, imitating a pair of propellers.

Maybe that would give Terry the idea that he wanted her to start the engines. They didn't start, but the machine gun did. Stowaway's curiosity had activated the firing mechanism.

The seaplane practically exploded with noise as a stream of machine gun bullets spewed from its nose. They chewed into the thatched roof of the Pygmy women's quarters like an invisible threshing machine, then as the plane swung slowly at the end of its tether, the bullets exploded into the roofs of smaller huts, blasting them to bits and sending debris flying.

Williard hit the dirt at the same time as his brothers, while the Pygmies

screamed and ran in circles, not understanding where the destruction was coming from until they saw brass cartridges flying into the air from the nose of the plane. Smoke poured from the machine gun vents as it fired on and on, blasting bark and wood from palm trees, then coming back to ravage the big house again as the plane swung around on its tether from the heavy machine gun's recoil. The noise was terrific, drowning out the screams and yells and cries of pain from terrified Pygmy men and women as hot bark and shards of wood flew through the air and bounced off their bodies. Fortunately for them, the line of fire was over their heads, but they were terrified nonetheless.

“Stop! Stop! You go, you go!” N'Waji screamed, covering his ears to drown out the din. Mokele Mbembe's mate was talking louder than he ever did!

Williard got to his knees and waved frantically toward the seaplane. Good God, none of them had remembered that it was armed! The machine gun roared on, stitching holes in everything in sight more than five feet above the ground.

Chapter Thirty-one

Terry woke up as abruptly as a sleeping tiger jabbed with a pitchfork. The noise inside the cockpit was even worse than outside and the frantic yowling of Stowaway was loud enough to be heard even over the ear shattering blasts of the machine gun running through a whole belt of ammunition. Smoke hazed the air and the odor of cordite permeated everything inside the cockpit. Frantically, she tried to figure out what was happening. Had the Mafia sent reinforcements? Had the Pygmies somehow gotten their hands on some automatic weapons? By the time she noticed the flashing red light on the

instrument panel, the machine gun had run through its first belt of ammunition and had ceased firing. She had no idea what the light meant, but it hadn't been lit when she went to sleep and she didn't like the clicking and snapping sounds coming from inside the nose of the plane as the gun went into automatic reload sequence. She reached out and flicked the toggle switch below the light. It changed to green and the clicking sounds stopped. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Meow?” Stowaway said, from where he had been hiding in a corner. He ran and jumped into Terry's lap.

Terry knew immediately who had been responsible for setting off the machine

gun. “Stowaway! You bad cat! You stay away from this instrument panel!”

“Meow,” Stowaway said again. He was willing to leave it alone if it promised not to start that awful noise again!

Terry suddenly remembered that the last time she had looked, the nose of the plane had been pointed in the direction of the village. Jim! Oh My God! was her first thought. She fanned the air with her hands to get rid of some of the acrid smoke and peered through the canopy toward the village.

* * * *

Williard stood up and brushed dirt from

his knees. "See? I told you she would talk," he said to N'Waji, who was staring stupidly at the now silent plane.

"Mokele Mbembe's mate speak. You go now. Go quick!" N'Waji said, looking around at the ruins of the village and the few Pygmies remaining. Most of them had scampered off into the brush. Jason reminded Williard of the reason they had braved the Pygmy village in the first place. "Don't forget Monica." In an aside, he whispered, "That's a damn fine girl you got, brother. She was right on the ball. I wonder how she figured out how to fire that machine gun, though?"

"Who cares. It worked, didn't it? N'Waji, we want Monica, the blond

woman.”

“Here I am,” Monica said.

Williard whirled around. Monica and Mugsy were both standing there, having come out of their hut as soon as the bullets stopped flying.

“Great. We're leaving now. Go get in the plane.”

“No. I'm staying here with Mugsy.”

“What! You can't do that!” He couldn't believe she was serious, but then he looked up and saw the confident expression on Mugsy's face.

“Yes I can. These little people have never heard of Jesus Christ. I believe I have been called to convert them.”

“Don't be a fool,” Jason said.

Monica smiled sweetly at him. “I'm sorry, Jason, but I've found a real mission in life here.” She sipped daintily from the wooden cup she was holding in one hand. “Besides, I love this wine. It makes me feel so

... so...” She blushed.

Mugsy put an arm around her. “It makes her feel religious and sexy at the same time. She ain't never gonna leave.” He looked at them belligerently.

“Well, I can plainly see that she's found her main man,” Jason said.

“Yeah. Say, why don't youse guys stay, too? We can make up and be friends. Da Godfather will never find us here.”

Williard said, “Well, thanks, Mugsy, but no thanks. Monica, if you're sure, we're leaving.”

“I'm sure.” She patted Mugsy on one massive arm. “You should see how nice he is now.”

“Let's go,” Jason said.

Marciano came stumbling up to them. He was blubbering so hard that he could

barely make himself understood. "Take me! If they don't want to go, I do!"

"Why should we?" Williard said.

"Look at what I'm going to have to marry!" He pointed to a wee Pygmy woman smiling at him from a toothless mouth. She had a baby suckling at each breast.

"I'm sure you'll make a good daddy," Williard said. "Come on, brothers, let's get out of here while we still can." As they walked back toward the pier, where the seaplane was still giving off faint wisps of smoke, Williard looked over his shoulder and saw N'Waji kicking at Marciano, who had fallen to the ground

and was crying like a baby.

* * * *

It took Williard and his brothers several minutes to get themselves untangled from Terry and Donna and Jeannie, who were doing their best to hug them to death. When Williard finally got free from everyone except Terry, who was sticking to him like one of the swamp leeches, Larry asked, "Where's Monica?"

"She and Mugsy decided to stay and go naked and teach the Pygmies how to turn the other cheek," he said.

"With cheeks like hers, that ought to be a

breeze,” Larry said.

“How do you know?” Jeannie said, glaring at him.

Larry thought fast. “I peeked out the door and saw her while you were hugging your brothers.”

“Why don't we get out of here while we can?” Jason said.

“Good idea,” Jeannie said, glancing out the window. Monica really was naked, or as near as made any difference. She moved in front of Larry to block the view.

“OK, Jim, why don't you and Jerry start

fixing that hole in the tail while I see if I can find the specs on this bird and see how much range it's got.”

While Williard and Jerry were hammering, Jason started the engines and put the seaplane into a slow taxi away from the shore, then began rummaging through the console to see if he could find the operator's manual. It was there. He scanned through the pages for a while, then idled the engines and went back into the cabin. Williard and Jerry had just finished their repairs and were scrounging in the pantry.

“Not a damn thing to drink in here,” Jerry complained.

“We could always go back and ask for some Palm wine to see us on our way,” Williard said.

“No thanks. From now on I'm sticking strictly to rum. Hey, Jase, where are we headed, anyway?”

“I think we got enough fuel to make the Virgin Islands, at least. From there, back to good old Dallas.”

“And still broke,” Williard said.

“Donna still has the stash she didn't have to use in Brazzaville. That's enough to get us started at something.”

Donna looked serious and didn't say

anything.

“OK, folks, I guess we can be off, thanks to Terry for learning how to fire that machine gun. That's what saved us.”

“I didn't fire it,” Terry said. “Stowaway did.”

Stowaway looked up from her lap where he had been washing gunpowder residue off his whiskers.

“Meow,” he said.

Jason stared at the cat. “I don't believe this shit. If he had been in ‘Nam with us, we would of won the war hands down, hippies or no hippies.”

“Meow,” Stowaway agreed and continued his bath.

Larry had been staring out the window as the seaplane drifted with its motors idling. “Say, what's that?”

He pointed.

In the distance, something was floating on the water. It looked flat and low in the water except for an elongated bulge rising from the center. Larry squinted as the plane drifted closer. “Hey, it's a man tied to a raft!” He exclaimed.

Williard peered over his shoulder. The bulge resolved into a human shape, too large and too white to be a Pygmy. “It's

one of Grazino's men,” he said.

Larry continued staring. “No it's not. That's Grazino himself!”

Williard looked at Jason. “Should we save him?”

Jason reflected a moment. “Shit, we ought not to, but I hate to think of just leaving him for the dinosaur. I guess we should take him aboard. Hell, maybe if we save his life, he'll put in a good word for us with his boss.”

Williard suddenly saw a subsurface wake moving toward Grazino's bound body. “I think it's too late,” he said.

Jason looked outside and saw the wake. "Oh, shit. I'm getting us out of here!" He ran for the cockpit.

* * * *

Mokele Mbembe, the last of its kind, nosed toward the drifting raft, ignoring the larger object nearby. That time had come and gone. It was sated from all the offerings the shore dwellers had sent it the previous evening, but like eating potato chips, there was always room for one more. Its little mind wished the noisome odor of palm smoke, always present where the shore dwellers lived, didn't keep it away from their area, but it would take what it could. Its head broke the surface and its jaws yawned open. A

mouthful of needle sharp teeth closed over the raft and drug it under the surface. Grazino died peacefully in his sleep. He had never regained consciousness from the load of Palm wine fed to him by the Pygmies.

Chapter Thirty-two

Jason chose the Virgin Islands as their midway stopping point, mainly because they were U.S. territories and Donna wouldn't have to worry about her lack of a passport there. Williard agreed. He was tired of trouble and tired of fighting. All he wanted to do now was to get back to Dallas and spend about two days in a hot shower, preferably with Terry there to scrub his back while he relaxed with enough rum and coke to wash the taste of Palm wine out of his mouth and the residual effects of it from his body. Of course they would be nearly as broke then as when they had first started talking about the expedition, but worry

about that could wait.

Terry was reflecting. She wondered what the Williard brothers, and especially Jim, would do once they got home. It was hard to imagine any of them working at anything as mundane as a regular job, but even heroes had to earn a living. She just hoped that whatever Jim Williard came up with would include her. And maybe he might even want to settle down, though she held little hope of that prospect. Hours and hours later, Jason found the Virgin Islands, easily this time with the modern navigation gear sported by Grazino's plane. He wished there was some legal way to obtain title to it, but knew there

wasn't. It was a beautiful piece of machinery to fly, even though he occasionally remembered the old Albatross with nostalgia bordering on that reserved for a childhood sweetheart. He circled the airport once, then came in for a smooth landing and taxied on to the hanger designated as the refueling section. He killed the engines and stretched. He was tired, but with Terry in the copilot's seat and the automatic pilot on, he had managed a few hours sleep.

Jason got up and said to Terry, "Why don't you see if the folks want to stretch their legs a bit while I get us tanked up?"

"Aren't you going to stop and rest?"

“Nope. Once an adventure is over, I'm anxious to get home and start planning the next one.”

Terry laughed and went back to the cabin while Jason continued making arrangements with the maintenance hanger over the radio. “Jason says we can get out for a stretch,” she said.

“I'm for that,” Williard said.

“Me, too,” Jerry said. “They're bound to have some rum somewhere in these parts. You folks unlimber however you want to; Donna and me are going over to the terminal and get us something better to drink than that lousy orange juice.”

Williard and Terry climbed down the stair steps and began walking toward a grassy strip of open ground near the hanger. They walked for a while, getting the kinks out of their legs, then sat down to watch the refueling. After a while, Jason waved for them to come back to the plane.

“All finished?” Williard asked.

“All done except for paying the man. Where's Jerry and Donna?”

“They haven't come back yet.”

“Well, shit, I'm ready to go.”

Williard shrugged and climbed back into

the cabin, hand in hand with Terry. An hour later they were still waiting.

“Where in the hell could they be?” Jason asked for the tenth time.

“Maybe he got into a poker game,” Williard said.

“Well, fuckit, I'm going to go look for him. You all wait here.”

Jason had hardly gotten the words out of his mouth when Jerry climbed into the cabin. He was covered with sweat, his abbreviated shorts and shirt dark with moisture.

“Where in hell have you been?” Jason

demanded.

“Looking for Donna.”

“Now where in hell did she get off to? We're ready to fly, man!”

“She's gone. I ran all over the place for an hour looking for her, then I finally found someone who remembered her leaving in a cab. It had to be her; no one else is dressed as ratty looking as we are.”

Williard laughed. “That's for sure. We look like a bunch of hippies.” They were all still dressed as they had been while pulling the raft through the Congo swamp. Even though they had rinsed

their garments out in the lake before leaving, they were still stained, torn and encrusted with insoluble filth of indeterminable origin.

Terry laughed with him. “The way she looked, I bet she had to pay the cabby in advance.”

The brothers stared at each other, their faces drooping like bloodhounds which had lost the scent of their quarry.

“What's wrong?” Terry said.

“She had the last of our money,” Williard said.

“I'll borrow some more for you,” Larry

said.

“I'll have a garage sale for you,” Jeannie said brightly.

Jason suddenly burst out laughing. “Fuckit. With family like this, we don't need her money no way. Sorry you lost your girlfriend, Jerry.”

Jerry shrugged. “Hell, she wasn't much fun no way. Anyhow, I got the rum. Anybody want a drink?”

“Yeah, but before you start pouring, everybody dig deep and pony up. We've got to pay for gas and landing fees.”

Jason counted out the money when they

were all finished. He laughed. “Just enough, with a fifty dollar bill left over for a taxi from the airport. Nice going folks! Nothing like starting out fresh.”

Williard didn't exactly agree with that. He'd had to contribute all of his mustering out pay. It left him with just about enough money to buy a small ice cream cone.

* * * *

Hours later, Jason landed in Lancaster, the same field they had taken off from more than a week ago, though it seemed like it had been a year. He parked the plane near the tower, ignoring the operator, who wasn't that anxious to talk

anyway. He recognized the plane and thought the Mafia was back again. Jason stayed in the cockpit a few extra minutes, then came back to the cabin and deplaned with the others.

When the tower operator saw the three cowboys who had treated him so rudely emerge, he expected them to be followed by Mafia thugs holding guns at their backs. From the looks of the plane and the rags they were wearing, he figured they had put up a hell of a fight before surrendering. Surprisingly, they were unencumbered by escorts. He regained a portion of his bravery and went down to greet them.

“Glad to see you back,” he said. “How

long are you going to stay parked?"

"I ain't got no idea," Jason said. "That there plane don't belong to us."

"Well, who's going to pay for the landing and parking fees?"

Jason hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "There's a note in the cockpit. It will tell you all you need to know. Come on folks, let's go find a cab."

The operator was afraid to ask any more questions. He climbed into the cockpit and saw a scribbled note attached to the instrument panel with a piece of scotch tape. He ripped it off and held it up to read: Dear Godfather,

Here's your fucking plane back. Grazino is sleeping with the fishes. Mugsy and Marciano are where you'll never find them. Now don't bother us no more or we'll come to New York and kick your Yankee Dago ass all the way back to Italy.

Regards,

The Williards

* * * *

While the Williards and Wilsons were luxuriating in soap, hot water and tall cold drinks, Don Falino received the text of the letter. He read it three times to make sure his brain was getting the

message his eyes were sending him. It was hard to believe. Grazino dead? And where were Mugsy, Marciano and the others? He was so upset that he got up from his desk and went into the very back room of the suite where Snow White lived, and watched him swim hungrily under the hatch until his nerves had been soothed back to something approaching normal. He touched the wall of the huge aquarium one last time, chuckling as Snow White swam over to investigate. "Patience, little beauty," he murmured, deciding to try one last time to corral the Texans.

Back outside, he called in Milo Terrazi, his acting underboss, who had been

appraised of the exploits of the cowboys. He explained that Grazino was probably dead and that Mugsy, Marciano and the other boys were missing, but omitted mentioning the contents of the note the Texans had left for him. It was too humiliating. He said, "Those crazy cowboys are back in Dallas. I want them brought back here tomorrow, and I don't care how many men it takes. Understand?"

"Yes, Godfather. Do you want the dentist and those broads, too?"

"Bring them, too. I want them all alive and able to walk."

"Yes, Godfather, I understand."

“Be sure you do. And be careful. Remember what happened to Grazino.”

“Yes, Godfather, I'll remember.”

“Good. Be gone.”

Terrazi hurried out of the office, intent on his mission. Grazino might have failed, but he wouldn't.

Chapter Thirty-three

“Do you think they will come after us again?” Williard threw out the question for open discussion, but it was more to Jason that he addressed it.

Jason rubbed his freshly-shaved chin and stroked his newly-trimmed mustache. It was a good question.

“Jim, I just don't know. I hope they don't because we ain't got no money to run anywhere, but they might.”

“Any ideas, supposing they do?”

Jason shrugged. “Not much we can do

about it if that's what the decision is. We can't watch all the time. All I can suggest is that we round up enough money to buy some ammunition. We ain't got a round to our name.”

“I've got a pistol,” Jeannie said.

“When did you buy a pistol?” Larry asked, surprised.

“I got it at a garage sale, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Williard said. “Can I see it, sis?”

“Sure.” She got up and returned a few minutes later with a little snub-nosed .25 automatic. Williard examined it. He

ejected the clip and slid the action back and forth. “Well, it works, anyhow. Mind if I borrow it for a few days?”

“That little popgun ain't big enough to do nothing but make someone mad,” Jason said.

“Yeah. I think I'll keep it anyway,” Williard said. He stuck it in his pocket. Jerry said, “You know what, guys? I think it might be a good idea for us to move out of here for a while until we see which way the wind's blowing.”

Jason shook his head. “They were after Larry, too, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, hell.”

“Why don't I sell my car?” Williard suggested. “That ought to raise enough money for the time being. Shit, I ain't got no money to buy gas no way.” He smiled mirthlessly.

“I'll drive you in mine if you want to go anywhere,” Terry said. “I didn't give notice at the airline, so I imagine my job is gone. I'll be free til I find another one.”

“Thanks, I may take you up on that,” Williard said.

“I've got some old garage sale signs. I'll put them out for tomorrow. There's still lots of things around here just gathering dust.”

The talk went on into late evening, interspersed with enjoying some of Jerry's concoctions, though the brothers stayed relatively sober for a change. None of them wanted to be under the weather if the Mafia came looking again.

Everyone was still behind on sleep and they all went to bed early, intending to go out the next day and see what Williard's Cougar was worth.

Williard was undressing when he felt the weight of Jeannie's little pistol in his pocket. He pulled it out and stared at it thoughtfully.

“What's wrong?” Terry said, stopping with her bra dangling from one shoulder.

It slid on down and she grabbed it before it could hit the floor.

Williard seemed to be mesmerized. Finally he turned to look at her. He went to her and pulled her close to him and began talking to her in a serious, low toned voice. Unlike Jerry, when he gambled, he liked to play the odds. He left the bedroom long enough to speak briefly to his brothers. "Just in case anything happens tonight," he said. After that, he went back into the bedroom, finished undressing and displaced Stowaway from Terry's chest. He had plans for that territory himself.

* * * *

Terrazini took no chances at all. He surrounded the house with enough men to have turned the tide at Gettysburg, then rang the doorbell, careful of Don Falino's admonishment to bring everyone back alive. Williard was sleeping lightly when he heard the doorbell ring. His dormant combat sense awakened, prickling his scalp and sending a chill down his spine. He flicked on the bedside lamp and nudged Terry, disturbing Stowaway in the process. He had been curled up on the soft pillows of her breasts.

“What is it?” Terry said.

“Trouble, I think. Get dressed, real quick like.” He began pulling on his

pants, ears tuned to sounds from the front of the house. He eased open the bedroom door in order to hear better.

“The garage sale doesn't start until daylight.” Jeannie's sleepy voice came to Williard, muffled but perfectly understandable. Then he heard a husky whisper. “Shut up broad. Don't make any noise.”

“Hurry,” Williard ordered, closing and locking the door. They were barely dressed when the doorknob rattled softly against the lock. “Grab Stowaway and hold him like I told you.”

The door was abruptly kicked open and two Italian looking men in dark suits

waved handguns at them. Williard glanced at Terry and slowly raised his hands. Terry clutched Stowaway to her chest , looking small and frightened.

“They're already dressed,” one of the hoods said.

“We were just going to bed,” Williard said.

“Shut up.” He was pushed against the wall and felt hands roving his body, searching for weapons. “He's clean. How about the broad?”

“You can let her go, “Williard said.
“She was just spending the night.”

“Shut up, I said.”

“But, look. She's just a pickup. Let her go.” This time he got a pistol barrel to the side of the head for his troubles, making his ears ring, but he was satisfied with the results. Br'er Rabbit had nothing on him and the hoods apparently had never heard of the tale.

Williard was forced to lean against the wall and had to follow the scene with Terry by voice and imagination. “Stand still, broad. And get rid of that cat.”

“No! My cat goes everywhere I go. And stop that. I don't have anything in there!”

“Get rid of the cat, I said.”

Terry's voice trembled. He imagined her staring at the blood he could feel trickling down the side of his face. "No. You can shoot me first. Stowaway stays with me!"

"What's the hold up?" This was a deeper voice, with the overtones of command in it.

"The broad won't let go of her cat."

"Is she clean?"

"Yeah, boss, and nothing in her purse but girl stuff and a little camera."

"All right, let her bring it along. The cat, too if that's what she wants. Snow White

is always hungry.”

Terrazini felt lenient. He was amazed at how easy the vaunted cowboys had been taken. They weren't even armed except for some empty pistols. He wondered if the Godfather was getting old. Maybe it was time he retired and let a younger man take over.

Williard and Terry were herded into the den with the others. Jason started when he saw the blood still trickling down Williard's face from the cut on his temple, then caught his brother's surreptitious wink. A slow smile crossed his face.

“What's the matter plowboy? You think

this is funny?" Terrazini said.

"It could get to be that way," Jason said.

Jerry had caught the wink, too. "It sure could," he said. "I bet your boss is going to die laughing."

"Shut up, plowboy." Terrazini looked around. The others had been allowed to dress under guard. "Let's go," he said to his army. "The Godfather is waiting."

"Maybe he'll let me have a garage sale for him," Jeannie said. A red mark showed on her cheek where she had been slapped, but she was still upbeat. At last she was getting to travel a bit, and she had utter faith that her brothers

wouldn't allow any real harm to come to her.

“Maybe I'll ask him for a little loan to tide me over until I get some paying patients,” Larry said. He never worried much about anything except keeping his practice going and his refrigerator stocked with Coors. Terrazini threw up his hands. “The whole bunch of you are crazy. No wonder you were so easy to take.”

He didn't stop to consider that if the Williards had possessed loads for their guns, the kidnapping might have gone harder than expected, especially in a residential area where a gunfight would have drawn crowds of cops.

He had his captives herded into several cars, closely guarded, and the convoy headed for the airport. There he dismissed most of his army, disgusted at having brought so many men along for such a simple operation. The Godfather was surely entering his dotage. He loaded his six captives onto a big Lear Jet he had commandeered and kept only two men with him to guard the six prisoners. He didn't tie any of them up, first because he didn't want to draw attention to them when they deplaned in New York, and secondly, because he couldn't for the life of him see where they were that dangerous. Hours later, just before landing in New York, he

allowed then each a bathroom break, one at a time. He watched with an amused expression as the younger woman carried her cat with her. It would provide about one hungry bite for Snow White, just a little appetizer for what he figured was going to be some heavier meals.

A quick check with the Godfather when they landed late that evening found him at his Manhattan office. He had been waiting to see if he brought the goods back as he had promised. "It was easy," Terrazini bragged.

"I'm surprised," the Godfather answered, "but bring them all here. I'll be waiting."

Terrazini hustled his captives into a stretch limousine which one of his button men had waiting, still taking only the two guards along. A short while later he led them into Falino's outer office.

“Ah, the world travelers return,” Falino said exuberantly. “Bring them on back to the aquarium. We'll conduct business there.”

Terrazini shivered involuntarily. That shark always gave him the willies. The cowboys didn't seem to be all that impressed.

“Hey, lookit the big fish!” Jerry said, as he was shoved into the last room of the

suite.

“Hey, he's cute,” Jason said. He turned to the Godfather. “Can I pet him?”

“Is there a fishing pole around here?” Williard said. “What should I use for bait?”

Falino stared at the cowboys, his first sight of them. He wondered why they appeared so unconcerned, then shrugged his shoulders. Snow White would make believers of them! He turned to the other captives.

“What's that broad doing with a cat?” He raised his eyes at Terrazini.

“I couldn't get it loose from her short of hurting her. Don't worry, it's harmless.”

“I know it is, but I don't like cats, especially black cats.”

“Don't talk about our cat thataway,” Jason said. “He's a dinosaur fighter.”

“And a number one ace with a machine gun,” Jerry said.

“Not to mention a M-16,” Williard added. He winked at Terry and she tensed her body.

“Give him here,” Falino demanded, advancing on Terry. “We'll see how he likes fighting with Snow White.” He

stood in front of her and held out his hands.

Terry handed him over, pinching his tail as hard as she could in the process. Stowaway howled and scratched his way up Falino's chest and face and onto his head, leaving red streaks behind. Falino reached his hands up to tear him loose but Stowaway leaped off first. Terry dipped into her bra and pulled out Jeannie's little automatic, and stuck it between Falino's eyes. Her hand trembled but she held the barrel firmly in place. "Don't move one inch," she threatened.

The two guards were distracted by the yowls of the cat. One made a move

toward it. Jason stuck out his leg and tripped him, then was on his back chopping at his neck in an instant. The man gave a jerk, then was still. Jason reached for his gun.

Jerry took his guard out when he took his eyes off him to see what the ruckus was. He simply swung a roundhouse right, pretending that the hood was a hippie, and thinking that even if he wasn't, he had probably been a draft dodger.

Terrazini had put away his gun, thinking the two guards had matters well under control. He reached for it, but not in time. Williard grappled with him, then used his younger sturdier body to force

him to his knees. He bent him backwards, drawing screams as Terrazini's knee joints popped, then reached a hand inside his coat and appropriated his weapon.

Jason picked up the prostate hood's gun and turned around, but it was all over by then. “Stowaway strikes again,” he grinned. “What a cat!”

Chapter Thirty-four

Jason walked over to where Falino still stood with his hands in the air, looking cross-eyed at the gun barrel Terry still held between his eyes. He shoved the nose of his appropriated weapon against the back of Falino's head. "Good show, Terry. You can sit down now."

Terry breathed a huge sigh of relief. She hadn't been at all certain she would have the courage to act when the time came and Williard gave the signal. Thank God she had, but she didn't think she could have held the little pistol another moment without fainting. She looked around for Stowaway. He had recovered

his wounded dignity quickly and was atop the aquarium, tapping playfully with an inquisitive paw as the big fish nosed up to the top of the tank, hungering for a meal.

“Stowaway! Get away from there! He might hurt you!” Terry called.

“I think Snow White might have to worry about him,” Falino said carefully, as Jason led him to a seat in the corner while Williard kept his weapon trained on Terrazini, ignoring his muffled cries as he held onto his injured knees.

“You're the Godfather, huh?” Jason said.

“Yes I am,” Falino acknowledged.

“Who's that?” Jason gestured at Terrazini.

“That was my underboss,” Falino said, looking disgustedly at the cripple.

“And those two? They're hit men, aren't they?”

Yes,” Falino said, not seeing any advantage in lying. He was in a tight fix.

“Which one slapped you, Jeannie?”

Jeannie pointed. Jason fired one shot. The man twitched and died.

“And that's the one that was pawing Terry,” Williard said. He aimed

carefully and fired a single shot. He was mad and sad and ready to kill a roomful of hoods if that's what it took to be left alone.

“Hey, save some for me!” Jerry said.

Falino gave up. He was tired of fighting the cowboys, but he wasn't ready to die yet. “Gentlemen, please!

Before you go any further, perhaps we can reach an understanding?”

“I understand you done pissed us off,” Jason growled.

“Understandably so, but we can solve our problems if you will listen.”

“I don't see how,” Williard said regretfully. That one shot to the head of the prostate guard had expugated his anger. He hoped the Godfather could extricate them from this situation. He was tired of killing.

“Please listen. All this became necessary after that episode at the country club. I couldn't allow it to go unrevenged. My position wouldn't allow it.”

“We're not interested in your position,” Williard said.

“Please. Animosity is no longer necessary. Mugsy, Marciano and Grazino were the only witnesses, and if I

can believe your note, they are no longer a problem.”

“They sure ain't” Jerry said. “You got anything to drink here?”

Falino motioned towards a liquor cabinet and winced as he saw the cowboy appropriate a bottle of rare napoleon brandy he had been saving for a special occasion. He ignored the pain and continued bargaining for his life. “In that case, why don't we call off hostilities?”

“Why should we?” Williard asked. Best to finish the whole thing now and get it over with.

“Because I can put a halt to any rumors which might get out among the families, since everyone knowing anything substantial has gone missing. If I am, um, unable to do that, my successor, or perhaps one of the other families might come looking for you again.”

“I don't think we can trust you,” Williard said.

Terry had been listening. She had shivered inside when Jim and Jason coldly put the hit men to death. They really were mad, but the Godfather was making sense. If they killed him, the whole chase might start over again. She looked at Falino. “Are you married?”

The Godfather felt his heart leap. Surely they wouldn't go after his family! That was uncivilized. He knew it was useless to deny it, though. The picture of him with his wife and two daughters occupied a prominent spot on his desk and the woman had her eye on it. "Yes," he said. Warmth tinged his voice at the thought of his family, so innocently unaware of the position he occupied.

"Good," Terry said. She dug into her purse and handed Williard the camera she always carried in case she wanted pictures from various parts of the globe during stopovers. She stripped off her blouse and unfastened her bra, then walked over and plopped herself down

in the Godfather's lap. She grabbed one of his hands and placed it on her breast. She smiled as lasciviously as she was able to. "Take some pictures, Jim."

Williard got the idea in an instant. He began snapping pictures, suggesting other poses and forcing Falino to smile as if he were enjoying himself. He was not. In all the years he had been married, he had never strayed, not once. The half naked woman on his lap made him feel as if he were committing adultery. Williard finished the last frame in the roll and dropped the camera in his pocket. "Guess who gets to see these pictures if anything ever happens to any of us?"

“I would rather not even think of it. You have my word. You will never be bothered again.”

“Wait a minute. What about this bird?” Jason pointed to Terrazini, who was still moaning softly and holding his knees.

“Oh yes, there is that, isn't there. He'll be taken care of.”

“I think we'd better take care of it ourselves,” Jerry said. “The rest of you go on outside. Me and Mister Godfather here can handle the business.”

Williard exchanged glances with Jason. They shrugged and herded Larry and Jeannie and Terry outside with them,

back to the outer office. Behind them, they heard a scream, then splashing noises. Falino was led into the outer office a moment later, urged on by a grim-faced Jerry. Falino's face was white and he was shaking, but trying to control it. He had never personally fed Snow White his meals, preferring to have an underling handle the details while he watched. He suspected that it wouldn't be long before he found a home in some deep-sea aquarium for Snow White. It shouldn't be hard; captive great white sharks were almost unheard of. He knew it was the only way to avoid having bad dreams.

“Does that settle everything?” Williard

asked, glancing around the room.

“I could use a loan,” Larry said.

“As far as that goes we all could. How else are we going to get back to Texas?” Jason said.

“May I?” Falino said, pointing to a picture on the wall.

“Go ahead. We'll watch,” Jason said, coming up behind him and sticking his gun into Falino's back. They will, too, Falino sighed to himself. No chance to use the pistol inside the safe on top of the money, not that he had any real intention of trying it. He was defeated. And when they left, the pictures would

go with them. They were certainly enterprising, he had to give them that! And then an idea occurred to him. He opened the safe and pulled out all the cash inside, then turned carefully and handed it to Jason.

“Consider it a gift to seal our bargain,” he said.

“Sounds fine to me,” Williard said. He didn't know how much money Falino had given Jason, but it looked to be enough to get them home and perhaps a little left over. “I guess that's all, then.”

“There is one other item,” Falino said.

“Don't tell me you're going to try to

renege?” Jason said. “That pet shark in there looks healthy enough to eat twice a day.”

Falino shuddered. “Not at all. That was the furthest thing from my mind. No, what I would like to do is offer you three gentlemen a job.”

“A job?” That was the last thing Williard had expected him to say.

“Yes, a job. Come to work for me. I need another underboss.”

“There's three of us.”

“You can all be underbosses. Given the demonstrations you have subjected me

to, I have no doubt at all that you could handle all the , um, necessary chores.”

Williard looked at his brothers.

“Nah,” Jason said. “I’ve had enough of this shit for a while. I think I’ll go up to British Columbia and pan for gold. I hear there’s good hunting and fishing, too.”

“Sorry. I miss my boat,” Jerry said. “I’m going to go down to the keys and see if I can find a charter or diving boat to captain.”

Terry held her breath. She watched Williard’s face. He appeared to be deep in thought. Surely he wasn’t thinking of

taking the Godfather up on his offer? No, more likely, he's thinking of going off on some other crazy jaunt. Damn.

Williard's face lost its rapt expression. He smiled and turned to Terry. "You can count me out. I'm going back to Dallas with Terry and Stowaway and look for a job."

Terry leaned into his embrace, letting out a pent up breath, but as they left the Godfather to his musings, she began to wonder how long that resolution would last.

THE END

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