

An abstract painting by Frank Lauder, featuring a dense composition of overlapping brushstrokes in vibrant colors like yellow, blue, red, and green, set against a white background. The strokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a complex, multi-layered visual experience.

Frank Lauder



# Riff- Raff

OLYMPIA

Rifraff

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*Frank Lauder*

**OLYMPIA PRESS**

Rifraff

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Rifraff

ISBN 0953654 electronic

An Olympia Press book

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**R I F F R A F F**

**O L Y M P I A P R E S S**

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*'Every lie rests  
Upon a pinnacle  
Of Truth.'*  
*Lervespoyou*

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*Book* **1**  
**Punters**

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# Chapter 1

## *Francisco Villa*

**There was at first just a suggestion,** an idea, and then the beam of energy itself broadened out and became a beam of light which then moved and blurred as Francisco Villa realised that he'd opened his eyes.

Outside, the traffic was moving as well; then, inside the wind moved the windows slightly; increasingly unevenly, uneasily, quickly rattled the panes as if to

ascertain that it could not shake them free of their bonds.

The cord of the Venetian blind bounced against the smeared glass. Outside the dust raised itself in September spirals, semi invisible.

Another hot, lazy late September afternoon, the Sun beginning to fall behind the trees, down amidst the tops of buildings in the middle distance where the verdant explosions of palm ack-ack met the sky against the puffs of vagrant cloud backgrounded by layers of deep blue taffeta sky lining the distant vista. If you had super hearing you might hear the somnolent sea, but it was not difficult to see and hear it in detail, given the demands of your mind's eye and a five minute stroll.

Here, I have to tell you that Francisco Villa was not the man he presented as being, no he was someone else in a differing dimension, someone lucky to be alive - someone who had been expected to have been dead but wasn't; someone who was not himself as

you saw him - which was in fact his elemental secret - which would at some point in this account - or perhaps in the puzzle of relative time - unfold to become the reality that it always was in physics; truth all of its own unchanging, mysterious dynamic creation.

**Some mornings** Francisco Villa, I, would walk out into that street, and there, nestled between various structures, Villa would see that life giving blue Vee of the ever present sea.

But now, on this over-warm, sleepy September afternoon, he'd woken for some untold reason, from a kind of slumber.

There was a rap on the glass. It wasn't simply the wind-restless cord of the blind making that noise - perhaps it was a coin? A metallic noise. A coin? I opened my eyes once again and swivelled my feet from the top of the desk down onto the floor. Then reached forward. My hand found the back of the 'phone.

***I clicked the 'phone on:***

“Yes”

“Is that Francisco Villa?”

“It is”

“Mr Villa, do you remember me – Federico Black?”

The sharp accent cut-in against the background noises – distinctly foreign, perhaps Scottish? I wasn't so good with accents, at least, not today and anyway, I was a foreigner, in fact not even who you think I was as well, at the same time.

“That's right, it's Francisco Villa.” I found myself difficult to believe at times, particularly that day.

“I've got something that might interest you -”

“Yes, eh, Federico, of course I remember you”

“We were talking about mutual friends – people we knew, together - remember?”

“People we knew?” Was this kosher?

“People we knew - together.”

“Well, that was at Teba’s Bar wasn’t it?”

“No, it was at Manolo’s - remember?”

“Oh, do excuse me - I always confuse bars” Now I began to remember.

“So do I.”

“We were eating tapas, do you remember?”

“Oh yes, I *remember* it!” I said, lying.

*I remembered nothing; not that alcohol was becoming a problem to me you understand, rather, that I lost focus after an evening’s drinks.*

“Ehm, how are you, anyway?”

“I’m doing fine you know”, brisk.

*Another lie. Oh, and I didn’t actually need the money, either.*

“Good to hear you’re busy – do you think you could handle something more?”

“I could try – for a friend, in fact I’ll lower my usual fee slightly... though of course expenses...”

“Well, I understand, expenses can't be lowered.”

“Absolutely.”

“Yes, fine, then.”

The man known as Francisco Villa leafed through his imaginary agenda.

“When can we meet, when can we discuss this?”

“Unhh”

*I once again leafed through my non-existent agenda...* “I'm free most of the remaining afternoons this week - lucky that.”

“We could meet any day you want.”

“What about late tomorrow afternoon? I have a lunch meet, and then I'm basically free.”

“That sounds fine – may I bring my friend who needs help?”

“Of course – could you just tell me a bit about your friend?”

“She'll want to speak to you.”

“Sounds very charming.”

“These things are never exactly charming, Francisco!” Guarded.

“I’m sorry – I’m being flippant.”

“Well, I’m sure we both welcome a pretty face in our lives.”

“You are right, Federico, business sometimes is not quite businesslike, and we need that relief.”

Now this man’s mind, my mind, unaccountably wound back to a dark night an age ago; it recalled a face that had begun to haunt him, someone whom he needed in his life - but was afraid to encounter again.

He remembered her shouting at him in the freezing, metallic, crystalline slipstream; remembered the desert floor coming up to meet him at ever increasing speed in the moonlight. As he hit the sand the sound jumped back at him dead, reflection-less. Not that he’d noticed, because just as quickly, he’d lost his breath, all of it. Then the dark, hard, hot wind gusted and the parachute threatened to drag him away into the wastes. It took him a while to wrap the parachute up as he’d seen in the movies,

to create a ball of the nylon and the shrouds and then finally, to look for her.

He, I, recalled the dark arid, absurd perspective - the confetti of paper following *them* both down as they fell, turning ever so slightly in the desert eddies, the hollow recording-studio nil-return thud as he fell and saw her miraculously bounce between two lethal rocky outcrops far away to his left: and how they had both survived, eventually gathering thousands of the dollar bills into the forgiving nylon of their parachutes in the bright day-lit moonlight, then burying their booty in the desert, taking a battered case full of the bills with them... He remembered the florid bursting beauty of the liquid metal fireball as the jet exploded far away, over the shallow hills where the desert ran to scattered rocks way over on the line of the horizon.

And very little else.

The woman - Christiane? Where was she now, she who had become a recurring ghost among the mysteries in his mind - where was she?

***I heard laughter at the other end of the line.*** *The sharpness of verbal focus distorted in such a way that I wasn't sure whether or not Federico was meaning straight satire, or else that he was taking the time to think.*

"Yes, Federico..."

"Fred, if you prefer-"

"Yes, five-ish-"

"Teba's Bar?"

"It's near that restaurant they call Crouch End, isn't it, at the other end of El Pueblo?"

"That's what the smart folks call it!"

"At the bar."

"It's small enough that you can't get lost inside!"

**It was a hot and blustery** early autumn evening, and the starlings squabbled noisily in the trees bordering the squares off the Calle St. Miguel. People walked and talked along the narrower concourses where the bars and

the restaurants grouped together and discussed about this and that, or nothing much for that matter, as they expounded to each other the stories of the times of their lives.

Teba's Bar was set slightly back from one of the busier concourses, down a side alley between a decrepit warehouse, a shop selling flamenco dresses for transvestites and a hairdresser's shop, somehow out of step, lost in the wilderness of the bars and boutiques and antiqued broken-down businesses and backed by a pizza parlour, also suffering from the generally run-down look of business in the area.

Yes, you could say that business was not prospering in this part of the world, though they'd never tell you, and, who knows, you might be misled as to what business they actually were engaged in, anyway.

I ordered a *tubo* and reacted to the cold glass as it breached my lips. Still, the liquid itself was satisfying enough.

“Hola, Francisco!”

The voice was almost at my elbow, and I started from my dream.

I gathered my thoughts quickly, for beside me was a man I now distinctly recollected from Manolo’s bar, and now accompanied by a tall dark gipsy of a woman, whose bright black eyes and dark skin informed me that she was *Gitana* through and through.

“Hey, *Buenos Tardes!*”

“Meet my *amiga*, Colorada”

Colorada did nothing, giving no gesture, simply flashing her eyes at me in reaction.

Federico gestured at a table and we sat around it after an interval.

“What was that?”

“Nothing” The woman spoke with the unpunctuated guttural drawl of the Deep South.

There was something between them the two of them - that Francisco Villa found little interest in, as yet. They exchanged glances with each other as if prompting one another to speak.

“Look”, said Federico at length, to the woman “I shall have to leave you with Francisco here... I’ll do something around town and I’ll meet you in that coffee shop, ‘*La Tahona*’ later.”

The woman remained silent, perhaps sealed into this by some agency that I could not comprehend, the small movements of her face betraying powerful emotions that as yet remained uncodified. She waited several minutes, toying with her glass of *dulce* before obviously deciding to begin telling me her story. I sat there while she gathered her thoughts: then:

“It was not my idea to come today”

“I realise...”

“Federico is a good friend...” she said this with a sort of irritation, as if the words themselves were not her friends, “but sometimes friends cannot help each other... so we came to you, because he knew you.”

She called him ‘C’, though he was unlikely to be known as that, someone

who had reached a point in his dealings along the coast such that a series of not entirely unexpected things resulted. First, his family became uneasy about the fact that his wealth had become so noticeable, and was obviously not due to his labours; then that he had become close with many dubious types along the coast, and finally that he gambled frequently at casinos in what was called the 'Golden Mile' (indeed for an important member of a well-known family this was almost a scandalous state of affairs).

Now, added to all this, he was sleeping with a woman (this woman), whom they took to be a *putana*, not a only a whore, that would be understandable, forgiveable, no, but also a woman who was a performer, a singer, a *gitana* of considerable public profile, not someone nameless that he just paid for by the hour at *Selecta*, the largest and tackiest whorehouse at this end of the coast, which would be after all relatively acceptable, but no, he was someone she saw every day, for no money - at a cost

irrelevant because it was a blow only to his reputation and status. Oh and of course, to his family's, too.

**“Well?”**

“It’s not so much this woman... you understand” she continued, distancing herself by tilting her head as if bowing – “no, it’s more to do with the status of his family: they started as labourers, made their accidental fortune buying pieces of scrub and rock wilderness which later became prime building plots for pennies, and selling these plots for fortunes. Then they joined what you could call the *in-crowd*, of the seriously wealthy along the coast. No manners” - she smiled to herself – “no breeding, but the unknowing aggression and violence of money and power.” She sat back and looked at me, as if that were some kind of answer to an as yet unasked question.

She started again;

“Then he became involved with someone called *Grim* or something - that was as much as I got - who had

something to do with an internet company called Autopart, or something – I heard him talking on the mobile a few times about what he called ‘Derivatives’ and ‘CDOs’. Well, that meant nothing until I realized that sometimes he seemed short of cash: then I became a little suspicious, you know...” She swept away an imaginary mosquito with an almost dramatic gesture as if to allay my eyes; “I realized that he was paying large sums of money to these people in *cash*. I thought that maybe I should get involved a little. I mean, it could affect *our* thing.”

She didn’t know it, but she’d hit me hard, like a sudden blow in the solar-plexus. I felt winded. Grim – a.k.a. JJ Grimme perhaps and Autopart a.k.a AutoPass (of course)!

The facts clanged together like a gruesome traffic accident in my mind. These factors made up a perfectly poisonous mix, like the emergence of a Kraken from the deep, like a nightmare re-inventing itself: all my anxieties reared up at me and probably only I knew the

significance of all this at that moment: what a coincidence, all my past terrors come to haunt me! But I was lucky, she hadn't noticed my paranoia.

**Next.** She looked at me with a question in her eyes. I was pretty numb by then so she didn't register that.

"How do these pockets exist in our society? Such wealth and aimless corruption amidst a sea of poverty!"

"This is no time for you to be thinking aloud."

"In the end, this is where it all comes from!" I was still in a sort of shock; bad P.R. though.

"Listen... you're not paid to be a philosopher..!"

"Everything has a start point... though usually the endpoint is almost infinitely distant" I was gabbling. I pulled myself together, finally.

"That doesn't help me at all"

I started again, a little emotionally breathless:

“Look at it as if it were a wall. We know where many of the bricks sit - now we have to find what the pattern is and then what the missing pieces are – the pattern will resolve itself at some point - and then we’ll at least have a idea of what the beast is!”

“Does that help me?” She was not pleased.

“Yes, I know, I’m sorry if I’m being obscure!”

“Francisco - I understand, but I don’t sympathise - the pressure wherever you are in the jungle is always enough to flatten the weak and to bring the rest into line with the status quo.” She was an intellectual, after all.

“Yes,” sadly.

She looked at me quizzically, in that way that gypsies have in their demeanour, caressing and tender, yet hinting at sudden passionate violence.

“You are *supposed* to know where we go from here!”

If I didn’t watch it, I’d blow this one -

“Eh - this is the way I think things out - don't concern yourself, really – this is how it all gets going.”

“Well, good!”

“Don't worry; I have a pretty good idea already, just leave it with me.”

I was lying, as usual. That had become almost second nature to me in the past couple of æons.

She smiled:

“Right!” She seemed relieved, and began to explain the details of the situation further.

**It seemed that her relationship with Mr C** had awakened slumbering prejudices. It was not surprising that such a relationship between a woman seen as a very common person and a man, a member of the cadre of the insecure and uneducated very rich, would anyway be regarded as anything other than suspect, either on his or more obviously, her part.

The problem now was that she had been threatened: the typical, unknown

protagonist saying that 'C' would be exposed in his dealings and worse, that her putative and as yet unformed career as a singer would be swiftly terminated by the succeeding scandal, police action etc., etc...

For somebody in her position, I expect this would not be an unlikely set of events. However there were other factors that concerned La Colorada: one was that actually their sexual involvement had begun to unwind – they were more friends than lovers now and she felt that twin responsibility as a weight that she felt she would have to bare. She looked a little glum at this, but typically of the female of the species, a little upbeat, too. Women always see some sort of renaissance just over the horizon, which is what makes them such great schemers and such unprincipled liars in the cause of a largely absent, imaginary Eden. In her case, with her intelligence, lack of ties and her looks - allied to her rising status as a performer – that would not be difficult to imagine.

That set of principles after all was the engine that drove her to begin with.

The second was that she had become concerned as a result of her affection for Mr C, that he would not in fact become so heavily embroiled in these putative deals, that he became prime meat for the police. That was the main thing. That was the story.

She'd become involved almost by default, having noticed that in the past few months he'd become involved in and had managed to break away from, several semi-criminal scams. One for example was an Internet scam, where so called 'Pop-Ups' would appear invitingly on computer screens. When a viewer answered on of these prompts by clicking the proffered button, they would be charged two dollars a minute until the user either became aware, or else the computer was shut down, which could be hours. Such a scam could net Seventy thousand Dollars an hour for its inventor on a good day.

Little did Colorado know it, but the man facing her across the table knew this area of 'commerce' very well indeed: in fact to his private amazement, the man known as Francisco Villa found that this obvious scam was still legal after a passage of years, and that actually he (or you) might find it on his (or you, your) screen any day (be warned).

So, to summarise somewhat over simplistically: Mr C had become lazy, slothful and it's cousin, greedy, as well. Which is where he and the story of his being scammed had started. Whether or not he had ultimately financed the scam or perhaps the other scams in question was not known. There are after all many takers on the now tawdry, euphemistically named 'Golden Mile' as greedy as he - but as an illustration of the usual indolence and unprincipled use of third party power by the rich it proved the elegant, ancient truth of an acid point - but most of all, it had re-invented the spectre of JJ Grimme, who loomed at me out of the past like that famous iceberg

had loomed in the track of the ill-advised, hapless, Titanic. Francisco Villa, as he was known, was given several other leads during his long conversation with La Colorada; who managed also to fill her eyes with self pitying tears at one crucial point, the better to both draw him more securely into the fold of her own belief and at the same time to test his naïveté, probe for his particular weakness.

The central problem remained in his mind, however - how to fight the Gorgon? La Colorada missed the signatures of this thought completely.

**A week later** Francisco Villa was standing outside a tall, steel, glass and concrete structure, fashionably attired in these days with mirrors rather than windows, the better to define its importance by underlining its assumed willingness and pretence to conform by reflecting back that which it did not represent. So much is in the imagination.

**It** was a little before nine in the morning, and my intention was to join the flood of workers into the building in as anonymous a way as possible.

My strategy worked. I joined the in-rush, cascaded into the foyer past the security guards, crammed into a lift and was disgorged together with a number of workers on to a floor which sported the tacky, huge, expensive yet Corporate, engraved nameplate *'AutoPass Corporation - Executive Offices'* encased in a massive block of smart dense bullet-proof crystal, masquerading as a rugged relation, an impersonation of Diamond in the centre of the lobby.

The lobby on this level was surprisingly wide; impressive, clean, marbled and spacious, given additional visual space by the myriad spectra which the block's many polished, contrived facets managed to reflect.

I took a moment to orientate myself, and then ducked into an empty space which may well have been a security

guard's room previously, but showed no signs of present occupation. I had to think a moment. I noted a formal barrier to one side that one had to cross in order to enter the AutoPass offices, formed by the aluminium uprights of a sort of doorway/lintel, enforced by a change of colour scheme and flooring; a few curious eyes, and one's imagination made up the rest. To the left of these impediments, just before the entrance was a sort of lobby: I entered it and was surprised to find that this was an adjunct to the offices, an informal reference-section-come-waiting area.

Equally surprising was the fact that the custodian of this area, who automatically, logically, took me for one of the AutoPass staff, was a bespectacled young woman wearing the sort of costume that one would rather expect of a schoolmarm than a corporate executive. She nodded to me as if we shared the same secret. Maybe we would. This added an extra *frisson* to this business, I was partial to the occasional schoolmarm.

I remembered one in my distant past called Sarah C. I still thought about her.

Enough of this reverie! I must appear busy.

**I drew out some apparently innocuous papers and read**, only to find that on paper at least, not a lot had changed at the corporation apart from its burgeoning growth, which meant that in this case, I did not see remaining at AutoPass a single person that I'd known in my past life there; they must have achieved some sort of seniority by now - or been replaced. Added to which of course, the fact that this was not an executive suite, rather an imposing but at the same time an outlying satellite office somewhere effectively *way out* in the wilderness of the web... I drew a breath of relief.

I suspected and then learned that now AutoPass was the largest one of a string of Internet companies which La Colorada had accidentally prompted me back to investigate: added to which I

knew the territory at least somewhat. On the web itself to the unknowing eye these corporations seemed innocuous: but, closer inspection of their corporate accounts would shew the wary certain weaknesses, which I thought on present evidence might lead me to something nasty. My right earlobe suddenly seemed to itch.

For my own purposes, added to the fact that I felt comfortable with my own internal knowledge of the workings of the various corporate elements, I decided to concentrate on the to me most familiar founding segment, the main holding company AutoPass, where I found almost at once that there was no direct access to many of the facts that I needed to investigate. Time had added passwords to everything for reasons of 'security'. Computers can be as easily set to block by programmed ignorance as to access by wide reference. Which is where my knowledge of the corporate structure of AutoPass would be a major element in entering into - and understanding - the

on-going situation there. For example - how many servers did the AutoPass Corporation maintain for their own use at that moment? (They ran their own.) And where were the backup servers situated? On my list, of course - and by the way - where were their accounts audited? In one of the dozen outlying countries which only operated on a need-to-know basis - or in all of them - or perhaps centrally?

AutoPass' revenues, I knew from my other life, were enormous, absurd and almost inexplicable: given that you were naïve - or else well paid-off, sufficiently to ignore them. These questions, reiterated in detailed summaries through another half-dozen related companies, began to yield interesting yet un-corroborated evidence from the files, though I had to research laterally: things which La Colorada might not want to know, but which outlined Mr'C's dealings in an interesting and enlightening way.

One thing that was almost certain from the beginning and which became sharper and clearer in definition as my

researches progressed, was that my intuition about Mr`C´, blind egoist that he was, was correct. Mr`C´ after all, was actually a rather small, blind, flabby fish in an ocean of sharks, though little did he know it. Even with his money, the companies that related together world-wide in this technological ziggurat had the revenues per day that Mr`C´ would have in his wildest dreams per lifetime, were he fortunate. Most of Mr`C´s ventures thus, were as tears to the Ocean.

And of course, worse; when Mr`C´ had had the temerity and greed to get himself mixed up with what amounted to the criminal end of these things, he´d never expected that he´d play with professionals, organised criminals who had spent a lifetime testing the rules until they broke. Which is where my knowledge came in. One day doubtless they would apply the same tests to him.

**Francisco Villa** borrowed a couple of bland old trading volume report files and made a move towards the

offices. As soon as the librarian in the reference section looked away, I lost myself in the lobby and then visited the canteen further to re-establish that I knew or remembered no-one there; then left the building. The following day I played the same trick, except that carrying AutoPass' internal folders, the security guards did not think of asking me for ID anyway. I played the same trick from then on whenever it was required; besides, I'd found a lost ID card in one the folders, which proved useful.

**So far** the profile of AutoPass's business activities seemed to me to be summarised thus: one of many random servers would take an order and pass it after processing and payment to an automatic system (a 'Bot') that would issue an order for the goods to be dispatched.

The Invoice would then be dispatched at the speed of light by email, from one of a dozen servers located in

one of many countries. Likewise, the transfer of goods was expedited, at least in theory, at the same time and with the usual speed. All this would take a very few fractions of a second, thousands of kilometres meaning only the additional passage of milliseconds to a powerful server.

Technically, that much was simple, clear: thus it would be straightforward to order from one outlet, receive at another station - *and suppose the order was then forgotten?* Suppose, to put it more succinctly, the order was just a piece of disjointed code? I'd often seen the 'Error Message' – *Unexpected end of file* on my screen, which meant that probably a single zero, one - or a comma of establishing code was missing from perhaps ten million bytes of information - and thus lacking its critical reference code, the File would become effectively unreadable: for example which of a basket of languages would it be in? - Was it numerical or alphabetical, coded, in

which form? The choices are actually endless.

The hissing and electronic chatter in cyberspace on the high-speed optical lines indicates the transfer of millions of code, words or calculations a second: that would decode as potentially tens of thousands of orders *a second*.

With an operation as large as AutoPass's, relatively small individual orders could vanish without trace – did vanish without trace, I knew that. And suppose there were orders that were in fact not orders at all, had never intended to be orders, where payment was made but nothing was ever intended to be delivered?

What was it that I was on to - and what was this all about? Well I had an idea, because in my other life I'd come across all this stuff and just left it to one side; at the time it had all been detail - after all, I was getting rich at the time - I'd come from miserable poverty to effective riches almost overnight by telling a few blind lies and weathering a few mistruths -

and asking questions of this situation at that time could only have ever served to consign me forever to poverty. After all, we all need the cash, don't we? And thus, due to *force majeure* I'd become a practised, practising, liar.

**But, to get back to Mr`C´. To some extent everyone is malleable,** everyone has, as it's said, their 'Price'. Mr`C´ was obviously a very malleable person in his own right, his greed and ultimately his weakness, never ceasing to lead him where the money was. After all, it was, in the final analysis and in his own mind, money that gave him whatever meaning he had.

And AutoPass was willing to offer him a Price for his imagination; in its own selfish interest AutoPass would operate as a broker – well, we all understand that – but now the real Machiavellian detail: the scale of AutoPass, like that of the *mega* software corporations of increasingly negative repute and

conversely ever increasing greed, had by default begun to create the belief - generate the paranoia of its apogee, had begun to procreate and purchase the belief that power was *'theirs'* as if it had been gifted to them by God, belonged to them by right, such that ultimately corruption had become its own motivation - justified by imaginary bluster and their corporate needs of course.

I'd have to say it – that I'd been part of it too, I'd been swept up out of the sadness of my then existence by the most extreme chance: at the time perhaps there was no alternative.

Time changes, you and it changes everything around you. Despite myself, my pride in consciousness, I'd never clearly understood where my luck had started or ended, where the corruption began, in my life. The only thing I knew for sure was that there was no way I would ever let my life return to the way it had been all that time ago. It seemed a thousand years ago now, and in the meantime PT Jones had mutated by

stress, chance and yes - by *luck*, into someone more positive, more ruthless, less desperate, more damned and far more darkly knowing in his soul, someone *lucky*, perhaps? Well, luck itself is often an undecided factor.

Taking a few examples of typically corporate greed: Enron, WorldCom, Tyco: staggeringly corrupted and wasteful Government institutions throwing money like confetti at vain 'Projects': the Seven (dark) Sisters of oil, political squandering and corruption by corporately sick bodies such as the European Commission and Spain, Greece, of *other* people's resources, accepted religious bigotry - and the major software giants today - corporately conceived and elegantly executed corruption has, for whatever reason, become a religion, a way of belief garnered by cynicism and 'enlightened' self interest; gain has become the aim of all their strivings, selfish ownership of ideas - and worse, ownership of people and their minds, the forced pirating or stealing of true, free qualities - the

cornerstone of their power and the totality of their corruption. Corruption has seeped into the highest elements of government in the most unlikely places; the members and relatives of many jointly in modern governments live wealthier and 'better' for the absolute corruption of their ideals, and sadly, nothing will ever change the paranoia and sickness of greed – except it's recognition.

## But to return to AutoPass:

I'd known for years that AutoPass's now massive bulk, combined with the aggression of ruthless and greedy management, would lead to the fact that ultimately The Corporation's mission statement, like any blustering organisation, typically the pretentious European Union's apparent goals masked its real aims.

And you have to remember that corporations and organisations like that exist only as you know their faces, to procreate and consolidate their own

greed: all other 'missions' they may have, become insignificant compared to this central sad symphony. It's logical, given the world in which they exist, for like Enron and the other conglomerates that quickly became history before them; they know that they will become history very quickly one day too. Their mortality is perhaps greater than ours. *'It's better to gain now what you will otherwise lose, and count the cost tomorrow'* is their dictum.

Corporations are only as mortal, pointless and quickly forgotten as numbers, individuals; it is only in their corporately bloated egos, in the internal arithmetic of their boardrooms that greed mitigates the overall message. For their own reasons thus they are fated to fight the notional enemy – in order to live for the corporate 'ever', however temporary that might turn out to be. Corporations (and governments) are machines fuelled by the flesh and blood and expediency of others.

**There** was still research to be made, data collected and assessed before I could clarify my theory, but in the meantime I had a pretty good idea of what I would find; I'd not risked my skin once before without finding-out why (eventually). The really most interesting, scariest of moments for me would come, when one way or the other, maybe by chance, I'd hit the right button and all the lights would come on, probably very suddenly and without warning.

Mr C had now become a very small, a very insignificant part of a very large puzzle: and Francisco Villa, like the fly in the proverbial ointment, was becoming more involved every day in this puzzle by default, through twisting this way and that. It was his history, though, which had ensnared him, the time that had gone before, whichever time that was. The conduct of his life, indeed *both* his lives, had mitigated joint involvements in oddly similar ways, ways beyond the mere native understanding possessed by either

Mr`C´, PT Jones, or indeed the veritable,  
invisible, Francisco Villa.

## Chapter 2

### *News via Nogales*

**Now he picked-up** the paper, opened the pages and began to read: sitting somewhere else in the bar, somewhere away from the street and where the clamour and the noise were distant. Then he opened the pages and began to read:

*‘Nogales: Friday.*

*A business jet, now thought to  
have belonged to  
The powerful Internet-e-commerce  
Linked **AutoPass** Corporation,  
exploded Thursday  
night, according to our reporter  
Rod Roberts who reports from  
this colorful Mexican border  
town, in the midst of the  
Fiesta season.  
Thursday, any friends  
and acquaintances, of  
company Marketing Comptroller  
PT Jones of **Anasco** fame,  
domiciled in the New Jersey  
suburb of Bobbingdon Heights,  
who divorced his brainchild some  
time ago vowing never to  
return to the company that he had  
saved from imminent disaster,  
will be aghast.  
It has been reported by  
Several agencies that he has  
Now been declared a victim of the  
Explosion which destroyed the  
Aircraft in which he and his Assistant*

*Were believed journeying towards  
Puerto Vallarta, MDF.*

*The precise reason for Jones'  
night-borne departure  
is not well established,  
but it is believed from sources  
in his office that his apparently  
passionate rejection of  
Anasco's avowed e-commerce  
requirement for a billion-dollar  
deal with South American  
Corporate raiders **SunAfed**,  
meant at that time that either  
he move, or else Tom Skellard,  
the CEO of Anasco,  
would have to find a new  
apartment somewhere  
else than San Juan PR.*

*(See edition) In the event  
He moved.*

*Early indications are that Jones  
lost his life when the Lear jet VI,  
apparently bound for Puerto Vallarta,  
where he was expected  
to take an extended fact-finding  
furlough according to AutoPass,*

*his newly found alma-mater,  
now said to be in deepest  
mourning for its relatively new boy.  
The jet exploded in mid-air at about  
five thousand feet (or flight level 50  
as pilots prefer to call it.)  
The fireball was seen some thirty  
miles away by horrified cattle herders,  
who, at first, because of the  
clear air thought that a  
doomsday comet had entered  
the earth's atmosphere and  
thus that the end was nigh.  
Which is what they told the  
local cops when they arrived,  
hot foot from a cantina  
twenty miles distant.  
It's not recorded if they  
were praying at the time,  
but even if the experience  
has been a nasty one for  
FAA Air Accident Investigators,  
who have so-far found little evidence  
of the human victims, and don't expect  
to do so, given the broken terrain  
and the hungry animals thereon.*

*Given the wide area which must  
have at some point been  
the recipient of any remains-  
and the fact that wild animals  
are no respectors of evidence,  
sadly there will be little evidence.  
Conversely, it won't be so for  
AutoPass Inc.. The Corporation,  
which was reportedly paying Jones  
up to \$5,000,000 yearly,  
states in it's latest press release,  
that not only was Jones Insured  
against death for \$20,000,000  
by them, but that he had  
been expected at some time  
in the near-ish future to be  
offered the post of CEO,  
taking the reigns of this  
massive company from the  
shy, and ultimately  
retirement minded JJ Grimme,  
his dynamic and fast moving boss.  
JJ is quoted as saying that the  
Unexpected demise of his 'favorite'  
Has left not only large and*

*expensive Inexplicable gaps  
in the books, due at the time  
to be reviewed by the fallen  
executive, but that AutoPass  
is, as a result, riven with  
sadness, and the inevitable Corporate  
rumours. In the past, Internal  
Revenue and Corporate Tax  
Authority Investigators have had  
Their doubts about the giant  
Corporation, doubts which still  
Continue, though with reduced  
Vigour as information seems  
To have vanished into the  
Thin air at flight level 50.*

*And so what we advise you  
Is to watch these pages for  
what we'll find Grimme up  
to, given his normal  
hyperactive and successful style.  
One way or the other, given  
his other penchant - for a Hotel  
residence lifestyle, we expect  
Billionaire JJ's outfit, replete with a  
new chain of hotels or leisure facilities -*

*created by expansive internet revenues  
still flooding in (so we are informed)-  
to bob-up like a cork just about  
anywhere where there's lots of cash  
in the offing.*

*And, not to be too insensitive at a time  
of Corporate sadness and burgeoning  
revenues, this could just turn out to  
be another case of  
'The King is Dead – Long Live the King',  
Jones would have to be  
real lucky to survive that disaster  
– we're confident he didn't –  
so, sadder but wiser, for us it's  
back tomorrow to just another  
busy day in Corporate America.'*

***He found an enclosure, yellowing,***  
decaying sheets of paper disintegrating  
with age as he held them to straighten  
them in his fingers - and more than that -  
combined with the packet, a copy -  
carefully cut segments from one of those  
extinct fax rolls. Had he by chance  
stumbled upon the key to what this was  
about or more perhaps? He'd begun with

the link – the link would be evident only to one whose mind possessed the required information; and only he outside of The Corporation had such information, only he knew what that link was: it was increasingly clear in his mind now.

This scrap of an old copy - itself as unlikely as a fall of snow in August - had arrived in the mandatory blank brown envelope, as indistinguishable from any other piece of mail as you could imagine. No headers, no footers, no intro - no note directing him anywhere, much. Even the postmark was indistinct. Just this piece of antique paper from an ancient copy of an extinct magazine. Did the sender know what he knew? And, more's the point, would they tell what they knew, and for how much and to whom? I was lost for a moment in profound, cold fear. I'd lived under my new, awkward, assumed name for almost three years now, and nothing much had happened. Maybe what had seemed awkward to me at the time was not so awkward after all.

Using a small amount of the money I'd built up a deliberately low profile, a quite inconsequential business, more a cover than anything else. I hardly needed to make a profit; the hidden dollars I held were still fresh in their packs, most of them. How do you spend a hundred-million brand-new dollars without attracting attention?

And after that absurd argument about nothing, that crazy situation with Christiane all that time ago, I'd not even thought about a woman, about a woman's touch, about a relationship. I'd ceased to feel that way. Francisco Villa in reality lived in numbness.

And the rest of our jointly discovered treasure? The bulk of the dollars were swaddled, buried under a rock in the desert where we'd left them, swathed in plastic and parachute nylon. Until both or one of us went back, nobody would ever know that the cache was there. There was even a question whether we would be able to locate it at

all, one patch of desert being very much the same as any other.

Maybe the worst of it was that I was neither sad nor happy, living in a cocoon of uncertain, anonymous purgatory at the far purchase of time. And discovery? Discovery was a moveable feast; I thought it unlikely ever to happen: simply because there was only one person who both knew *my* faces sufficiently to be capable of blowing the whistle: because the person who inhabited my, Francisco Villa's, body was thought to be a dead man, a dead man who had been unknowingly involved in the convoluted plot that had nearly succeeded in killing his namesake, the '*real*' PT Jones and perhaps myself too, though the evidence linking one to the other had been sprayed around in the desert outside Nogales one crystal clear, almost blindingly bright cold night, sufficiently that it could never be pieced together to satisfy a federal team.

As far as the world at large was concerned PT Jones was dead, killed in

that explosion years ago. Nevertheless, someone whose 'status' would suffer greatly, probably fatally, were it ever to be known that the made man, JJ Grimme, had generated a potentially fatal slip with the expensive machinations which might in future imperil the fortunes and profits of the very Corporation itself were PT Jones ever found alive, was JJ Grimme himself.

JJ Grimme, the creator of this puzzle, would be unlikely ever to want anyone to know the theory, or whether or not the dead man still existed, even that the ex-PT Jones was actually alive: after all he should be decently dead, that was a tidy idea and ensured the good fortune of the Corporation; look at it there, was too much about profit in all this; many hundreds of millions of dollars and telephone numbers in whichever other currencies you could conjecture. It was bigger than any one person, even JJ Grimme or PT Jones, whoever or wherever he was now.

The problem for Francisco Villa was now that JJ Grimme, were he ever to

find out about PT Jones' miraculous escape over the desert - (and there was no concrete evidence of that that he knew, except for the missing millions themselves) - would want the money he'd coveted and saved in so miserly a fashion - *back*: it was an awful lot for his deceased Marketing man to have taken with him to the grave, especially if he were not after all dead and thus capable of telling the tale to a Federal Prosecutor...

The fact was that before the Lear jet had departed on its fatal flight and exploded over the desert, Christiane Moore had taken the initiative - as she always seemed to - and loaded it with the cardboard cartons of dollars that she'd found rotting in JJ Grimme's cellar. Only JJ Grimme knew her secret - if it ever got out, he'd be topped by the mob, if he wasn't put inside for ninety-nine years recurring by the Feds; which regard gave him a pretty watertight motive for wanting it all back - and for murdering any parties

who either knew, or maybe even resisted his efforts by whatever method.

Those other parties? Why - PT Jones and Christiane Moore, the only people in this phenomenal world who knew enough to be a serious threat to Grimme, (*whilst holding the invisible key to his missing non-existent millions!*) And further; it followed that he'd like the cash back before either PT Jones or Christiane Moore, *his ex-whore*, spent it or got blown away spending it and then took the secret of its whereabouts with them.

Of course the loss of the money was never mentioned in news reports because it had never officially existed: but the fact that only a few hundred thousand of the upward of three-hundred million dollars had ever been found, must have stuck in the craw of JJ Grimme at his desk. Jones on his part was positive that JJ Grimme would be sure to require some adequate form of vengeance.

You have to remind yourself, naturally, that officially the money didn't ever exist, it was cash after all, not on

paper or plastic or electronic record. But that's just a detail in the official mind, isn't it?

This too must have been a question that the ever expedient mind of JJ Grimme had mulled over once upon a time; perhaps when he once again bounced on his less than fatherly knee someone very like Christiane Moore, someone who was contracted to take care of his immediate wishes.

Why, even those who might be looking for the three-hundred million confetti-stashed black-money Dollars missing from Grimme's AutoPass box-cellar, would be uncertain of anything about Francisco Villa, except perhaps his height and other basic details which would copy over to a million other people in any country - no, PT Jones was safe in his present anonymity. But why - how - this brown envelope, these anonymous copies of a press report from another time - why should this stuff arrive here on his desk in a nondescript office in a nowhere town?

Francisco Villa had escaped from one deadly *cul-de-sac* into another, exchanged a twilight world for the blinding glare of an electronic daylight desert of unknowing.

**The voice was a light, elegant treble, unexpected and bright on the telephone,** with a Southern female spin to the usual Midwestern drawl, which he found surprising and pleasurable.

At first he was taken aback enough to fall silent. Though in a way he'd expected something like this to happen eventually. He would have to face it. Anyway her tone seemed almost too friendly to be dangerous.

The voice started again:

“Is that Francisco?”

“It is!”

“Excuse my sudden call, you sound a little surprised”

“Well, not surprised, just... well this *is* unexpected... is it about something you need looking into?”

“Forgive me, but... not exactly... I’m Claudia Hamer - the person who sent you the brown envelope the other day... I meant to call you the same day but apparently you were indisposed... at any rate there was no answer, and so I’ve left it a bit late in the day to call you, I do apologise.”

He took a deep breath. *That was it!* He stilled his breathing, then:

“Yes, I was surprised to get those copies the other day... actually I had no idea what they were about.”

He was lying: well, being necessarily disingenuous, then.

“Tactless of me – I expect you are curious to know my involvement with the AutoPass Corporation?”

“Tell me - sure.”

His chest tightened.

“Can we meet? May I drop in on you tomorrow?”

“Of course – but let me tell you I know very little about AutoPass.” He was fishing, caught out in the minefield of inadequate understanding. He needed to stay out of any involvement with AutoPass or any other linked company at this journalistic level, for several reasons - after all he was pursuing a snooping job, wasn't he?

“I realize that, but as I'm writing a piece about them, and I thought that you were looking at them too – well, I thought perhaps we could put our heads together.”

The sweet ozone of relief flooded over me like an ice-cold beer in Alexandria after the Sahara's heat. He realized that unconsciously he'd been holding his breath, which released itself with a whoop. Claudia Hamer obviously had connected him only in passing with the Corporation and knew nothing about his earlier involvement. Thank God!

**The buzzer released the lower door** and he heard light steps on the sandy

stairway. He closed the office door and waited. The knock was light and he waited a few seconds before opening the door, expecting someone quite different from the person he saw; more academic, perhaps.

The woman confronting him was slender and lithe-hipped with cropped bottle-blond hair, dark glasses, wearing *vaqueros* tight at the hip and accommodating a pair of battered pointed snakeskin stirrup boots. She wore a faded Tee-shirt and a long leather jacket and held cradled in her arms a laptop in a case with a broken handle.

“Hi!”

“Hullo”

“I’m Claudia Hamer” she held out a hand. He introduced himself. They sat back into the leather desk chairs in the office and regarded each other for a moment. He made two cups of coffee and put his feet up over the end of the desk, which gave him the space to think a little, steady his nerves.

The relief made him feel almost as if he’d known her for a long time, though

of course she was a complete stranger. She showed him her press card, and after cursorily apologizing for her bad habits, lit a cigarette.

At length Claudia Hamer began to relax and further, to expand upon her interest in the matter.

“Let me explain,” she began, though Francisco Villa was not about to correct her in any way in anything she would say.

She outlined what he already knew about the AutoPass Corporation, showing her lack of knowledge about the breadth of the situation; but of course in any official sense he would declare that he knew nothing, and thus was not able to clarify any of her misunderstandings.

Finally, after playing around the point, she came to what she considered the nub of the problem:

“By chance, I was in the plaza outside AutoPass the other day and saw you walk by, into the lift. That was a bold move! So I tried the same thing next - but as the rush was going down, the security

guards stopped me. Of course I had no valid ID. That screw-up took twenty minutes or more. When I phoned the AutoPass office on the internal, they told me that there was nobody to comment about my story - of course, that way they got to know my interest, which must have muddied the waters for any future actions. Stupid of me! I was standing there wondering what to do, when by chance I saw you leaving, recognized you from earlier that morning, noticed that you seemed to be very self-involved, or to put it another way not a drudge from the Corporation - and so I followed you: I saw you enter this building, checked the name board, and it all clicked into place.”

“Very astute of you.”

“I’m sorry I did it that way, me following a professional sleuth!” She laughed.

“Yes, that is funny.” He laughed mechanically, but failed to grasp the humour.

“Oh, thanks!” Apologetic now.

They checked each other out again for a moment, calculating this and that. Then she returned to her story:

“Let me tell you what I’ve found so far: you see, I happened upon AutoPass and its mighty gaggle of companies, when, by chance (I work for various papers), I noticed in several offices that they’d received complaints to do with non-delivery of items from AutoPass and its related companies. These items were so unrelated that I became curious that one corporation could extend such a large business umbrella - and of course with that sort of width -” she fanned out her hands in the air, “I had a handle on it that other journo’s wouldn’t unless they’d stumbled upon it too. Of course it has a sound basis both in business practice and on the Web, logically, the larger and more lateralized a company can be, the more people it can deal with and do business with: and the larger its discounts on volume the larger its cash-flow (principally speaking, of course).”

“Good thinking!”

“So I dug around in the archives. Those copies I sent you were made from unedited roughs: there seem to be a remarkable scarcity of library references in the published side of the archive - which is kind of strange, wouldn't you think? They must control output very rigidly and carefully. Why? I found those on a stored backup DVD from a couple of years ago, which, I suppose would be considered to be too small-meat at this time to weed-out stuff from. Then I heard somewhere that AutoPass is like Microwhatsit and Vdot – litigious to a fine point.”

“Ahah!” Thus her suspicions were aroused. The story from her viewpoint had begun to develop in areas he'd not considered up to now. Claudia Hamer had blundered upon something that he'd not had access to, or for that matter, thought of. He chipped-in there:

“Just for the record – if a certain (he gave Mr'C's name) or a singer called 'La Colorada' comes up in any of your investigations, let me know.” He layered

some minor details and she scribbled a note.

“Ah, yes!”

“Do you have more? After you finish your story I’ll try to expand mine a bit.”

“Right.” He sensed she was excited, in full flow now.

“Would you like another coffee while we talk?”

“Umm.” She nodded and made to light another cigarette.

“Keep talking”, he was thirsty but maybe the flow wouldn’t wait. He tinkled the cups together in the small kitchen while she raised her voice a little and began to explain the main thrust of the story from her point of view:

“I see that AutoPass has been operating for some ten years: but at the beginning it was nothing; just a shop operating out of down-town New Jersey, upstairs from a shady café. Then things seemed to have changed: there seems to have been a sudden rush of development, not unusual with web

companies; except that in this case branches seemed to spring-up everywhere: here, London England, in Caracas, in Rome, New York, then Malaga Spain, Stockholm, the Virgin Islands, Moscow, Grenada, Guatemala, Panama, Medellin. You mention it; they've probably got an office there."

"What does this bring us to?"

"Well, suddenly the story took on a new slant; maybe a nasty one."

"Tell me."

"A couple of years ago the Marketing man, his name was..." she shuffled her papers and he caught his breath in the gathering gloom: "...yes, one PT Jones - and a woman, maybe his lover or mistress or something (*I'll tell you what I know about her later*) - were killed in a mystery mid-air explosion while they were flying a company jet: apparently *en-route* to Mexico somewhere: the FAA found nothing identifiable, apart from a few thousand dollars and some female underwear blowing around the cactuses in the desert about where the explosion

seems to have occurred. Wild animals and the fact that sagebrush migrates constantly meant that it was not possible to locate any particular spot: anyway the wreckage had fallen thousands of feet, and been exploded as well, so there was nothing much they could pin anything on to. No body parts or anything. This Jones seems to have been the pilot.”

“Sounds like the perfect plot, wouldn’t you think?”

“Right, no traces of the crime - well - we don’t know! It just smells like it, know what I mean?”

She took a long breath, and a sip of the cooling coffee. Then she looked at me hard.

“My goodness...yeah.”

“It gets better!”

“Who?”

“This PT Jones was some sort of tycoon: he was killed of course in the plane, together with his mistress, or whoever she was – when I traced her in the records, whereas his was a straightforward tracing job, you know,

Harvard, Wall Street, all the right East Coast clubs - it turned out that she'd been in gaol in Europe somewhere, she'd been a prostitute earlier and then got involved with the company later: I reckon she was servicing the CEO JJ Grimme (*who's believed to be dead now, and that's another story!*) Which is how she held on to her job – he must have known about her record if it was *that* easy for me to find out over the internet - on her knees, like poor old Marilyn Monroe (*yes, literally!*)”

“More?”

“Actually, the story of those three items seems to end there. As far as I know, no trace of the first two has ever been found: and JJ Grimme? Apparently he later committed suicide by walking into the sea near Capri with his pockets full of small change! That's how they found the body – months later, mind, *you know*, dead. If you can believe that *that* was suicide, you can believe anything!”

“Jesus, that's mob stuff unless I'm suddenly raving ga-ga!”

“Jesus has got nothing to do with it: but as you see, after these untimely demises, the mystery only ever thickens!”

“So what do you think is the real story?”

She smiled, almost theatrically.

The darkness cycled on, intensifying like ink, the mad mix of molecules at times obscuring his view as if it were about to turn to that smoke effect you see in movies. Perhaps they were.

She blew a smoke ring and then puffed her cheeks, the better to gather slackening energy and dramatic effect.

“Well – put it this way: I think there’s more to it than that, I mean, it smells, somewhat.”

“And my Mr C?”

“Your Mr C sounds like a small part player”

“Mr C is a player all right, and that’s the way he likes to think of himself, but I reckon you’re right and he’s just another fish in a barrel.”

“So whose barrel is it?”

“Well, what I’ve found flipping through those files, is that the corporation is so world-wide in its application - and so rich - that any one of a number of third-parties could have had a deciding hand in what went down. Just take the demise of JJ Grimme – how do we know that he’s dead? Are you telling me that on that coast of Italy the mob don’t hold sway? – Like pigs have wings! Think of the camorra: I can tell you that if you look at an official map of Naples, it’s little more than a small town – and that the city itself is ninety-percent not officially there. Oh, and don’t raise your voice about any thing related to organized crime in Reggio di Calabria and sound as if you’re trouble, or the 'Ndrangheta will cut your throat!”

“Oh?”

“And nobody will know a darn thing!”

“Oh?”

“Yes, today, in the twenty-first century!”

“Okay, but we’re not there - we’re here.”

“So, well, to make myself crystal clear: unless I saw Grimme’s *mug* on the table here, I wouldn’t believe it was here, the table, neither. Know what I mean?”

**“Well?”**

“Well. If you have the spare time you can come with - I’m going to try and trace anyone from the old AutoPass who has any links we can identify and see where they’ve got to.”

“Uhuh”

“It could be good for my career, I can see it now in *Time* magazine: ‘*New developments in world-wide criminal activity etcetera*’ by Claudia Hamer!...”

“Shall we try?”

**Claudia Hamer spent the next few days** checking newspaper and press archives: using the Internet she found from official Italian Carabinieri sources some very unlikely ‘Confidential’ data apparently overlooked by a paper-pusher somewhere; found also that AutoPass had been referred to at some of the Mafia

trials at that time taking place in Naples. The American press had apparently overlooked that as well.

**She** found, above all, that real evidence of AutoPass's operations were sketchy and incomplete, secret, the profit and loss accounts so spread throughout the global operations, so segmented, that it was impossible to be clear about them. AutoPass's operating profits were hidden in legal and fiscal obscurity. Claudia Hamer finally found that the identification of JJ Grimme's body had been hampered, indeed prevented, by the fact that the features themselves were badly decomposed and decayed as well as partly eaten, by 'water based creatures' whatever that meant. So Grimme might well not be as dead as he seemed – but how would you ever prove it one way or the other?

Then Francisco Villa searched various interment archives and found that the *Corpus Delicti* had been quickly flown out of Italy and then quickly and carefully

rendered to unidentifiable ashes by a caring incinerator in New Jersey - which thus neatly closed any further investigation along those lines, while Claudia Hamer found from photographs that the funeral cortege was peopled with many people associated with the New Jersey mob. In the pictures they looked suitably downcast.

**Of course** only *he*, Francisco Villa, was in a position know that the PT Jones in point was not dead - that he had merely disappeared – albeit with two-hundred-million-plus dollars: but now JJ Grimme seemed to have turned the same clever trick. Did Grimme know about their close escape, or had he just intuited the technique with that bent mind of his - and claimed it as his own to use - and how would he use it now?

Francisco Villa shivered in the cold wind of realization. The satellite of untruth that he had so carefully launched at the time seemed to have reached its apogee, and had now begun to fall back into the

gravity of reality - because no - that was his mistake: there was only one other person who'd turned the trick too and who could spring the trap that they had primed, albeit in order to save their own skins at the time: his lover, his ex-lover now; Christiane, *the Whore*.

And where the hell was she?

He'd lost touch with her and now there was only the merest thread left through which he might be able to trace her – and if something caught her eye and she misread a situation, or some third party noticed that somehow the logic she lived in failed quite to fit - easy with an ex-con - Christiane might blow both their cover stories unintentionally, a landmine waiting to explode in both their lives.

**The fact was** that Francisco Villa must find her in order to protect them both. And maybe worse - the situation was being brought to a head by the fact that it was likely in Villa's mind that the dead man JJ Grimme was not as dead as was being

taken for granted - and that he'd remember PT Jones and his lover, who anyway had been *his* very own whore onetime, and JJ Grimme was a very possessive man indeed.

Most of all of course JJ Grimme must want his money, his two-hundred million officially non-existent dollars, back in the moldering cardboard boxes in his cellar where they belonged - because, despite social appearances and attitudes to the contrary, JJ Grimme was a conformist in his attitudes about at least two forms of private property: his money – and his whore.

And one other thing was for sure: Francisco Villa knew that if JJ Grimme ever had the slightest inkling that PT Jones and *his* whore were still alive - and lovers too - he, JJ Grimme, would see to it this time that there would be no mistake: he would in the old accounting phrase 'finalize' their lives. It seemed thus that PT Jones aka Francisco Villa had drawn the short straw this time: he would have no choice were JJ Grimme to realize his existence but to kill the invisible ex-Grimme, convincingly and invisibly. He

would have to kill Grimme to stop the story spreading and killing them.

Meanwhile, in the next few days a refreshed picture began to emerge. A short report in a magazine some days later said that one part of the Corporation's empire was being sited on a large, isolated 'spread' they'd bought in the 'Blue Mountains' Region of British Columbia. It was reported to be tagged as their future 'Nerve Centre'.

But how would Francisco Villa operate now? Well one thing was for sure: luck would have to be with him, yet it would be no part of the mix. He might have to do the thing with his bare hands. The thought made him shudder. He would sleep badly that night, and dream of the dark wild woods of British Columbia.

## Chapter 3

### *Johnson's Bluff*

***The morning light was piercing,*** shot through with golden sunlit colour, as glassy crystal clear bright and peaceful as the opening sequence of a horror movie.

Jones left the river and began to make his way towards the distant icy granite of the mountains, the promise at the intersection of the mating, falling

slopes. After all this time he'd memorised the map image of this last part of the trip: actually the map was stuck somewhere in the back pocket of the rucksack.

He'd left the road behind and then turned on foot towards this part of the mountains just before dawn, calculating that this would give him just enough time to cover the fifteen mile stretch before he hit the crook of the mountains where they intersected with the river before it grew dark. He was not alone though; the timbers creaked and protested and the wind sent bright shimmers of cold across the rock-strewn spaces. Then he found himself momentarily out of balance and as he straightened-up, saw a tall, striking, tawny woman walking near him, perhaps ten paces away to his right. Most of all what registered in him were her extraordinary eyes, more pools of endless dark water than mere eyes, promising...

Then, just as suddenly, she was gone amongst the trees: zigzagging in and out of the icy tree-shadows, silent.

Perhaps she had never been there? PT Jones stopped for a moment, unaccountably winded and confused, gathered the fallen bulk of the old Winchester carbine in his left hand and continued towards the distant intersecting slopes.

**He walked alone all day** until the dark bulk of the shadow of the mountains had shifted and enclosed his path in its portfolio of coldness. At length, as the light faded, Jones found himself walking along the frosty stillness of a clear, slim, sandy path that wound its way around the mountains at this elevation.

It was both cold and icy and he was tired - exhausted actually. PT Jones had travelled now for eleven days by car, truck and 'plane and now finally on foot.

What was his aim? He stumbled in the gathering dark and rested his painful right foot. He always dragged that foot.

Starlight, bright as street lights in a city, lit his way now. Far off, a coyote yowled at the madness of the risen Moon.

Then way down there in the valley, he saw the indistinct reflection of lights blotted out at intervals by the swaying of the trees.

You see, PT Jones was looking for something, now more desperately than he had ever thought likely in his life but absurdly what it was, he could not exactly say; the story he was following having spiralled in such a way that he was not sure what he might find. It could mean death; or even some kind of release. Adrenaline had confusingly become a sort of addiction to him, and he chased its wild nights with a kind of sadness and despair; iron in his soul for those lost things which he'd hardly known.

The twinkling cold, bright, lights out there signalled the beginning of what it might turn out to be: somewhere here in the wildwoods he would find what he had been looking for this past age of time, all his life. Peace, perhaps? At last he knew it in his bones.

**His feet crunched stone,** old brown crisp leaves, pine cones and

needles, in the darkness. Following the curve of the path and the bright slip of sand, he approached an apparently empty outlying house of the little settlement and was surprised to see a shaded light appear in a window near the main entryway.

As he passed, a voice.

“Who is that?” A gentle, light contralto. How would he explain himself? It was burgeoning cold.

“I was looking for somewhere to stay the night”

“Who is that?”

“My name is Villa, I’m passing through”

A flashlight splashed sudden sharp yellow daylight in his eyes.

“Ah!” There was only very little surprise in the voice - as if this were an everyday occurrence in such an isolated place.

“Villa, you say?”

“Let me explain –“

“No, you don’t have to, you can stay here, I could use the money!” The

light flickered to the ground to guide him in towards the doorway.

“Thanks.”

There was no reply; people out here in the wild were always straightforward, direct, honest, curt in their speech.

**The following morning Francisco Villa** rolled out of his bunk bed and fastened on his boots, straightened and entered the saloon of the house, and then found himself looking at an unexpected vista from the main picture window in what was obviously the main room of the house.

From his point of view the land fell away steeply until it met the tussle of a rocky stream. The stretch of broken ground between the window and the torn excited water was decorated with green and brown tussocks and showed little evidence of man's intrusion.

“I love the smell of napalm in the morning.”

“What?”

That light voice again, this time at his elbow, mellow as soft coffee.

“You heard!”

“I heard alright!”

“In America, that would count as a literary quote!”

His first reaction was stilled by the contralto timbre of the voice. He turned to find that this was the woman from last night in the darkness.

“You’re a writer?”

“Your pose reminded me of that saying: *what a glorious script moment!*”

“Ah, you must be, then.”

“Hardly – I aspire but never finish the first chapter! – would you like a little breakfast?”

**Now he leant back to find her again at his elbow**, albeit this time at some distance and at the other end of a plain pine table. She certainly seemed to have developed into someone suddenly desirable, overnight. She wore jeans and rugged mountain boots, and a low-cut top in dense cotton that hid nothing from him

that he was supposed to see. Breakfast, and her strong unsupported breasts, had been all he'd needed to replenish his exhaustion.

“Are you pressing on?”

“Where to?”

“You tell me.”

“Let me say that I don't want to go anywhere now.”

“Be real!”

“Well, after such a pleasant breakfast and such a deep sleep - I haven't even got round to looking at my watch – today; I don't much feel like going anywhere much.”

“But you were going somewhere, weren't you?”

“In theory: but suddenly all my aggressive hormones suffered terminal failure when I walked down between those beautiful hills and into your house.”

“Weren't you at least *en-route* somewhere?”

“In theory” the lies just had to begin... “I just like country like this – I'm not used to it.”

“We, that is we in the sense of the people in this settlement, knew you was coming some way out -”

“How was that?”

‘The ancient wonders of short-wave radio and suchlike.’ She laughed disjointedly. At this elevation and distance mobile phones became simply toys, and even regular telephones themselves became unreliable.

“You have a set here?”

“Sure” her voice betrayed a flat accented note, almost a French accent, “...nobody’s goin’ anywhere without a radio ‘round here.” She laughed. “We’re real out of touch here.”

“How...?”

“We was told that you was walking round the bluff... only a maniac or a stranger would follow those paths in the dark and risk their skin to get here... what remains, to my mind, is why...?”

**Why? – he could not say: because** whatever backwoods JJ Grimme had decided to go to ground in, if indeed this

was the one; he had probably used the same system that Francisco Villa had toyed with to develop himself a new identity.

“Do you think I’m a maniac?”

“That remains to be seen – have you noticed I hung your gun away somewhere!”

“With my bag and my coat and my hat”

“Oh sure, all kinds a things!”

“You know, it was quite a stroke of luck to walk in to you like that.”

“Sure was: could be God hisself somewhere in all this”

“I hope it is”

“So do I!” suddenly she looked almost grave, and then she smiled. For his part, Francisco Villa was thinking.

**If JJ Grimme was here in the forest somewhere,** it would mean that many of his former associates in AutoPass would be around as well: that eventually the group would grow hungry

for more money: given any question-marks the compass would swing round and eventually pinpoint, via some agency (as he had done Grimme), Francisco Villa and ultimately whoever Christiane was calling herself now. Whatever: maybe it was better to cut the cord now in order to attenuate the pain, curtail the agony.

He shuddered in realization: he might have been lucky in the past, but he would have to have luck in spades to get out of this one, whole, untainted and undiscovered.

**It took some time for him to orientate himself**, but the powerful presence of the forest had taken the aggressive urgency from him, drained it like sap from a leaf; and he had gained an unexpected new secret organic energy from the process.

And now the secret. He was sure in his bones that he was close to the living dead man now - close to JJ Grimme, the drowned CEO of the old

AutoPass Corporation of years ago, found with his pockets full of symbolically heavy coins; he had the scent of it. Yes, Francisco Villa was close to probably the only person on earth who could identify who this particular PT Jones, was - and then kill the impostor because that would be necessary for *his* security.

Nobody must ever get to know the why, the who, or the how. The information must remain hermetic, sealed. Only *he*, PT Jones, possessed such knowledge – absurdly, PT Jones the target, who would be thus soon dead himself if he didn't kill – or do something fast about the drowned man with pockets full of money - JJ Grimme.

**Jones had stumbled upon the complete refurbished identity of Grimme** quite by chance. It was as he sorted through the many cuttings that Claudia Hamer had copied and spread upon the floor of the office.

One theme recurred in the mass of pulp information generated promiscuously by the newspapers, and that was that Grimme apparently liked hunting and fishing: several times he found mentioned an area of British Columbia north of Victoria in the Blue Mountains region. That lit-up a few lights in his head: the magazine article could just be right!

Then, again by some chance he'd fished-up a report in '*The Blue Mountains Gazette*' that a rich Easterner, a Mr J. James Deacon, had bought a huge spread up from Abercrombie, just a few miles. Abercrombie was around thirty miles north of the local County Town of Blue Lakes.

This information then tied-in with a report that Mr Deacon had applied for a special satellite transmission transponder to be set up on the peak of one of his recent acquisitions, a mountain called Johnson's Bluff.

*'The transponder'* commented Mr Deacon *'would be a major help to planes in the area that could take their bearings*

*from it.* He of course had his own landing ground, together with the usual lake and helipad: and the beacon itself would make an excellent satellite up-and-down web facility, free to all in the vicinity to use as well, for Internet traffic (there would be bandwidth to spare, in the jargon of the technology). So, as a sweetener, J.James Deacon had offered the residents in the vicinity the carrot of that unused capacity – free.

Francisco Villa continued on his reconnaissance, stolidly walking through the woods, lost in his thoughts: there was plenty of time to ponder, refine, in such a timeless place - but one thing he didn't have enough of was time. However (as far as he could discern) only the public library in Pine Bluff had had the money to take-up Deacon's offer and run the lines all that way to connect it's own link into the circuit. Nice scheme, that.

When you thought about it, whoever J.James Deacon might be, he had initials uncannily the same as Grimme's, a fact that in itself didn't mean

a great deal, except that that could just mean that Grimme's ego was rearing itself among the gathered multitude. To Villa that fact linked to his obvious riches, spoke of opulence and corruption. After all, J.James Deacon seemed to have money to burn. Think about it; Deacon had done just enough to make a lateral statement for his own ego's sake without exactly being too obvious. It would of course be naïve and possibly fatal to imagine that this unknown person, whoever he turned out to be in the end, was at all likely to be a kind, clubbable, comforting sort of guy. Or, for that matter, even, JJ Grimme himself.

**And**, were you awkward enough, it was possible to look at the founding of the new estate in another way entirely. The new airstrip would offer virtually unquestioned and unfettered access to the property at all times; such that any people visiting or transiting would be unlikely ever to come into contact with

any of the locals. Logically, given the remoteness from any major centre and the distances involved, no one, including the locals, could ever know exactly what J.James Deacon was up to.

As if to underline this, later Francisco Villa saw a De Havilland Twin Otter amphibian aircraft skim low over the peaks many miles away in the middle distance after takeoff, and then clumsily turn East towards the distant mainland, still losing water from its hull as it struggled for height over the mountains. It wallowed slightly in the air as if it were heavily loaded.

Johnson's Bluff would make a logical aiming point for his first reconnaissance in the next couple of days. By his reckoning the mountain itself was about eight miles away, though the main property could be a good bit closer. He'd find out pretty soon anyway: it would be as well to stay silent about his intentions: he confirmed to DiDi Martin, now his host, that he was a writer who would be visiting only as long as the

weather held, which seemed to satisfy her interest for the time being. There was another factor though - as at her age she lived alone, there was probably more than casual interest working away there in the back of her mind, and though Francisco Villa was not looking for involvement, DiDi Martin was an uncommonly intelligent, good looking, and fit sort of woman. It was the mountain air here and the elevation, as well as the relaxed conditions - and the healthy diet. So he told himself.

So you see, in a way it was inevitable that in the next few hours they would become lovers, at her inception. He was snuggling down into sleep, savouring the delicious warmth of the feather down cocooning his tired bones, relaxing his mind in the silence of the forest night, beginning to see the stars cancel out in the darkest navy blue of the firmament through the clear glass of the window panes.

Just as sleep began to overtake him, he became aware that someone was

taking-up space in the confines of the room, compressing the air minutely. The door creaked. It was one of those rare moments when when you have become so aware of the fineness of your senses, sharpened by fine clean air and psychologically unpolluted space, that even a movement twenty yards away becomes an intrusion into your measured beat.

Suddenly he was awake and aware. Before he saw her, he sensed her body with that fine hormonal smell like lemon and powder, which women have. Then she was next to the bed and he heard the shimmer of texture against skin as the shirt fell from her shoulders to the floor.

The wind soughed through the pines outside the window at the very same moment, soft as silk, as smooth as a fine breeze in summer. Then he felt rather than saw her displacement in the blue dark, standing next to the bed and frightened to be rejected. He raised one arm and took her hips in the sweep of it.

She half fell upon him, with a little contralto laugh of joyous acceptance. Thus they became lovers that night, as you can imagine; and he was exhausted in the morning. She was first up, '*With the Lark*' as she said, singing in the kitchen in that strange hybrid accent of hers, waking him up, and now she had that subtle Mona Lisa smile on her lips: now she had found him and she would make him hers.

Francisco Villa forgot his personal fear, his mission, for the next few days. Time anyway was not a factor; what he would have to do soon was to make a reconnaissance and work out what his next move would be. DiDi Martin was a wonderful lover, was becoming a good friend, he thought: but she was an unforeseen impediment to what should be a fast, surgical mission.

**Three days later Francisco Villa** sat on a rock looking down a long steep broken slope at a large house set back in the trees at the edge of the valley

in front of him. The dense woods he had walked through had taken many hours of concerted effort and the ground was uneven and unfriendly. He had lied to DiDi Martin in telling her that he was looking for solitude for a few days in a patch of land some way away from J. James Deacon's Johnson's Bluff spread, *'mind you, there was no other way'* as he saw it, *'if she knew – well, she might well gossip about it'*. As it was anyway, he was sure that she would tell her neighbours about him pretty soon, if she had not done so already.

The house he watched in the valley itself was large, heavily built out of local materials, sprawling, and he figured, contained anything up to fifty or more large separate rooms. There had been no perceptible movement around the house for some time. He'd sat there on the crag watching for a few freezing hours, whilst the helicopter had upped and gone carrying apparently only the pilot and loaded with boxes of files.

Then, five minutes later he saw a somehow familiar figure with the stolid yet rhythmic gait that he remembered well (was it his imagination?) leave by a side door, carrying a hunting rifle with a stubby red-dot laser sight sitting like a extraneous box on the top of the stock. The figure made almost directly for the patch of woodland at the foot of the valley beneath where he sat high-up behind a rock.

He shook-out the binoculars from the pack once more and examined the shape more closely as it traversed his field of sight from right to left. Slowly the shape became more distinct as it rose through the sorrel and the dense screen of brush and pines.

Then. With a sudden mix of curious expectancy and shock Francisco Villa now clearly recognised the unchanged face of a dead man - the JJ Grimme whom he remembered from his days at AutoPass, the same JJ Grimme who had arranged the taking-out of his own whore and PT Jones, simultaneously

and very surgically - the same JJ Grimme who had taken for granted that the few pieces of aircraft and pathetic pieces of human property which were eventually found in the New Mexico desert near Nogales had sealed the fates of the two people who had lost their usefulness to him in his greed for power. This was the man who had arranged the insurance fakery that had released at least thirty million dollars in payouts after the 'tragic' arranged accidental deaths of his '*close friend and confidante*' PT Jones and his PA the Company whore, Christiane Moore. The same JJ Grimme who had been found drowned, floating off Naples in the Tyrrhenian Sea with his pockets full of coins - and then speedily rendered to unidentifiable ashes. How bizarre.

**The glory of the wild, vertiginous view** was broken for several minutes while PT Jones began to struggle up the side of the now nearly sheer rock of the bluff, heading apparently unconsciously, for the steepest part.

Francisco Villa had no particular plan now, but was troubled by the glimmer of just a very unpleasant instinct, more a feeling in his gut, that somehow JJ Grimme had either seen, sensed, or somewhere or other heard that he was up here on the bluff.

Francisco Villa a.k.a. PT Jones had abandoned all his earlier carefully thought-out speculation, aiming simply to maintain his distance and invisibility from Grimme until such a moment as he might require for whatever he had decided to do. His first idea was to *kill*, at which he blenched. But didn't it have to be done? In the meantime, whatever that would turn out to be, all he knew for sure at that freezing morning moment was that the rules of this game were in a process of drastic change.

Jones kept moving ever upward, reversing, inching, scrabbling with worn heels increasingly desperately on the steep rockface scarred by fissures, in-grown hard-living elder trees and the rugged handholds garnered by

groundcover bushes and shrubs. At last he halted to catch his breath, breathing hard, sweat running into his eyes despite the cutting-edge of freezing air. He had to wait.

After a few moments he saw again the head of the undead, drowned, decayed dead man, Grimme inexorably bobbing up like an explosive bubble, in his direction through the surrounding broken sea of stony fissures and groundcover, the grey birch tones of his sallow skin and the thick black tube of the rifle barrel over his shoulder breaking the natural line of the slope with unexpected shapes and unnaturally flat colours.

PT Jones was sweating now, his shirt soaked with sweat accenting its freezing cuffs as they contacted the icy wind outside his jacket and rapidly took on a coat of ice.

He had been retreating slowly backwards up the slope now for ten or fifteen minutes, his back ached, and the house was becoming distant. Now as the height increased the mountainside

became harsher, more angular and as they both rose higher, hunter and hunted - more rocky and treacherous. Halting for a moment, he saw that Grimme was traversing the face of the hill at a steeper incline, an angle more likely to bring them to some sort of collision in a way that Grimme seemed unaware of. But then it suddenly became clear that Grimme knew he was there, for why would he traverse the hill this way?

At any time should Grimme look up above him, he might well see PT Jones' face. But if he were indeed intent on hunting he would at some point begin to pursue his own ideas, change his line, move away at some sort of angle and if he did that PT Jones would have to think of something - would have to reason after all why he was there - and what he should do. How to *kill* him? The cold steel of the Winchester weighed heavy and unaccountably sticky in his hand.

The whole scenario now hinged on Grimme's intentions. If Grimme had realized that he had been watching the

house in the valley the situation could deteriorate, become rapidly altogether more serious - but of that PT Jones was not at all clear. He was at the same time in a state of indecision as to exactly how he should play his hand if and when he confronted Grimme. That would also be a moment of great peril. Should he just shoot him in the back? Wouldn't that be an act of immense cowardice? No, surely, kill just simply meant *kill*, no excuses. *One shot. Dead. Food for the wolves and coyotes and bears...*

If Grimme recognised him – and he himself had recognised Grimme immediately, because a few years is hardly long enough to forget such a thing as the appearance of a man – Grimme might well use the powerful Ruger .350 to blow him away.

There would be no escape: distance to a hollow-point bullet is merely academic, physics and dynamics; and he, PT Jones, was literally a mile *within* the diameter of lethal range of that rifle.

The thought struck him as Grimme broke cover suddenly and unexpectedly, directly below him not more than three hundred metres away now, looking down carefully as he picked his way through the shale and sharp broken shards of ancient volcanic granite. At that moment it struck Francisco Villa as odd that JJ Grimme seemed not to be wearing clothes fitted to hunting in these conditions, his jacket was light, though he wore boots and he was not carrying a pack on his back.

Then why? Suddenly it became clear.

**Grimme had stopped,** PT Jones thought, perhaps to gather breath. Then casually, quickly, as if simply ascertaining his position, he ran his eyes through the bushes and tree cover immediately above him.

But, *no!* With a whoosh of effort and compressed freezing breath, Francisco Villa realized what all this had

constituted - Grimme the schemer *knew he was there - Grimme was tracking him!*

Then Grimme just as suddenly took the rifle in both hands and jerked it awkwardly at first then increasingly smoothly through an imaginary quadrant as if reading off the degrees of elevation, seeking, up towards PT Jones: as if searching with a torch through a dark space. Yes, exactly like that. Now he knew - Grimme had seen him all right!

A red spot lazily licked through the green succulent leaves of a tree close to where he stood transfixed by cold, followed immediately by a shell, carving its way through the trunk of the Elder, shattering into pieces, showering him with pieces of crisp bark as sharp, silver fragments of hot metal like frozen water siphoned out into the air like a cloud of lethal steam and white sound peaked in high soprano as a blurred gout of grey-white cotton-wool smoke leapt from the muzzle of the gun.

*'Clack!'* as the bolt went back, forward then down. Next, a small shower

of rock fragments exploded from behind his head as a second, flatter, deeper report echoed up the gorge and the rock face and batted savagely, tunelessly, between the granite and marble buttresses. He barely had time to react as another pile-driver socketed into the rock near his face and released a brand new metallic shower of angry, sharp silver sparks.

He panicked for a moment and found himself suddenly scrabbling for purchase: slid down a few expensive feet. He could see clearly now with a certain kind of numbing shock that Grimme was shouting something, his mouth moving and grimacing, screaming at the top of his voice, the cracked octave battered by a sudden gust of refrigerated wind:

*“Jones, yer motherfucker... I should’a killed yer myself!”*

The next shell was a little wide. It *whanged* off into a million cubic yards of gusting, troubled air. Thank God! Grimme’s aim was temporarily becoming worse - but it would get better as he

steadied himself from his paranoid fury long enough to blow PT Jones into nirvana.

**Now, Jones was rimed with sweat, fear, pain and dirt.** He'd broken a few fingernails on the rock and then almost lost the Winchester. There was a grimy smear of blood on its stock and lever which made it sticky to the touch, now it was covered with the prints of his hands, the marks of his battered fingers.

Not quite lost, though. As it began to slide away from him over the perilous, damp convex of granite, he grabbed at it and caught his fingers in the long lever guard. That made it worse. Running with sweat and gut-wrenched panic, he found new paranoid energy and skill as he skittered like a steaming Pine-Marten up the steepening face for a few seconds, a few more precious yards, more distance between himself and his assassin.

Quickly he found himself almost cresting the bluff, at which point he

realized that he would present a perfect cut-out target against the deep high blues of the skyline. Jesus! JJ Grimme would not be dumb enough to miss that chance. The rocks were becoming sharper and steeper and more expensive, more deadly, by the yard.

The vista as his head broke the crest was wonderful. Two hundred and plus degrees of vista, wonderful commanding nature below and around him. PT Jones realized that if he had to die, this would be a good place to do it. Maybe it would come now. He was tired, exhausted, cold and hungry, after walking for long hours through thick forest and sleeping fitfully: he could feel the energy beginning to ebb away from his body like ebbing alcohol - and in contrast, JJ Grimme was fresh, rested, fed, psychopathic - and nasty.

He stopped to gather his thoughts for a precious few seconds: he could hear Grimme now crashing through the forest on the downslope, homing-in and hungry for the kill, coming for him. He pushed a

couple of heavy freezing leaden long .38 cartridges through the hinged magazine plate of the Winchester into the rifle, with shivering, drunken, fiddling fingers. His weapon would only be accurate at a distance less than about two hundred metres, and Grimme's Ruger could kill him at a mile. As if to underline this fact, he heard a sharp crack and another lethal shell smacked away at a rock near his cheek - too close for comfort.

He'd lost sight of Grimme now - Grimme was playing a final game of cat-and-mouse, the better to savour his long awaited bloody victory. And of course: Grimme had a red-spot laser sight on the Ruger, could anyway see him easily, outlined perfectly like a cut-out totem or a rotating target at the funfair against the tight sightline of sky. Jones had become a sport shooter's perfect target, whilst Grimme's only disadvantage was the piercing dark sharp crystal brilliance of the air against the icy ancient hard treacherous marble of the bluff. At that moment, deafened and blinded by the

thick, dynamic, flexing plasma of the rotating void surrounding him, PT Jones could only hear – but could not see - JJ Grimme: on this bluff he was trapped in the dense sun-and-shade darkness of the blinding early sky with the light at an angle into his eyes.

**More fractured moments** passed in this silent, sliding, closing cacophonous dance of fear. His fear. Kill? That could be he who would wear the shroud. The sweat was turning to ice on his face, was freezing on his eyebrows and threatening his ability to focus his eyes. A huge Eagle coursed through the buffeting immense dark indigo of the void overhead, as the wind ruffled the tops of the trees deep down the gorge restlessly, before suddenly changing direction to batter instead at the rocks on the peak, reminding him of the uneasy frisson of excitement of a crowd in an arena, thrilling, on the tips of its toes for this coup-de-gras, the final deadly caress.

**It had begun to turn icy cold** as the wind shifted, the rocks becoming rimed with a microscopically thin, invisible sheet of treacherous, soft, jelly-like ice.

For a moment he imagined that this was all some sort of nightmare and that he would soon awake, it would quickly all be over. Then next he heard a renewed thrashing in the undergrowth below - Grimme had not halted in *his* personal search for PT Jones' nirvana.

PT Jones levered a leaden round into the breach of the Winchester and heard the uncanny, eerie, answering sharp '*clack*' invisibly far down the scree face, as Grimme pushed a cartridge into the breach of the Ruger, brought the bolt of the rifle forward and slapped it down hard on the rosewood stock.

More silence, more delay. *Kill? Who?*

**Then there,** suddenly Grimme was below him and breaking cover a couple of hundred metres away, just within reach of the Winchester. Jones saw the spidery red finger of the infra-red

sight hang for a moment in the air and then waver all-knowing through the flurried dense gaseous contact-mist, tracing its way inch-by-inch towards him through rising smoky tendrils of freezing theatrical fog.

Next, the seeking finger prodded the rock a few inches away to his left and he skidded on the broken shale at his feet as another sharp spray of sparks cascaded into the air and skittered spent, playful, down the rocks.

He hadn't heard that one. It'd been said before by someone that you never heard the one that got you. That would mean... But JJ Grimme's latest earner, latest smart scheme, had managed to pencil-in PT Jones' delirious predicament beautifully. You had to remember that JJ Grimme was after all the King of this mountain, Absolute Ruler of this spread - and of course Dictator of Johnson's Bluff and all its ghosts, *and he knew it.*

**For, a few moments later,** in frozen silence, PT Jones watched JJ

Grimme advance almost proud, pompous, arrogant, Napoleonic, into the centre of the clearing below PT Jones' prison in the sky, proffering himself as a target, profanely gesturing and thumping at his own chest like a latter-day Mussolini, amid an accompanying stream of obscenities.

To complete the performance, or perhaps this overture - as Jones was fated to be the main event - Grimme even went so far in his paranoia, his largesse, to hoist himself up more imposingly into this new wild proscenium, an almost level boulder of enormous size the better to please his audience, this main stage towering over *his, JJ Grimme's* vista now far, far below - to wave, with the Ruger in one hand, an Emperor's expansive last goodbye to PT Jones before he finished the ceremony and killed him.

Grimme was screaming at the top of his voice again against the buffeting of the wind, using his free hand like a dramatic paddle. PT Jones caught only some of his soliloquy:

*“...I’ve got you this time - you motherfucking fake, I knew there was something weird about you Jones - you bullshitted your way into my organization: fucked my whore - I worked it out this week - and it clicked - but this time it’s going to be forever... nobody will know I let a ligger into my backyard to steal my fuckin’ money and my pussy - that’s why I’m gonna wipe you out - and then I’ll trap that whore and make her into a sideshow for my soldiers - she’ll wish she’d never lived - think about that while you die...!”*

He was taunting PT Jones, like the showman he fancied himself to be; *“...You fucking fake, you rifraff, I’m gonna blast your fuckin’ brains to kingdom come...!”*

**JJ Grimme**, the Absolute Ruler of the Rock, the Spread, *and* Johnson’s Bluff, *and* all the lands surrounding it to the horizon, was doing a combined victory and revenge dance on his stage, just like Francisco Villa remembered that a Red Indian chief would in the Saturday-

morning movies, the wide vista of twenty miles of woods behind him and the valley with the river in the middle distance, at the foot of this immense bluff.

Were he not fated thus to die, PT Jones would have considered this a wonderful sight, felt for his camera, found his cell-phone: but, despite the fact that there really should have been singing and music-over the marvellous Technicolor scenario, instead there was only a cold dead silence in the mind of PT Jones as he saw JJ Grimme take aim carelessly, in slow motion, almost playfully from the hip with his rosewood stocked rifle as if he were nonchalantly playing a new design of guitar - and another shell whanged away from the rockface of the bluff close to PT Jones; much too close for comfort.

JJ Grimme was playing theatrical to his imaginary audience, taking his time, enjoying his assumed pride in Kingship - and PT Jones was now firmly trapped between the run of scree and the dark uneven granite of the rock face of the bluff, with nowhere else to go this time but

*nowhere*; for whichever way he moved JJ Grimme would have an easy lazy, red-finger bead on him. He was going to die. 'So *this is how it feels...*'

In the clearing, now seventy five metres below Jones, Grimme took his time to help himself to another mouthful of liquor from a gold hip-flask he'd produced from somewhere - then atomized bourbon all over the mountain as he began to simultaneously laugh, dance and raggedly chortle his reading of the British Columbian version of the *Mortician's Revenge* - especially for PT Jones and of course to warm-up the audience for the main event.

**For his part**, the trapped and humiliated PT Jones was being alternately buffeted, frozen by the hostile wind and frozen again by the cold gusting eddies. Francisco Villa a.k.a PT Jones, was getting ready to die, with a species of fascinated, terrified, weird fatalism unexpected even by he, as he watched his last cabaret, as he said his final prayers; like a rabbit in the piercing,

manufactured, ruby-red laser-light of a bad dream, while the insane JJ Grimme continued his crooked ballet on the rock below, cold bloodedly savouring his new victory-to-be, relishing his next victim.

**For JJ Grimme this must constitute** the mob version of shooting fish in a barrel – thought PT Jones – for nobody would ever miss him out here on the edge of the ends of days, *mainly because he didn't actually exist!* People disappeared every day in wildernesses like this and were never found, but they would be mourned, perhaps searched for, because they were people who had actually existed. They'd been written into the script. That was nature after all, you had to watch your own back, no one else could do it for you - just as JJ Grimme couldn't avoid hitting PT Jones with the Ruger, unless he suddenly went blind. How could he, - it would be illogical, wouldn't it? No-one would suspect what had happened to Francisco Villa – how could they? After all he'd told DiDi Martin that he was going

east, not north; by rights he should be at least a good day's walk from here. No, they'd never find him. And now, where was the music for the final act? But - a moment: JJ Grimme was lifting a commanding hand, as if to start the overture, open the oratorio for the final reprise, in a jumble of soft lost phrases and hard alcohol:

## **..and then he was *gone*...**

**PT Jones** saw nothing but a blur; heard only a wind-tattered scream and then the Morse Code of a series of prolonged, rotating, heavy impacts over the shoulder of the rock, saw the treetops down below shudder and shake as something bulky twirled its way like a sycamore seed into space, before falling a thousand or more feet into the gorge in front of him; a spread-eagled, overloaded butterfly.

**PT Jones** choked on oxygen and suddenly regained uncontrollable life, leant against a tree suddenly aged and pouring with sweat despite the cold wind, his clothes soaked through with terror preserved by ice. But he was *alive*.

He was *alive*? It took a long time for him to recover, leaning dizzily against the tree like a drunk, long enough for the sweat to begin to freeze. Then he began to shake and shiver uncontrollably: next, he stripped off his clothes, dried his body down and then found some dry clothes and a sweater from the rucksack. After a while he began to feel better.

Later still, after making something hot to drink he made his perilous way down to the rock. He found the rosewood-stocked Ruger together with the gold hip-flask, rimed and slimy, where he had heard them fall into the Vee-shaped base of the rainwater run-off at the foot of the boulder, glazed with treacherous lichen and engraved with the already fading boot-prints and skid-marks of the

Emperor's feet. *The King is dead, long Live the King!*

**He didn't bother to look into the** void of the valley behind the huge rock, he'd suffered from vertigo enough times on these savage, pendulous slopes – besides, the tree-cover in the gorge below was both wide and deep and inviting him to die, this time for ever.

He hefted the rifle; the Ruger contained an almost full clip of .350 hollow-nosed ammunition, obviously freshly loaded. There was no doubt in his mind that he would have given his life to one of those rounds if fate had not given him a hand and the Emperor not overplayed his.

**Later that day** he followed the ridge for several hours; down at last into the comforting embrace of a valley. Using the GPS he plotted his course over the step of the next set of hills and out into the isolated calm of the next valley -

which led the very next day, to exhaustion - and the inestimable pleasure of DiDi Martin's astonished arms.

**He awoke to find DiDi snoring** softly beside him, in that mellifluous way she had. Then he realized how sore his body was. Several days of hacking up and down steep wooded slopes, and a night-and-a-half of frozen sleep, had not helped his protesting limbs.

He went into the kitchen to make a hot coffee and was seized all of a sudden by a sneezing fit. He needed time to himself and a series of hot showers in order to clear his mind, reach back to normality; that, and he would need to develop a good cover story to explain his bumps, cuts and scratches. That would come later: much to his relief he became aware that the trauma had already started to recede: most of the pain was in his mind, now. He would have to forget that what happened had ever happened. That would be the best way for it, the only way.

At the same time however, he checked the usual outlets: no reports at all of J.James Deacon or his activities. The Johnson's Bluff spread was huge, isolated and very easily cut-off from the real world, given its geographic and physical position, those deep woods, the non-existence of roads, the lack of reliable information unfiltered by partial observers. Information not centrally laundered for the benefit of the AutoPass Corporation was easily controlled: it would never get out. They might even fabricate something about Grimme's death to assuage the unwary and smooth the path of AutoPass to its next transition.

This gave PT Jones an opportunity; time to relax - time being the buffer enabling him to maintain his cover story. And the good news? No reason to be alarmed; no cause for concern in anything he'd heard since from DiDi, from any media, no news of anything but bland normality; fact was that Johnson's Bluff constituted a notable space in BC, but compared to the void into which the

Emperor of the North, JJ Grimme, had fallen, it was insignificant and easily overlooked.

**Later DiDi Martin** informed him in answer to his curious questions, that she was a botanist who studied (obscure) lichen and flora. He had already noted that her work was slow and time consuming - in the sense that nothing can interrupt the natural scheme of things – it was clear that her progress was mitigated by nature, which knowledge gave him security, for like DiDi nature began inexorably and subtly to rule him.

**He spent the next ten days** working with her and in her garden. They both knew, indeed had always been aware, that at some moment he would have to decide whether to leave her or to maintain contact: at all events he would have to return to his office by the sea a long way away to the South.

His adventures apart, he had still not resolved the questions that La Colorada had put to him: understanding the precise role of Mr C, for example, would take some handling - after all the financial scale of the thing had changed.

There was still the question of the Derivatives trading in which Mr C had become embroiled to be looked into. It seemed a fact now and Francisco Villa no longer had the creeping feeling that he had had, that Mr C was at the centre of any scam – no, he was what you might call a victim (of his own greed). The only question thus remaining was - was Mr C a major player, a fool - or just a patsy? Privately Francisco Villa's sensitive nose had informed him that Mr C was a vain patsy, albeit a fool embroiled in a situation that he had neither the wit, the intelligence, nor the enlightened self-interest to cope with before it overcame him. The problem thus arose, how was Francisco Villa to nail the problem down one way or the other and satisfy La

Colorada's anxieties without exciting  
suspicion?

*Book* **2**  
**Players**

Rifraff

## Chapter 4

*Christiane Moore*

**Christiane Moore picks up the fold** of paper and scans it with rich green eyes, defensive, duplicitous, feral, in the close, richly dense, mahogany-stripped wilderness of the casino saloon hardly understanding the message scrawled across it.

She has begun to accept that her life such as it is, an unbearable construct of truth and fantasy, cannot exist any

longer in the vacuum which she has unwittingly created around her.

She understands that fact well, and the anaesthetizing drift of alcohol which comes between her and reality each day underlines the fact that her present borrowed life is a tool wilfully created by her which ultimately has become a negative, bitter, way of reaching back to her own lost soul.

And in the meantime? - In the meantime, for her own survival she must maintain her balance and the cocoon of pretence that she lives in.

Christiane is suddenly aware of eyes that are watching her. She feels that the clear humourless, mechanical crystal of those lenses focuses on her; those appraising eyes concealed somewhere in those artfully contrived areas between the tables, the bar, shadows, between the twin lines of people at the tables. Unblinking eyes with a harsh, cold, sharp seductive blade of gold cast into them by the reflection of gold-glazed lamps.

At length her eyes meet across the intervening space with those of someone who might share her thoughts. Christiane feels now that the time is right for her next game.

She stifles a yawn and he nods slowly, deliberately across at her, keeping her eyes in the centre of his focus as if they are agreeing upon something; in a way they are.

Those eyes hold hers wrapt, for a light-speed moment. For a further few moments now she is sensuously unconscious of herself in the shadows as she leans across the rich gilding of the cornice, the thick rib of the table punching a line of pressure into her pubis as she casts an oblong of plastic onto a chosen spot.

Suddenly she finds the stranger at her elbow, leaning across to light the cigarette she is fumbling from its wrought golden case.

The stranger stands beside her for a second, unwilling to speak. This is after all logical, made especially so by the

isolated, hermetic logic of this time and place. They are side by side for a moment, matching profiles, silent, unheeding as the ball skitters then clatters to a halt.

She uses the case like a fan, with it's engraving as a gesture - and a foil to state the obvious. Which assumed fact is not at all obvious: her initials are not the initials which she has had placed upon it, for in all this intervening time Christiane Moore has become someone else.

**And then a voice tilts the balance**, all suddenly very simple, cut through with the dull burr of drink:

"I looked at you and then I wondered." For a moment she wonders herself, having curtailed the singularity of her dream for a moment - she says:

"Wondered?" He replies in the absurd case:

"What you look like without those clothes"

She lays her head back, almost touching him as he stands close behind

her like her shadow, breaking his cocoon of space, and laughs: though little does he suspect the irony with which she is laughing.

**The alcohol these past months,** her pain, the instability of her life itself, has until this very moment among moments, only served to blur her reflexes. Christiane is living in a floating world, and this is just another form of play through which to play, to pass time. In that distant time before she became a past mistress of her own survival, one could, if one knew it, detect something desperate in the restless movement of the pulse in her neck at any stressed moment.

This evening the pulse was there again. In a place where there was all to lose, she had found something more to play for, win for, if only for a time.

She could feel it, right there. And at the very same moment her co-respondent could only misread her mood, which he did:

*"Better than you imagine!"*

"I like you." The oxygen of the imagination, the power of arrogance, together with its accompanying, glossy ozone-delicate skin of irresponsibility.

She places the plaques now proffered her into the inadequate bag that she carries on a strap from her shoulder.

Christiane sees all this, and has the immediate impulse to flee, but stills it. It's hard to grasp are you not her, but she has the requirement in her guts to drain this invisible agony that exists in her belly at its root: challenge it; destroy it together with her fears before she can move on. She is stifling her secret affliction once more.

"You should gamble for me ."

"My cigarette is out."

"There's nothing to it."

"No, it's easy!"

**Such things can be simple.** Much as the slick steel against the glove, perhaps? Only if one has the nerve to do so.

Initially Christiane had had to locate the fear she felt. She had spent much of her grown life restlessly moving among the scum, the trash, running wild, afraid and unsure, frightened. You could say that that the chemistry, the summary, of these emotions had generated a dangerous new determining factor, fear.

There was much lost time to deal with, lost hopes and lost dreams in a women's time scheme, her life. There had come a moment when she knew she must confront that disease in her, that inherited fear of all these gypsy things, that loneliness. And perhaps she'd thought that once she was sure that she had located the fear in her heart and bones, she would be free at last to destroy it, lose it, walk away and forget. That would be the scent of her new freedom, she thought, for she needed to be light, light; sufficient to be able once more to breathe, become like a moth in a candle's light; without having to dance in the darkness of her loneliness, finding

once again the eventual headlight of release, of escape.

Attracted by the dangerous, dislocated chemistry of the process, perhaps then she could allow herself to become comfortably lost, fall back into what was simply *her* real life, find the track of her life and take it to where it should be - lead it back: leave all the old cruel sadness behind.

At times like these times - *now* -she needed something powerful and strong to still the dreadful loneliness inside her: tonight she elected the new poison to be his, the signature his scent, his sex.

So finally perhaps that was it, now, here, happening, forgetting, allowing merely the remembrance that all things will in the end, be complete.

**She smiled, suddenly** nervous, smoothed her dress when his eyes strayed, drank another cocktail, another '*Lumumba.*'

A smile from the barman and the *now* cocoon of alcohol meant that her fear

was distanced by the numbness, gone for a while. Christiane was panting with the sudden promise, the promise of dynamic release.

She gaily clattered down the steps through the hall with this new, forgotten stranger; some sort of laughter thick in both their mouths; past the eyes of the doorman, simultaneously envious and somehow isolated... watched by the cool glass eye of the camera that she knew must be concealed somewhere there in the darkness.

*"What a dump!"* she said half meaning it, the better to feel her breasts secretly flex against the fabric of the dress as she breathed, then released lucky air.

**At last, out in the cold,** with her stranger, his fingers gently coaxing the nerve-ends on the inside of her arm to life.

At last, Christiane could try to breathe again, to fly like a bird over the

trees in the park, using the wind as motive power, no, using the wind as her reason for fleeing.

Fly away. This pipeline was part of time. And the time was right to begin to change. She must make ready for change after this endless time of petrification: her mind hadn't been able to move for two years or more.

Change she would, like a Python waking from it's long, long slumber to slough it's skin. She must get out of here. But where would she go, how could she ever find all the ragged pieces of metal and the lost art in that ragged body that she'd left behind in the desert of New Mexico – and put the impossible puzzle together again?

**Next**, she slides into the leather of a long low car. All metallic angles and confusion of flat and sliding surfaces, the summary of its power generated from the inside - (*The smile appears on the skin, outside*).

The alcohol makes her smile, then laugh, breaking the spell like crystal shattering on steel.

Finally, to shut her eyes and rest her head against the restraint. The armrests at just the right height, the warmth, the arrangement of dials, seat, window.

Now to forget. She dreams, for her dreams are the only luxury she has had to herself for what seems an age.

**It was that first day, she remembered, when she had flown solo for the first time.** When she had landed that first time that morning with her instructor beside her it seemed to be just another learning curve amidst the business of her days: just a routine flip.

Then without warning he'd climbed out and said: "Now Lieutenant, it's all yours – fly me a circuit, solo!" She shook with sudden, hidden, breathy excitement. He clicked the cabin door secure locked and walked away. She felt her body turn

to water, felt herself sweat profusely with terror, her stomach all knotted up with an expected, unspoken fear of death. She had thought *'Now I shall die for sure, I'm dead, I'm not ready, I can't be ready to die!'*

**Seen from the pilot's seat** the nose of the aircraft formed a hump, and one had to taxi it from side to side using the rudder, in order to keep the runway ahead until the aeroplane was lined up.

She had done this many times in the past, why was it that today she was so terrified - perhaps because she might now die alone?

A moment of relief: the thought; *'at least it will be fast, the splintering crack as the aluminium sunders - and then - release'*.

But to die alone was what really frightened her, though she would die that way, anyway, in the end: perhaps in an aircraft similar to this one. There was a foretelling in it, did she but know.

Then as the engine noise rose, the throttle eased forward against the wires and the markers rushed bye, the tail came up with a colossal, elegant, swoosh of smooth geometric lift, energy, power. As she eased it down, immediately the end of the runway was before her, the plane dizzily beginning to lighten and leave the bonds of earth behind, to swerve slightly in eddies of cross-wind, zooming towards the urgent acid-blue final runway markers. Terrifyingly fast...

Now the trees; as the nose lifted the engine seemed to deliver endless boundless liquid power, the perimeter pylons and the lights rushing at her... lighter, lighter...

**All blurred...** that was her first time of powerful change, an embrace of fear that released in her an ecstasy close to orgasm...

After all, that was why she was now so interested in getting involved in a business. *'Hardware'* or *'Tractor Parts'*,

something simple, to be simply understood, simply dealt with.

It was late now, too late, sad year's gone bye. No time for regret, though. She'd struck out, left corrupt twisted minds behind, struck out blindly on her own and found what was hers - whilst losing that which was most precious to her - the knowledge of her own heart, her own soul, her own self and all the emotions that a woman must have; just as the Fox has.

That was her only set of regrets, the loss of all her simplicity and innocence. The lost Fox of her.

And just as the airplane soared, so did her understanding of what she had now the freedom to achieve.

**The car slid along:** Christiane Moore all wrapped in this cocoon of speed.

She was waiting. The stranger was in no hurry to start the game: he took his time and timed it all well. She could only appreciate the elegant, coincident gentle suggestiveness of his control of pace.

Something *right* about the placing of his hands, perhaps? Yes, expertise and the work of experience.

“I need the money” Actually: “I am greedy”

*'One has to admire technical excellence,'* that's what her instructor had always said.

*“Well achieved, you sat it down nicely.”*

“What?”

**The nature of any well-played** game is timing: some would call that gamesmanship: but no, it is its pace that is at the powerful centre of it.

You have to *own* pace, to grasp it and control it once it is yours, like a wild horse, like a dancing, deadly aircraft, that power is yours to use so long as you don't let it slip – or you'll lose everything: it may destroy you. He made comments to make her smile, no sign of a fumble in the mind - or the fingers.

**Once upon a time** Christiane had discovered that she'd liked to play, almost anything. She'd discovered again recently that she liked to chance numbers in the casino, for numbers have a strange vibrance and symmetry. For this reason she had the capacity now to play the tables and win. She's good at it, it was all due to the physics of her mind.

Now the stranger was talking;

*"I couldn't understand you, the way you stood there, the way you had such control, the way you kept on winning... you impressed me!"*

She smiled:

"I aim to win... I hardly ever loose".

They looked at one another.

"Still, I was impressed!"

She drew back a little.

"Yes, I noticed that there was a certain quality of coolness, something about you that defied description"

A silence as she felt her heart beat. The car sped through London town, then Kensington, approaching the motorway.

"I always get warm driving on a Motorway!"

"She likes Motorways." He referred to the car as if it were his mistress, needed something from him, and had him in the palm of her hand.

In a way she did, of course.

"Has she a good body?"

"What can I say - she's beautiful, like you - you must know that!"

"Yes."

They were talking in a sort of circus of play. This was a play without words, a sort of circling, a way of waiting for each other's weakness to show.

Now each phrase took on a set of meanings which had many scattered functions, allowing endless variation, amusing them, separating them, bringing them together again and swinging them open, apart once more; like a Tango.

The engine growled as they rounded a curve and he dropped the engine a gear.

"You have an intricate control"

"You mean a touch?"

"A touch with the car, too."

"The controls give me power."

"Yes, I see!"

There was laughter in this small, wind-battered enclosure.

"Just what are you thinking!"

"Shall you, I mean... Do you want?"

"No."

"You need control in a place like that."

"Umm!"

"Mainly the face!"

"Oh, sometimes the body - that tells you a lot about the face."

"Ha, ha!"

"Really?"

"Don't look at me, I need to drive".

She looked anyway using the width of her sight covertly, in such a way that he would not detect it;

"No, I promise I won't."

"You don't have to promise." She lied of course, she'd become good at that in her lost life, she'd had had to learn that.

His trust demonstrated to her his weakness in turn giving her greater space for her duplicity.

There was a space in time; then:

"Yes, I saw you leant impatiently against the table, but that your face was at rest..."

"Oh?"

"And I saw your hands..."

"Against the table?"

"Against the table, the darkness makes a fine frame..."

"I watched yours."

"Ah, you play a lot..."

"A lot!"

"So I thought..."

"And then what did you think?" He dropped a hand and changed gear.

"I wondered if ever I could control those hands..."

"I think, *No!* ..." It came with a species of horror, a secret gasp, an Old Moon's Spirit become Hermes - in her mind.

"I mean, only..."

"Oh, Yes!" He let the words tail away from him into the speed and the ravenous wind.

She looked across at him secretly, duplicitously. She glanced through the window. In all this tracery of lights and acceleration was a hidden moment, a string of logical sequences that was leading her somewhere - with a precise point requiring the perfection of the last sequence to begin perfecting the next; tantalizingly close yet limited by the logic of rationality; enough to imagine. Without such factors there can only be the corruscation of your loss of control, as in the piloting of an aeroplane.

The key to their game here, the secret quality of its nature, was that this fabric, its structure, was part of her intuition, her imagination.

"What?"

"Oh, I'm only musing." Christiane had never seriously considered that her imagination could be anything to reckon with, but now it was. Forged by fear and experience and loss; independent too,

alive. He stopped the car and leaned across to her:

"What shall we do? Would you like a drink?"

There was an offer in his eyes: he smiled slightly as his arm moved. She was suddenly disengaged, disentangled. Unmoving, still, unimpressed. She could see a tiny vein beating a rhythm on his forehead, the nervous turn of an eye, something. She admired his still perfect balance, poise.

**Far out in the forest** the wolves were calling and those howls echoed in her mind. Time was short. Among the pines the wind whistled and eddied, moving the snow. Her eyes showed flat circles of vulpine green in the blankness of the light. One day *they* might get her; she knew it. For what? The money, her own escape and natural duplicity, their separate security reasons – or something else?

She was aware of all that and that now all her time was borrowed. His voice broke in:

"We could drink something or..."

"Oh, that!"

"Or that!"

Expecting a reaction and finding none. Clarissa shading her eyes with her long lashes, making to react slowly, thoughtfully, playfully.

"Yes, I mean that!"

"Oh, that!" They both laughed, he had his hand on the ignition key and he said:

"Well, *let's*, Clarissa!"

They stopped outside a bar.

The street was cold and the pavement wet with something, maybe a street sweeper's water, perhaps tears. She drank a lot, deep, she needed to drink. A sudden rushing in the head, Rooks rising, disturbed, the sky assuming that dense foggy blue that one associates with dawn.

They sat smiling at one another, the pale, discoloured clammy chipped

plastic veneer of the tabletop reflecting the green cold cathodes from above, lit side-on by the rising colour reflectance of the earliest sun-swelling sky. She smiled, flushed with alcohol, sadness, or something she could only feel, not identify. Now he said;

"You know, I want you" in the sweetest way.

"Want?" She answered as if unknowing of such things. She'd almost forgotten the words to use since that time.

Want? How could she explain that she'd lost so much - her desire - her need as well to be anything else but part of the darkness - and now he demanded light – *light!* Wanting was another country; what she needed now was peace, peace and the touch of someone's hands to steady the tremble in hers.

She wanted that, simply.

**But perhaps sex; maybe lust,** could quell the sadness of her blood, her soul, the sickness of her mind's eye.

"Yes..."

"Want?" She felt that she should say: "*I'm just a whore; you can have me for simple money!*" It would be true, and it would make the transaction fast, simple, *enough*. Then, perhaps she might have made space, light, time enough, time to start to forget once more. Time was the key after all.

He was waiting for her reply.

"..Want your hands on me?"

It came to her as a disjointed dislocated trail of lost data on a distant, forgotten computer's random memory, somewhere at the other end of the world.

"Want you, where your legs meet."

Was that in her head? Was it that she wanted sex with him? Or was it that she must simply have human warmth, embrace, required some sort of organic *need* from him - which certain *need* seemed to have deserted her. All at once she was downcast.

"Very much!"

A reflex. He smiled at her with his teeth, suddenly sharp teeth.

She smiled back, and thought, *'It's now to think something, be something, do something, and be someone. Now the dice are down. It's my game, my turn.'* Then: *'What am I thinking?'* It was the alcohol talking, she was restless and it was time for her to move, weary again, before *forever* claimed her.

**Christiane found herself walking in the darkness.** On her watch the time was four-fifty in the morning: there was already a change of light in the dark blue of the sky.

She had excised herself away. Escaped involvement at the very first opportunity: she could not let herself feel the knife of involvement, though lust had been real and enjoyable and was past now. At least she would be sate for a time. All this now was a mute, closed country to her wandering mind. She was numb all over tonight, her legs and back bruised. Making real love would have been impossible, just as impossible as lust had been possible. She'd acted the

sex out, and enjoyed the existential fact of it while it lasted, but love was as impossible now as loving had turned out to be in the past.

At length she hailed a cab and could see what the driver suspected of her in her brief, creased black dress: she cut across his thought as she gave him the address of her apartment. He dropped her outside on the kerb and seemed to watch closely as she fiddled in her purse, then opened the front door with her security key. At length he drove off, mouthing and gesticulating to himself.

She checked the 'phone for messages, but there were none. How could she expect that? No one knew who she was, after all! Next, she stripped off all her clothes and threw them into the washing machine, showered to void the scent of smoke, traffic, sex. She felt distantly nauseous.

She'd entered into the contract for the apartment and paid whatever they asked in cash, it meant nothing to her. Almost three years down the line after

seeing Jones for the last time, time had effectively broken her link with reality, divorced her from human kind. Time had its limits, and so did love and your relationship with whatever the mess was called.

For her own security's sake she had made a point of knowing no one in the block, and no one except the maids of room service knew her - which was the way she liked it to be; at least here she was safe in her luxurious anonymity.

She slept fitfully for four hours.

For some time now she had been troubled by recurrent dreams about *him*, Jones - one where she'd see him near the seashore, playing around with a waitress from a bar (how had that happened?) - Then she'd walk along the broken detritus and driftwood at the top of the beach and then speak to his father (whom he'd said was dead) and his father's friends.

She found this particularly painful not only because it reminded her of her own capacity for invention and lies, but

also her ability to become emotional about logical things – and then to blow it. That was how she had ended-up in prison, that’s how she screwed-up at AutoPass – and that was how she’d allowed the situation to get out of hand with *him*. But still the dream managed to nettle her, worry her about detail, unsubstantiated things, things that were past salvage.

Sometimes she would wake and cry out – *‘No, no, it’s wrong I was not like that, I didn’t mean it like that!’*

Amid the nonsense rubble of the dream she was convinced that the logic was there, their breakup had been a disaster, a dreadful error; that whatever he’d thought at the time had somehow been suggested to him. Okay, he knew about who she had been, which was painful enough, but at least she had put that time behind her, he’d never given a sign that he was concerned by her ‘past’ that Victorian leftover: and they’d seemed to be secure together, they’d struck out into new uncharted time *together* - and

then she had sadly, fallen in love for not the first time, with someone who only hurt her even if it was by a stupid chance, that wicked, sharp, random splinter of misfortune which had torn her apart.

She'd had these lonely empty dreams now for more than a year, and the agony never seemed to cease, the cold was always there, like a random spirit come to haunt her. She would never admit it, but she'd never sleep a whole night without waking to imagine him there, curled up beside her so that she could use his body as her own radiator, or to think that she had heard him knocking on the door to be let in, all cold in the icy dawn, from the airport.

How pointless!

Later that morning she took a sleeping pill rather than cry herself to sleep. Now her loneliness seemed absolute: perhaps it would last for all of her life. Love should never be as painful, deadly and killing as this. But it is - and it was.

**On her way to Bond Street the next day**, Christiane took a late, hung-over breakfast at a restaurant along Oxford Street and then visited an Internet café to check her email.

She had not accessed her account for over a month now and somehow seventy spam emails had arrived offering her everything from Viagra through 'Mechanical Aids' to killings on the stock-market and 'Emotional Counseling.' In itself it was amazing how these self-proclaimed 'experts' had such trouble in spelling correctly the tags to the messages they were sending - even their own names. She was about to delete the list of detritus *en-masse* when she read a strange heading on one: it said: '\$wherethehellareu?'

And it was tagged 'Jones'. There was only one person who would write *that*. She emailed back the blank page and signed it 'Jones'. It would carry her mail reply marker and he would become aware of how he could find her.

What the hell did he want now?

Her heart leapt, suddenly she felt warm in the rising cold east wind.

**It was twenty four** hours later, when he opened his email that he received her message: he immediately mailed back a message which they had agreed years before would be their code in order to clear their communication: *'Do you like the Tango?'*

**She'd forgotten the line; it made her laugh for the first time that day.** Now that the line was cleared, they could begin to talk.

She immediately began to compose excited messages to him in her mind. It was a luxury; this feeling of being cleansed of the past, almost of being innocent again, of that painful, slow, quality - simplicity.

Three years previously they had broken up in a furious quarrel about an insignificant situation. He'd lied to her about his age – so what! She'd been

angry because... because... Then he'd taken pains to forget it, while she had used it to punish herself as if it were somehow crucial, as if any amount of other small inequalities about him were somehow critical secrets he'd kept from her – she used them to blame all her pain on him.

Time was the healer in this, the absorbing blankness of time had sealed all her horrors into one disposable element and she'd made sure that it was forgotten. That cleared the field for her, perhaps for him too: at last now perhaps they'd have a chance to become the sort of people that she'd want them to become, had she been up to now in some sort of position to control the deteriorating helter-skelter of their fates. And now that she was, suddenly mysteriously free she felt new, ready for him and his body and the long time they should be together for in the future. Dreams! Together, their lost world of pointless words.

The built-in distortions of their lives, accentuated by the hermetic, sealed life

that they had shared at AutoPass - which had precipitated their meeting, their affair and whatever else that had followed so painfully far – had effectively prevented personal progress for either of them.

All the pretence, stress, pressure and the darkness of their earlier time together at AutoPass could now be put behind them – because it seemed to her that the two of them would now begin to generate a new future out of the gas of nothing, starting today - whereas yesterday there had been simply nothing at all, no horizon. She would see - the chemistry of time had changed all that, perhaps for her forever.

Rifraff

## Chapter 5

*DiDi Martin*

**DiDi Martin was hard at work writing** (she would say ‘crafting’) one of her ‘New’ stories.

Perhaps this one would go somewhere this time. It seemed right, somehow, she was happy, almost. She began by sketching out the rough essence of her lead character, someone

she had thought to use as her... then the word failed her – ‘*her – protagonist*’... that was it, the word that everyone seemed to use now!

She started with a sweeping ‘*Protagonist’s Portrait*’, which handed her the first scene of a movie. An idea to move on with:

*‘...this guy was an adventurer, you could see it in the way he moved; straight yet powerful, slow and yet somehow purposeful, thickset and muscular yet lithe: and in the way he dressed: in all weathers with a hat; in the Winter to keep him warm, in Spring and Summer to keep his head from the destructive power of the Sun; at all events to shade his sharp crazy, dark eyes, usually protected with dark glasses.*

*And he dressed that way too: strong boots and rugged clothing: a leather jacket (A2E) built to take a hurricane:*

*denims, a bag to carry what - his book - an automatic pistol? At any rate it was all in place in him, no questions obvious, or prescient; with him the image was all in place: it was part of the character, in some part inherited from his forefathers, part a gestalt of his heroes. He said one day: "I was born in serendipity; I shall die in a desert of others" Whatever that meant would likely be a secret that he would carry with him beyond the grave.'*

**DiDi Martin sat back**, pleased with her labours so far. Her hero sounded about right. To some extent she'd based it upon a series of dream images, to some extent upon a gestalt - her image of what he should be - but very largely upon a stranger she'd met recently. She wrote in colour, in ink, in pencil, in marker, upon lined yellowish paper, to further stimulate her mind.

**Jones opened the cabinet, bought the 'Blue Mountains**

*Gazette*’ for the headline **‘Deacon Story – Latest’**, then sat somewhere in a nearby bar, somewhere away from the street where the sounds of people were distant.

He’d scouted the library and all the sources available to him at that time: eventually encountering an amateur sleuth through an Internet chatroom involved with illegal activity on the web.

Later he opened a dialogue with his contact by email, who turned out to be somebody one would only ever meet on the web – someone who had a great, if shuttered, interest in things of a devious nature, someone who undertook to come back to him with information about AutoPass’s relationships with outside investors, no matter how unimportant it might seem. ‘Packman’ (his contact) had found that AutoPass was investing heavily in all types of electronic and wire money: from international overnights and electronic debentures through to the aptly named ‘Derivatives’ and their derivatives - CDO’s, (*Collateralized Debt Obligations*)

– a specialized and barely legal insurance against non-payment of Derivative based debt, the earnings from which had the potential to gain many millions – and to lose just as much.

As a result the premiums to dealers covered not only their reputations, but also delivered risk avoidance, priced accordingly high, which is where the gains were and are.

It occurred to him that, carrying the logic forward, AutoPass could actually use their position as both a web of companies and a source of cash to do both things simultaneously. They could even exploit their situation of trust by using trading spread, effectively leeching into areas where no one would expect them to be, using the understood trust of financial institutions and auditors in far destinations to make overnight profits. The downside? What about a crash?

After all, that's the way international banking works, on trust – doesn't it? With such a large mass of promised cash permanently on the wires,

promises became a virtual currency themselves. Also, extending the logic, with such a widely spread net of business it became possible to create a 'Virtual' net to both dispense product of one sort or another and collect and use income and virtual promises, *simultaneously*.

That way too, The Corporation could empower itself to sweep-up its own 'failures' whether '*virtual*', real – factual or fictional - or not, then render them to invisibility. Not that anyone in their right mind would be likely to 'trust' The Corporation, would they?

The world of wires is a wonderful, fatal thing. Thus, sensing a yawning opportunity, of course AutoPass - The Corporation - whatever their publicly avowed intentions, managed to get in there *big*, using enormous, continuous rolling cash balances, which could be (centrally) switched back and forth - in and out. It was a perfectly possible operation using available technology which could be steered, from the Johnson's Bluff spread mansion or

anywhere else on Earth, using the power of the satellite, the transponder and the speed of light.

Such trade never stops, day in, day out; because its strength and its reach is to where the market is - wherever trading activity is taking place. Which means everywhere in this burgeoning global electronic world - and for this reason the strength of this world is also its greatest weakness, it's openness to fraud - in spades.

**He opened the newspaper** and began to read over his beer:

*'...the sudden disappearance of an associate of J. James Deacon from his new kingdom up at Johnson's Bluff has woken old stories of the curse of these mountains.*

*The story goes that when Johnson himself was prospecting up in these parts in the 1880's, he happened upon a beautiful Indian woman, who lured him away into the hills*

*with her eyes and whatever else; her eyes, it was said, were "...dark and promising all things".*

*At any rate, poor Johnson came Down from the mountain in rags, raving about a hoard (or lode) that he said he had seen.*

*It was reported afterwards that he'd never recovered his composure, always insisting that the mysterious Indian maiden – he reportedly called her 'Christina' - had led him to the lode somewhere in one of the many deep wooded crevices that you can see up on the mountain - and then was killed herself, dying after falling into a subterranean chamber - which neither was nor has - been sought -for nor found, until the present.*

*We all know that many stories have been generated about Johnson's Bluff, so many that we could print a book of them. But it remains an enduring mystery why Johnson, a teetotaler and not given to exaggeration, it was reported, should have found himself*

*in such a predicament.*

*An interesting fact remains however: there is a recurring tale in these parts, not only at the 'Bluff' - concerning a dark and somehow fascinating woman, reported to have been seen many times in the forest in the past one hundred or more years.*

*In case you are lucky (or unlucky!) enough to see her, she is apparently Native American or perhaps of Spanish origin: she is slender, has the expected tawny skin, black hair and dark eyes.*

*She is never clad in the way one might expect in these rugged parts, being lightly clothed, and she appears at times of real danger to people who are thus warned, if they but know it.*

*(Be warned!)*

*To return to BC reality: maybe Mr Deacon's acquaintance made the ultimate error and thought that he could 'own' the lode for himself. We're speculating, of course. Whatever, it could take thousands*

*of years until some enterprising cave archaeologist gets down there in the next couple of æons and discovers whatever really happened - if at all. But as you know, in territory like that whatever happened is unlikely ever to be discovered.*

*What really happened to J. James Deacon's associate - and why and when? For one thing, why and how did he end up taking a dive in Tartan Lake on a freezing night? The City Sheriff at Blue River has called Marshall Jake Godfrey up from Victoria to look into it – and has requested, incidentally, that all local residents be wary, but has not as yet told them just what to be wary of.*

*What do you think? Our correspondence page, website and e-mail are available and awaiting your thoughts. More later!*

**Information** about potential problems with Derivatives and the electronic operations of AutoPass would take some time, years maybe, to filter through to newspapers like the '*Gazette*'.

In the meantime there was not very much else he could do in the absence of data - today, he'd have to take time, maybe hunt around at the public library on the Internet - until he'd found it.

**DiDi Martin had done pretty well that day too.**

She reckoned she'd written four or five pages of good stuff. The problem would arise when all that colour and lined paper were to be translated into some sort of typescript.

Her pages mostly dealt with the background of the story, which was about an adventurer who walked through the mountains looking for a treasure, lost somewhere in caves which had been sunken after a time between competing

rock faces by the up-heaving of huge rock formations, thousands of years before.

This all sounded a bit sci-fi, but perhaps she'd set it sometime in the future: maybe on another planet. There could be red deserts and swirling whirlwinds *and...* and then there had to be traces in some sort of records like the ones she always seemed to be sorting through - (only a lot dustier) - perhaps a story or two about lost civilizations – or a *romance*.

*A sad romance would be good!*

And then the adventurer would come upon the cache, hidden in the feminine folds of the rocks, as if mother earth herself were giving back that which was not hers...

DiDi was lost in thought for a minute, one hand raised as if to make some momentous mark upon the page. At that moment her reverie was broken.

There was a muted ringing sound. Her special phone, ringing in its stash at the back of the house, down in the rag-

box in the kitchen where no-one would think to look.

She glanced at her watch, moved across the kitchen then hauled the bulk of the handset out, black, clunky and technical: what they call *hardened*. It was her link.

She'd kept it hidden from him, anyone – a high-tech satellite phone in a place like this would look pretty out of place and she, *they*, wouldn't want that. She clicked-up the carbon-fiber stick of the aerial and pointed it skyward, to ensure that it cleared the trees and surrounding buttresses of rock.

Her reckoning was that the satellite must be dead overhead by now. Not that one wasn't overhead every few minutes: there were after all twelve hundred or more circuiting 'comms' satellites thirty thousand kilometers out, with very little traffic to occupy them with nowadays.

She turned the handset on, then punched in her access code, put the receiver to her ear and began to listen to whatever fresh data it was that they

wanted her to hear this day. Then she left the environs of the house and started to walk down the trail towards the side road, at first aimlessly, then a little faster to clear the zitts on the line.

**PT Jones drove down the rough trail** he had used that first time that he'd walked into the area.

That first time had been a darkling afternoon, the air becoming cold and damp, the trees creaking and presaging winter chills; but now here was a difference, a couple of months had passed and he could just feel the first buds of spring. Or rather, he could both see and savour them. It would be another couple of kilometers before he could approach the track turning off towards DiDi Martin's house.

The springs on the pickup protested at their misuse. He always marvelled to himself just where the umbilical of white sand had come from at this deep juncture of the mountains. It must have been

deposited millennia ago, just so that people like he could make a path, now, for just a few brief years in the trace of moments that flowed away from him each day, faster, like water.

Bizarre? Mind you, the whole darn arrangement here was pretty bizarre.

He hadn't yet sought out the name of the settlement, if indeed it had one; a few scattered houses on the downslope of a rocky, rugged hill facing roughly South-East, North-West.

The houses stood well away from each other, at least two hundred metres apart, with their own generators and everything that one could need to be self-sufficient. There was power of sorts, running between tattered telephone poles, but the presence of stand-alone generators in each house implied that the supply could be unreliable if snow fell heavily enough.

As each house stood by itself, the foliage and trees growing up between them completed the totality of their separation. One could spend weeks here

and nobody would know if you were there or not. A lonely existence if you were the sociable kind - not that he was, particularly. No, the quiet of the deep woods suited him very well, better than he would have expected it to had you quizzed him about it before. And of course the presence of DiDi Martin had had an unexpected significance in the mix; her presence made it more than bearable, in fact downright welcoming.

The pickup shifted uneasily and slewed as he turned a sharp bend in the track. There ahead of him was the brown rear of a bear, just clearing away from the track.

With a sudden shudder of realization he became aware that this was bear country: down South most people had never seen a bear, whilst here everyone carried a rifle in the cab or on their shoulder in the event that they might have to defend themselves - much as he had been forced into defending himself pro-actively against the malevolence of a crooked corporation like AutoPass.

He wondered just what was going on in the boardroom at the Johnson's Bluff spread: or maybe back at Crouch End in England where he had first encountered AutoPass and JJ Grimme and his cronies - and first encountered Christiane Moore.

It struck him as somewhere perversely poetic that the corrosive corruption of AutoPass should flower and take root in a deeply corrupt place like London, where greed and power were the only vehicles of regard, and where money and its exercise brought you still more riches. Where imaginary 'Honours' were handed down to the most corrupt of all to control their excesses, larded generously with 'gifts' for expected favours.

Why, just down 'Green' Lanes to the east of Crouch End in the area known as the 'Ladder' he'd seen where started a whole variety of dormitories, slums and red-light areas garrisoned by enslaved under-age East European prostitutes and their inevitable violent followers and

rabble of arms smugglers, thieves, con-artists and drug dealers.

Followed across the metropolis by more terraces - rank upon rank of sad ladders and suburbs right to the horizon, where people, victims of their own egos, are even today stacked like books on a tottering set of shelves and where loss of one's footing means disaster, both personally and socially. For there is no safety belt in those places, when you fall, you fall hard - and the chances of personal survival are merely vestigial. It's a jungle, only one of concrete and forgetfulness and greed.

Of course that is the ethos of organized criminality. A situation that has been allowed, arranged indeed, to decay in a manner such as this - poverty and above all ignorance beget crime, and with it is carried as a fellow traveler inequality, violence, slavery and squalor.

If you manage to hoist yourself clear of that and become 'eminent' by whatever means, they'll make you a 'Lord' to neutralize any potential threat.

Which ultimately is what such squalor in these areas generates, while people blindly procreate themselves as if to expiate their own helplessness – and as this unhappy ignorance procreates children who will live in the same ignorance: they as a result of their own inchoate selves become perversely proud: because that is all they know and their squalor, all they will ever possess.

What next? Why?

To start the cycle of squalor and forsaken purposes once again of course. Will perversity, greed in power and pride in stupidity and ignorance ever end?

**At that point on the track** there began a main rutted section given by logic, default, over to motor traffic. This was where when he first arrived he had randomly, unknowingly, parked the pickup under a tree, before cutting off into the woodland using line-of-sight and his GPS to navigate towards the Johnson's Bluff spread. It was now that he realized how

naïve and dangerous his initial plan had been. But that had been almost months ago: perhaps at that time with winter upon the land, bears stayed up in their mountain hideouts. He didn't know that either.

The pickup jolted sharply as he made slow progress. And then to his surprise, he saw DiDi Martin apparently trekking towards him, putting something boxy black and bulky, perhaps her binoculars, back into her rucksack.

She was wearing a woolen hat with a red bobble and waved at him as if it were possible not to see an isolated person with a big red dot on their head on an empty green track in the forest.

He brought the pickup to a halt beside her, about to warn her about the bear, but anyway she sprang at him as if suddenly ravenous for his touch, her eyes shining and somehow full of tears, cold nose brushing against his unshaven cheek. He forgot to say anything.

"I was wondering where you were, Darling."

“I left town and drove slowly.”

“So I see.”

“I have food and stuff in the back seat.”

“Great! I can cook us something delicious tonight, and we can curl up on the sofa together.” She wiped an incautious tear from the edge of one eye.

Rifraff

## Chapter 6

### *Blue Lakes Rhapsody*

**He bought the local** paper and sat in the hotel bar to read.

A week had passed. They, he and DiDi Martin, had driven on a shopping expedition to Blue Lakes, some thirty-five miles south of her house, picking a bustling market day. He'd had nothing much to buy, so while she shopped, he used the time to let his mind run riot. He'd

spent so much time with her in the last couple of months that he would have to re-orientate himself, get a reality fix before deciding upon anything further.

He'd picked a comfortable spot in one of those bookshops that are half café - half shop. He sat away from the street on a leather sofa, in the cover of the thick glass enclosures where the people and the noise were distant.

He opened the paper he'd bought and began to read: ideas drifted into and out of his mind: it was at moments like this that that he felt tempted to give up his aimless existence and begin to settle down somehow, somewhere.

Here, perhaps, with DiDi Martin? After all it was comfortable, and her loving was close to him. DiDi gave him everything he wanted, or for that matter needed. She was real, prescient, affectionate, loving. But most of all, just real. He needed to be with real people, to have real things to make contact with - to have real feelings about - he needed to

break into a sector of life where he could begin to truly feel things once again.

It must be important to kick-start the process, perhaps beginning by trusting her with almost anything. It's an important moment for a relationship: he'd even thought to tell her about his problems with AutoPass, introduce them covertly, but then decided that their relationship was at too early a stage for that just yet. After all, what more could anyone want from someone else than loving, regard, truth, warmth, trust? He felt that given time, his feeling for DiDi could change into something a lot more permanent. Time, of course, being the imponderable.

On an impulse he left the café, tipping the exhausted waitress well, and began to make his way towards the county library, down mainstreet, where at least he thought he might find a little recourse amongst other's thoughts, and the saved periodicals section: maybe give himself room to think, too.

A car horn blasted close to his left hand and he veered right, clipping the edge of a corroded pavement as he half tripped into the crossing at the intersection of the two streets. He found himself momentarily out of balance, half-crouched by a paper vendor's stall, leaning awkwardly against it with his left hand.

As he straightened-up he, saw a tall, striking, tawny woman perhaps a South American, wearing a red soft hat, walking perhaps ten paces away to his right. Most of all, what registered with him were her extraordinary, dark eyes.

And then she was gone amongst the crowd crossing the intersection.

**At the library he first located** the Periodicals section and then took time to search through the litter of old magazines in a series of boxes, browning in their age.

He'd about given up, when by good fortune he'd found what he was

looking for - and then found somewhere at the back to sit - somewhere away from the busy passageway and the two other quiet readers.

He opened the paper and began to read the page, noticing the subtle change in voicing between a couple of years before and the present, together with the perfunctorily aged patina of its word structure and presentation:

*“The latest from the burgeoning  
Conglomerate known as  
AutoPass says CEO JJ Grimme,  
is that sales continue to blaze  
a trail ahead.  
AutoPass’s new purchase,  
Marketing Maestro PT  
Jones is reported to be  
blazing trails for AutoPass  
as wide and as profitable  
as those he created for  
other, lucky companies,  
in earlier luckier times by  
the veritable Jones, the  
eponymous hero of many of  
the marketing miracles which  
have influenced US retailers –*

*and which continue to confound like-minded companies worldwide by their very fruitfulness and the audacity of their profit/revenue bases. Just to put you in the picture, The revenue stream of e-commercials like netcompany, abcimage and the unlikely but wierdly blatant shhhh as well as older stagers like bookstreet, have fuelled the dynamism of AutoPass, which is fast becoming a phenomenon set to replace the failed splendors of the earliest doomed e-commercials of ancient history, yesterday (that is to say, the first crashed Internet boom) with a thrusting and ruthless resumption of profits fuelled by daily growing global cash flows. AutoPass rose fourteen percent today with the hint of hugely augmented profits due to be unveiled next quarter at their AGM.”*

*What* sobered him about the report, elderly as it was, was that though PT Jones was apparently a paragon of trading virtue on the date indicated by the top margin of the page - aided by the invisible JJ Grimme of course - in reality JJ Grimme was at the time positioning PT Jones and anyone close to him for a nasty hasty demise.

And they were history these people, because even though he and Christiane were alive, in the textbook of JJ Grimme's compatriots they were *dead* - ex. And if ever an ex should raise its head that head would be cut off. You see; like a serpent, ex was only ever regarded as trouble - ex was yesterday - and the money to be made was *today, now*. The fact, at that moment generally unknown, and only today becoming clear to snoopers and people like PT Jones (or for that matter Francisco Villa), was that JJ Grimme had some very nasty sharp unexpected personal corners; some

indissoluble agendas and realities to cover-up, whatever that might require.

However the situation eventually resolved itself, it was clear that in the monster corporate *corpus delicti* that JJ Grimme represented, anything awkward would most quickly be diverted by attaching any doubts or problems onto some other individual - or better still an unrelated group of people - and then nullified, most probably in the case of an AutoPass senior executive, by death.

Death is very finite, after all.

For example, you can't ask questions of a dead man (or woman) especially if they've been blown to pieces in an unfortunate accident; just as you can't be tried for slandering them, you're free to pin anything you like on them, even if it can't be proved either way.

*Zap!* A dramatic shift like that would quickly deliver a plausible explanation for the loss of any sum, or anything you liked to, if the accounts seemed logical and had been massaged from far back enough in the records to

appear correct. Let's face it, what are paper shredders for? And nobody would have any practical reasons to become litigious. Actually they couldn't - could they - their targets were dead!

PT Jones had only tardily become aware that the original scam that Grimme had involved him in was just a small set-up for a much bigger operation. '*Patsy among Patsies*' was the expression. And he'd thought himself very lucky at the time. Which tells you a lot about relative applications of the word luck, doesn't it.

You see, PT Jones now had affirmed that Grimme had taken him for his namesake, the Yankee PT Jones, errant weird zillionaire *and* simultaneously this fresh-faced, naïve, un-expecting PT Jones' doppelganger - a more than zillion-to-one coincidence granted, but such errors of fact created by chance were automatically totally lost on the hard, cold, logical mind of JJ Grimme: like Winchester .38's at anything but short range - peas at a tank. Such things could

not be admitted in the mind of the man, were you to know the man at all.

So, this particular undead PT Jones had, anyway, never grasped the depth of Grimme's involvement in the many and various areas of the Corporation's business: how could he, he knew what he was told, that was all. As in all large organizations and corporations, need-to-know is the religion you are told to believe in.

At some point he would have to ask Christiane in greater detail, if he could ever pluck up the courage again to confront her with that particular argument.

From JJ Grimme's point of view, the situation had worked for him – and he could scam it to make a great deal more cash. Greed after all, was his main engine. It was very likely after all, thought PT Jones that at that time Grimme had not yet detected the fact that the PT Jones that he'd 'killed' was not the PT Jones whom he thought he'd killed! It seemed to him that Grimme would be a man unlikely to have that much

imagination. However, twisted minds of such straight brilliance aren't simply bent; they avoid description precisely because they are in fact lethal; because their limitations are not of greed or knowledge, but of motivation. People as twisted as Grimme are fuelled by complex phenomena, added to which simple greed and avarice as well as the psychopath's fear of his own darkness, creates huge, dynamically forged, motivations

JJ Grimme could have learned anything if he wanted to enough, further to which, he of course had motives that PT Jones, Christiane Moore and anyone else involved could only theorize about..

Just how do you gauge the psychopathy of a butcher like Stalin or a madman like Hitler or a pervert like Saddam Hussein? The fact is that they are all from the same seed. He'd found there that the irony of the standard model of a psychopath and the contradiction of a JJ Grimme managed to cut-out both ways.

Yet another active factor. The fact that Grimme had allowed the information given out to be presented in the way that it had been in the media in general and particularly in the press, indicated clearly to the 'undead' PT Jones that that JJ Grimme had had still more logics to juggle, still more magics involved in his labyrinthine thinking.

**There was for example,** the insurance scam. The insurance scam was only first of probably many complex *schemes* dreamt up by JJ Grimme and detected by Jones – but the Catch 22 situation that the undead PT Jones was in at that moment made it impossible, meant that whatever *he* did, the moment his head broke the line of the metaphorical parapet he would get it blown away.

Absurd? Not at all! The logic of it all is as usual, greed, money for nothing. The sudden 'loss' of PT Jones two years previously had meant a hefty 'damages' insurance payout: and AutoPass would find 'records' of his salary – the sums

involved wrongly quoted in the press at the time, to favour their imaginary records. Which would simultaneously precipitate a quasi-ritual cleansing, a sudden bout of musical chairs within the Corporation, which could - and had - resulted in his unfortunate and accurately judged demise.

The timing, he had to say, was perfect; theatrical in its own pristine way. Yes, JJ Grimme had really known how to scheme a scam. He was a pro.

This led PT Jones at the time to conjecture that JJ Grimme might not be JJ Grimme at all. It came at him all in a rush, one Wednesday evening when it was raining. Well, who was Grimme? Or rather, who *had* he been?

And for goodness sake, who might he be in his *next* manifestation? Was that, like the electronic money in AutoPass's computers, just a figment of the imagination? The answer would prove many points, as yet unseen. He'd seen JJ Grimme under what was apparently another name dance backwards into a

sheer drop of at least a thousand feet: there was no way that he could have survived that. He'd heard the crashing in the trees: found JJ Grimme's Ruger at the foot of the boulder and brought it back with him. It would shortly reside in his boot-cupboard. Oh, just one small missing detail here. Poor old Mr X had been found drowned a few miles away in a tarn known as Tartan's Lake. Had he flown there from the mountain, do you think?

**PT Jones switched back to** his memory of the report in the '*Blue Mountains Gazette*'. It reiterated the point that the man he'd seen take a dive was described as falling to his death into a local lake, some miles away. *Some miles away from where?*

They'd fished him out and identified him as an associate of J. James Deacon. *Who? (Sodden pockets jingling with useless riches, perhaps?)*

Everyone at AutoPass had of course been speechless with grief. Literally, speechless. Forget the grief.

**The body** had been removed by the Twin Otter from the boathouse by the lake and flown to the mainland for speedy cremation. Was it Jones's imagination, or were these bodies all being rather hastily cremated? This wasn't the tropics. It would be simple to keep a body for days until the coroner or whoever could come down the line and do their stuff.

Mind you, ashes are really simple to fake, aren't they? The incident and its tricky fantasy of location had been forgotten in the twinkling of an eye by most of the press he'd seen, apart from *'The Blue Mountains Gazette'* that was.

The fact that J.James Deacon had never been reported as having disappeared indicated only one thing to PT Jones: that J.James Deacon had never existed - (in a mortal sense). Which then posited the idea that his lack of existence could be used – maybe as a

switch - for someone else to take over and become J.James Deacon, all over again. This was getting to smell a bit. PT Jones took a deep breath. That was, of course, if JJ Grimme had in fact been J.James Deacon! Quite a thought!

The leader writer/editor of the *'Blue Mountains Gazette'* seemed, like PT Jones, loathe to leave the affair at Tartan's Lake as simply that, apparently having nothing else to write about.

In the following week's issue the leader carried a short piece about what was now styled 'The Mystery of Johnson's Bluff'. The leader continued, in faintly dated tabloid tradition:

*"... the bizarre death of an unnamed associate of Mr Deacon, the new owner of the spread containing Johnson's Bluff, the ill-fated and ill-reputed mountain North and West of here, rolls on. The reported facts have*

*thrown-up yet another  
strange story.*

*Now listen here:*

*Deacon was apparently  
searching for a marauding  
Cougar up on the 'Bluff'  
Himself, on the very day  
of the alleged disappearance  
of his unfortunate  
associate. His office informs  
us that Deacon*

*was out looking for the  
big cat armed with a  
powerful hunting gun.*

*Thus he was miles away  
at the time. No further  
mention has been made  
of that, though it is known  
that local hunters apparently  
up in the hills reported  
later that they'd heard  
several sharp reports from  
the middle distance at  
that time on that day obtaining,  
it seems, from the general  
direction of the bluff –*

*which to us seems to equate  
with the sound of a .350,  
a common enough cannon  
around here, being fired.  
There was no comment  
From Deacon's old HQ on  
this point and we're waiting  
on them: maybe they'll have  
something relevant or  
interesting to say.  
The cops down river  
don't! Be assured readers,  
you of the Gazette will be  
the first to know - maybe  
we'll beat Marshall  
Jake Godfrey to the scent  
of a rat next time!"*

***He left the library*** and began to  
make his way back down mainstreet  
towards where they'd left the pickup.

***At that same moment*** PT  
Jones saw DiDi Martin on the far side of  
the street, busily making her way, so he

thought, to the next boutique, or whatever.

At first he thought to hasten along the street and join her, but then an unlikely thing happened: he saw her pass under the awning of a shop, striped by hard fingers of Spring sunlight and darkness and as she moved under the shade it seemed all at once to become transparent, waver like a distant roadway in intense heat, or your face in a mirror as cigarette smoke drifts across the reflected space and the glass throws distortion back at you, basket-weave, wavering light and darkness, colours and greys.

In other words, for a moment she seemed sufficiently indistinct to seem to have disappeared. That was all.

**Then the whirr of everyday life** re-entered the main street of the small town at Blue Lakes and all was forgotten. And he forgot, too: then he halted and began to ponder. Part of it was that still, ancient machinery in his mind, an irritation which had been developing for months; more a

survival mechanism than anything else; part was the feeling that he'd had for some time that the moment to begin to forget old, worn out, spoiled, life had arrived.

There are moments in time when forgetting becomes a critical part of the scheme: PT Jones had come to realize how important it was to him that he forget who he had been, allow himself to become the changed person who was standing there now in working boots, a thick tartan jacket and heavy denims – nothing remained of the pallid, asthmatic survivor from the mouldering cube high in a grey concrete sky somewhere in the Northeast of England years ago.

At that moment, PT Jones became aware that he had entered a process of change so radical that he would quite literally have problems recognizing his old PT Jones' self. He would have to say, were he questioned, that the difference in now him derived from what had happened to him inside in the last couple of years, a difference to the architecture of his mind

brought about by change, not simply to his environment or appearance. No, the change in him had come from deep inside, like a lie turning inside-out and becoming all-at-once real, with the shock of that reality the prescient, profoundly unchangeable - true. At the same time his grasp of the phenomenal world had developed, stretched, such that now he at last clearly could see the aimless futility of his existence before the encounter with AutoPass had occurred, an existence that he would never willingly return to.

It came with a further shudder of realization that he saw just how much he had changed and how far he had developed in so short a time: far enough to discover the new America in his psyche. The potential richness of your life itself is without parallel or scale. If you as an individual have the fortune, the gall, or the strength of mind (or a combination of all three) sufficient to stand back critically, put your life in perspective and to discover its glory and size and variety, you will have taken a personal giant step

towards a special, singular, transcendent freedom – at that moment you'll have changed forever.

With a shock PT Jones realized upon reflection that he and Christiane Moore had lived on less than one percent of this Earth for all of their lives: now suddenly, independently, as if an invisible switch had been turned, they'd both have a fresh chance to begin to see this world - *their own worlds* - with all their mysteries, in unexpected, newfound, freshness and clarity and were they to accept this chance to begin afresh despite the old gulf in understanding between them, this would spark a something which was unspoken, unfelt, organic, something particularly theirs. Something...

Rifraff

*Book* **3**  
**Rifraff**

Rifraff

## Chapter 7

### *Turnpike*

# **She picked me up near**

the turnpike. I had walked there from the garage where I'd left the car for the timing problem to be fixed.

It took barely a moment before the questioning started.

"You've been away so long - and I've been working on a new set of stories

for the *Wash' Post*, tell me what's gone down?"

Claudia Hamer was all eager ears; her tail was probably bushy too.

### ***I was thinking sardonic:***

I'd figured up to then that it was the urgency of inexperience that carried her along, that Claudia Hamer in her various travails had not lost the sensual naiveté that appeared up to now to have endeared her to manifold beds and editorial offices throughout the land.

We had driven into town, were close to the office, before I had unwound enough to begin her version of a debrief.

The problem was to dodge the more awkward elements of her questions, which I did. It had been a long drag from British Columbia, the wide stretch of ocean, then all the way down the gorgeous, scenic coast in order to unwind, before the timing on the rented Pontiac had begun to bang, bang.

Eventually I'd limped in to the turnpike and left it there, not ten miles from home.

Over a coffee I explained the more obvious elements about Deacon and the spread over by the mountains: then filled-in how important it had been to try to pinpoint Deacon and his strange relationship with AutoPass. I of course omitted to tell her whom I suspected that he really had been all along, seeming as if I were as unknowing as she. That was the idea.

It seemed to work, a necessary piece of legerdemain; it had seemed to me that I couldn't be precise to her about what the real problem was of course after I was more confident, more sure of her – anyway, I'd figured that such precision might well be a requirement later. But I was buying time, friendly insulating time, like distance, part of the trick. As well as the fact that I would have to safeguard myself by not disclosing my urgent interest in all this AutoPass stuff, because the situation was still potentially hazardous - if I let too much out about PT

Jones and his relationship with AutoPass and Francisco Villa, I might find myself in real jeopardy, or in the final analysis in a box. The threat was ever present, though I was not sure what form it might assume or for that matter from which direction it would come which hovered somewhere in the darkness of my imagination, damning me.

In the paranoia of all this was my fear of death, unnatural death I mean, perhaps as a result of lead poisoning - this time via an unidentified associate very likely garnered through the unravelling of the corporate mysteries of The AutoPass Corporation. For in this case the fact was simply that the next time the idea of *dead* visited AutoPass, and particularly in the case of PT Jones, it would mean as in the case of an AutoPass 'ex', *totally, absolutely, dead...* Silenced, gone. I would have to take care about what I knew, or they might well take care of me.

At length we returned to the office: I'd kind of loaned it to her whilst I was

away, to act as a sort of custodian. She'd been using it to organise her work, and articles and scraps of notes were all over the floor (where she apparently organized herself more effectively).

"Oh, that woman, 'La C', left this for you yesterday." She said, hefting me a package - one of those padded envelopes.

The name 'Francisco Villa' was scrawled on one side of the padded brick with marker pen, which served to underline to me just who I was to assume I was at that moment. I pinched open the edge of the pack, thrust a thin pencil in and riffled the leaves I could see: they looked to me like pictures, photographs printed out from a computer: I put the stack to one side, I would examine it more closely later.

But Claudia Hamer's curiosity was pricked, I could see that. I was suddenly nervous, nervous about blowing *anything* at all. I just felt that I'd got very close to something or other that would prove important - perhaps critical, at last, though

for the life of me, I couldn't describe what exactly it was. Ever had that?

The close of the La C case, maybe presaging the end of my *personal* case - the one between PT Jones, Francisco Villa, JJ Grimme, J.James Deacon, Christiane Moore. Sudden violent death - and *The Corporation*. AutoPass, was close, in some ways too close. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

I took a deep breath. Maybe, after all, something important about all that was in that envelope: I thus reckoned all of a sudden, whistles blowing, red lights flashing, that I couldn't let *anyone* see what these things were - until I'd checked them myself. It's my insecurity, you see. It's endemic, that's what it is.

I'd brought some copies of the *Blue Mountains Gazette* along with me for Claudia's interest: issued over the period of just over two months, they covered the story of J.James Deacon and the disappearing associate crudely but well enough, which would give Claudia something to play with. I showed her. She

seemed particularly to like the idea of leading on the various stories which surrounded the 'Bluff', frowning her brow at mention of the phantom Indian woman.

"That could be an alternative storyline for you though - more stories - more cash!" I proffered.

"You know, I've heard tell of that somewhere before, never heard of it happening, though."

"Well?"

"What, '*The Spectre in Them There Mountains!*'?"

"Let me think a moment-"

"Where was that?"

"It was... it was..."

"Well?"

"You're always so darn impatient!"

"What do you expect, - that's me, Pulitzer Hamer they call me - *not for nothing!*"

"Huh!"

"**Wait!**" she lifted one hand, a sensitive, delicate, abstracted finger, dangling as if it were about to part company and parachute to the floor; *La*

Hamer, posed like a paranoid MD in a pit orchestra prompting the opening chord: then; "... *I know!* ... it was a story I'd come across months ago that happened a few years ago: a professor in a university somewhere had an affair with a woman - who turned out to be ...well..." She seemed for a moment to have to force her brain to gain sharp focus – then as she leant forward her pupils grew black and she shivered surrealistically, ecstatically: "...*well, so they say - actually nobody knows for sure!* - But she turned out to be someone..." her voice sank to barely a hoarse whisper "... whom they *said* had *died* (!) – who been *murdered* actually - a couple of years previously - *A Whore!*" Her voice seemed to have reached its apogee, and now sank as quickly after the damning final deleted expletive, as it had earlier risen to the challenge of this tale.

**She sat back**, watching for my reaction.

Women often seem to live their lives content, somewhere in that half-

world between real things and superstition, magic, *zemi*, living the life of everyday but hanging on wildly to vital contact with their primeaval selves, their primitive souls, by relating so closely to natural things that those things become symbols more-or-less by default: stones or earth or grasses, herbs or sand, elemental, filled with ancient, zinging, sonorant, *juju*. Meaningful only to the ‘*Hetarii*’, meaningless as a blank wall to the male masses.

“Uh, huh, does that make a difference?” She looked unwontedly surprised:

“To the trash, the tabloids, sure – I just tack it on – the tabloids are all over it, the broadsheets ignore it.”

Suddenly Claudia Hamer was back to normal humanness with a rush. Click.

“When the guy recovered – it turned out that he’d been in some sort of fight with a killer that apparently *she had led him to...!*” (*Gasp*).

Her recall was a little hazy, Francisco Villa could tell. She twitched and tinkled one of her giant earrings with a nervous, delicate, dishonest finger –

“...Well, things got kind of difficult – you can imagine - *if* you’d been screwing a *ghost!*”

She obviously imagined that she could feel it, as if she’d had the ghost *around* her, rather than *up* her (if you see what I mean). Then she squirmed suddenly and a-rhythmically as if the ghost had been she after all, perhaps in her deepest psyche. Women are often the clones, the ghosts of all their millions of years of foremothers. After digesting her own cookie-ness she continued:

“There was something in it about a computer program catching a murderer or something.”

“Pigs-have-wings kinda thang?”

“*It’s a story - is all!*” Claudia was defensive suddenly, defending her female right to dwell in transitory, useful, pointless, fantasy.

“That sort of story is an earner, it has, like, tentacles - it could go on forever!”

“Haha, I knew you’d know, *definitely!*”

“You could take a holiday, or a hike, and then scribble your Pulitzer tome about it!”

“*Spooks, spectres, phantoms, phantasms, idolons, shadows, the undead, bogeys, shades, djinns...!*”

He thought suddenly: ‘... You know, I must be the most hunted dead person on the planet, wanted by the nastiest set of hoodlums on the World Wide Web, for the craziest of reasons – to wit, not *being dead* – if they knew just where I was and were sure that I was alive they’d goddamn *hit* me - and I’m having this asinine conversation!’

He continued:

“There are spooks and... ghosts *and, and...?*”

He broke off. He’d suddenly realized that something else he’d seen or heard was bugging him in an unexpected

way and that he didn't yet have a clear picture of it in his mind - Yet. *Damn my memory!*

"Literally?"

"Could be the *undead?!?*"

"Could be pretty... Oof, yuck... messy then!"

"Yuck!"

"Oh yeah, cowgirl?"

She'd slowed.

"Well, eventually I lost my picture of the story... you know, it was all, like, over for me." She glanced at the floor, a little down in mood; she'd lost a story, after all. Stillborn.

"I see."

Then all at once she was hyper - *quizzical* again. Journalist's logic, maybe?

Now Francisco Villa could see in her moist, gleaming, urgent, motivated, twitchy, pinpoint, eyes that she'd recanted, forgotten, and changed the frame. She was coming-in again, making another final approach.

He was still formulating a satisfactory answer to the question she'd not yet asked, when she asked it anyway.

Lucky?

In the event he was taken by surprise. Where'd he heard that, anyway? He stalled, about to reveal all when:

"Tell me what've you been doing, anyway - you've been away more than a month."

"Oh, just a short holiday on the lam!" He rolled his jaw a little, and lied. No breaks in the story, must keep going. It sounded convincing, he thought: which meant that he'd likely get away with it this time, after all why should she know about DiDi Martin? That way he could leave the sexual bit out. No, it was better to be mysterious than naïvely transparent - that was the path of the simple, of the fool. He now found himself nervous, moistening suddenly parched lips.

"Went walking, bought a gun, shot at something and missed it. You know." His fingers were itching, trembling

imperceptibly, his heart beating rather too fast.

“After that I checked out the AutoPass thing, JJ Grimme and all - and then began to find J.James Deacon interesting – whereupon he seemed to, like, *whisp* away, know what I mean?” His heart rate had levelled-off now. Smoke and mirrors.

“Oh yeah, buster?” Phew!

“Well, the way they explained it – you’ll find it reported in the paper - he seemed to have gone for a swim *and* went looking for a nasty Cougar - *simultaneously* mind you!”

“More?”

“Oh, the weather there was cold – apparently, that is, well that’s what the info was, in those parts – and from the papers, of course.” An awkward moment. He’d got too close to the ‘unknown’ facts that time – she might notice that stupid slip and come back at him with her photographically perfect female mind (*‘...you said, at five-twenty-five on the twenty-seventh of March two years*

ago...!') He should stay away from the subject, not address it and avoid it if he could. Or better, maybe not even think about it at all, ever again if possible.

Unaccountably his fingers had stopped their microscopically twitchy yammering. For the moment at least, all was calm - his lies had apparently worked, all was secure.

Opposite him, Claudia Hamer hadn't shifted her eyes from where they'd been all that time, watching him as if she were in some kind of trance. You know.

"Hell's Bells! Swimming's bad enough in summer in the sea, I need warmth, I guess I'm kinda skinny-ish. I only swim in my apartment pool at the moment (you should try it,) *and* its warm!" she said as if to sell it like some perky real-estate agent, all of a sudden gone odd.

"Well, this *is* a warm place."

Suddenly she shivered.

"So they say..."

"Well, maybe not always, the wind, you know..."

“Oof! – Go on telling me... the stuff.”

“Okay. Well, then they found a *stiff*, mind you, floating in a lake called Tartan’s Lake; nobody knows the fuck about it, who anybody else is, did he drown, was shot with a Tommy gun, what else, whodunit, da, da, da, etcetera, etcetera. Probably floating face down, pockets weighed down with money; I mean it’s becoming traditional, after all for mob scum like that. I wonder who Tartan was, come to think of it.”

“Be serious - how was he killed? Somebody must know!”

“That’s a thought”. For a moment he cranked his mind back to the absurd scene on the bluff as he accidentally remembered and simultaneously was about to forget it in any rational sense - remembered the nightmare of the icy crags and the skittering treacherous shale underfoot, the blank echoless song, the report of the .350 below him, his frozen limbs, the waves of fear and sweat. He shut his eyes, came all over giddy and

nauseous. Now he shuddered all over, memories of fear and hypothermia. It had been a frozen nightmare, he was convinced that he really would be a dead man that time - but now he was here, alive, warm; thousands of miles away. Alive, warm.

He was grim suddenly, inside himself. *'No skid marks on the rock (how would they ever locate it - or find them). No mud on the battered face, no branches, pine needles and twigs in the tattered wings of the butterfly... Shhh! Quiet!'*

### **There was a blank again. In him.**

“Yeah - how was the fucker stiffed? – I didn't hear a thing about it; in those parts unless it's outright murder of someone, they just aren't that pushed; and the Corporation people apparently weren't up to volunteering much, either”

“I expected that. No links I guess, know what I mean? Oof!”

“No people, no names no - *blackout*, know what I mean?”

“That’s a performance, then.”

“Oh, and then they gave the corpse the big burn after airlifting it carefully in the company ‘plane - to New Jersey, of all places. Know what I mean? Rendered to ashes. Can’t identify those!”

“Yeah, probably own the incinerator, big in garbage disposal and mortgage loans in New Jersey – the Sopranos, know what I mean? Word is the British president got scammed on that one (*Well, I read the London ‘Daily Mail’ like everyone else in New Mexico!*)”

She began scribbling on what looked like a tissue. It probably was one. She had pockets full of tissues, to cry into or wipe something off something or other. They all do, you know, all those counterfeit tears have to go somewhere.

At length he moved, breaking her trance:

“Well Hon, you can see that there’s plenty of meat left on the bone there for you to check out too – even dig up the barbecue records - if there are any

that mean anything you can get to. I didn't believe even a teensy-weensy thing about the whole thing. I couldn't find records and well, you know about the lack of, and all. Would you say it was ultra suspicious, or just, well, very very suspicious?"

"Yep."

Scribble, scribble, scribble. Rip.

"You know the land up there North of Victoria itself is really breathtaking, you should take a hike, stretch the legs."

She put the pencil neatly into the spring at the top of the writing pad she wasn't using because it was full of, like, notes and scribbles.

"If I had the inclination, maybe. For the time being, I reckon I'm better off with Joe's Gym - the beefcake there doesn't actually want to kill you, just fuck you - which I can totally empathise with. Haha!"

**Meanwhile, back in my secret doom, that certain something** had begun to tick away once again whilst I was sleeping, as if it were an unneeded noisy watch in the dark bedroom of my mind. The thing

woke me up like a kick in somewhere, like a grumbling gut. It had to do with the confusion of twenty-first-century things, with what computers are given to drive you mad with as you open a lost document '*Unexpected end of file.*' - one of those cryptic messages that mean that your precious data is all fucked up and that you should throw the computer into the nearest lake and go home, get drunk.

Or, to put it another way, logic chains that seemed to evade all logic, e.g. my efforts to join them up. But I had much more stuff to unload and sort before I would have sufficient time to set apart and speculate about that sort of thing. So where should all this urgent data come from? I opened my eyes. I'd lost time.

Claudia Hamer was sitting there in front of me, knees primly and innocently glued together like a teacher, as if this was the next lesson about to begin. You never know your luck, do you - perhaps it would.

Watches, clocks, bling, time, you know: women, The Moon, madness, me,

Claudia Hamer, her nice shapely knees. *Unexpected end of file?* I had to get this mess finished. I made half of a manful new start:

“And the original Mr C-the one that started it all – the one that almost got away?”

“Thrill me.”

“Well, guess what! I found through all that paper guff that that Mr C was patsy number one; they’d lined him up to screw him - for his cash of course - small change for them, but enough when a couple of million’s given to you in cash for *zilch*, by a sucker, to be interesting - you know how it works: there’s a sucker born every minute and all - though I figure that La Colorada queered their pitch by getting involved – traditionally women don’t get involved in that sort of thing on this part of the coast, it’s the Latin thing!”

“Well?”

“Well, one thing is that because the prize is no longer so glamorous, I reckon they’ll ease off now so long as La C is around.”

“Ten tons of useless paper later?”

“Not ecologically sound at all. But well, that’s the officially straight explanation over ... of course I’ll bet the thing’s more involved than simply that - because I dug it out from a variety of sources with the proverbial wastepaper mountain and had to patch it together; I haven’t had time (lie) to make a whole thing out of the pieces just yet. Maybe I will. (Oh, yeah?) Those sources are very bitty in themselves (another lie), really not that interesting - more paper - you know. This is what I’ll report to La Colorada when I speak to her tomorrow. I have a few nice things that I’ve kept by, though.” (Another darn lie, there was an unexplained gap in this story as big as a bus, and my chances of ever getting paid for finding next to nothing were at that moment, rapidly dwindling. I had to make it all up, I couldn’t be seen to be living on zilch now, could I.)

Claudia Hamer, meantime, had been looking increasingly expectantly at the package on the desk, rather like a

pigeon with *that* look in its mad eye, excited for no apparent reason but that one, yes, like a jet parrot about to strike at stunning speed.

Trying, but not succeeding to put her off, I toyed with it, hefted it, listened for a tick, sniffed it and placed it against a strong light. No suspicious batteries or wires, no thick, sweaty candle-shaped, yellowish, uneven, paper-covered musty-smelling tubes. Nope. Nothing. Dammit, it was definitely inert. Except for its content, whatever that was of course, which, I had the intimation, could blow-up right in my face, literally, lethally.

Claudia's parrot-self was in the meantime bright, twitching, about to leave the safety of her Palm tree and make a dive for it.

"Open the damn package, for goodness' sake, it's driving me nuts!" She was looking odd, twitchy, mighty expectant, excited, flushed.

"Is it a friggin' bomb?"

"*Bang!*" She jumped, a trifle theatrically I thought.

“This is not a game show!”

“Ouch!”

I was holding the flexing package in my hand and almost dropped it. I had a nasty attack of cramp in my fingers from the pressure.

“Have you ever thought when you’re watching on of those vintage game shows, that you’re watching dead people winning obsolete domestic appliances?”

“Sell ‘em on E-bay and make a pile!” I could see that the diversionary tactic was simply not going to work out.

“Watch out!”

“Do what?”

“You never know!”

“Open dammit...!”

“Look...”

“Oh, this!” I casually took out my favourite switch-blade, clicked the button, snapped the blade into murder position and gave it an experimental swing: *r-rip...!*

The packaging gave unexpectedly and cascaded what I’d taken before to be

photographs, out on the desk in an untidy pile.

They weren't pictures of the old fashioned sort that you'd probably expect: no, rather more than that - twice as incriminating. Darn it all, though, now the secret was there for all eyes to see now; of course Claudia was eyes-on about it. For a moment it felt as if it ought to be a pile of naughty photographs; Dammit. I just shouldn't be so tricky, should I? She fell on it as if she were an eagle discovering a tasty fish.

Papers. Fishy? They were papers, actually. Over to Claudia: all of a sudden her flush looked a little less pink - could that be the excitement receding?

"Oh!"

The *papers*? Oh, them! They looked like just a sheaf of copies of receipts of cash in-payments that Mr Chad made to AutoPass.

"My God!" The gap in my credibility, in my earning potential, in my self-belief - as a genuine fake, no less - the lack of info that I'd been so paranoid

about had suddenly narrowed by a trillion miles now. Why, I felt almost at home on this one! *What next...!*

“Not far to go!”

I sounded for a moment as if I were in command, spoiled the whole effect by gathering the whole mess together like an excited croupier gathering floppy, oversized cards, pages slipping out of overly excited hands. What did it amount to, all this, after all?

Amphiprostyle figures slipped right through my fingers as I gathered the little pile together. Now I could begin to make it out, the image of my dreams and nightmares about La C, in columned glory. I gave Claudia Hamer some pages to sort, while covertly checking the rest at lightning speed. Claudia excitedly riffled her bit too, looking awfully busy as she peeked through her sexy narrow short-sighted glasses, while at length I too began to look somewhat more soberly, duplicitously, at mine - because she was there. Strewth! This was the way out alright! Fate – or somebody, (or

something) had unshackled my shackles and freed me to breathe clean fresh air once more!

Reading through the small tree that the heap of documents must represent, it became clear to me in the next few minutes that most of the in-payments into this particular AutoPass ledger had been in the tens of thousands of dollars. There were many lists of them, but Mr C's were gathered together for some reason unknown to me, ranked by date.

I realized suddenly that the receipts we had in our hands must have come out of a safe somewhere. They were both precious and, you could say confidential, as well as carefully selected. I reckoned that they'd been copied in the dead of night, straight out of the safe; torches at midnight, lights flashing into the camera lense - like a bad thriller: that sort of thing. But, images apart, none of this made total sense to me yet, if indeed it ever would.

Ah! But then suddenly the story got better as I sorted the sheaf: J. James Deacon as titular custodian of the funds had signed all the transactions, at least in theory, for they had all been through his office and been initialled and stamped there.

Included was the continuous stationery sheet facsimile page of an accounts ledger, (computer generated of course), showing a string of other small punters (small, if you think a million dollars or more is a small amount, of course).

The total amount that Deacon had held in his Corporate hands seemed to be in the region of a hundred and fifty million dollars, totalled on just the entries I could find on the sheets, of which Mr C's total was just under three million dollars, probably more, most of it in cash. And those were just the entries on this single sheet: what about all the other sheets that I didn't have access to?

The note on pink paper which followed the papers as they fell into my

lap was attached to a wodge of dollar bills – amounting to more than I would ever have thought to have charged anyone. In a somehow familiar curly scrawl and with the whisper of an accented Spanish it said:

*‘...Thank you Mr Villa for your help, sending me the originals of these notes and cross referencing them with the derivatives was a clever stroke: this way I can begin to re-organize the situation and perhaps begin to recoup something of what my lover has lost to this con-man over these past few months. I’ll be leaving this area today and I may or may not see you again: I trust that the sum enclosed covers your expenses etc.’*

**“Ah!”**

**“Well, you are a clever boy Francisco,”** said Claudia Hamer, re-

arranging her hair for some reason as yet unknown to Señor Villa by passing her fingers through it, tossing her head and then shaking it out and her body around like pole dancer, or perhaps as if she'd contacted some new form of St. Vitas' dance.

Jerk, jerk, jerk.

"...Is there supper for me somewhere in there?"

I, well, Francisco Villa anyway, was still asking my/him self who on earth could have sent La Colorada the papers - and incidentally, cross referenced them to the derivatives market - for it wasn't me, or he!

**I looked at Claudia's mouth** and an unexpected thought came into my mind: I felt like eating dinner suddenly, but a long slow and well, sexual sort of meal, with her as the main course. It seemed to come to me on an impulse; I just did it on the lam, like that -

"May I ask you a personal question?" After all this crazy stuff I found

myself looking at her in a new way suddenly. It was the release of tension and... body language, you know.

“I dare you!” Said Claudia Hamer, still dancing there, daring me, suddenly more open and with her lips, her loosened blouse, her breasts, her tidy arse and her eyes joining my game.

“Do you know anything about futures - derivatives?”

“Not a lot! (Well, actually, nothing). Haha!”

“Aha, and one more thing - are you a natural blond?”

“Well, that’s a leading question to ask a lady, you’re just going to have to find out yourself!”

**I chucked** the sheaf of papers into the ‘La C’ file and mimed that I’d scribbled *CLOSED* on it to emphasise my extreme duplicity in this matter. Then I dropped it back into its slot and slammed the filing cabinet shut.

She laughed. She was quickly into my mood, making me an offer that I could not refuse. The game on her level was working itself out nicely now. How unexpected! Or maybe not - for she had initiated the whole thing, hadn't she, and probably checked out my bank balance and bona-fides as well along the way? Ever the journalist on the trail of something, well, *big*.

"Okay, so long you let me explain what a CDO is"

"Will it take long?"

"Could take ages."

"Will it hurt?"

"Not if you like pain."

"Better and better."

"Well, where'll I start?"

"You mean I have to tell you? Come on, Francisco...!"

"Well, help is always warmly appreciated. And God knows, a squiff of alcohol would help."

"Much later, then."

"Well, if you say so!"

**Much later.**

Much, very much later, Francisco Villa raised my bleary head and realized that my naked body was draped over that of Claudia Hamer, the stringer journalist.

My temples dully ticked away the time. The light seemed unusually bright and I could hear the sea. I had a large and unneeded taste in my mouth. I sat up. Of course - I was in her room!

“Ouch” That was my head acting as if I’d been slugged, or drugged.

*La* Hamer turned over in her sleep, smiled to herself, pulled the sheets over her head, and returned to her slumbers. It took a while, but eventually I jolted to upright, wavered across the room, pulled the open curtains too and made coffee in the kitchenette adjoining the room.

*La* Hamer had thought of everything for her comfort: a little apartment in an apart-hotel, it’s own catering facilities and shower room, giving out onto an encased third-level sun-terrace where she could sunbathe nude

without bother (hence, no bikini marks at all, I'd checked) - and of course a swimming pool down below for hot days, not omitting psycho-room for hot, hormonal bodies. Obligatory for some people.

Perfect for (and maybe typical of) wandering women journalists hoping for a piece of male plunder whilst earning their daily bread I, I surmised, *could have been tailor made!*

**But as you see now** - and as I began to realize at that time - I'd become cynical. And to a cynic (who would contend that this is logical) there is nothing that has not been motivated, nothing in a phenomenal world that has ever happened for no cause - and my cynicism has deep, logically illogical roots, let me tell you.

Despite any knowledge to the contrary, Francisco Villa, in one of his multiple existences, had almost inevitably begun to objectivize women, you know,

see them in a sort of logical way. Suicidal, I hear you think.

Romance? Señor Francisco Villa would contend that this form of madness is potentially fatal because it's driven by impulses one does not understand and cannot control - and absolutely fatal when the people you are dealing (in 'Love') with, are essentially being subjective about themselves and all the things and people around them, almost all of the time. A sea of madness amid unforced errors, perhaps?

Romance?\* - It's a war of lies dreams and general duplicities, generated to exact the improbable from its unlikely, believing, partly insane, naïve, willing acolytes; a crazy minefield ranged over by blind, illogical, insecure, driven maniacs with emotional bloodlust. Shall I go on? They'll get you if you don't watch out.

Romance after all is the final graveyard of our trust and affection. Not built to last you know; tomorrow's model

is always rumoured to be better than yesterdays, but never is.

You have a question?

It's the paintwork, not chipped at all, and the newfound tightening of your jeans, which promise to allow you just one more dream before the end of the movie.

Just one, you understand. Metaphorically speaking, of course, because once the movie's over you're out into the freezing car park (of life as it really is) – the freezing rain's dripping down your neck, and it's dark, dark, dark.

Love\*? Hey, be real. It's cheaper and far more economical to pay for 'Love' in cash.

Ask one of the damaged, uncountable mileu of casualties of \* above. If you don't believe me - don't ask here, ask there. To pay for love honestly might seem expensive, even strange, at the time, but really it amounts to just a brief percentage of what the other route will cost you.

I hate to sound like a moralist, but remember that whatever happens with 'love' you always end up paying for it by the yard anyway: as your romantic illusions are trashed out of all super-mortal shape one by one, as you realize that following the other sheep and goats and being 'normal' will mean death to your own finest feelings in the end.

Finally - as it's mostly the 'yards' I mentioned in the payment section above that break your back - and your heart (re:\*), if you have a vestigial one left over from the feast, financially and figuratively as well as physically – well that just doesn't constitute a good deal does it? Or does a good deal include one that costs you a large non-recoverable slice of your life, then?

Call me a cynic? You're welcome; your heart/back/bank is waiting and will report to you for your come-uppance sucker, in stereo usually.

**But, meanwhile.** Claudia Hamer slept on, smiling and dreaming of love



ruthless by turns; but despite this, somewhere in my broken heart, I, PT Jones have discovered an almost fatal fascination, a deadly attraction, for it.

It's the fascination of the fly for the flypaper, the moth to the dark umbra around the flame.

And then, there is the subject of the fortune that Christiane Moore and I stashed out there under a pile of stones in a desert, the wilderness, somewhere a twenty miles or so from Nogales, Mexico, beneath the skyway that tracks in blue lines against white on the Jeppesen high altitude way charts, all the ancient freezing deep-frozen stratospheric road, to that mysterious blue high skyway waypoint, Hermosillo.

Ah now, that's fascination!

Think of it like this: the candle this time is the imagined security of the money: the flame is all the other punters who want to get to it before you get to use any more than you already have.

The darkness of the umbra; that, like the faulty cognition of the poor burnt

dead moth, is the imagination of how cool it would be to have peace, space, in your life, unencumbered by cares or the imagined responsibilities that our civilisation has brought to that personal cosy comfy urban nightmare, your unwilling door.

Perversely, that attracted me too: a different form of fatal attraction: the dangerously *now* beauty of Christiane Moore and the antipathetic, perilous desirability of *forever* security for my life.

What? Love and Money? No, it can't be a bad novel: more like *'Le Rouge et Le Noir* perhaps? How long would I be able to live with her around - and how long without her? How much time do I have to explain to you about suburban *angst*?

Angst? Stendhal would rotate in his grave. Let me give you an example: (PT Jones and) I have spent too many of my years in the corruption of such ideas and suburban misery one can only experience and understand if one has personal, sad, experience of one of the

imploding, decaying areas of that paranoid dying state, Europe, to ever consider returning.

So, at one point I'd escaped and was glad to be out of there: I would, unless shackled, never go back to the box I once inhabited in that place in that mess that everyone who knows better, calls Flat 636, *Hell*.

Well chance being what it is, perhaps by some mischance, it could happen. I might be air-cargoed, dead of course, in a box myself – though of course that would not be in life, so it wouldn't count – and anyway it would have had to be accompanied by some form of unfortunate accident - or fate. I heard a man say once that life is just a holiday from death. Think of me as being on an existential life-filled holiday.

**At that moment Claudia Hamer** awoke again and sought with her hand for mine.

“Francisco?” At this one time, I realized that I'd almost forgotten my *now*

I-D, my name *here*, at the other end of the world. It came as something of a surprise.

“Hey, Claudia”

“I’ve had a lovely sleep Franco: could you make me a coffee?”

I made her a coffee, how could I not, a throb in my guts with wanting more of her. Love? Freud would call you neurotic. Better, nasty old *lust*. This piling up of lust had been working for some time, now it was real. Claudia had a special deliciousness that would be easy to imagine, but hard either to express or explain. That’s where the music of love is located on the map, isn’t it? Just there.

Despite all my paranoia, I would have to say that Claudia has a way with her, a sort of gentle busy charm, perfect if you are a journalist. I sat on her side of the bed. She grasped my hand.

“That was a very nice night, Francisco”

“It was.” I meant it.

“Look, we can be friends if you like, but let’s not spoil the morning.”

“Don’t be nervous, I wasn’t going to.” I stooped to kiss her brow.

“No, I needed that and I learned a lot about you, too. Thanks.”

“Don’t let’s rush.”

“Absolutely not: look, we don’t actually have to do anything all day except...”

“Really?”

“Surreally.”

“Thanks, Francisco.”

I snuggled next to her on the bed and we lay there for a while, simply sharing each other’s warmth as it percolated through our souls into one another’s body. I was getting dangerously spiritual. Later, as I began to slide between wakefulness and sleep, she whispered:

“Where will we go from here, do you think?”

It caught me unawares - how would you answer that?

“I meant - with the story.” And then she fell back into sleep.

She had overridden all my indecision and bleariness and cut my chances of embarrassment. But Claudia seemed natural like that, she *always* did. She was already taking control of an otherwise tricky situation. I just had to admire her reflexes. I suddenly yawned uncontrolled, despite myself. Perhaps she was the exception to the cynicism of the rule I'd outlined in my mind. *Like hell!* Damaged cynics die hard. Well, they've fallen hard, bounced high, haven't they?

Ergo, they must die hard.

**Maybe, maybe not.**

***She was checking her body minutely now,*** as women tend to do, unconsciously picking at her skin with her thumb and the third finger of her hand. She continued, breaking my line of thought, as I yawned and stretched again.

“Today, I'm going to start putting my story together, it's looking complicated and there are so many gaps I'm not sure

which to sort out first, *so much scum to sort!* But first I have to wake up ... what will you do?"

My hand caught her rump, and she shifted a little, the better to focus on the sensation.

"Oh – and I'm checking-out the derivatives business vis-à-vis Mr C and AutoPass."

"You know the Internet contact I made? Well that could clear a lot of stuff!"

"Ouch!" At last my lying fingers had found their way between her legs. Now they found her most delicate lips.

"Make sure it checks out -"

"You could do that on the – ooh - phone." Her legs had eased apart.

"It's a deal then, I'll do that and you just go ahead as usual. I think that we're close to the end of this story – at last!"

Francisco Villa's hand found her breast and nuzzled the nipple. Now she'd lost all the focus she'd ever had, only one question remained unanswered.

"You know what?"

"Tell me?"

“Hmmm.”

“Go on -” She eased my fingers against her pubic bone with her hand.

“Well?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Well -”

“Ooh, that was good, good, good!”

“If you had a little more hair there...” Francisco Villa indicated by pressuring his fingers slightly.

“Ouch. Yes?”

“But you don’t have to stop shaving for me -”

“Come on!”

“Well, I reckon that you’re not a natural blond after all!”

She laughed, lay back on the bed, opened her legs and laughed. Then she said:

“Okay, smartarse take a look - but first... let’s do it again, one more time. Play the music Maestro!”

Francisco Villa had never been a musical sort of person, but I discovered at that moment that he intuitively knew how

to play the air-guitar – using Claudia as his instrument, naturally.

**We** spent the rest of the morning together, and then she showered, changed into something that ‘...*doesn’t smell of come!*’ and rushing out with her laptop in its broken case, clattered gaily down the stairs.

She was wearing a bright, thin, cotton dress. Francisco Villa watched her skirt the swimming pool and turn to wave to him, for a moment he could see the cleft of her behind as she moved - and then she was gone in a twist of wind.

Francisco Villa had time now to lie back on Claudia Hamer’s bed and think. One thing he hadn’t yet fathomed about her was that instinctive sense of working direction: she seemed to have a powerful instinct for the right story. As much as he distrusted his own intuition, he could but see that the purpose in her work seemed in a bizarre way to emanate from some agency not quite herself. She would

suddenly run up the stairs into the office brandishing a scrap of paper and shouting

“I’ve got another fact, another one!” Wherever these facts came from was another unknown. Her travels around the area were mostly confined, in so far as he could see, to government offices and libraries.

Once or twice she went away to another library or reference source for a day or so. Of course the tenor of her life was such that she habitually worked on several stories at the same time, which kept her in a constant whirl of nervous energy.

Plucky, busy, buzzy, fun to be with, but secretly stressed too *my* Claudia Hamer the journo remained something of an enigma, a human puzzle, to me, it helped keep the thing vital and alive, not that I had doubts about it anyway.

There was the time that I took her to one of those plush show-bizzy restaurants close to Sunset and Vine Street. She looked around her as if

sharing some secret with me, and then kicked-off her shoes under the table as if it were a conspiracy, then squirmed around a great deal as if finding better purchase for her butt.

I light-heartedly asked her if she had the habit of taking anything else off in restaurants. She'd been listening to me with a smile on her face, her head tilted to one side in the correct conspiratorial sort of way, her fist supporting her head at the temple, her elbow on the table. She was watching my mouth in that urgent 'go-on' sort of way she has, with a fizzy, impish expression, as if to hurry me along in my spiel.

She smiled and simply opened her fist.

"Yes", she said.

Out of her palm fell a tiny triangular G-string. Straight into the salad like a guided missile, lethal to any neutrality I might have been considering. Neutrality, however, was something that we never seriously thought about. Why not have fun and work together!

But, back to the salad.

“Give you something to chew on, doesn’t it?” She said as we both exploded into crazy giggles.

That was just one more thing I got to like about her primitively beautiful charm. But, like all women, she was primitive first and charming later. Charm being of course a direct, urgent defence, a bi-partisan product of primitivism. And additionally, in-between, came many other things - ego, self-interest, jealousy, envy, insecurity, wickedness and weakness cleverly deconstructed and then remade-up as strength. The Dance of the Seven Veils in fact.

Men are fools and women primitives; it’s organic you know, can’t ever be changed.

*Claudia* spent a lot of her day on the Internet, sometimes at my office too. But she was always secretive about her activities, avowing that the products of her searches were strictly for her eyes, only.

Press secrecy and codes being as they were, I was not particularly put out by this: in fact the more time she spent doing her thing, the better her results and the better her mood. Thus the better our relationship and let's face it, the better the sex.

Then one day she decided quite independently of me, that we would be better off as 'just friends' would, than locked into a romantic alliance. This, privately, suited me just fine, I enjoy lust.

It reminded me of the time in my youth when the girls in the university campus slept around quite openly. As long as you kept yourself unattached emotionally (it was their age that dictated that possibility) you could survive very well ego-wise. Plenty of what you required on a Friday night too.

Claudia even used the phrase 'fuck-friends' to describe our crazy, airy, warm but basically randy, relationship. Claudia was a little *fly* with her words sometimes for my taste.

Actually, I felt all the more secure for that. If it were possible to stay good friends and still to have great sex – then why wasn't the rest of the world doing it!

Ah, but have you spotted the deliberate error? Claudia Hamer was good at deliberate errors while Francisco Villa was sadly inferior in that department.

It requires the absolutely united sophistication of a devious mind and the corruption of ideas characterized by what politicians call expediency, to be able to use a relationship that is at the primitive level as a lever whilst simultaneously flighting the thing as a sophisticated product of close and loving minds.

Confused? So am I, because it's a fact that women are past-masters at this form of duplicity, just as they are adept at slamming the doors in their own minds after a few public/private tears of self deprecation, at the point where the expediency (which could otherwise be described as self-interest,) has run its term - passed its usefulness. Suddenly they forget everything, develop perfect

and complete amnesia; the spell has been cast and outlived its usefulness – now - on to the next one.

*A singer once sang:*

‘If I take you in  
My arms and kiss you  
Then doing wrong’s  
The right thing for me.’

A song that however never occupied any part of *my* mind, the mind of the person known as Francisco Villa, at that moment.

Rifraff

## Chapter 8

### *Welcome to Africa*

**TWA 328** was late into Johannesburg that morning due to a strike at Dohar that had jumbled the overnight flight schedules, which meant that every flight in Southern Africa was now ahead of it on the landing schedule.

Francisco Villa, now travelling in his real identity as PT Jones, cleared the

immigration desk at a little after eight-thirty local time, his head suffering the rigours of too much Jack Daniels and ginger ale, added to the fact that it was midnight somewhere else.

He felt the heat rising: stopped off at the toilets in order to take his shirt off, stuffed it into his bag.

On the way through the passport control, at the customs barrier he passed a man with a battered cardboard shard in his hands leaning across: *'Welcome to Africa (Pte).'*

Then before him, to the right he saw a litter of eager exchange counters, banks and teller machines, and a little to the left, a series of overstaffed car hire desks, their staff still wiping the sleep from their eyes, and then under the glass dome over to the far left, a little café shaded by pretend palm trees over umbrellas, with small tables, where in theory one could while away the afternoon with a brandy, or a cappuccino.

He had to wait for her, now. He hired a cell-phone at the desk and found

the number of the hotel which he'd booked. The reservation was good.

Now the winter heat began to grip; the humidity was beginning to climb. Another tired, dusty, brown day ahead. Confronting him in the arrivals hall he found a listless gaggle of truly shifty trash, individuals of all persuasions. It was rather like a scene from one of those early 'fifties Ealing comedies, where Robert Morley plays the wheezing agent upon a tropical island, for a stuffy British company that no-one has ever heard of.

PT Jones chose to sit and begin to tackle the rising winter (summer) heat under the neoprene palms, read *'Die Burger'* and the latest *'Financial Times'* with one eye while watching the gate with the other, rather than risk being diverted by something unexpected; it was the least painful option for the moment.

The Tannoy was giving-out messages. *'Will all internal passengers please check their firearms in at the firearms office for secure transportation'...* *'Flight 93 to Lisbon will leave shortly...'* it

faded to a drone as he almost nodded off over his flaccid latte – then: *‘Virgin Atlantic 456 from London, Heathrow has landed...’* followed by landing details. He’d lost count of the minutes he’d spent reading the newspapers. Then, for no particular reason he was suddenly fully awake.

He had picked an eye-line sufficient to scan the bleary ‘arrivals’ being bothered by the bureaucrats at the gates as they entered. From where he sat there was also a much longer view, interrupted at intervals, of the arrival’s hall all the way back to the baggage conveyors. Listless, blank, passengers were wondering through, tottering slightly.

And then, to his amazement: after three years or so, he had no trouble, he recognized her immediately. He blinked. She was suddenly there fifty feet away in front of him, dazed, nervous; a little spaced out, one of the last through the gate, obviously having stopped to freshen-up.

Yes, it was she. He'd detected her slow, slightly off-balance way of walking in the newly acquired pencil skirt and the tall heels – something out of a Robert Parker promo - some way down the walkway before she crossed the final barrier.

At once he fell out of control, something gripped his heart, his vitals; all at once he was in that madness of real love again: he felt the crisp dark flavour of those dense, tense, cold nights at the AutoPass office, remembered the crisp icy mornings; above all remembered her body and its warmth, her touch - and her eyes. Why, how, was it that they had broken up? His hands began to go hot and cold and shake.

Then she found him, his face, she was looking into his eyes her eyes seeking for something essential, a slight wrinkle on her brow, a small swollen place under each flat, perfectly green eye.

Perhaps she'd find him by some miraculous agency.

“Is it you?”

“No. It’s me!”

They stood there in a sort of silent secret dream, regarding each other for a long time: seconds, minutes or hours, it was not to say. Then:

“Do you still feel for me?” Her eyes had grown dark with a kind of fear in them.

“That’s what I was thinking about you, me.” Her eyes were still troubled, urgent, scanning, and nervous, his hands still tricky and shaking.

“Do you still love me then?”

Curious bystanders were watching this meeting, perhaps envious at the obvious singularity of the moment; perhaps listening to them, decoding the moment.

He was sweating in the early Sun’s ascent.

“No, I mean look - come sit here with me and let me look into your eyes.” It took a moment, he ordered coffee and croissants.

They sat under the polystyrene palms that tottered over them now, as if

they had not slept either. Her eyes were still scanning his as if to find some dreadful fault, some fatal flaw in her imagined image of him. At any rate she found none.

Suddenly there was relief in her face now, the desperation gone.

“God!”

“What was that disagreement all about?”

“It was stupid.”

“Who cares – we’re here, now. Its *now*, not yesterday – or last year.”

A deep sigh.

**An hour later** they were at the hotel and she was in the shower. Unconsciously, carelessly, she’d thrown her clothes as usual everywhere, all over the room, which always amused him. He’d told her before that in another life she must have starred in one of those movies where the camera follows the trail of the heroine as she throws her things down, leaving a trail of skimpiest and more intimate garments as she is seduced, or

seduces. He was drying himself with a towel as she re-entered.

It had become a hot winter's morning and the heat outside was rising. Some Pelicans argued noisily overhead. Naked, she opened the window and leaned out, to catch the sights and the scents of this new land. A passing workman got to see something unexpected as he glanced up by chance.

Christiane Moore faced PT Jones.

"You haven't changed – you are still as lovely!"

"Neither have you – much." She flung herself on the bed and luxuriantly stretched her body taut in the heat of the January wind as it coursed through the windows. "Maybe we should swim now." She looked through slit eyes at him, as if she were deliberately lying, expecting a retort, which she got.

"I have use for you first."

"Do you?" She prowled around the room like the wild creature she was, underneath all the camouflage, and finally

sat astride him, as if taunting him. "Are you sure?"

"Never surer!"

He slid her over onto her side and they made love the way she'd always preferred, he controlling her restless movement by grasping her rising leg to steady them both.

The orgasm rippled out of her. And then a second, this time more profound. All at once her eyes were closed, exhausted. Then she was asleep, unconscious, untroubled, smiling, her brow no longer wrinkled, and any desperation gone. He got up and walked over to the small *escritoire* by the door; quite a refinement for a second-class hotel.

He rummaged in his case for the letter he'd written her some time before. He had finished the manuscript; it lay in his safe back at the office waiting to be re-written. Having never had the excuse to write a book before, he'd waited until he was really sad before he'd started;

imagining that maybe it would give the book some gravity.

He would call it: well, how about 'Meet Joe Bloggs' that was as good a title for any book which dealt with the non-existent life of someone who was only temporarily alive (in the words). You know.

He read through the letter; he'd originally written it in ink using his favourite precious old fountain pen, almost ninety years old. It looked real - and good, perhaps he should give it to her as a sort of proof of his love.

*We were rotten to each other,  
helped by our own fears and  
people with ulterior motives  
who gave us prejudiced  
opinions and fucked us up  
at a time when we had both  
been suffering psychological  
tortures.*

*If, or even if not, that we  
ever meet again, then it will  
be at a time when the nightmares*

*are past and we can get on with our lives. And I still love you. The book I'm thinking of writing will incorporate part of our relationship: maybe you'll see the pain in it as part of the therapy we probably still need. I'll send you a copy if it's ever finished; at the moment it's 2/3 of the way through. Shall I dedicate it to you?*

**He** put the letter, carefully folded, into her bag where she'd find it and then slipped into the slumberous bed and wafted her body smell, a luxury that he needed so badly.

He'd worked out an agenda for them. After she awoke they spent most of the afternoon by the pool, and then toured that part of Gauteng, saw the sights of Johannesburg from the security of his hired car.

They ate long and slow, made love most of the rest of the night, and the

following morning drove in his hired car around the metropolitan ring road past places that seemed bizarrely part of his very psyche - from the forgotten wonderland of his youth: 'Eden Vale' for example (*'I always thought that was processed cheese!'*). There were many others.

Finally, after a few botched attempts they found the road they were looking for, the 'N1', going north. Bizarrely, he remembered, he had driven the same N1, only southwards, at the far north side of the huge continent, through Algeria, starting in Algiers and passing through Tamanrasset two-thousand-five-hundred parched desert miles later, and then on into Chad, and further and further into the true heart of darkness and danger.

But that was another story.

Today they drove north, on into that sudden one-hundred-and-eighty degree dome of unbroken, unblinking blue, the car solitary for miles on the highway and driving in its own shadow,

only scattered squatter cities and roadhouses marking out the boundaries of the low-lying countryside on either side.

Just over two hundred miles from Johannesburg he drove off right, past a few small towns and settlements, along a highway of hills and shallow dales with increasing foliage and rocky outcrops, until they breached a valley where one could see the flat battlements of diamond mine spoil-heaps.

For all the world, here it seemed that the Maya had visited, yet never completed one of the vast monuments they made to their Gods - and then left; but in fact these spoil heaps remain monuments to another, more intractable set of Gods – the Gods of greed, self-interest, ignorance and stupidity.

He'd known this landscape before, but had never had reason to tell her. Further, he knew the town where he wanted to be, and the Welkom Inn, a sprawling hotel set back from the road and constructed around a swimming pool.

It was there that they spent several days, rising late for a patio breakfast, basking in the sun, listening to the resident cackling Pelicans and what looked like Macaws as they argued over the roofs in the brilliant, blinding, dark navy-blue dome of the South African Winter sky.

**He awoke to find her staring at him quizzically:** sitting in a dent in the mattress, naked with her knees drawn up defensively, pensively.

There was something in her eyes that was difficult to fathom. Suddenly she spoke.

“Do you love me?”

“More than I ever should”

“So, you don’t trust me?”

“Not that, but I’m just happy that we want each other so much.”

“Have you forgotten?” That was a loaded question. He made himself look confused by sleep. “Don’t try and squirm your way out of this one-”

“Forgotten – what?”

“What the argument was about, because I know!” He had. Trivial things always escaped him. She had the woman thing, a photographic memory for detail going back a million years.

“What argument?”

“Our argument... after we left Mexico, remember?” She wasn’t being solicitous, however.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it has to do with my security - and our trust – I’m not trash, you know!”

“Oh something...”

“Oh, something?” She was threatening to get nasty now.

“Well – you seem to know.”

She stared at him not friendly, nursing an ancient hurt.

“No, not something trivial - after all that’s why we’ve been apart these last million years!”

“Yes I have forgotten.”

“Why?”

“Life... I had to live it... and you were so distant... I didn’t even know where you were half the time: you never answered my emails...” He stopped. She looked at him, she hadn’t forgotten.

“It was the stewardess on the plane-”

“Well?”

“She wanted to fuck you!”

“No. No. It was just flirtation-”

“Not just flirtation – I could see you wanted her-”

“I didn’t”

“You did!”

“I didn’t”

“I know you did.”

“Well, you’re wrong... you and the rest of the women in the world always fail to grasp male logic-”

“Oh, you mean, just let me stick it in her and then we’ll go home and forget what happened!”

“No it-”

“Oh yes, it was!”

Suddenly she was in floods of tears, her eyes and nose all swollen red,

tears and snot dribbling down her cheeks. She grabbed for the hotel Kleenex.

“You motherfucker, don’t you understand jealousy?”

Dab, dab, scrub.

Her eyes looked as if she had just survived a battle, all the kohl and lipstick and foundation mixed up like kedgereee. Perfect bush camouflage, only not in the bush - but in the *vel/dt* of the mind instead.

“I didn’t, or we wouldn’t be here together.”

“I think I’ll go home! I’m disgusted - I’m fucking a maniac!”

“Look, please...”

“I was so hurt after all that... we’d just survived nearly dying... I’d saved us – I’d thought it out with the parachutes and things and we’d have died without them because you never thought... so we could be together and then you-”

“I can only say it was my worst habit”

“Habit, what fucking habit?”

“Doing that-”

“And you hurt me so *much*. I went off sex! Do you know how anxiety and jealousy gnaw away at you? Do you?” He was going to say that you shouldn’t try to teach your grandmother how to suck eggs, but decided that that was the wrong moment. Instead:

“Can I say I’m sorry... can I?”

“No. No. No, no, no, that’s too easy! You haired off into the desert and buried the boxes. Okay, so we’ve still got the money, but money has nothing to do with our honesty... with our...”

“But that money makes us independent doesn’t it?”

“Not of each other – anyway, we have enough.”

“So that means that you *do* still love me?”

“Maybe”

“How much - maybe?”

“Don’t manipulate me!”

“I’m not”

“Don’t even try!”

“I...”

“Huh!”

She got up off the bed and went into the bathroom, scrubbing at the mess on her face.

**It was later that day.**

They were in a restaurant that sided onto the main town of Welkom. From the hotel they'd walked across the parched grass and into the residential quarter and soon found an empty, comfortable restaurant in an unlikely area: homespun tablecloths, polite waitresses, good food.

She seemed to have forgotten their spat earlier. For his part he was thinking about the money they'd left in the desert.

“Look, I've still got the GPS coordinates where we put the money – the GPS is always pretty close, it shouldn't take very long to find.”

“What'll we do with that much paper?”

“That's true – what can you do with it?”

“There’s at least a hundred kilos of the stuff, I should think.”

“We could take a camper – you know a –bago - (What’s it called?)”

“Camper?”

“I’ve forgotten – Winnebago - yes we could.”

“It would be a pretty cool cover for us, but I’m still nervous about the whole thing.” She looked less ruffled.

“That would be the least of it. Nobody’s done anything there but transit through that area for at least the past two hundred years. People don’t stop in the middle of a bug infested dangerous desert for nothing; you get the hell through it as fast as you can!”

“Or you could say that it’s just a small matter, not just scrub, scorpions, snakes, cactuses – but the occasional small matter of two-hundred-million plus, smackers!”

“As it is, seriously, I don’t think much has happened there in the past thousand years. This means that nobody’s

even going to think about what we're up to – they'd think we were touring.”

“You buried it well”

“You know we did: the cairn of stones is well enough constructed that only we would notice its significance out there in the badlands.”

“At the moment I've got plenty to get on with: how much did we walk away with?”

“I had three; I guess you had the same.”

“Which leaves a couple of hundred out there under a few stones!”

“Phew!”

Neither of them had thought to imagine how much they had stashed away under that cairn. When he thought about it, it winded him. The capital he was living on seemed to go on forever, anyway.

“Where would we stash it once we liberated it?”

“Oh, I've dug-up a couple of places in the Antilles – you know.”

“So your training at business school wasn’t in vain, then.”

“You betcha.”

She seemed light-hearted for the moment, but he remained on watch.

She wrinkled her brow.

“The logistics could turn out to be tricky.”

“Not to begin with at least: the Winnebago, the stop in the desert: nobody would question that, even if they actually saw us in a thousand square miles of scrub-land.”

“Later?”

“We’d have to think of a ruse - or two: there are places we could stash stuff: maybe we could buy apartments – they’re building lots of new condominiums up in Nevada near Vegas: we could stash it all over the place and use it at our leisure. Actually I haven’t thought about it too much – it never seemed that real to me somehow. Until now, that is.”

“Yes, this whole thing’s been like some sort of dream sequence: actually I didn’t know if it was a dream or a day-

mare.” She looked grave. “I have to say that I’ve sleep-walked my way through it until now. After we split -” She stopped suddenly. He remained silent.

“It was...” he began. And then she continued talking through him:

“After that... I lost my way: I thought I was happy – I stashed myself away with some friends that I knew and lived this insane life, in a sort of hotel in Kensington. All casinos and the best restaurants: very comfortable and *posh* – that’s what they say in British – *posh*. But it was like living in cotton wool: one day when you step out of it you realize that you’ve lost the use of your legs, you can’t breathe and you’re almost a...” Her voice wavered as she pushed one wrist against her eyes.

“I’m so sorry!”

“And then you realize you’re all completely fucked up – you’ll die from inside if some miracle doesn’t come along pretty damn fast.”

“Well, maybe...”

“Maybe... *what?*”

“Maybe this is a... good thing for us?”

“I hope it is – I really do.” She looked at him with wide sad eyes, suddenly. Not quite a question.

PT Jones, despite his experiences, particularly in the last months, hoped so too. Only he couldn't say it: the anxiety gnawed away at his belly. He wished he could say “*I love you*” or something equally beloved of the duplicitous character of women, that she would carry on her sleeve until a better quote came along. But damn logic stopped him. Instead he said:

“I care about you, very, very much... and I want us to be real friends ... forever.” That was a lie. Except for *forever*.

He wanted to make her his: absolutely, *forever* in a way that would ensure their relationship, regardless of the pointless indicators of reality, not extend its lease for just a few more weary months. No. *Forever*. But in the scheme of things, he would have to be very

careful, that's the way it was and that's the way he'd play it, because in the shifting universe that had once been The AutoPass Corporation, the universe that had encompassed PT Jones the undead and Christiane Moore the whore, *forever* could turn out to be a very short, a cruelly bitter time.

Rifraff

## Chapter 9

### *PT Jones*

*PT Jones* had not communicated with, or heard from, DiDi Martin for more than a month now. The real problem had been communication on the lam, as he moved from place to place. If the agency had been the real thing, then that might well have worked out otherwise.

As it was, he had also had continuing communication problems with Claudia Hamer (and the world in general) and the fact that he'd told DiDi that he would be out of touch for a while complicated his thoughts about the situation between the two of them.

To have two affairs on the go at the same time, thousands of miles apart seems on the surface to be fairly simple, but there was more to it than simply distance. The phenomenon of the proverbial two buses arriving at the same time had reared its ugly head, he'd found himself desperate for someone, but now - in short, he'd had what was for him, a rare attack of guilt - he felt like a rat.

Often enough in earlier days he'd played women off against each other without understanding the personal damage he'd caused them. And then of course, there was the complicating factor sent to finally skew the chemistry: his old, real, love for Christiane. That was awful, painful, and awkward, which started his problems all off again in stereo, this time.

It was with such thoughts in his mind that he approached the whole idea of starting and halting his communication with DiDi. He composed a letter: a gently off-putting one. He would have to be subtle; after all, she had been uncommonly loving and gentle to him, it was the least he could do.

Then he sent it to her at the settlement at Blue River. There wasn't much to the address: everyone for a hundred miles would know who and where she was, there were only a few houses in that valley by the river.

The complication of not having a telephone was actually a rare let-out for him. Just what would he have to say that wouldn't actually hurt, anyway? His love for Christiane was, whether he liked it or not, the big thing in his life: this time at least he was in and then out of the jaws of a dilemma: he simply could not let Christiane Moore get away from him ever again, because despite himself, PT Jones had known right from the start that he was in love with Christiane Moore for keeps,

for *his* mortal ever and however much he struggled, in his mind the barbed wire of the thought seemed to snare him ever more securely.

No, nothing could change that, it was written in the scarred stone of Johnson's Bluff, the broken body of JJ Grimme and in the tattered fragments of duralumin lying in the Mexico/Arizona desert, near Nogales.

**He received the first letter he'd written** to DiDi, back, after about two weeks. The second one followed six days later. He found it absurd that they were stamped: *NO SUCH PERSON* and *NO SUCH ADDRESS*, because he'd been there, he'd lived there, after all.

But for every letter he sent her he received the same reply: DiDi Martin had never appeared on the postal roll: either that or... well, what? He wrote to the Sheriff's Office at Blue River and asked him to investigate. After an interval he received a very polite letter back, that the person he was seeking was unknown in

those parts. They apparently thought him slightly mad. His hackles rose. Everything in his mind seemed to go blank.

From the point-of-view of a Private Eye, the DiDi Martin thing was a mystery all waiting to be unraveled, whereas from the point of view of her lover it was a bizarre nightmare which had failed so far to yield a shred of evidence one way or the other. How could he tackle this?

Internet searches yielded nothing: university searches came to nothing. Searches of the Blue Mountain area yielded nothing up. He phoned the editor of the *'Blue Mountains Gazette'* and asked his advice. Nothing: they thought he was crazy too. How?

*DiDi was gone?*

For the first few days he was upset, in the grip of some sort of sick imagination which made him feel nauseous. Maybe she was *dead*?

But the upshot - of course - was that this blank moment in his existence, coming as it had at a critical moment, could perversely serve to clear the way

sufficiently for his relationship with Christiane at last to flourish, were he and she ever to be able to hold whatever it was they had, together long enough. Long enough for what? Ah, that was the question.

He'd have to work out the question sufficiently that there would be a workable answer that either of them could give back for it. Or else he'd be back in the darkness of a howling wind on a dangerous night, high over the desert, crying like a wolf at the moon for some kind of unearned forgiveness. How crazy!

**Fate** throws you some strange partners, strange bedfellows, trash, scum, riffraff; strange choices and even stranger chances. PT Jones knew that he would have to grasp this opportunity; it was the one he had hoped for, for a lifetime or more.

PT Jones the supposedly tragically dead fugitive billionaire - a.k.a. Francisco Villa, the suburban PI in a dusty coastal

backwater - a.k.a. the alternative dead-ringer for the *real* PT Jones. This, the *unreal*, suburban PT Jones – who for his own purposes no longer existed, even in the records where he had come from - which had anyway ceased to correlate long before - found himself lost in a heady liquor of guilt, regret, victory - and in the grip of that dread of the unknown that might lie ahead of him - rich in hidden minefields and unpleasant mantraps.

How would he cope with it? Why, he and Christiane Moore, someone he was learning to love once again, would cope with it *together*.

Such a thought, that they could join life-on-life with each other's lives - had never occurred to him before: of course, if they were to really be together, it was the only feasible thing, the only way. Up to then his stock excuse had been that he was so used to living and having to make out on his own, that he'd forgotten how to be simply *sociable*.

**And then it happened:** he opened his email one sleepy hot afternoon out at an Internet café on the edge of another flyblown town, and the flag came up *'Mail for You'*.

It was the email address he'd used for so long for Francisco Villa's business; most of the time it had remained irritatingly pristine, but this time the message it contained was a little over forty-eight hours old. Not only that, but it had an unfamiliar and surprising title in the 'senders' box: *'Federal Agencies'*.

His curiosity engaged he clicked on the button over the update line which read, cryptically: *'Information - Secure Server 097'* and then jumped as if he'd been slapped in the face as the message hit the screen.

He read it over and over several times before it even began to make any kind of sense to him: it read:

*'...we hear that you have been of great help to one of our agents in the field. We would like to take this opportunity to thank*

*you and also to inform you that, due to your absence at your office address certain business documentation has now been passed-on directly to your client who we understand was dealing with the matter of (Mr C's name was here) and that if we are in future in receipt of further documentation or information concerning this person we will pass it on to you at your office, immediately.*

*Nothing of this message must be seen by or spoken of with any third party.*

*Any quotations about it or information about this agency message will be denied.*

*This email cannot be copied or printed out. Please destroy it.*

*It is in your interests to secure the confidentiality of this matter.*

*Do not reply to this email, it has been sent by secure automated server equipment.*

*Again, thank you.'*

The email was referenced CC/DD Fdc: with a number following it. That was all.

Next, the name search of DiDi Martin he'd made in the academic areas that she'd declared as hers drew blanks: as for Claudia Hamer; well, time would tell. He'd neither had the time nor the energy sufficient to chase that up.

The cryptic Special Agents CC and DD seemed not to be sufficiently cryptic to be anything but literal: perhaps he'd been the lover of both of them, maybe not, nevertheless, the shock was sufficient that it took him a while to fit this puzzle together among all the pieces of the other puzzles of recent days that did not wish to fit.

At least that'd cleared one thing: the sudden payoff he'd received from La Colorada was for info picked up and copied by some federal agency or other and passed on to her direct. Well, it'd saved him the postage, at least.

The question remained - who were those people anyway - could they be the FBI, who operate worldwide and thus have the ability to pounce anywhere at any time - or some other office he'd

never suspected - and had they been routinely watching for the end's of all world's, or just for passing shadows, Riffraff, people like them?

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Olympia Press, London  
Olympiapresslondon.com  
Olympia Publishing MMXIII  
The Bookstreet Group MMXIII