



Paul Sinor

**WRATH
OF THE
DIXIE
MAFIA**

**A Mystery Novel of
Johnny Morocco, Dixie Detective**

He didn't want to get involved, hadn't wanted to be the one to find the body, but now that he had, he was stuck with the consequences...

"What do you want from me?" Johnny asked.

"Thomas said you knew he didn't kill that man, but he can't prove it," she said. "You know if they find him, he's gonna automatically be guilty and he'll go to the chain gang for the rest of his life or to the electric chair if they can make it happen. That would kill my mama. You can't let them do it to him. You're his only hope, so please help him." There was a long pause and then she added, "Please, Mister Johnny."

Johnny signaled for another bottle of beer as he spoke into the phone. "The Atlanta Police are handling the case. I don't have anything to do with it one way or another." The bartender sat the bottle on top of the juke box. Johnny handed him a quarter then waved him off.

"But you could look into it, couldn't you?" Rachel's voice was cracking. "I—I can pay you some money. Not much, but I have a little."

"I don't know..." His voice trailed off. "I've never done anything like this before. I don't know if I'm the right person."

"What do you mean you've never done anything like this before? You've never worked on a murder case or you've never tried to help a Negro?"

Johnny Morocco hit Atlanta, Georgia in 1953. The former army military policeman changed his name from McDonald and used his military training to become a licensed PI. Johnny's "office" was a pool room called Big Town in the heart of the city. His clients were the players and the occasional lawyer who came in on their lunch hour. Johnny's luck ran out the morning he came into Big Town and found a dead man lying on a pool table. With only Thomas the Negro rack boy in the building, Thomas would be the prime suspect.

Once Johnny decided to help Thomas, he found himself caught between emerging crime syndicates in Atlanta, Miami, and the casinos controlled by Myer Lansky in Havana. Cheating wives, roadhouse murders, imported muscle, marked cards, loaded dice, and a dangerous woman named Rachel were but a few of the roadblocks Johnny faced in his task.

With Atlanta Police Detective Sergeant Jack Brewer looking for both the killer and the money the dead man was supposed to be carrying, Johnny must use all his training and instincts to protect not only himself but Thomas as well. If he fails, they both will suffer the Wrath of The Dixie Mafia.

KUDOS for *Wrath of the Dixie Mafia*

In *Wrath of the Dixie Mafia* by Paul Sinor, Johnny Morocco is a PI in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1953. When he discovers a dead body lying on a pool table, he doesn't realize the trouble it's going to cause him. His colored friend Thomas, who worked at the pool hall where the dead man was found, becomes the prime suspect, simply because he is colored. Johnny is convinced his friend didn't do it, but how to prove it? And since the dead man was supposed to be carrying a large amount of money, the cops and the Dixie Mafia are watching his every move, just in case he's the one who took it. Like his previous book, *Dancing in the Dark*, Sinor has crafted an intriguing mystery with hard-hitting characters and fast-paced action that will keep you turning pages way into the night. ~ Taylor Jones, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

Wrath of the Dixie Mafia by Paul Sinor is a historical mystery/thriller. Set in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1953, it's the story of Johnny Morocco, a former military policeman now a private detective. He's a good man, so when a black man Johnny knows is accused of a murder that he didn't commit, Johnny is honor bound to help him prove it. But what of the money the dead man had with him? The cops and the mafia think Johnny has it since he found the body. Now his life is in danger too. *Wrath of the Dixie Mafia* is a fast-paced, tension-filled mystery with a marvelous central character that you can't help but root for. This is one you'll want to read again and again. ~ Regan Murphy, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones and Regan Murphy*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, is not an isolated act conducted in front of a computer screen, an old-fashioned typewriter, or on a stack of yellow legal pads while sitting in a coffee shop. It is a collaboration of any number of people who help bring the words to life. Many of the people may never know of their contributions by way of a small snippet of dialog, a favorite phrase, or some other act or omission they may not even realize they contributed. In my own case, my fascination with “story” began when my grandmother, whom we called Mama Waller told me stories of what she referred to as the “old days.” If she was not the one telling the stories, it was my daddy, a member of America’s Greatest Generation, who rode the rails on freight trains, looking for work, survived the great depression and WWII, and loved to talk about it. To them, I owe my ability, if there is one, to tell a story.

To bring this book to life I have had the incredible pleasure to work with two outstanding editors, Judith Geary and Faith C. at Black Opal Books. I thank them for the attention to detail, and Jack Jackson for the cover art work that is spot on.

For their continued advice, encouragement, and suggestions, some of which I actually took, my daughters Colleen and Victoria and especially my wife Jewell for being there when I needed her.

Mistakes, errors, omissions, and other things you don’t like or agree with that you may find in this work are mine and mine alone.

WRATH OF THE DIXIE MAFIA

Paul Sinor

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: HISTORICAL/MYSTERY-DETECTIVE/THRILLER

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DEDICATION

This one is for my daddy, Ben Sinor, who lived the stories I can only write about and share with those who did not know him. I miss you more with every beat of my heart.

CHAPTER 1

Johnny Morocco stepped off the downtown bus at Five Points in Atlanta a few minutes after seven, walked across the street, and headed for Edgewood Avenue. Even at that early hour in the spring of 1953, the streets were filling with the workers who swarmed into the largest city in the South. Like any big city, Atlanta had its own signature. That morning it smelled of azaleas, fresh brewed coffee, exhaust fumes, and opportunity. Around him, Johnny heard the sound of car and truck horns, an occasional siren as a police or ambulance answered a call, and the chiming of the massive clock at City Hall, mixed with the voices of the city's workers and strangers as they started another day.

Seven was early, even for Johnny, but he had tossed and turned throughout the night as he relived days and nights spent in North Africa and Italy in the army during the war. He usually was able to keep the memories safely hidden away, but sometimes they escaped and attacked him as he slept. The memories and the shakes and sweats they caused were behind him as he headed for Big Town. He expected that, even at this hour, Thomas the rack boy and janitor would already have coffee brewing. A cup of Thomas's coffee and the morning paper would be enough to get him started for the day.

Big Town was a pool room. You could shoot a game for fun, a beer or a couple of bucks. In Big Town the beer was

cold, the chili dogs were hot, and no self-respecting woman ever climbed the stairs to the second floor establishment.

It was also where hustlers came for a game. When an out-of-towner came in, the tables cleared and professional hustlers with names like Willie Mosconi and Minnesota Fats took on all comers in a game of rotation, bank or nine-ball. The stakes were as high as the crowd could afford.

There would be no games shot on table number seven this day. That's where a body lay, blood still seeping from the hole in his chest.

When Johnny tried the street level door leading to the second floor where Big Town was located, it was unlocked. Good. Thomas was on time. He usually came in about seven in the morning to restock the beer cooler, put the chili on to cook and clean up after the previous night's crowd left. Atlanta had a two a.m. closing time for pool rooms, bars, and the other places considered unsavory, but its lax enforcement was tolerated by the city fathers.

With a light breeze blowing, many of the men on the street wore jackets. The jacket Johnny wore was not so much to protect him from the possible chill, but to cover the .45 automatic pistol in his shoulder holster. This was the same style weapon he carried for the five plus years he served in the US Army, in North Africa, Italy and in the Occupation of Japan. During that time, he carried it in a holster on his hip. Now it rested in a brown leather shoulder holster with a large US embossed on it he purchased at an Army/Navy surplus store for fifty cents. This was the kind of holster used by men who were assigned to tanks. The holster he picked out of the pile on the table at the store had a small dark brown spot on the corner which could have been either blood or a scorch mark from a fire. Either way, Johnny felt the holster had already suffered as much as it could, and he would be safe wearing it.

As he pushed open the door, Johnny saw Eddie, the local bug runner making his morning stop at the shoe repair shop that occupied the ground floor of the building he was about

to enter. Eddie was making the payoff delivery. The *bug* was the name given to the lottery, although illegal, played by many of the people of the city. The owner or one of his two family members who worked there had picked the right numbers and won. Eddie would return in the afternoon to pick up the slips for the numbers played that day.

Eddie held up a hand, acknowledging Johnny. The smell of leather and shoe polish rushed from the open door as he stood there. The old man who owned the shop had been a refugee from Eastern Europe a few years before the war started. The locals said that during the war no American military person could pay for having his or her shoes repaired or shined in the shop.

“Morning, Eddie. What was the bug last night?” Johnny asked, referring to the three digit number taken from the closing stock market report in the *Atlanta Journal* each evening.

“Nine three seven, Mister John. Always a good number for Tuesday.” Eddie was in his late teens, still close enough to the farm to retain the belief that colored folks addressed white men as mister.

“Check with me on Friday. I’ve got a good number I want to play.” As Johnny stepped into the stairway, he noticed the bulb at the top of the stairs was out and the only illumination in the entryway was the natural light from the early morning sun. As soon as he stepped inside he was hit with the odor of stale beer and day old bar rags. Missing was the smell of fresh brewed coffee. Johnny took the steps two at a time until he reached the top.

The well-worn wooden stairs ended just in front of the main bar. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, Johnny expected to see Thomas either behind the bar or mopping the floor. Thomas lived with his mother and sister in a section of Atlanta known as Cabbage Town. It was not far from the center of the city, yet Atlanta, and all it had to offer, might as well have been a million miles away for most of the people who lived in Cabbage Town.

Thomas walked with a limp from an injury he received during WWII. It was just after D-Day and medical treatment, especially for the few Negro units on the front was catch-as-catch-can. Once when one of the men in Big Town made a joke about Thomas's limp, he said he had earned it the hard way in France. That gave Thomas an instant boost in stature with all the men who had also served.

The large room that was Big Town was divided in half by the bar. Each half had two rows of seven pool tables. The walls were lined with tall wooden chairs where men sat while they waited for their next shot on the table. The bookies and players sat in those chairs when they listened to the bank of radios broadcasting the day's selection of baseball games.

"Hey, Thomas? You got the coffee ready?" Johnny stood on the landing at the top of the stairs and looked around. Like the stairway, the room was unusually dark.

"Thomas?" he called cautiously and the feeling that something was not right formed a shiver running from the back of his neck to the tips of his fingers. He usually liked to go on more than instinct, but it was something he trusted and, when it happened, he responded.

To the right, a light was shining over one of the tables. Overhead, suspended horizontally from two five foot lengths of black electrical wire was a three foot long florescent light. It was kept from swinging by cables which ran from the corners of the light to the high ceiling where they were secured. A second wire ran the length of the room over each table. This wire had a row of wooden numbers which could be slid across with the tip of the pool cue. The players kept score with the numbers. In the middle of each row of numbers was the larger number identifying the table.

The only light over table number seven was shining down. It was the only light in the room which was on as Johnny walked toward it. Johnny knew what the light was shining on. The only question was when the "what" would turn into a "who?"

Johnny cautiously approached. It was an instinct born of war and, within the next few steps, he knew what he was going to find. Lying on table number seven was a body. The blood draining from the body stained a dark circle beneath his left shoulder on the green felt of the pool table. A blood-red stain had stopped spreading on his chest. His white shirt looked like someone had poked a small hole just under the pocket on the left side, leaving him the ultimate in a broken heart.

Johnny reached into his own shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes. Carefully placed behind the pack of cigarettes was the small, black, Zippo lighter he had carried throughout the war. With its square edges, it stood upright between his own flesh and whatever might invade it.

“Maybe if you had one of *these*,” he said as he flipped open the top, spun the wheel, and touched the flame to his cigarette, “you’d still be here.”

Johnny looked at the lighter he had carried and remembered the man who had been saved when a lighter in his pocket took the hit and stopped a bullet. From that day on, Johnny and almost everyone he knew who was there at the time, carried a Zippo in the shirt pocket over their heart. He hardly ever used it to light cigarettes, and a lighter probably wouldn’t stop another bullet for the next hundred years, but it was always there. Just in case.

Johnny sensed the movement before he heard the sound. He quickly turned toward the noise, squatted slightly, and listened. As he heard it again, he pulled his jacket open so he had quick and easy access to his weapon. The sound was like a door being opened or closed. Johnny was not foolish enough to simply walk toward it. With one dead man on the table beside him, there was no way of knowing if the noisemaker also wanted Johnny to go for a Daily Double. That was a bet he had no interest in.

Johnny had a license to carry, so without waiting to see or hear anything else, he eased the .45 caliber automatic from

its resting place in the holster. He maintained the crouch as he walked toward the sound.

Johnny took several steps and saw the source of the sound. It was Thomas.

“Don’t shoot me, Mister Johnny. I ain’t had nothing to do with that argument back there.” Thomas held his hands in the air. Behind him was his mop bucket with the long wooden handle of his mop protruding like a flag pole awaiting the raising of the colors. The smell of stale mop-water filled the air.

“Do you know what happened here, Thomas?” Johnny holstered his weapon.

“Oh, Lawdy, Mister Johnny. That man’s dead, ain’t he?” Thomas had already begun to back up as he spoke. “I got’s to get out of here. They find a dead white man in here wit’ me bein’ the only colored man around, I’ll be hanging before the sun sets.” He backed away and almost tripped over the mop handle as he headed for the door.

“Not yet, Thomas. You need to talk to me before you leave.” Johnny took Thomas by the arm and led him to the table where the man lay. He walked around the table and, for the first time, saw the weapon lying next to the body. “What time did you get here this morning?” He turned to face Thomas.

Thomas was shaking. “’Bout the same I do every day. Little before seven. I catch the bus at six thirty and it takes me to Five Points. I walks from there. Take about five minutes.” He looked at Johnny, his eyes wide with fear. “I swear on my mama’s grave, Mister Johnny, I didn’t do that man no harm.” He took a step closer to the body. “Oh, Lawdy, that man done died right there on that table. I got’s to go. I got’s to go right now, and I ain’t never coming back. You know that’s the truth, Mister Johnny. No matter what you say, the po-lice gonna say it was me. Ain’t no getting ’round that.”

By this time, his shaking was making it hard to understand his words. He was still talking as he turned and headed for the steps.

CHAPTER 2

Johnny had arrived, in more ways than one, in Atlanta in the spring of 1952. Two years earlier, he was still in the army and was known as Sergeant John McDonald.

When the war in Europe ended, Johnny was sent from Italy to Japan as a part of the invasion forces. When the two atomic bombs ended the war, invasion forces quickly became occupation forces. Unlike his time in North Africa and Italy, in Japan, as a military policeman, he had it made. He had his own jeep and a nice place to live. His off-duty companion, Miko, was a young, attractive, Japanese college student who lost her family during the war. For about the cost of a hamburger and a Coke back home, he could have her for a week. She stayed with him for almost six months before moving in with a lieutenant who graduated too late from West Point to make the war. The butter-bar volunteered to come to Japan to make his mark during the occupation.

The first thing he did after taking Johnny's companion was to get drunk and throw up in front of General McArthur one night at the officer's club. The next week, Miko came back asking if she could be Johnny's special lady again. By that time, he had orders ending his tour in Japan.

Five weeks later, he was assigned to a military police detachment at Fort Benning, Georgia.

The war had ended, most of the military forces had returned home, and life in uniform became routine. When

Johnny was a teenager in West Palm Beach, Florida, he boxed at the local YMCA and then moved on to be city champion in the middle-weight division of Golden Gloves. He boxed a few matches in North Africa and in Japan, but at Fort Benning, he joined the boxing team and gained a reputation as a scrappy fighter who took some of the hardest shots his opponents had and always came back for more.

Across the Chattahoochee River from the city of Columbus, Georgia, the gate town for Fort Benning, was a small Alabama town that resembled any city the old west of the late 1800s had to offer. Phenix City was known around the world as a wide-open Mecca for prostitution, gambling, and drinking and where the cost of having a rival killed was well within the budget of even the lowest ranking private at Fort Benning. Prior to WWII, General Patton had threatened, or rather promised, the mayor that if one more of his men was found floating in the river, he would bring an entire armored division's tanks across the state line and level the city. With Patton gone and the threat removed, it was business as usual for the city of multiple sins.

Johnny's training and his ability with his fists meant he spent many nights as a military policeman roaming the streets of both Columbus and Phenix City, looking for drunk or missing soldiers. Most were quickly found in the numerous whore houses, while a few were never seen again.

It was not unusual for Johnny and his partner to visit several of the better-known bars and whore houses in Phenix City and Columbus. They got to know a few of the women and some of their regular customers on a first-name basis.

One night on a joint patrol with a Columbus police officer, they pulled a car over that was being driven by a drunk driver. The driver turned out to be the wife of the mayor of Phenix City. Johnny volunteered to drive her home when they recognized who she was. They knew if they gave her a ticket it would be torn up as soon as her husband made one call the next morning.

The drive home turned into another hour sitting with her as she drank coffee and told Johnny how miserable she was. Before he left, she pulled him to her, and with whiskey breath that could peel wallpaper, she gave him a long lingering kiss. The kiss and the potential it held were not lost on Johnny. That night led to several other late night rendezvous and ultimately getting caught by her husband.

Within twelve hours of the mayor coming home unexpectedly and Johnny leaving through a bedroom window, he was out of the army and standing at the Muskogee County line. He had a duffle bag at his feet and his thumb out, facing south and home to Florida.



In West Palm Beach, he tried to make it in several jobs. He drove a milk truck, sold tires at an auto store and worked as an insurance salesman. Each lasted a few days or at the most a couple of weeks. Johnny didn't want to live with his parents, so he took a room in a boarding house that was home to other recently discharged veterans who, like Johnny, were still looking for their place in post-war society.

One evening the telephone in the downstairs sitting room rang. A former first sergeant from an infantry unit who was now working as a house painter answered it.

"Hey, Johnny, it's for you. He didn't say who it was. You want me to find out?"

The man was dressed in white coveralls splattered with paint and smelled of alcohol. One night Johnny learned the smell could come from real whiskey or paint thinner. He was sitting on the end of the porch in the early evening shadows when the painter came home. Johnny watched, first in curiosity and then in fear, as the painter took the top off a can of a paint thinner made from denatured alcohol. He placed several slices of bread over an empty, and hopefully clean, paint can. Johnny watched him pour the alcohol over the bread to

filter it. When the second can was full, the man noticed Johnny and offered him a drink. The drink was quickly turned down and the offer was not repeated. Johnny had watched as the can was emptied, one drink at a time.

“No, I’ll get it.” Johnny sat at the top of the steps leading up to the old house while he read the evening paper. He folded it, placed it on the step, and walked into the house.

The main room was a large area which had once been part of the living room of a very expensive home. Now it was divided into two rooms. One still served as the living room, but the other half had been converted to another bedroom when the war started and the military came to town. With more men in town than rooms, everyone with a house rented their spare rooms to the military. This house was owned by an older couple whose children had all moved out long ago. The house always smelled of furniture polish and kitchen grease. Johnny stood by the now thread-bare couch as he picked up the handset.

“Hey, Johnny!”

He recognized the voice on the other end immediately. It was David Gladstone, a man he had known since they were in grammar school. David joined the navy the day after Pearl Harbor, and they had not seen each other in over six years when Johnny came home. Once they both returned to West Palm Beach, they had met by chance in a bar one evening, and the war and its separation soon ceased to be a topic of conversation.

“Yeah, I still got my camera. Film? Yeah, I got some of that too.” Johnny spoke while the painter, whose name he did not know, sat at the end of the couch and listened.

“Hang on a second.” Johnny put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to the eavesdropper. “Don’t you have something to do someplace else?”

The painter started to protest, then slowly rose from the seat and walked away.

“Okay, I’m back. I can meet you at that place on Okeechobee Road in an hour.”

He replaced the handset and climbed the stairs to his second floor room. In earlier times, his room had probably belonged to a young boy, as there were three sets of initials carved inconspicuously low into the baseboard. Each had a heart around them with a plus sign in the middle. In each set, one pair of initials were the same; the others were different. When Johnny saw them he thought of his youth and lost loves. He often wondered if the boy went to war, and if so, had he made it back, but he didn't have the nerve to ask the owners of the house.

Johnny pulled his camera from the back of the small closet in his room. He had traded for it on the black market in Japan. It was one of the best available and he got it for two cartons of cigarettes. Smokes were worth more than money in occupied Japan. You could get a woman for a week for a couple of packs. For a carton, Johnny found out, the women did things he had never even heard of until he got to Tokyo.

He pulled the camera bag from beneath a pile of clothing, slung it over his shoulder, and went downstairs. Tonight he had a *job*.



Johnny pulled his car into the white crushed shell parking lot of the drive-in restaurant on Okeechobee Road. Two long sheds with tin roofs where cars pulled in with their noses pointed to the sidewalk led from the sheds to the inside of the restaurant. The car hops, old Negro men in white shirts and black pants, quickly ran from the building to the cars as they pulled in. As soon as Johnny cut the engine, an old man was standing by the open driver's window.

"Evenin' Suh. What'll it be tonight? The beer's cold, and the barbecue ain't. Only thang that'd be better is if you had a lady friend with you." He leaned closer as he dropped his voice. "Course, if you was a mind to, I 'spect we could find you one of them too." When Johnny didn't respond, he

changed his patter. "It sho' is hot tonight, but I think we're gonna get some rain. You know, when you gets to be my age, you can almost feel the rain in your bones afore it even crosses the county line. You just wait. Someday, you'll be old, and you'll know what I mean."

"Just bring me a sandwich, sliced pork, and a Pabst. Tell 'em to put some extra hot sauce on it, too. I'll pass on your other offer." Johnny didn't want one of the women they were pushing from the bar. He'd seen too many guys get more than they bargained for when they got a girl sight unseen.

One of the things his mother sent him when he was in the army was an occasional bottle of hot sauce from the barbecue stand. He doled it out almost a drop at the time to liven up the endless boxes of K-Rations. When they got to a location where they had real cooked food, the sauce even made the powdered eggs somewhat palatable.

Johnny turned the dial on the radio as he waited for his food. All he was able to pick up was a station in West Palm Beach that came in with very little static. He alternated rolling the windows up and down. With them down, the mosquitoes were all over him, but with them up the heat was stifling. He was in the process of rolling them down again, when the passenger's door opened and David Gladstone slid into the front seat.

"Easy on the cloth. They're still not making covers that'll fit this one." Like most returning vets, Johnny didn't have a car. He drove the old 1937 Plymouth sedan he borrowed from his dad. He already had his eye on a 1941 sedan. It was rusty red in color, and he had driven it a couple of times when he went to the used car lot where it sat. He had almost enough to buy it, but, like everything else in his life, it would have to wait

There weren't any automobiles made from 1941 until the war ended. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, all automobile assembly line production was dedicated to turning out Jeeps and other pieces needed for the war. It took a year to get things back to normal on the lines after V-J Day.

“You got your camera?”

“You told me to bring it, didn’t you?”

“Don’t get your ass on your shoulders. If we do this right tonight, we’ll split twenty dollars. How’s that sound?” David leaned across the seat when the car hop brought a tray with Johnny’s sandwich and beer.

“Hey, tell that ol’ Jake to bring me a sandwich and a bottle of whatever it is you’re drinking.” He handed Johnny a fifty-cent piece. “And I want my change, too.”

The old man opened the two legs of the tray and hooked the back lip over the window. He adjusted them so that the legs rested against the driver’s door and held the tray steady and level at window height.

“Here.” Johnny handed him a quarter for the beer and fifteen cents for the sandwich. “He’s gonna give you the tip when you bring another sandwich and another beer.” He placed the fifty cent piece on the corner of the tray.

“Another Pabst, suh?”

David leaned across the front seat and spoke to the car hop. “Damn right, and it better be cold if you expect to keep that change.”

“Don’t you gentlemens worry. I’m gonna earn that tip.”



It was barely dark when they pulled from the drive-in and headed south on Okeechobee Road. The winter had passed and with hardly a notice, spring had turned into early summer. The almost tropical climate of West Palm Beach meant many flowers were in full bloom. Oleander bushes, heavy with white blooms and enough poison on each bush to kill a dozen people lined the sides of the road.

“Up here, turn right.” David pointed to an upcoming intersection. “It’s about a mile on up from here.”

Johnny slowed for the light. “Don’t you think you might want to wait a little longer?”

“Wait. Why?”

“If you’re trying to get a picture of the woman with her boyfriend, you might want to give them time to get undressed and in bed.”

A large truck loaded with vegetables from one of the many farms closer to Lake Okeechobee crossed the road in front of them. The smell of fresh-cut celery filled the night air as it passed.

David shook his head. “They ain’t got all night. The guy’s married to some Jap broad he brought home in ’forty-six, so he’s got to hurry so he can get home to her. The husband that hired us said the little wife’s always sitting at home, like nothing’s been going on, by nine when he gets back from bowling on Thursdays. It’s almost seven now, so that don’t give them much time to do the nasty.”

Johnny drove slowly down the street. They passed several houses still showing damage from the hurricane of 1949. One house had its roof completely lifted off in one piece and then dropped into the back yard. The walls of the house still stood. Windows—cracked, broken and missing—told the story of the neighborhood’s compassion for the former residents. In all likelihood, once the storm passed, the people who lived there came back, salvaged what they could from the rain-soaked interior and left town. That is, if they themselves survived the storm’s fury.

“Does he know she lets this guy in every week?”

“He must. He’s giving us twenty smackers to prove it.” David leaned out the window to get a good read on the house numbers. “Slow down, we’re getting close. He said the address was One Hundred Fourteen Chickamauga. That house we just passed was Two Hundred.”

Johnny depressed the clutch and slipped the long, floor mounted gear shift into second. The extra torque on the engine slowed it without the use of brakes and the accompaniment of lights, in case anyone was curious about the strange car in the neighborhood.

“Look. Over there.” David pointed across the street. “The guy’s supposed to have a ’thirty-four Buick. That must be it.”

Parked on the side of the road was a massive black sedan. The four-door car was a favorite of gangsters of the Depression era. It was heavy, fast, and had doors that, when opened, formed a wall from which to shoot.

“You ever shoot a Thompson, Johnny?”

“Yeah, I had one for a couple of months in North Africa. Why?”

“Just wondered.”

“You didn’t say anything about a Thompson. Is this guy supposed to have a gun?”

“Naw, everything’s gonna be okay. Trust me.” David opened the door as they rolled slowly and silently down the street. “Let me out here for a second.”

Before Johnny could say anything, David jumped from the car and headed for the Buick. Even in the waning light, Johnny saw the massive switchblade knife as David flicked it open. With a deft motion, David made two stabbing moves as he walked quickly across the ground in front of the car and both front tires hissed as they lost air pressure. He was back in the car before Johnny was fifty feet from where he had jumped.

“Okay, pull over and park. It’s time to go to work.”

They walked slowly toward the front yard of the house at One Hundred Fourteen. Two doors down, an old man sat on his front porch. He gave them a half-hearted nod in polite recognition of their presence.

“Just go up to the front door like we know the folks here. He gave me a key, so pretend to knock and while you do that, I’ll unlock the door. The bedroom’s across to the left. There ain’t but three rooms, so we won’t have any trouble finding it.” David held up a black skeleton key that probably fit half the front door locks in the city. “You just get that camera ready. We need to get them together in the bedroom.

It don't matter what they're doing, just so long as they're doing it in the bedroom."

They approached the house down a walkway in the front yard. The sweet smell of night blooming angel trumpets filled the air. Both sides of the cement walkway were lined with roses and other flowers in full bloom. A large bush with red flowers that Johnny did not recognize partially covered the small front stoop. They stood in front of the door while David slipped the key into the square black metal lock and turned the white door knob. With hardly a sound, the door swung open. Both men quickly stepped inside.

"Over there," David whispered as he pointed to the left. "That's the bedroom." The sounds coming from the room left no doubt that the people in it were making love in the most primitive manner.

"Damn. Listen to that." David had to suppress a giggle.

Johnny hesitated as he unsnapped the cover from the camera. He reached into his pocket and pulled out two flashbulbs. He placed one in the flash attachment and put the other one in his mouth ready to use as soon as he popped the first one out.

Johnny saw the low stool before David did. With a flashbulb in his mouth, he could only mumble before David tripped over it and fell into a table holding a lamp. Within seconds of the lamp crashing to the floor, the man was out of the bedroom and headed toward them. Johnny held his ground and got one picture.

The photo showed a naked man with a baseball bat in his hand swinging it in Johnny's direction. The next photo, if he had been able to get it, would have shown that same man connecting with the bat breaking Johnny's arm as he and David ran for their lives.



Johnny's broken arm kept him from working his job as a laborer on a construction crew. He normally carried bricks and mixed and pushed wheelbarrows filled with cement for the experienced brick layer. With no job, he had to move back home and, for the next six weeks, Johnny lived on his mustering out pay from the army. He did not collect all of his pay while on active duty so when he finally got to a pay master he was amazed at how much the army owed him.

He still slept in the room he had occupied in his parent's home as long as he could remember. As an only child, Johnny had been one of the lucky ones in the crowd he ran with. He didn't have to share a bedroom, wear hand-me-downs, or fight over who sat where in the back seat of his dad's car. He also had no one to blame when he got caught at something his parents did not approve of, and he got caught a lot.

By the end of the first month, Johnny knew it was time for a change and, once he decided to change, he went for the gold ring.



"More coffee, Johnny," his mother asked as she took the aluminum percolator off the stove.

"No—yes, pour me another cup and have a seat, Ma, I want to talk to you and Dad."

"What's up, son?" His father was shoveling a fluffy, buttered biscuit in his mouth as he spoke.

"I'm getting my cast off tomorrow, and I think it's time I left home—"

"You know you don't have to do that, son. It was just bad luck that you broke your arm. Nothing else," his mother said as she sipped her coffee.

"Sometimes I think if it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have any luck at all."

His mother sat heavily in a chair. “Johnny, you can stay here as long as you like. You know we don’t mind. We’ve missed you so much during the war.”

“I know, but I can’t live in my old room forever. I’m going to Atlanta. To—to—start over. I need to get away from here. Not you two, but here. This city. The people I know and who know me. I’ve got to make a fresh start, and I want to do it in Atlanta. I’m sorry, but I’ve made up my mind.” He noticed when he rose from the table his mother was wiping tears from her eyes.

All of that was behind him. He had made the change he wanted.

Once he got to Atlanta, Johnny McDonald changed his name to Johnny Morocco. Six months later, he had a license and worked as a private investigator in Atlanta, Georgia.

CHAPTER 3

The Atlanta Police Department was housed in a gray stone building on Decatur Street. From the outside, the stones looked like they were rescued from the rubble of a medieval castle destroyed long ago. Inside, whether you were a police officer, a petty criminal, or a family member of either, you might as well have been in the castle's dungeon. Dark and dank, it smelled of stale cigarette smoke, urine, and sweat. It was the frightened sweat of the men and women, pulled from the streets for crimes they may or may not have committed, mixed with the sweat of honest work from the few cops who tried to make a difference.

Detective Sergeant Jack Brewer was not part of the latter group. He got the gold shield of a detective ten years earlier when he was forty one. In those ten years, he bullied his way into and out of every scam known to the department. He was credited with two justified shootings, and at least five suspensions for offenses ranging from excessive force to kick-backs.

He was the first person Johnny called.

"Brewer, here. Who's this?" His voice had the edge of a lifelong smoker, punctuated by periodic coughing spasms.

"Sergeant Brewer, it's Johnny Morocco. You working the day shift today?" Johnny stood by the pay phone and watched the steps leading up to the second floor as he spoke.

“Why? You wanna take me to dinner? I go at noon and—” Before he could finish, he began to cough.

“No, but I got something here you may want to see.”

“If you’re at Big Town, it’s too early for any of the usual low-life’s to be there. What’d you do, hit the bug?”

In the background, Johnny heard the sound of another detective as he interrogated a suspect. The man was obviously in pain as the detective told him in no uncertain terms what he was about to do to him. As he listened, Johnny then heard him do it.

“No. This is serious,” Johnny said. “I don’t want to say anything over the phone, but you may want to come down here and bring a black and white with you. A meat wagon’s probably a good idea, too.” Johnny hung up the phone before Brewer could ask any more questions.

For the entire time he’d worked as a private investigator, Johnny had used Big Town as his office and primary source of employment. Most of his work came from the men who frequented the pool room. Even they occasionally needed a PI to gather information for a divorce or a lawsuit. Two of the regulars who stopped by and shot a game of pool on their lunch break were local attorneys. Another was an insurance agent. He got work from them on a regular basis.

Johnny walked back to table number seven. The man was still there and he was still dead. There was no doubt about it. Johnny took another cigarette from the pack, lit it, and pulled the smoke deeply into his lungs. He let the smoke roll from his lips and out his nose as he leaned over the body.

For a fleeting second, Johnny was back in uniform. Back in North Africa. Back in the war. Before he stepped off the transport ship that carried him to combat, Johnny had seen only one dead body in his life. He attended his grandfather’s funeral when he was in first grade. He remembered how much he wanted to talk to the man he called Papa just one more time. His father said he could talk to Papa but the old man could only listen. For the rest of his life, every time Johnny smelled roses, his first thought was of that day. One

dead body in his nineteen-year-old life. He broke that record the second day he was on the sands of North Africa.

In his mind, he was standing up in the passenger's seat of an army Jeep. He had on goggles to protect his eyes from the sand and a cloth was draped over his mouth and around his neck to keep the sand out of his clothes. Nothing worked. Every pore, every opening in his body filled with sand the day he stepped off the transport and landed into the middle of a war fought between the three greatest tacticians and megalomaniacs on either side—Patton and Montgomery for the Allies and Rommel for the Germans. Johnny stood in the Jeep, his mouth grinding sand with every word, his lungs filling with it with each breath, and looked at the dead men lining the road. Uniforms and philosophies were of no matter. They were all dead.

British, American, and German forces tried to recover their dead and bury them, but in many cases, by the time they were able to go look for them, they had been claimed by the desert sands. They were the first casualties of war Johnny had seen. Unfortunately, they would not be the last.

Johnny felt the bead of sweat form on his upper lip as he regained his composure. He walked around the table to get a better look at the man. He was wearing nice pants and a white, long-sleeved dress shirt. His feet were covered with two toned brown and white shoes, and he was wearing white socks. Johnny looked at the shoes for a long minute. There was something about them that seemed familiar. He couldn't place what it was at the moment. Surely it would come to him eventually.

The shirt was starched and nice looking except for the large red stain and the hole where the bullet entered his chest. There was probably an even larger hole in the back where it exited, and it was a sure bet the stain was much larger there than in the front.

The man's eyes were open, and it looked like he was staring at the corner of the light hanging overhead. Johnny looked up and smiled as he wondered if the dead man's last

thought was to worry about the spider web covering the end of the light and why someone hadn't cleaned it off.

Johnny was still looking at the man's body when he noticed the corner of a piece of paper sticking out of the man's watch pocket. Using the tips of his fingers, he slid the paper out. It was a receipt for a round of golf at Flat Rock Golf Course, a popular course just south of Atlanta.

Somehow the golf ticket didn't go with the Model 1911 army .45 caliber pistol lying beside the body. Whoever shot him wanted the search for the murder weapon to be an easy one.

Johnny sat on the end of the table next to number seven and stared at the body. "Is there something you want to tell me? Am I overlooking anything that could tell me who you are or what happened?" He spoke aloud to the dead man knowing if those questions got answered, they would not be verbalized by the man in front of him. He was still sitting when he heard someone call his name.

"Morocco? You up there?" Sergeant Brewer was chugging up the steps. By the time he got to the top, his breathing was already labored. "This better not be some kinda bullshit hustle."

The detective had passed his fifty-second birthday. He had spent most of those years with the Atlanta Police Department, first as a beat cop in the West End section of the city. When he made detective, he perfected his style of clothing from the many second-hand stores he shook down on the beat. He was wearing a brown suit, a wide tie, and he held a brown felt Stetson fedora. He stopped at the top of the stairs, pulled a soiled handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped the sweat from his face as he looked for Johnny.

"Over here. You can make up your own mind if it's a hustle or not." Johnny sat on the edge of the table across from number seven and waited for Brewer to come to him. It was almost nine and time for some of the regulars to start making their way to the pool room. Like Johnny, some of the men,

especially, the bookies, spent all day there during baseball season.

“I got a black and white downstairs. You owe both of them a beer next time they come up.” He made his way toward Johnny. “And if this ain’t—” He stopped in mid-sentence when he saw the body on the table. “You kill him?” Brewer’s hand was cautiously, and without his even noticing it, reaching behind his back for his weapon.

“No. He was dead when I got here. He almost bled out. It’s all over the table.” Johnny hopped down and walked toward Brewer. He held his hands in front of him, palms out.

Brewer dropped his reach and pulled a small notebook from his shirt pocket. He walked to the table, bent over, and looked at the man. “Whadda you think? He’s been dead...what...two hours?” He picked up the dead man’s hand and dropped it on the table. “He ain’t even started getting stiff, yet.” For the first time, he noticed the gun lying on the opposite side. “You carry a forty-five don’t you, Johnny?” He took out his handkerchief, wrapped it around the pistol, and dropped it into his jacket pocket. “And I’ll bet we got your prints on file from when you got your PI ticket.”

He turned to face Johnny. “And let me guess. You left your piece at home today. Am I right?” The detective reached into his other pocket and pulled out a single long wooden kitchen match. “You got a cigarette?” He held out his hand.

Johnny slowly pulled his jacket back to reveal his weapon still strapped in the holster. With his other hand, he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his cigarettes. “I’ll bet you’re smoking Luckies, today. Right?” Johnny tapped the pack against his outstretched index finger and a single cigarette popped loose.

“One of my favorites.” Brewer flicked the end of the match with his thumbnail, waited till the flame stabilized, and touched it to the tip of the cigarette hanging from the center of his mouth. He took a deep pull and walked around

the table where the body lay. “Looks familiar. Have I seen him in here before?”

“Could be. There’s a lot of men who come in here, shoot a game or two, and leave. Maybe he was one of them.” Johnny pulled a cigarette for himself from the pack. “Maybe you shot a game with him. That’s where you know him from.”

“I don’t think so. He’s dressed a lot nicer than the average low-life that calls this place home. He don’t look like a hustler, either.” Brewer stopped at the side of the table, looked closely at the blood stain on the man’s shirt. “You ever see somebody shot when you were in the army?”

“Yeah, a couple of times.”

Brewer continued without looking up. “How many did you shoot?”

“I’ve got an appointment with a client this morning. So if you don’t need me any more—”

Before he could finish, Brewer struck like a mongoose on a cobra. He grabbed Johnny by the front of his shirt and pushed him against the wall. “The only appointment you got today, or any other day ’till I tell you different is with me. I got a stiff on a pool table and a two-bit loser who thinks he’s Sherlock Holmes that calls me and tells me I better get my ass down to a hang-out for every petty thief, bookie, and hustler in Atlanta. That’s what I got. What you better have is a reason for me not to drag you down to the castle and drop your ass in the dungeon.”

Brewer slipped his hand inside Johnny’s jacket and pulled it back, revealing the weapon still in its holster. “Maybe you’re like one of them cowboys in the movies. You know, the ones that carry two guns.”

Johnny knew from experience that Brewer was not as friendly as he seemed on the surface. He had a reputation throughout the city as a cop who was not above breaking a law or an arm when it came to getting what he wanted. And all he wanted was a closed case. Guilt or innocence was de-

terminated by the courts. Brewer supplied the fodder for the justice system to grind.

“Okay. Okay, I was just doing my civic duty. I come in here, find a dead man on one of the pool tables, and you’re the first name that pops into my mind to call.” Johnny gently placed his hands atop Brewer’s and tapped them in an effort to get the man to loosen his grip. Nose-to-nose, Johnny could smell the sweet, rose-tinted scent of Brewer’s hair tonic.

Brewer removed his hands and stepped back. “You just caught me at a bad time, that’s all.” He raked his big hands over Johnny’s shirt, as if to smooth out the wrinkles. “The wife’s been after me to consider some other line of work. One that pays better, you know what I mean?” He began to walk toward a row of pin-ball machines sitting against the wall. “I was thinking maybe a car salesman. Everybody’s getting new cars now. Whadda you think? Would you buy a car from me?”

“Would you want your customers to sign the papers before or after you shook them down and slammed them against the hood of the car?”

Even Brewer laughed at that. “You know I ain’t that bad...am I?”

It was not unusual for Detective Sergeant Jack Brewer to visit Big Town with his hand out. Everyone knew that gambling was against the law in Atlanta, but it was overlooked unless there was a politician who needed a cause. To keep politicians from servicing that cause in Big Town, Brewer was the man the owner called when he heard of any actions directed toward him or his business. During football season, Brewer usually played a parlay card each weekend. He never did it in person, but everyone knew the runner who brought it in was working for Brewer.

“You got a nickel?” Brewer turned to face Johnny. He was standing in front of a Shooting Gallery game. For a nickel, the player got to fire twenty electronic shots at a variety of targets.

“Here.” Johnny handed him a five-cent coin.

“Tell you what, gimme two and we’ll see who’s the best shot. You win and I let you go home. I win, and—” He hesitated, smiled. “—and you come with me.”

“Don’t you think you should be working on solving the murder of the dead guy back there instead of bumming nickels from me?” Johnny reached into his pocket and pulled two nickels from his change. He handed them to Brewer.

“Bumming? Did I say I wouldn’t pay you back?” He dropped the coin in the slot. The targets behind the glass ran from side to side in an erratic dance. He swung the short rifle from one to the other and hit eighteen out of twenty targets. “As for our friend, the stranger currently residing on table number seven, that one’s wrapped up. It’s in the bag already.” He leaned against the machine and pulled another match from his jacket pocket and held it up in a motion for another cigarette.

“Wrapped up? You know who killed him?”

“Course I do. All’s I gotta do is go pick him up.”

“Who do you think killed him?”

“No thinking to it. I already know who done it.” He looked around and saw the mop and bucket sitting in the aisle. “You open the place today?”

“No. You know Thomas always opens and makes the coffee while he cleans up.”

“Then why ain’t he here? He have an appointment to get his conk done?”

Johnny met Thomas when he first came to Big Town. Thomas was already working as the rack boy and janitor. No matter where he was or what he was doing as soon as he heard someone yell “RACK!” he made his way to the table and racked the balls for the particular game they were playing. He had been doing it so long, it took mere seconds for him to place the balls in perfect order for rotation, eight-ball or nine-ball. Each rack cost ten cents which was either tossed to Thomas or dropped into one of the corner pockets. He usually got a nickel tip after racking a game or two for the

steady players. Johnny had been there the day Thomas explained about his leg.

"I'll tell you why he's not here. First, I don't think he did it and, second, you do and he knew what would happen to him if he was here when you arrived."

"I knew you soldier-boys stood up for each other, but I never thought a white man would do it for the likes of a rack boy."

"You have no idea who he is or what he did during the war. Where were you in June of 'forty-four? Rousting drunks and pimps to keep the streets of Atlanta safe for the folks back home?" Johnny pulled out another cigarette and without being asked, handed one to Brewer. "Thomas was part of a Negro unit called the Red Ball Express. They drove trucks full of supplies from the beach at Normandy to the men who were cleaning up the mess the Germans left behind as they ran for Berlin." He took a long drag and let the smoke slowly slip from his mouth. "One day his truck took a direct hit from a German anti-tank weapon. The truck rolled over and caught on fire. Thomas was thrown out and it broke his leg. His relief driver was trapped in the fire."

"I suppose Thomas was a hero?" Brewer lit another one of Johnny's cigarettes.

"You figure it out. Thomas went back to the truck and pulled the other guy out. The bone was sticking out of his leg the whole time. That got him a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star." Johnny stopped talking.

"He tell you this and you believed him?"

"I believe he deserved more than to know he was coming back to Atlanta and the best he could hope for was to ride on the back of a garbage truck or mop floors in a pool room."

"Your heart-warming story is tugging at my heart strings."

"I wish I could believe that, but you'd have to have a heart. You and me and everybody else in Atlanta knows you don't."

Brewster smiled and turned toward the mop and bucket. “I’d like to stay here and trade stories with you but unless you’ve taken up mopping floors, I’m gonna go get me a gimp-legged nigger named Thomas.”

CHAPTER 4

It was not unusual for Big Town to be half filled and buzzing with regulars by mid-morning. Many of them came from the boarding house and hotels, many no more than flop houses, scattered all over town. Some of the men rode the bus, some walked and a few drove from where they lived to the pool room. They spent the day hustling pool, betting on baseball, football or basketball games depending on the season or generally trying to figure the next angle that would make them a few bucks.

Some were married with working wives. A few actually had jobs themselves. That small group came in after work or on their lunch break. The two things most of them had in common was a general dislike of the police, anything or anyone who had to do with them, and anything that resembled a regular job. Some took part time or day labor jobs; those lasted only long enough to get back to their seats along the walls in Big Town.

When they began to arrive that morning they were not happy to see their favorite hang-out filled to the brim with blue suits when they topped the stairs.

Johnny heard the owner, Henry Belcher, before he reached the top of the stairs. Like most of the men who frequented Big Town, the owner had a nickname. He opened the pool room in 1949 with money he inherited when his mother died. A player himself, he spent most of his time and

all of his money betting on baseball. By owning the place, he had the opportunity to make a few bucks from the other players. That was enough to keep the place open and operating. The owner, like many of the men who frequented the pool room, would bet on any sporting event. Also like the others, he was always looking for an edge. Once he managed to buy a hockey player. The player, whose name and team had long been forgotten by most of the men, had dogged a couple of shots thus insuring the other team won. The only problem was that Henry could not get anyone in Atlanta to bet on a sport they did not understand and most of them had never even heard of. It cost him the price of the bribe and he couldn't place a single bet on the already determined outcome of the game. Once the word got out that he fixed the hockey game, he was given the nickname Hockey Doc.

"What the hell's going on?" Hockey Doc made his way up the remainder of the steps. He pushed aside a young uniformed Atlanta police officer.

"I'm sorry, sir, you can't—"

"The hell I can't. Get out of my way before you get hurt." Doc stopped at the top of the flight. "Thomas? Thomas? Did you let all these people in here?"

Johnny came to him. "Take it easy, Doc, Thomas is not here." Hockey Doc brushed by Johnny when he saw another group of uniformed police officers in the middle of the room. Beside them were three men in white hospital uniforms. Another man was pulling a tall step ladder over to the end of table number seven.

"Will somebody tell me what the hell's going on and why I've got so many cops in here people will think I'm giving away donuts?" He turned toward Johnny. "You know what this is all about?"

Johnny took him by the arm and led him to a chair along the opposite wall. "I'd say having a dead man on one of the tables was a good guess." He paused to allow his comment to sink in. He pulled out his pack of Luckies and offered one to Doc, who quickly accepted.

“A dead man? Is it one of the regulars? What was it, heart attack?” Doc took the cigarette and offered light, and when he fired it up, he pulled deeply from the cigarette. “Wait a minute. If he had a heart attack, how’d he fall on the table? You said he was *on* table seven. Not beside it or under it. Something ain’t right here, Johnny. What’s going on?”

“I think he’s been in a couple of times, but I can’t remember his name.” Johnny hesitated. “But that’s not important. Somebody shot him.”

“They shot him on the table? Shit. The bullet must have gone into the slate. You know how much it’s gonna cost to get a new piece of slate?” Doc dropped the half-smoked cigarette on the wood floor, crushed it beneath his shoe with a twisting motion of his foot and walked toward the activity.

A man with a camera was now standing atop the next-to-the last step of a six foot ladder at the end of the table. He was leaning toward the middle of the table as he took photos of the dead man. As each flashbulb popped, he pushed a button on the back of the gooseneck attachment and the bulb was ejected and dropped to the floor. Doc crushed one beneath his feet as he walked up.

“You gonna clean up your own mess. This ain’t what I pay Thomas for.” Doc looked around. “Where the *hell* is he, anyways? You seen him, Johnny? He’s never late.”

“Why don’t we let the cops do whatever it is they need to do, and I’ll tell you everything I know? Let’s go to your office.”

Without waiting, he led Doc to the small room that served as an office and occasional bedroom for the owner. The office had a large old wooden desk, two chairs and a small couch. The walls were covered with large, out-of-date calendars kept only for the photos of scantily clad women. They posed while holding cans of motor oil or a variety of automotive parts. Others were posed in skimpy lingerie. Doc sat and Johnny stood.

“I got here early this morning. I’m supposed to go over to a lawyer’s office and pick up some papers he wants me to

serve. He wanted me to meet me here at nine, 'cause he didn't want anyone in his office to know he was using me. I came in and there was nobody else here, except Thomas, and I didn't see him right away." Johnny took a seat on the couch. Doc swiveled in the chair to face him. "Not all of the lights were on like normal, so it didn't feel right when I was coming up the steps, you know what I mean?"

Doc nodded. "Yeah, like something ain't right, but you don't know just what."

Johnny continued to talk to Doc as he pulled off the shoulder rig and opened the bottom right drawer of the desk. He had an agreement with Doc to let him keep his pistol and holster in the drawer when he was in the building. "I looked around and saw something on the table. By the time I got back there and saw it was a stiff, I saw Thomas in the back where he keeps his mop bucket. He panicked when he saw me. Said he had to get out of here."

"You think Thomas done it? I know he carries a knife, but they all either have a knife or a straight razor in their pocket. But you said this guy was shot."

"No, I don't think he did it, but Brewer does."

"Brewer? How'd he get involved in this already? Did you call him?"

"As soon as I found the body."

"I guess he'd probably get the squeal anyways. He's been working homicide for the last year or two." Doc motioned for Johnny to give him another cigarette. "From what you said, this would probably be a homicide. Not too many guys'll shoot themselves on a pool table. Why does he think Thomas killed the guy?"

"Because Thomas was working, and he left before Brewer got here. In his world that's an admission of guilt. Plus if you noticed, the dead man is white and Thomas ain't. Thomas was smart enough to know Brewer would make that connection right away. He left as soon as he saw what had happened. He told me he had nothing to do with it, and I believe it. He was as surprised to see the body as I wa—" Johnny

was interrupted when a young police officer came to the door.

“Mister Belcher, we need to talk to you. You want to do it here or you want to come downtown with us?”

“Look outside the window, Junior. We’re already downtown. I ain’t going nowhere with you or anyone else wearing a uniform. You want to talk? Do it here and do it fast. I got a business to run.”

Over the officer’s shoulder, two men in hospital whites were rolling a stretcher with a body covered in a white sheet. They had it tucked tightly around the body, so in death the former occupant of table number seven now looked like a week’s worth of bundled up dirty clothes being rolled to the cleaners.

The officer took out a small notebook, folded the cover back and pulled a pencil from his shirt pocket. “I’ll need your full name and address.”

“How about we trade? You tell me the name and address of the man you just scraped off one of my tables and I’ll give you mine.” Doc looked at Johnny for support and approval. A slight nod was sufficient.

“No need to be that way, Hockey Doc, I’m just—”

“Hockey Doc? How’d we get on first name basis? My name is Mister Belcher to you, Junior. Only my friends call me that. And we ain’t even been formally introduced.”

“You want to be a hard-ass, Mister Belcher, I’ll show you hard. We’ll keep cops up here investigating everything and everyone so long that the only business you’ll have is the officers buying cokes and crackers if you’re lucky. You want to play that way, it’s your call.”

Doc looked at Johnny.

“I was the first one here today,” Johnny said. “I’ve already talked to Detective Brewer. Mister Belcher, here, arrived only about twenty minutes ago.”

The officer turned to Johnny. “So, what? Are you his lawyer or something? Detective Brewer said all of you guys stuck together. Something about honor among thieves is

what he said.” The officer closed his book and walked away. “I ain’t got time to play grab-ass with you people. Let the suits figure out who done what to who.”

They watched as he walked out of the office and left the pool room. Several of the regulars had gathered outside the door during the exchange and were now waiting to see what happened next. Johnny and Doc ignored them and went to the counter to get a cup of coffee. By that time, the seats along the wall were also filling up as the news spread about the dead man.

Like Hockey Doc, most of the other men who frequented Big Town were known only by their nicknames. The first time Johnny walked upstairs and became a part of the Big Town culture, he was immediately taken by the colorful names the men used. Even though they had distinctive names, he felt like he was looking at cars in a used car lot. If you walked through the lot you’d find Fords, Chevrolets, a Studebaker or two, and maybe even a Cadillac or a Packard. Stand next to each model and you knew it was distinct, but if you stood back and looked at the lot as a whole, all you saw were used, worn-out cars. They all looked the same, most had the same problems and many, like the men at Big Town, were probably not fixable.

Men with names like Oots, Slim, Haboo, Preacher, Red, and Crip gathered in small groups to discuss what had happened. Preacher, the oldest of the group, alternated between hanging out at Big Town and standing on a street corner, Bible in hand, graphically describing the road to ruin.

He once left for several months when he started a church that held services in an old gas station that was closed on Sunday. He soon came back and now could be counted on as a poker player if he could find enough money to sit in on a game. He was the first to approach Johnny and Doc.

“You ain’t gonna lose your license or nothing, are you?” he asked Doc as he placed a five cent piece in a quart jar on the counter and poured a cup of coffee. The men would cheat a stranger and sometimes each other out of his life savings if

given the opportunity, but they all paid their tab at Big Town.

“I didn’t have nothing to do with it. I don’t even know who the guy was.” Doc turned to Johnny. “You said you knew him?”

Johnny topped off his coffee from the large coffee urn which had once sat in an Army mess hall. He still took it without cream or sugar after years of black coffee in the army. “I said he was in here a couple of times. I recognized him but I don’t know his name.”

Doc looked around as the last blue suiter left the room. The chalk mark was still on the green felt covering of the table where the body had been when the cops arrived. Blood stains had ruined the remainder of the felt.

“I should have shook his ass down for the cost of fixing the table before they took him out of here.”

CHAPTER 5

By three in the afternoon, everyone in Atlanta who was out of doors, and most of those inside buildings, were soaking wet. From mid-May to mid-September, the daily humidity was usually as high as the actual temperature. By mid-afternoon storm clouds gathered in sufficient quantity to darken the sky, drop the temperature a few degrees and create enough wind to blow debris all over the streets, soon followed by booming thunder and the crack of lightning as the storm hovered over the modern, new high-rise landscape that was becoming Atlanta and drenched everything and everyone. The storm lasted only long enough for the ground to be teased with a scant resupply of the moisture which the Georgia summer quickly fried from it again.

The afternoon Johnny walked out of Big Town was no exception. He had spent most of the day there after talking to the cops working the death. When he left Big Town, Johnny was wearing a white, short-sleeved shirt and brown pants. He carried a light sports jacket over his shoulder until he got to the street. Since he had retrieved the shoulder rig from Doc's office, he had to slip on the jacket. When he pushed open the door leading to the street, the heat hit him like a warm, wet blanket.

He heard the first roll of thunder as he walked down Whitehall Street to the hamburger joint on the corner. He wasn't particularly hungry, but the two large fans spinning at

either end of the diner offered a short respite from the heat. At the counter he ordered a burger and fries. As he waited he glanced around the diner looking to see if he recognized any of the other patrons.

This was a favorite place for the men from Big Town who were coming or going and wanted something different from the spicy but limited menu served where they spent most of the day. For forty cents, they could get a decent hamburger, a plate of fries so greasy you left an oil slick on your evening bathwater, a cup of coffee with unlimited refills and a piece of pie. Placing a half dollar on the counter when you sat down guaranteed the waitress a ten cent tip and that your coffee cup never ran dry.

Johnny took a seat and placed two quarters in front of him when he ordered.

He found a copy of the *Atlanta Constitution*, the morning newspaper, on the stool next to his. Johnny opened it to the sports section and read the box scores for the teams in the Southern Association. The Atlanta Crackers were first and the Chattanooga Lookouts were only one game behind.

He was checking the line-up for the evening game between the Crackers and the New Orleans Pelicans when he was jostled as the stool next to him filled with another body. Without looking, he knew who it was.

“Lemme have the comics, will you? I want to see what’s happening to the Phantom. They got him in a cave, and some guy’s about to pull off his mask.” Detective Brewer motioned for a cup of coffee as he took the seat. “You think you’d pull the mask off the Phantom if you got the chance? It’d be like taking it off the Lone Ranger. Some people just don’t need to have others know who they are.”

Johnny put his part of the newspaper down. “You’re taking this someplace, right?”

“Smart. You should be a detective. You ever thought about that? Maybe you could get hired in some little shithole town down in South Georgia. A place with three cops, one car, maybe an old motorcycle to catch speeders if they got a

speed trap set up. I'll bet a town like that has a need for a detective to figure out who's stole old widow Jones drawers off the clothes line."

The waitress slid a mug of coffee in front of Brewer. "This gonna be it or you want something to eat?" She stood in front of them, order pad in her hand.

"I'd like something to take home with me. What time do you get off?" Brewer smiled at his feeble attempt at a pick-up line.

"Why would I want to go home with you? You already got one asshole living there. There's no room for another one." She closed her pad and walked to the other end of the counter.

Johnny had to laugh as he looked at Brewer. "I'll bet you've been saving that line for just the perfect opportunity, haven't you?"

"I'll tell you what I did save. I saved your ass."

"From what?" Johnny picked up his coffee mug.

"You know I could have run you in this morning if I wasn't such a nice guy." Brewer took a drink from his coffee and waited for Johnny to respond.

"Yeah, I suppose you could have, but you and I both know I didn't do it. I'm not even sure I know the man. I think even you'll have to agree you probably need to know the victim in a crime like this to have a motive."

Brewer nodded in agreement.

Outside the café, a fire truck sped by, its lights and siren breaking the stillness of the post-thunder-storm afternoon.

Brewer pulled three photos from his jacket pocket. "Take a good look at these and tell me everything you know about the subject." He placed the photos on the counter. Just as Johnny picked up the first one, the waitress came with his order. As she placed the plate with the burger and fries on the counter, she noticed the photos.

"He dead?" She sat the second plate with the pie beside the photos.

“Now what makes you think that? Maybe he just likes to pose lying down on a morgue table with his eyes closed.” Brewer slid one of the photos around so she could get a good look at it. “You ever see him in here? Maybe early this morning?”

She studied the photos for a minute. “He does kinda look familiar, but I can’t be sure. Unless he was a big tipper, I’d never remember him.” She placed the photos back on the counter. “You may want to talk to Peggy. She comes in at five and gets off at three. You just missed her.”

“See, that’s called detective work.” Brewer reached across and picked up one of the greasy fries off Johnny’s plate and took a bite.

Johnny swiveled sideways on the low stool. He held up his hamburger. “You want a bite of this to go with your fries?”

“Keep that up and I may reconsider my decision that you’re not a suspect.” Brewster scooped up the photos and put them in his pocket. “We’ll talk some more later.” He stood up. “You got enough change there to pay for my coffee. I’ll catch the bill next time.”

“That’s why no waitress will ever remember you, Mister Big Tipper.” Johnny finished his meal, read the sports section, folded the paper, and placed it on the stool when he left.

He stepped out on the sidewalk and let two people with large umbrellas pass by him. They must have been tourists, he thought, as no one in Atlanta used umbrellas. The rain lasted ten or fifteen minutes, and if you got caught out in it the best way to stay dry was to slip into an open shop’s doorway or take refuge under an overhead canopy. Carrying an umbrella was just not worth the return. As soon as the two passed him, he melted into the crowd on the sidewalk. He had taken but a few steps when he heard his name called from a doorway.

“Mister Johnny?” The person who called his name stepped beside him and walked at his pace. “Is there some

way I can call you tonight? I can get to a phone anytime you can.”

The woman walking beside Johnny was a very attractive young woman in her mid-twenties. She was about five feet six inches tall and even as she hunkered beneath the umbrella, he could tell she had a very nice figure. Her skin was the color of cream, lightly dusted with coffee. “I’m Thomas’s sister. He said you could be trusted. He needs help.”

Johnny did a double take because she had to be at least half, if not more, white.

The streets were filled with shoppers, office workers, and those with nothing to do. The people were both white and colored, but they were not walking together. Without speaking, Johnny nodded his acknowledgement to the woman. With her a few feet behind him, he walked to a bus stop where he stood near the light post. His companion recognized what he was doing and stood slightly to the right with the post almost between them. Here they could talk without raising eyebrows.

“Did Thomas tell you where to find me?”

“He said you usually went to Jack’s for something to eat about this time every day.” Her voice gave away her nervousness. “I took a day off from work to find you. We really need your help, but I can’t talk to you here. Can I call you someplace tonight? Anywhere. Just for a few minutes. Please?”

Johnny looked at her. Her eyes were filled with fear and pleading. They were also unusually light for someone who claimed to be Thomas’s sister.

“I’ll be at the Emerald Lounge at eight. The number is Euclid two, two, six, one. Can you remember that?”

“I’ll call you at eight.” She turned to walk away, stopped and came back. “My name is Rachel.” She stepped back and disappeared into the crowd on the sidewalk.

In spite of himself, Johnny watched her walk away. The sway of her hips and legs revealed she knew she was being

watched. If she was doing it just for him, he thought as he shook his head, he was not sure if it was working or not.

Johnny walked the three blocks down Whitehall to Five Points, where he waited for the bus to take him to his rooming house. By the time the bus came, the clouds had cleared away and the sun was beating down with a vengeance, lest anyone forget the rain and its relief was only temporary.

There were only three other people waiting to get on the bus when it stopped. As soon as it pulled to the curb, the rear door opened and several people got off. After Johnny boarded in the front, an old man with a cane slowly stepped on the first step, grabbed the metal hand rail, and pulled himself into the bus. As soon as he dropped a token in the fare box, he made his way to the back of the bus marked *Colored Seating Area*.

Johnny pulled the cord above the window, and the bell rang for his stop. The driver slipped to the curb and Johnny got off across the street from the old brick boarding house where he lived.

When Johnny first arrived in Atlanta, he stayed in a cheap hotel not far from the bus station. With no job and no contacts in the city, he had to take what he could find. His first job was as a cook in a diner across from his hotel. It was there that he met Henry Lewis. Henry was a bookie who lived in the same hotel and ate at least one meal a day in the diner. After watching Henry for several weeks, Johnny's police training kicked in, and he realized he was doing his daily tally at the table each morning. When it came time for the Kentucky Derby, Johnny had a horse he wanted to play.

Henry was sitting at the counter when Johnny placed his breakfast in front of him. At the time, Henry had the sports page open.

"You know anything about horses?" Johnny asked as he poured a second cup of coffee for Henry.

"Enough to know they're hard to pick." Henry looked up from the paper. "How 'bout you? You a railbird? You follow the horses?"

“I bet on them some when I lived in Florida. Dogs, too. I have one in the Derby I really like. I’d like to put a fin on him.” Johnny slid a five dollar bill across the counter toward Henry. “You know any place that’ll cover the bet?”

Before Henry could answer, another customer rapped his knuckles on the counter to get Johnny’s attention. Johnny left the five on the counter when he walked down to the other man.

“What’s a man got to do to get some food around here?” he demanded and slid the nearby napkin holder to his place.

“No problem. Take a look at the menu and I’ll be—”

“I don’t need a menu. I already know what I want.” He cut Johnny off in mid-sentence. “I want eggs over, country ham, two biscuits, grits, and some of that stuff you put in cups and call coffee.” He almost threw the menu at Johnny as he slid it across the counter.

From his seat at the end of the restaurant, Henry was watching the action as it unfolded.

Johnny drew a cup of coffee, and reached beneath the counter to pick up a set-up for the man. As he placed it in front of him, he hesitated. “If you don’t mind, I got a question for you.”

“What is it?” The man looked up from the morning paper he was folding as he propped it up between his plate and the napkin holder.

“How many people do you see working behind the counter here?”

“I see you, but I’m still not sure you’re actually working.”

“Good. Real good. But look around. Who do you think is gonna cook the food you just ordered?” He leaned down to eye level with the man. “You see a cook anywhere? I’ll give you a hint. It’s gonna be me, and while I’m cooking, I’ll probably remember how nice and friendly you’ve been to me since you got here.” He stood to his full five-foot-ten-inch height. “You sure you don’t want to take your business and your attitude someplace else this morning and start over?”

Without comment, the man stood and left.

Johnny watched him leave and then returned to stand in front of Henry.

Henry nodded. "I'll keep this five in case I happen to run across someone who can get down on the horses. Who do you like?"

"His name is Hill Gail. He's going to be Eddie Arcaro's mount. I think that's an almost unbeatable combination."

A week later, Arcaro rode the horse to a Derby win, and Henry paid Johnny fourteen dollars. Johnny and Henry had been friends ever since. It was Henry who suggested Johnny put his military police talents to use and get his private investigator's license in Atlanta. It was also Henry who introduced him to Big Town.

Henry took Johnny there one Saturday to listen to a baseball game he was booking. The chairs along the wall were filled with men paying rapt attention to the games being broadcast. Henry used Big Town to listen to the ball games and conduct his business. That day, he was booking fly balls in a game between the Washington Senators and the Cleveland Indians. The Senator's pitcher had just come up from the minors and the Cleveland players were hitting balls all over the park, most of them in the air. Henry lost his shirt that day, but Johnny was hooked on Big Town and the men who called it home.

Just after getting his license, Johnny moved to the place where he now lived on Ponce de Leon Avenue. It was an old neighborhood, quiet, few children, enough bars and restaurants to add variety to his evening's drinking and meals. And it was on the bus line. Just what he wanted.

At ten minutes to eight, Johnny walked down the street to the Emerald Bar. It was a small place that served a decent steak and a drink worth paying for. They had a juke box that was not too loud if you were on the phone, and loud enough to dance to if you were one of the men who brought a wife or girlfriend.

“Evening, Johnny.” Without asking, Ray, the bartender slid a bottle of Johnny’s brand of beer down the bar where it landed almost dead center in front of him.

Johnny picked up the bottle and nodded his greeting to Ray. He wondered if Rachel really was going to call and what she wanted.

As he sat, sipping on the beer, he realized he had thought entirely too much about her since meeting her in the afternoon rain. He unconsciously shook his head to clear the thoughts.

At exactly eight, the phone on the wall at the opposite end of the bar from the juke box rang. Ray walked toward it to answer, when Johnny stood.

“I think it’s for me, Ray. I’ll get it.”

He pulled the receiver off the hook on the fourth ring.

“Hello?” There was silence on the other end. “Hello?”

“Is—is this the Emerald Bar?” a female voice asked. Wives and girlfriends often called looking for the man in their life, so it was not unusual.

“This is the Emerald. Are you Rachel?”

CHAPTER 6

The Rio Vista Supper Club was a not-so-well-kept secret. The two-story building overlooking the Chattahoochee River was a popular destination for dining and dancing. Tony Ventura and the All Stars had headlined the entertainment on the upper floor restaurant for as long as anyone could remember. The best item on the menu was a Kansas City steak dinner with baked potato, salad and hot rolls made daily in the kitchen's bakery. The music was mostly Tony's rendition of songs popular on the radio of the day or those from the big bands of the past decade. The club had one of the few liquor licenses in the city so the patrons could get a highball, or a glass of wine. There was Champagne for the ladies and special celebrations. As good as those features were, that was not the reason most of the guests came to the Rio, as it was known.

Patrons arrived at the Rio Vista Supper Club in Lincolns, Cadillacs, and a few older Packards. As soon as they pulled into the parking lot, an attendant opened the car doors for them to exit, and the cars were parked in a lot between the building and the river. When they stepped from the cars, the men were dressed for a night on the town. The majority of them wore suits and ties, many of them still wore hats, and it was not unusual to see a tuxedo or two. Their ladies, many of whom were actually their wives, wore cocktail dresses, heels and enough jewelry to make a cat burglar chase his tail. Most

came to enjoy dinner and perhaps to dance. Downstairs held different attractions.

Downstairs, accessible only to special clients, was a full service casino. Slot machines lined the walls and blackjack dealers, craps and roulette tables stood ready for any guest who wanted to try their luck. Guards stood at the only two doors leading into or out of the casino.

Unlike those found at the other underground gambling rooms in the Atlanta area, these guards were not off-duty cops on the payroll. These guards were imported muscle. Rowdy customers or bad losers were given the opportunity to apologize to those they offended. If they chose not to do so, they were escorted out of the room. Rumors abounded about them being escorted all the way across the parking lot and into the river below. A serious offense at the Rio Vista met with serious consequences.

The Rio was the main casino for a new group in town. Atlanta had dealt with invading Yankees, carpet baggers, the Ku Klux Klan and the impact of World War Two on the local economy. This new group, known as the Dixie Mafia, had the potential to be more devastating than all of the others combined.

Atlanta was a cultural oasis in the middle of a turn-of-the-century desert of lifestyle and thought. Thirty miles in any direction from Five Points you were on dirt roads with clapboard houses. The occupants wore overalls, grew what they ate and thought education was a waste of a good field hand's time. Atlanta was as foreign to most of them as the Pyramids.

The Dixie Mafia also saw Atlanta as a Pyramid of sorts. It was filled with treasure waiting to be plundered.

They started organizing bootlegging operations and distribution during the Prohibition era. Their talents were refined with black market operations during the war. With several military bases in the area, a bomber plant in Marietta and the expansion of the airport at Chandler Field, there was

a lot of money to be made if the persons had no loyalties to anyone or anything.

After the war, the returning GIs had a lot of money to spend and not much to spend it on. Ever the one to discover a need and fulfill it—slot machines, juke boxes, prostitution, and whiskey in the multitude of dry counties throughout the South felt the not-so-gentle touch of the Dixie Mafia. They continued to make a lot of money, mainly because they did not care who got hurt in the process.

Throughout the South, in the larger cities like Atlanta, New Orleans, Miami, Memphis and Nashville, you could find casinos to rival the newly created gambling Mecca of Las Vegas. The Rio was the premier spot for Atlanta.

The black 1952 Cadillac Fleetwood pulled to the entrance of the Rio. The parking attendants knew immediately who was in it. They rushed to open the doors on both sides for Abraham Salem and his girlfriend. Abraham was married and had two children in a private school on the north side of Atlanta, the only school in town that was both prestigious and admitted Jews. Early in his rise to the top of the local heap, Abraham had been trapped in a warehouse he and another man had set on fire. Before he could get out, his face was severely burned, earning him the nickname of “Jew Ugly.”

The last person who was not an intimate of Abe’s who called him that to his face had disappeared, never to be seen again.

“Good evening, Mister Salem. I’ll take good care of the Caddy. You just go on in and have a good time.” The valet was a young man who knew enough to immediately forget the names of anyone who arrived or left the Rio in case he was ever asked. For that he made more in tips on the weekend than most family men made in a week.

Salem did not respond to the young man other than to casually hand him a dollar bill. Salem walked ahead of the striking brunette who was his companion for the evening. She was left to follow him.

Inside, he was immediately greeted by several of the regulars. Like a king surveying his domain, he hesitated long enough for everyone to notice his arrival. He took the opportunity to quickly see who was there that he needed to acknowledge or who needed to acknowledge him. As he made his way to his reserved table, glasses were raised in a toast, hands were offered for a handshake and occasionally a close associate introduced him to his lady for the evening.

At his table, the *maître d'* pulled out a chair for the lady and one for Salem. Before either of them had settled into the seats, another man was pouring them a glass of champagne. "Our special tonight is *filet mignon*, just like you like it. I took the liberty of having the chef start one for you and the lady when I saw you arrive."

"You must think I'm a big tipper, Ernie." Salem shook out the napkin and placed it in his lap. "Or do you treat all the thugs in here like this?"

"Just you, Mister Salem." Ernie hesitated. "And of course, the lady." He reached over and pulled the linen napkin from the table in front of her, popped it open, and placed it on her lap.

"You're good, Ernie. I'll remember that later." Salem took a sip from his glass and motioned for Ernie to lean close to him. "Go downstairs and see if Joe Skinner is in the house. If he is, tell him to come see me. Don't let anyone hear you tell him." He folded a bill and tucked it into Ernie's pocket.

The band started a new number, and several couples left their tables for the dance floor.

"I wish you'd dance with me. It's not so hard. I taught lots of guys—"

Salem cut his companion off in mid-sentence. "Then why don't you have one of them bring you here, buy you dinner, a bottle of champagne, some nice clothes, and maybe they'll dance with you?" Abe stood, tossed his napkin in the middle of the table. "I gotta go to the can. You stay here."

With that, he disappeared down the hallway.



Joe Skinner was at the craps table when Ernie approached him.

The table rail was filled with players. Each person had his, or occasionally her, stack of chips rolled out in the tray in front of them. Several players had impressive racks with the high value black and gold chips in them.

Joe had the dice and had, just two rolls previously, rolled his come out number. The marker was placed on the nine indicating Joe's point. He had covered most of the numbers on the layout and was taking the payoff for his last roll which was a six when Ernie came to stand discretely behind him.

Ernie was in a jam. His duty was on the floor upstairs taking care of the guests. However when Abraham Salem gave him a mission he had to carry it out.

If Joe's luck held and he didn't roll a seven soon, Ernie could find himself standing there for a long time; he dared not interrupt the man in the middle of a good run.

The stick man captured the dice, flipped them several times to the land with a five and a four showing and slid them back to Skinner. "The point is nine. All bets are down."

Skinner took the dice and handed them to the tall blonde standing next to him. She was almost as tall as Skinner in her heels. She wore a tight fitting green dress that accentuated every curve, and she had plenty of them to display.

"Here you go, Virginia, you like to blow on things, see what you can do with these." His comment was met with laughter from those on the rail and no embarrassment from Virginia as she did as she was told.

Virginia, with the crowd's encouragement, blew on the dice and then held them in her right hand. She shook them close to her right ear and, with the crowd around the table yelling, tossed them to the far end where they bounced off the upswing of the table and rolled to a stop in the middle of

the FIELD play area. One dice quickly showed a two, the other spun on its edge and finally landed with a five showing. With Virginia rolling a seven, Joe's run was over.

"Good run, Joe. I made a bundle off you," one of the men standing next to him joked as he watched Joe's chips raked from the cloth.

"I'm sorry, Joe, I'll do better next time." Virginia held his arm in an obvious promise to make up for her loss of the dice.

Joe turned to order a drink when Ernie slid beside him. "Mister Skinner, Mister Salem is upstairs. He'd like to see you." He hesitated, "without anyone knowing."

Without acknowledging his presence, Joe spoke to Ernie. "Tell him I'll meet him in the office in ten minutes."

He took Virginia's hand from his arm and placed it in Ernie's. "Take Virginia upstairs and get us a good table. I'll be up after I talk to Abe." Joe Skinner was the only person Ernie knew who called Mister Abraham Salem "Abe." Maybe others had, but they probably were someplace between the Rio and the Gulf of Mexico where the Chattahoochee River ended its journey.

Ernie escorted Virginia to a table only two over from where Abraham Salem was sitting. Once she was seated and he had taken her drink order, he went back to Salem.

"Mister Skinner will meet you in the office in ten minutes."

"Was that ten minutes from when he told you or from now, Ernie?"

"I suppose it was from when he said it, Mister Salem. And that was about three minutes ago. I had to bring his lady up and—"

"No, what you had to do was go give him the message I told you to deliver. And then, if there was one from him, you had to bring it to me. We got guys outside who park cars and guys in here who park people. Do this again and you'll be working for one of those two groups." Salem stood and walked away.

A very large man standing by the door moved at the same time and followed Salem through the kitchen to the Rio's office.

The office was small but well furnished. It was used by a number of people. The manager of the Rio almost had to make a reservation on the weekend to get into it. It was a place where strategy was planned, profits were distributed, disagreements were settled and contracts were awarded. These contracts were not for road paving, house building, automobile purchases or delivery of meat to the Rio. The contracts awarded in the manager's office were serious. Deadly serious.

When Abraham entered, his bodyguard stood outside the door. Joe was already inside pouring a drink.

"Scotch, okay?" Joe poured a second drink for Abraham when he entered.

"That's good." He picked up the glass, touched his to Joe's and took a drink. "Not bad. Where'd we get it?"

"It came in from that shipment that went to the country club. Three cases of scotch and another five of bourbon. There'll be more next time."

Abraham walked around the small office, touched a few things on the desk, took another sip of his scotch, and then sat behind the desk. If it was a power play to let Joe know who was the senior person in the room it worked. When he sat, he motioned for Joe to take a seat.

Joe poured both of them another drink then took a seat in a large cloth covered chair in a corner to the left of the desk.

"I been thinking, Joe."

"That can be a dangerous thing, Abe, depending on what you been thinking about." Joe had been born in New York and even with over twenty years in the Deep South, he still had a Brooklyn accent on some words. His "you" always came out as "youse."

"Havana."

"You thinking about going?"

“Not me, you, Joe. I’m thinking about you going to Havana.”

“Why do you want me to go to Havana? We went last year, remember? There’s a lot of action down there, but it’s too far away. Ain’t it?”

“You gotta start thinking bigger, Joe. We got airplanes now that go all the way across the states without stopping. You can grab a plane from here to Miami, spend the night and be in Havana the next day. That makes it as close as driving to New Orleans.”

“Okay, so what’s there now that wasn’t last year?” Joe reached for the bottle and poured another drink. He slid the bottle back without pouring one for Abe.

“Casinos with lots of money. That’s what’s there. All we got to do is get into the middle of them and we can lay off as much cash as we can bring back.”

“I suppose you have a way to get in on the action?”

Abe smiled and took the bottle from the middle of the desk. He took his time as he poured another drink, swirled the stolen amber liquid in the cut glass tumbler and held it up for a toast.

“I don’t, but you do.”

“How do I have a way to get in?”

Abe smiled at his old friend. “How long you been banging that broad, uh, what’s her name, that you brought here tonight, Joe?”

“Uh, you mean Virginia, that the one? I don’t know, maybe six months. What’s she got to do with my plan?”

“What do you know about her, Joe?”

“I know she’s got great tits—”

“I’m not talking about what you two do in the bedroom or wherever you take her. I mean, what do you know about her personal life?”

Joe stared at him for a silent moment.

“What do you know about her husband, Joe? You do know she’s married, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know. But he’s never around. Some kinda traveling salesman or something.” Joe was leaning forward in the chair. Abe had his undivided attention.

“A salesman? Any idea what he sells or where he goes when he leaves town?”

“Her husband’s activities are not high on my list of conversation topics. All’s I need to know is that he’s out of town, and he ain’t coming back when I’m with her.” Joe hesitated. “Don’t I?”

“I think you better find out where he is when he travels, and what it is he sells.”

“You want me to go up and ask Virginia, or are you going to tell me?”

“He works for Saint Louis Games. That mean anything to you?”

“SLG? The card company? He sells dice and cards?”

“The very one. And guess who his biggest customer is about to become?”

When Joe and Abe touched glasses for their final toast that night, Abe had initiated a plan which would take the Dixie Mafia from a disorganized group of backwoods petty thieves and a few sophisticated men like Abe and Joe to a force to be reckoned with in the world of crime.

CHAPTER 7

Saturday morning, Johnny rose at six like he always did. He had no real place to go or anything to do, but his internal alarm clock said it was time to get up. After talking to Rachel the night before, he stayed at the Emerald bar a little longer than usual. He drank a little more than usual and, this morning, he felt it a little more than usual. His mouth tasted like the entire Russian Army had marched through it with muddy boots.

Outside his window at the boarding house, he could hear the sounds of birds as they communicated with each other from their perches in the oak trees that dotted not only his back yard but the entire neighborhood. Some of the bird sounds, he thought as he lay in bed listening to them, were warnings about cats or other animals in their territory. Some must have been male birds looking for girl birds, or vice versa as he wasn't sure how it worked in the bird community. One particularly loud and annoying one must have been the neighborhood gossip, for every time he or she sounded off, several others quickly joined in and drowned out the sounds.

“Why can't you just look for worms or pick up an acorn and be about your business?” he asked aloud as he continued to listen.

Having had enough with his conversation with the birds, Johnny slipped from the bed, and dressed in only white boxer shorts and a cotton tee shirt, he started the day. His room at the boarding house was sparse, but it had everything he

needed. His bed was a twin with a mattress so soft he had to bolster it with a piece of quarter inch thick plywood so it didn't sag. He had a small closet where he hung his two suits, a raincoat that he kept when he left the army, and an overcoat that he hardly ever wore.

He bought the coat the year before when Atlanta had one of its annual weeks of below freezing weather. He saw the coat in the window at a men's store on Peachtree. The timing of the sale was perfect. Johnny had just gotten paid for chasing down a guy who owed a furniture store over five hundred dollars. His fee was twenty percent of what he collected, so he had a fresh C note burning a hole in his pocket.

On one wall was a dresser where he had the top drawer filled with the neatly folded shirts he picked up twice a week from the laundry at the corner on Ponce de Leon Avenue where he caught the bus to town. Shirts, washed, ironed and folded were twenty cents each. He could splurge a buck a week on nice shirts if nothing else.

The second drawer was filled with his socks, boxer shorts and undershirts. That left two drawers for a couple of pair of work pants he wore on occasion and a sweater which would have been much better off hanging on a rack in the closet, but it was something he never got around to doing.

In the center of the top drawer, between the neatly stacked shirts, lay Johnny's .45 automatic. He kept it there out of habit. There was no need to hide it as he had a license, and leaving it in plain sight was no problem since he never had any visitors to this room. For him, placing the gun in the drawer was something he had done every night since he got it, and he felt comfortable doing so.

Each room had a small table and a chair. The bathroom with the tub and shower were down the hall and used by Johnny and the four other occupants on the top floor. Five people, including the kid who lived with his parents in the two big rooms downstairs shared the bottom floor bathroom. The walls of his room were painted a dull shade of green over plaster and lathing. If you tried to hang a picture, you

wound up with a hole the size of a golf ball as the plaster cracked and crumbled around the nail. That was reason enough for Johnny not to hang anything on the walls.

Still in his boxers, coffee pot in hand, Johnny walked down the hallway to the bathroom, found it unlocked and entered. He quickly stood over the toilet, placed one hand against the wall and aimed for the open bowl beneath him.

After he finished, he brushed his teeth and filled his coffee pot from the white porcelain sink.

Cooking in the rooms was prohibited, but each occupant had a hot plate and a coffee pot. Back in his room he placed the coffee pot on the hotplate and took down his shaving kit, clean boxers and slipped a towel from the rack where he hung it every day when he finished showering. He walked back down the hallway and found the bathroom still empty. He locked the door, stripped and took a quick shower. By the time he finished and returned to the room, the coffee was ready.

On Saturdays, Ruth Gittens, or Miss Ruth as she was known by her boarders had breakfast on the table at seven. There was a twenty minute window of opportunity at each meal. Miss it and miss the meal. The amount you paid at Miss Ruth's was based on one of two systems. You could rent a room with or without meals. If you paid to eat there, you got breakfast and supper. Even those, like Johnny, who didn't pay for their meals got breakfast on Saturday morning.

"Morning, Miss Ruth." Johnny pulled out a chair from the old dark mahogany table as he took a place beside one of the other men who lived on the second floor.

"Good morning, Mister Morocco. I heard you come in after eleven last night." She spoke without looking up from bringing in a plate of biscuits from the kitchen. "Is everything all right?"

Miss Ruth treated the single men in her boarding house like her sons. She looked after them, made sure they got enough to eat, occasionally did some sewing of buttons and

small rips in shirts and pants and generally made your business her business.

She placed the pan of biscuits on the table, stopped and looked at Johnny. He knew the look. She was not going to return to the kitchen until she had an explanation of why he had returned home at a time that was, in her opinion, far too late for any person to be out at night.

Now everyone at the table was looking at Johnny.

“Go ahead, Johnny, tell her why you was out last night. We all wanna know.” Harold Dotson was a bus driver for the city of Atlanta and had lived at Miss Ruth’s place longer than any of the others.

All the people who lived there knew Johnny was a private investigator, but they knew very little about what he or any other person who was a PI did for a living.

“Strictly business. I had to watch a warehouse to see if I could determine who was stealing from the place.” He reached for a platter of fried eggs.

“Did you have to shoot anybody?” A small voice rolled in from a table set in the corner for the only child who lived in the building.

“No, Scooter, I didn’t shoot anybody.” Johnny turned to face the six-year-old boy. “I didn’t even see anybody the whole time I was there.”

“Well, if I’d been with you, I’d sure shot somebody with that big ol’ gun you carry.” He made a pistol with his thumb and forefinger and pointed it toward the table. “Pow, pow! You’re all shot.” Before he could reload, his mother came to the table and stood in front of him.

“Young man, you stop that right now. I’ll have none of that at the table. You want to play like you have a gun, you go outside to shoot at people.”

Johnny finished his meal and returned to his room. As he walked from the table, he wondered what the people there would have thought if he told them where he really was last night and especially who he was with.

CHAPTER 8

Rachel was hesitant to talk to Johnny when he answered the phone at the Emerald. “I—I don’t know if I should be talking to you or not. Thomas said you’re friends with that detective who came out here to the house and talked to Mama and me.”

“Believe me when I say if you’re talking about an Atlanta Detective named Brewer, that guy doesn’t have any friends.” Johnny held the phone in his right hand and covered his left ear with his left hand. “What did he say when he came over there?”

“He said he knew Thomas killed that man, and if we’d tell him where he was, he wouldn’t hurt him.” She hesitated. “I think that was a lie, don’t you?”

“Do you know where Thomas is?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone.

“Rachel, you still there?”

“I am, but I’m not sure I want to answer that question.”

“Okay, let me ask it another way. Is Thomas all right?”

He could almost feel the tension leave her voice as she answered. “I think he’s okay. He didn’t really tell me where he was or what he was doing but I think I know.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Thomas said you knew he didn’t kill that man, but he can’t prove it. You know if they find him, he’s gonna automatically be guilty and he’ll go to the chain gang for the rest

of his life or to the electric chair if they can make it happen. That would kill my mama. You can't let them do it to him. You're his only hope, so please help him." There was a long pause and then she added, "Please, Mister Johnny."

Johnny signaled for another bottle of beer as he spoke into the phone. "The Atlanta Police are handling the case. I don't have anything to do with it one way or another." The bartender sat the bottle on top of the juke box. Johnny handed him a quarter then waved him off.

"But you could look into it, couldn't you?" Rachel's voice was cracking. "I—I can pay you some money. Not much, but I have a little."

"I don't know..." His voice trailed off. "I've never done anything like this before. I don't know if I'm the right person."

"What do you mean you've never done anything like this before? You've never worked on a murder case or you've never tried to help a Negro?"

"Now wait just a minute, you can't—"

Rachel cut him off in mid-sentence. "If it makes you feel any better, Thomas and me are not really brother and sister. We're cousins and the lady we both call Mama is really our grandmother. Our mothers were sisters. Our grandfather was a white man. You saw me and you know I've got white blood. My daddy was white, too, but Thomas's mother was a very angry woman. She wanted to find the blackest man she could so her children didn't have any white features at all. So Thomas is really part white, too. My mother felt just the opposite. I have a sister in Detroit who is passing and nobody knows."

"Passing? I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"She's so light skinned she's passing for white. She looks like she came from Italy or Mexico or someplace like that." She hesitated. "I know you noticed when we were talking that I'm not much darker than you. I've even thought about passing myself."

Johnny recalled, when she stepped out into the rain beside him, he did notice that she was not only light skinned, but a very nice looking woman as well.

The juke box began to rumble as two nickels were dropped into the slot and a record was selected. A couple walked hand-in-hand to the small dance floor and stood as they waited for the music to start. Soon Patti Page started lamenting about her loss of a partner during a waltz number as the couple slowly circled the floor.

“I can meet you someplace. Tonight if you want. And give you some money if you’ll help Thomas.”

“Meet? Where?” He almost laughed at the thought of a place where he could meet Thomas’s sister or cousin or whatever she was without one of them getting hurt. He had heard Thomas mention once that he lived near Cabbage Town. If she lived near or with Thomas in Cabbage Town, it was a place where Johnny would not be welcome after dark. She certainly could not just come walking into the Emerald, wave at the bartender and take a seat across the table from Johnny.

“There’s a little bar on Peachtree not far from you. I’ve been there before. With men. White men. And nobody said anything.”

She gave him the name and told him she was two blocks away from the bar in a phone booth.

Johnny sat in the booth alone for a few minutes. He had to think this one through if he could. The first question that came to mind was simple. Why was he trying to help Thomas? He didn’t know him that well. Johnny knew he or his cousin couldn’t pay even his normal fee, and he had never worked on an investigation that included a murder. He placed the beer bottle on the table and ran his finger around the edge of the neck. The glass was smooth and cool to the touch, but it was still glass. One tiny crack and it could nick you. The crack could grow and cut. A drop of blood from a nick, then more from a cut and then—who knew? He picked up the bottle, tilted it to his mouth and, hoping the smooth lip

had no way of cutting him, downed the remainder of the liquid.

He was going, but was it to help an innocent man who was also a fellow veteran or a woman he just met and would be as deadly as a rattlesnake to him if he handled her the wrong way?

Thirty minutes later when he pulled up on the street outside the club on Ivy Street, Rachel was standing beside the phone booth where she had made the call. In the dim light from the booth, a streetlight overhead and the glow from the club's sign she looked anything except Thomas's sister.

Rachel wore a light blue dress that could have gotten her arrested on any number of street corners in Atlanta. The dress was tight at the hips, came to mid-calf and had long sleeves. She was smoking a cigarette and Johnny knew from the way she held it and took drags from it, she was just doing it for show. She did not inhale the smoke and, as soon as she got a mouthful, it was quickly expelled in a cloud.

He parked the car and walked back to where she stood.

"Rachel?" He knew it was her, but still called her name.

She dropped her cigarette, quickly crushed it beneath her foot, and turned in his direction. "Yes. I'm glad you came." She held out her hand, then quickly dropped it before Johnny could decide if he wanted to take it or not.

"Look, I don't know if this is a good idea. I mean—"

Rachel cut him off again. "I know what you mean. If you don't want to be seen with me, I understand, but at least let me try to convince you to help Thomas." She hesitated for a moment, and then nodded toward his car. "Is that your car?"

"It is." Johnny was driving a 1937 Chevrolet two-door sedan he had taken as payment for a job from one of the players at Big Town. It was actually worth more than the job, and the guy was supposed to pay Johnny and reclaim his car, but so far the bill of sale written on paper intended to hold a chili dog said the car belonged to Johnny.

“We can ride in the car. Nobody will see us and if they do, just tell them I’m a whore you picked up.” Without waiting for his response, she walked toward his car.

Johnny drove for over an hour. They went down Peachtree to Five Points, took Whitehall until they picked up Lee Street, and headed toward the West End section of Atlanta. Johnny knew that some of the houses in West End had been taken over by Negroes so it was not unusual to see both races in the same neighborhood.

“Did you grow up in Atlanta?” Rachel asked as they drove.

“No. I was born in West Palm Beach, Florida, and spent my life there till I was drafted in ’ forty-two.” He pulled up to a stop light and watched an old man barely make it across the street before the light changed.

“You were in the war?”

“Yeah. North Africa, Italy, and then they sent me to Japan. I got there two weeks after they dropped the bomb.”

“That must have been horrible. The bomb, I mean.” She took a moment and looked at the man beside her. “I know the war was bad and all, but the bombing must have been especially bad if the pictures I saw in *Life Magazine* were true.”

“They didn’t even come close.”

“Thomas doesn’t talk about it much, but I heard him tell a friend who was in the navy about getting wounded and some kind of medal. They were drinking, and I think that’s the only reason he talked about it. His friend called him a hero.”

For the remainder of the drive they talked about Thomas and Rachel and how they grew up. She told him how their grandmother took them both in when first Thomas’s mother left home, and then when Rachel’s mother was killed in a yet-unsolved murder.

“After she was killed, they wanted to arrest my father, but then the police saw me and realized he was white. Nobody, not even my grandmother, thinks he did it, but it didn’t matter. No white man was going to be arrested for killing a Ne-

gro woman.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. “You want one?” She offered the pack to Johnny.

He waved her off as he down-shifted the car and spotted an entrance to a small city park. Johnny pulled the car into a parking space just inside the entrance. “We can talk here for a few minutes.” He shifted sideways in the seat and turned toward her. “Okay, we’re only gonna have this conversation once. You tell me everything I want to know and don’t hold back, you understand?”

“I never hold back.” She spoke through a cloud of smoke.

“And if you’re not really going to smoke that thing, get rid of it.” Johnny took the cigarette from her hand and crushed it in the ash tray beneath the dash board.

“I thought men liked women who smoke.” She shifted toward him and pulled one leg beneath her on the seat.

“We can talk about what men like and don’t like some other time. Right now, we’re talking about Thomas and how to save his ass.” He looked deeply into her dark eyes. “That is why you wanted to meet me, isn’t it?”

Rachel reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope. “I told you I had some money to pay you. If I wanted to meet you for any other reason, you’d be the one paying.” She pulled the top back on the envelope and dropped it on the seat between them. “I may not be able to pay as much as your regular clients, but maybe it won’t take as long to find out who really killed that man in the pool room.”

“I need to know where Thomas is. You do know, don’t you?”

“I said I think I do, but I’m not sure. He may be living with a cousin of ours in Hapeville.”

“Just how many cousins do you have in this city?”

“You don’t know a lot about us, do you?”

“Us? You mean you and Thomas?”

“No, I mean people like Thomas and me. All we have is family. We have to keep up with them because we never know when we’ll need help. We can’t go to a bank or a fi-

nance company when we need money. We just have each other.” She softened a bit. “That’s why it’s so important that you help Thomas. He and I have lived like brother and sister for so long that that’s how I feel about him. He’s blood. It doesn’t get any closer than that.”

She was still looking at him when another car pulled into the parking lot. Although it was on the other side of the paved strip, she quickly turned toward Johnny. “You want me to duck down or lay my head in your lap?”

Before he could answer the car pulled to a stop and cut the lights. Once again, it was quiet and all that concerned them was their discussion in the car where they sat.

Rachel gave a little laugh as Johnny pulled a cigarette from his pack. “You’ve never done this before, have you?”

“Done what?”

“Been out with a colored girl. I thought all you white boys had to change your luck at least once in your life.”

“I’m not out with you. I’m trying to figure out how to help a little guy who is probably in more trouble than he ever thought possible. Right now, I don’t give a shit what color he is. If he’s not guilty he shouldn’t have to hide.” Johnny pulled a match from the small box in the ash tray and clicked the end of it with his thumbnail. The flame flickered for a second and then caught.

As he touched it to the end of his cigarette, Rachel pulled a cigarette from her pack and placed it in her mouth as well. He was about to blow out the match when Rachel caught his hand in both of hers and pulled it toward her. Leaning forward, she lit her cigarette from the match and then carefully, with pursed lips, blew the match out.

Johnny grabbed her hand. “Game’s over. If you want me to help you and Thomas, cut the shit and play straight with me. I want to know where I can find him Monday morning. If you don’t know, then you find out. If you can’t find out by Monday morning, you call me and that’s the last conversation you and I will ever have.” He did not notice the small smile that

slightly turned up the corner of her mouth as he started the car, put it in gear and pulled out of the parking lot.

The ride back into Atlanta was made in silence until they got to the intersection of Moreland Avenue. "Where do you want me to drop you?"

"Anyplace on a bus line is fine. I can catch one on almost any corner around here." Rachel looked out the window and did not face him when she spoke.

"You take that money." He pushed the envelope toward her on the rough brown fabric of the seat. "Put it in your purse and keep it."

"How am I supposed to pay you if you won't take my money?"

"You asked if Thomas was a hero? He saved a guy in 'forty-four so now maybe it's time somebody did something to save him." Johnny glanced in her direction as he drove. "I'm doing this as a favor for Thomas, not you."

He pulled the car up to a light and waited for it to change to green. Outside the car, the summer night was heavy with heat and humidity that did not disappear when the sun went down. Almost every house they passed coming and going to the park had someone sitting on the front porch. The lucky ones had a rocking chair that's motion gave them the false sense of cooling off. Others fanned themselves with cardboard fans on flat sticks advertising funeral homes or churches.

Many of the neighborhood kids still played in the streets. Some were on roller skates strapped to their shoes, some had games of "flies and grounders" going beneath streetlights between the traffic. He passed one old pickup truck with the tail gate down and a group of five or six gathered around sharing a watermelon.

The light changed and he crossed the intersection, pulled to the curb and slipped the car into neutral. "You call me at Big Town Monday morning. If you don't call by ten, don't call at all." He hesitated, waiting for her to open the door and leave.

Rachel looked at the envelope. “Are you sure you don’t want this money?” She hesitated a second. “I’m not a whore. I have a job. I worked for this money and earned it honestly. You can call the Grady Hospital and they’ll tell you I work in the laundry. It’s hard, honest work. Like you do. Hard and honest.”

She held out the envelope in one last gesture.

“I told you it was a favor, didn’t I?”

Rachel folded the envelope and put it back in her purse. “Okay, I understand favors.” She opened the door and slid out. When she closed the door, she walked around in front of the car, taking her time till she got to the driver’s side window.

Johnny had his left arm resting on the edge of the car’s window frame. Rachel leaned down and placed her hand on his bare arm. “Like I said, I understand favors. And now I owe you one.”

Her fingers trailed across his skin as she turned and walked to the bus stop.

CHAPTER 9

Ask anyone on the streets of Havana Cuba who was in charge and they would tell you, “Batista runs Cuba. Meyer Lansky runs Havana.” Lansky ran it through his gambling empire in all the major hotels, race tracks and free standing casino operations in Havana.

Gambling first came to Cuba in 1919, but it was nothing like what Lansky brought when he hit town. Originally designed to cater to the Cuban populace, it was a combination of low money bets placed on roulette, craps and other table games or on the national lottery. By the time the Americans of the Roaring Twenties discovered this little bit of Sodom off the southern coast of Florida, the casino owners had discovered another way to make money. Marked cards, shaved dice, mechanics imported from illegal casinos in the US and dealers banned from European casinos were on the payroll. By the mid-twenties, the suckers were never given an even break and the casinos started a long, steady downhill slide. All of that changed when Fulgencio Batista came to power.

He saw the casinos as a way to help finance the lifestyle to which an up and coming Caribbean dictator ascribed. Shortly after taking over the country, he offered the casino operation to Lansky.

In less than two years with the casinos under Lansky’s rule, the corruption was gone and the tourists were back.

The first full service casino in Havana was small compared to the legal ones in Vegas and even the illegal, but overlooked, ones in Miami Beach. Set in the Nacional Hotel, it had a total of ten table games and twenty-one slot machines. It was opened by a seasoned casino operator from Las Vegas. He knew what he was doing in Las Vegas and tried to do the same thing in Havana. Unfortunately, Havana was not quite ready for a legitimately run casino.

Batista knew he could make a fortune on the casinos, but he also knew he did not have the experts within his trusted circle of friends and supporters to make them work. He had to look outside the Cuban people for that. He contacted Lansky and made him an offer he could not refuse. As soon as the head of one of the largest Mafia families in the United States stepped off the plane in Havana, he smelled money.

Lansky placed his trusted Lieutenants in the San Souci Hotel, the Capri and eventually in the Nacional. Even the supposedly state-run lottery answered to Lansky. The change in the operations meant that for the average tourist who came down from the east coast and the local player from Cuba, there was no need for marked cards or shaved dice. There was enough money flowing through the cashier cages to satisfy even the insatiable appetites of the Mafia.

But even the Mafia can't resist temptation. This time it wasn't the established, old line Costa Nostra, but the upstart syndicate known as the Dixie Mafia that wanted a piece of the action.

During the years after the Depression and into World War Two the two homespun industries that began to take hold in the South were illegal whiskey and gambling. Whiskey was so widespread that almost every family had someone who made whiskey or home brewed beer. It was all tax-free and illegal. The whiskey was made and bottled in stills set deep in the pine forests of Georgia, the swamps of Louisiana or the hills of Tennessee. The market was every country store and gas station in the state. Pay enough to the county sheriff

and a judge or two, and your business flourished until a politician needed a platform for an upcoming election.

Gambling was different. It was not a one-person operation like a still. Gambling was done in roadhouses or supper clubs in some of the bigger cities in the states. Because of the size of the operation, organization was inevitable. Local men associated with the Dixie Mafia worked the tables, dealt the cards, tended the bars and made certain that the money stayed in the house.

When the first illegal casino was planned for Miami, two factions wanted the action. The old-line organized syndicate and the local Dixie Mafia. Heads were broken, bodies were found floating in Biscayne Bay and no one could determine how to share. Finally a compromise was reached, Miami went to the Mafia and, as a part of the deal, a small take from the casinos in Cuba was promised to their Dixie counterparts.

That money was for Abe Salem, the head of the Dixie Mafia, and Joe Skinner was responsible for delivering it to him.



Otis Hightower loved being on the road. No factory job for him. No, sir. He wanted to jump in his car, load his sample case into the trunk and head out. One week, he'd head north from Atlanta toward Chattanooga. There were only two gambling houses there, but a lot of the bars on the highway bought his punch boards. In a good week, he could sell fifty boards, and with a profit of fifty cents a board, he'd clear twenty five dollars just on them. That didn't count the decks of playing card and counter stands containing twenty pair of dice sold at most of the gas stations and truck stops. All things considered, he'd bring home at least fifty dollars cash after he paid for gas and expenses on a trip to Chattanooga. And that was his worst territory.

Otis got up and headed for the bathroom as soon as the alarm began to ring. He had been lying in bed, listening to the clock tick for over an hour. He always did that when he was heading for his biggest accounts in Florida. His wife Virginia lay next to him. She didn't move until the clock jarred her awake.

"Oh, God. Is it time to get up already?" She pulled the pillow over her head to drown out the sound.

"It's Monday all over the world. A new week and a new adventure," Otis responded in a much-too cheery manner for Virginia. They were at opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to sleep habits. Virginia was a night person. She could sleep till noon or later every day if left alone. Otis went to bed by ten every night and was awake by six-thirty every morning even if he didn't have an alarm clock. He even awoke at the same time on the weekends.

Virginia rolled over and pulled the pillow from her head now that the alarm had been silenced. "You seem to have all the adventures. My week is going to be the same as last week, the week before and next week as well." Virginia stretched, pushing her arms over her head while yawning. Her blonde hair was mussed from sleep and from her and Otis having made love the night before. She wore a long, satin nightgown to bed. As she slid across the bed, the smooth material felt cool against her warm skin. Without thinking, she rubbed her hands across her flat stomach and felt the liquid softness of the satin against her body. She smiled as she remembered who gave her the nightgown.

She heard the shower as Otis stood in the bathtub and let the water run.

"Make sure you put the curtains inside the tub. I don't want to mop water again after you get through," she yelled from the bedside where she sat. She reached over to the nightstand and pulled out a cigarette from the pack Otis left lying there. He had a new lighter he picked up someplace on his last trip to New Orleans, and she used that to fire up her first smoke of the day. By the time she pulled the first drag of smoke deep

into her lungs, she heard the water pipe clank in the walls as Otis cut off the flow. She knew he'd shave in the bathroom and in five minutes he'd be standing naked in the bedroom.

Otis was not a big man, but he carried himself and his weight well. He stood about five eight, and weighed just shy of one ninety. He had a head full of brown hair, ears slightly too big for his head and a noticeable scar on his right forearm where a piece of shrapnel sliced it open one spring day in France. Seeing him like that was a sight she had grown tired of so long ago she couldn't remember.

"Where you going this week?" She called out.

"Oh, I got a good trip scheduled. This one's gonna make me a lot of money." Otis almost sang the words as he replied. "I may have to stay all week and not come back till Saturday or Sunday." He opened the door and walked out of the bathroom. He had two small pieces of tissue paper stuck to his face to stop the blood from shaving nicks. "You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

Virginia stood and touched his arm. "Oh, baby, you know I don't like it when you stay out of town so long at one time." She smiled. "But if that's what it takes to get you to move up in the company, I guess you gotta do it."

She dropped the satin gown, walked away, and entered the bathroom naked. She knew he was watching, and even better she knew he wanted her.

Twenty minutes later, she stood in front of the stove and, with a deft motion, flipped two fried eggs in a pan then slid them onto a plate which she set in front of Otis. She quickly cooked two more and put them on a plate for herself. Toast popped out of a stainless steel toaster, and as usual, it was burned to a light crisp on one side. Otis took his knife and scrapped off the burned part as Virginia sat down.

Otis had fixed the coffee pot the night before. It was ready for a flame to be lit beneath it which he always did every morning when he got to the kitchen a few minutes before Virginia did.

“You never did say where you were going this week,” she said as she drank coffee from a large white cup.

“Florida. I’m going to try to get all the way to Miami. That’s why it may take me all week to go there and come back. It’s two days down and two back, so if I try to do it in one week, I’ll not have much time for work.”

Virginia was thinking of a week without him being home. She was especially interested in his being gone on the weekend. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll find something to do. Maybe I’ll go to a movie if you’re not home this weekend. There’s a new Bette Davis one coming on. Remember, we saw the previews when we were at the Roxy.”

“Yeah, you and Mae can go.”

Virginia worked as a bank teller and sometimes went to lunch and movies with another teller named Mae. At least that’s what she told Otis. If he ever came to the bank and actually wanted to meet Mae, Virginia was prepared to say she had quit unexpectedly that very morning. Mae was an excuse, not a person.

“I gotta pack some orders to take to the post office this morning.” Otis had turned their small second bedroom into his warehouse and did all his packing and shipping from there. The walls were lined with shelves he had built and they held boxes of assorted styles of playing cards, dice, both loose and affixed in pairs to cardboard counter stands, and punchboards in an endless variety of sizes, styles and prices. On one wall was the prize that went with the punch boards if they had one. The most popular ones were purchased for the money prizes. Virginia knew that some of the salesmen had the key to the punch boards and knew exactly which little hole to punch in order to win. If you knew which one held the winner, you simply went to a friend’s territory, punched the boards and split the money. Otis said he never did it, but Virginia wasn’t sure he was that honest.

He would be in there for an hour or more and Virginia had to catch the bus in fifteen minutes. When she finished

dressing, she called out to him. "I'm leaving. I'll see you in a week or so, right?"

Otis walked out of the room to respond. "Yeah, I'm getting a late start today. And I gotta go out to a place here in Atlanta I been trying to get into for a long time. I got a call and they want to meet me."

"Really, which one's that?"

"You ever heard of the Rio Vista Supper Club?"

CHAPTER 10

April in Atlanta meant the azaleas were in full bloom. Peach, apple and cherry trees that had weathered the winter were dropping their blossoms all over the city. The city, known as the Dogwood Capital of the World was reveling in its reputation. It was a gardener's dream come true.

The seasons at Big Town were measured by the professional or college sports that were available for betting on. Fall began when college teams took to the field followed by the pro teams. The winter was taken with basketball and everyone's battle cry was "just wait till April!" that's when baseball season began, and every man there was convinced this was his year to clean up.

Just as Atlanta's Dogwood Society waited for the first bloom, the men at Big Town waited for the first pitch. Baseball was the lifeblood of the gambling crowd at the upstairs pool room just off Edgewood Avenue. Games were broadcast on the radios along the wall from Spring Training all the way to the last game of the World Series.

Johnny drove to Big Town that morning. He wanted to have his car close by in case Rachel called with information on Thomas's whereabouts. Rachel—Thomas's sister or cousin or whatever she was. He had tried to push the conversation he had with her that night out of his mind, but every time he did it crept back with a vengeance. He wanted to help Thomas

because...and that's where it ended. He kept telling himself that Thomas was a nice kid and could not have killed the man he found on the pool table. He had no obligation to help him and didn't know anything about him other than what he knew from seeing him and talking to him at Big Town. They were both veterans but their paths never had and never would cross in any setting other than the pool room. But then Rachel stepped into the picture.

Hers was a simple request. *Help my brother.* Johnny had heard that before. He'd taken a case once when a lawyer hired him to find his own brother. The lawyer's brother had returned to Atlanta after the war, spent a couple of years working at a printing plant and then just disappeared. He'd spent some time at the veteran's administration being treated for what they called "shell shock" from his time in the army. The lawyer gave Johnny all the information on the man, handed him a photo, gave him his last known address, and sealed the deal by saying, "Find him. He's my brother."

It took three weeks but Johnny had found him in a flop house lying on an old blanket he'd been given by the Salvation Army. He was too malnourished and too drunk to care if he was ever found. Johnny cleaned him up, got him a room in a dollar-a-day hotel, and fed him for three days before he told his brother he had found him. By then, he was almost presentable.

Johnny collected his fee, got the expenses for the clothes, hotel, and food for the man and forgot about it. One day about six months later, one of the other regulars at Big Town mentioned that the lawyer's brother had gone on another bender. This time he had been found, not by a PI, but by a garbage man. He was lying dead in an alley when they came to pick up the garbage behind the apartment where he lived. Johnny later heard that the lawyer paid for his brother's body to be shipped home for burial. Unlike most of the men who died in alleys in Atlanta, he had a family who cared for him and wanted him home.

Johnny hoped Thomas's fate would not mirror that man's.

There was a parking lot across the street from Big Town where Johnny parked when he drove into town. When he pulled in, he recognized a couple of cars that belonged to some of the men who would be sitting around the walls of the pool room when he arrived. To say the cars belonged to the men was a stretch. They were driven by the men, but they were owned and financed up to the tip of the radio antenna by as many loan companies as would let them have money. Most of them would be repossessed at least once before the last pitch of the World Series in October.

He left the car and walked toward the booth where an attendant stood with a ticket stub in his hand.

“Here you go, sir. You gonna be all day?” The attendant handed Johnny his half of the stub. The other half would be stuck beneath the windshield wiper blade on the car.

“All day.” He placed the stub in his pocket and continued to walk.

As he was about to cross the street, he saw one of the many newspaper vendors that called the streets of Atlanta their sales territory. Like most of the men at Big Town, they were an unusual lot. Most had been selling papers, both the early morning and afternoon editions for years. They usually worked a five or six block area and one did not cross into another’s territory.

Across from Johnny was the one everyone called Boots. Boots was of an indeterminate age. It could have been mid-thirties; it could have been mid-fifties. He was short, wore his hair long and always wore jodhpurs and riding boots. No matter the weather, he could be seen, newspapers beneath his arms and always in his jodhpurs and boots.

Johnny crossed the street and opened the street-level door to enter the building. As soon as his shoe touched the first step, he heard the unmistakable sound of a rack of pool balls being broken. He looked at his watch. It was only five after nine and a game was already in progress. Most of the players would not start arriving until about ten. The first baseball game came on the radio at noon. Games would continue late

into the night. Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis and Detroit games always started an hour behind Atlanta time, so they were the last ones booked at night if they were playing at home.

When he reached the top of the steps, a player everyone knew as Red was shooting a game of nine-ball with a man Johnny did not recognize. He was probably a new man in town who just wanted to kill some time and shoot a game. If he was a hustler who came specifically to pick up some money games, he was much too early.

When Johnny passed Red, the man who stood well over six feet tall and weighed in at about two hundred fifty pounds was leaning on the pool cue, waiting for the other man to take his shot.

“Morning, Johnny.” Red rubbed the blue square of pool chalk on the tip of his cue as he spoke.

“Red. How’s it going?” Johnny kept walking.

“You ain’t found no other dead men, have you? We don’t need to lose no more tables.” Red looked around to see if anyone else was laughing at his joke.

The only one to respond was Hockey Doc who was working behind the counter. “Red, you keep talking that shit, and you can just get your big ass out of here.” He did not like anyone talking about what had happened the previous week. “I don’t need you to jinx this place no more than it already is.”

Johnny passed by Hockey Doc and leaned across the counter to speak to him. “Have I had any calls this morning?”

“Ain’t nobody had any calls today. No wives looking for their husbands, no loan sharks verifying employment, no bill collectors thinking they’re calling somebody’s house. If I had as many people on the payroll as claim to work here, I’d be stumbling over employees.” Hockey Doc pulled a bar rag from beneath the counter and wiped it down.

Johnny, like everyone else had heard that diatribe many times. Most of it was true. Many of the men listed Big Town

as their place of employment and gave the number of the pay phone in the booth at the end of the counter as a way to reach their boss. When a loan company or almost anyone else called to verify employment, Hockey Doc always told the caller that the person was his best employee and had worked for him for years.

The coffee urn was steaming when Johnny grabbed a mug and placed it beneath the spout. He was pulling the handle when the phone rang. Normally Thomas would have answered, but with him gone and no one hired to replace him, it became the responsibility of anybody who was standing nearby to answer it.

“Big Town. Whoever you want ain’t here.” A man Johnny knew only as Pete spoke into the handset. “Who? Mister Johnny? Hang on.”

He covered the mouthpiece and yelled. “Is there anybody here called ‘Mister Johnny?’”

“I’ll take it.” Johnny walked to the end of the bar and reached for the phone.

“Who the hell you know that calls you Mister Johnny?” He held the phone in front of him, but did not release it.

“You hold that phone for another second and you’ll be calling me more than mister.” Johnny snatched the phone and stepped sideways to shield his voice, but did not turn his back on the man.

“This is Johnny Morocco.” He knew from the silence on the other end of the line that it was Rachel. “Hello?”

“It’s Rachel” Her voice was barely audible above the noise in the background from wherever she was calling. That, combined with the pool game going on two tables from where Johnny stood, made the conversation difficult.

“Do you have an address for me?”

“Yes, I mean no. Not an address with a number and everything.”

“Then I don’t think I can help you.” He knew he should have placed the receiver back in the phone’s cradle. He knew

he should have broken the connection. He knew all of these things, but he ignored them.

“Please, don’t hang up. I—I know where he is, it’s just that the place doesn’t exactly have an address. You ever heard of Plunkett Town?”

Every city in the South and probably in the entire United States, for all Johnny knew, had at least one section of town where Negroes lived. It usually had its own unique name. Plunkett Town was one of those places. It was just far enough south of Atlanta not to be an actual part of the city, but close enough so that the residents who had a job could catch a bus to work. Bounded by the main road out of town to the south on one side and railroad tracks on the other, it was a community within itself.

The houses were mostly clapboard and tarpaper shacks without plumbing, electricity or running water. The roads were hard-packed red clay until it rained. Then the streets turned into a quagmire of thick red paste that stuck to everything and everyone. In the summer that clay was ground into a fine powder by the hundreds of feet, cars, push carts and animals that called Plunkett Town home. The powder in turn became a fine dust that settled on the area like a dark red fog. It would have been impossible to get an accurate count of the number of people who called Plunkett Town home. If an outsider ventured into the conclave and knocked on a door, no matter the reason, the person he was looking for was not at home. Furthermore, that person was completely unknown to the resident of the house. There were few exceptions, one of whom was the insurance man.

The “policy man” as he was known in the community, was always a white man who traveled the streets of Plunkett Town with complete impunity. He collected the dimes and quarters that it took to keep policies in order. More important, he paid out the money when someone died, or in many cases was killed. He was the only outsider who knew the secrets of Plunkett Town, but as a part of that confidence, he never betrayed their trust.

“He’s in Plunkett Town?”

“I think he may be living with a relative out there. If he is, you’ll never find him by yourself. If you want to go out there, I can go with you. I’ll have to ask for a day off. I don’t know if I can get it or not, but if you want to go, I’ll just stay out of work that day and we can go together.”

“I don’t want you to lose your job over this.” Johnny took the receiver from his ear and leaned back on the stool in the phone booth. He closed his eyes and tried to think of what he was getting himself into. After a moment, he spoke back into the handset. “Look, see if you can find out for sure if he’s there. If he is, tell him I want to meet him at the caddy shack at Flat Rock Golf Course. It’s only a few miles from there. He can hitch a ride or walk if he has to. I’ll meet him there Sunday morning about ten. You got it?”

“Flat Rock Golf Course Sunday at ten.” There was a hesitation on the phone. “I don’t work on Sundays. You want me to go with you? I can miss church if you want me to.”

“No.” As soon as he said it, he felt like he answered too quickly. “No, let me meet him alone the first time.”

“How will I know what he told you if I’m not there?”

“I didn’t realize you and I were working together on this. I’m the only one who needs to know what he says.” Behind him Red was picking up two dollars off the table. He smiled as the other man put his cue back in the rack and headed for the door. “If you want to know if I find out anything, you can call me at the Emerald. I’m usually there at night.”

“Thank you for doing this. For Thomas. For both of us.” Johnny heard a male voice yelling Rachel’s name in the background. “I gotta go. My boss is looking for me.” The line went dead.

CHAPTER 11

The Rio Vista Supper Club was built on the eastern bank of the Chattahoochee River for several reasons. The castle-like structure was a perfect fit for the high bank overlooking the green forests of Atlanta's suburbs to the east and south. With the land sloping down from the peak at the river's edge, putting in a second story to level the structure was a piece of cake. The lower level was accessible through the kitchen from the parking lot or from the staircase leading down from the main floor on the inside.

The river itself provided one of the best security measures for the Rio. The steep bank dropped straight into the murky, reddish-brown water. No outcroppings, no rocks, nothing stood between the water and anything, or in some cases anyone, who was dropped from the bank.

It was no secret that when a body turned up floating in the river sometimes as far south as the Georgia/Alabama border in Columbus, a courtesy visit was made to the Rio. For years, any dead body found floating in the river north of Phenix City, Alabama was credited to the Rio. Those found near or below the famous place in Alabama, near Fort Benning were credited to Phenix City.

Since the Dixie Mafia was deeply involved in both the Rio and also many of the activities in Phenix City, there was a good chance that all of the bodies in the river were a direct result of a Dixie Mafia issue.

Otis Hightower knew as much about the Dixie Mafia as most people in the South did at the time, which was not much. What he didn't realize when he pulled his two-door Chevrolet Bel-Air into the parking lot was that he would soon have more information about them than he ever wanted.

The lot was almost deserted when he pulled in. There were only four other vehicles that he could see. An old Plymouth pick-up truck was sitting in the far corner of the lot, a green Studebaker and a newer Cadillac were parked near the entrance. Otis pulled his car beside the Cadillac, opened the door and got out.

He went to the trunk and opened it to retrieve his sample case. He picked up a couple of extra punch boards and a prize box that contained a small wooden box that resembled a pirate's treasure chest. Inside the chest was an assortment of soaps, powders and perfumes. This was one of the prizes on one of his most popular boards since every man on the road liked to take a chance on winning something for the ladies back home. If the weather was cooler, he'd have a treasure chest like this one filled with candy. With the exception of money, chocolate was the number one prize he had.

Otis held the treasure chest in one hand, reached into the trunk, grabbed the sample case by the handle, and swung it out. He tucked the chest into the crook of his elbow, closed the trunk and then headed for the entrance. As was his habit he did a practice introduction aloud to himself as he walked.

"Mister Skinner, good to meet you. I'm Otis Hightower. High, but not high when it comes to prices." He smiled at his old worn-out joke and repeated the introduction several times. Otis always did the little speech to himself to make certain he did not forget the customer's name.

The entrance to the Rio was a large wooden door. The hinges and all the lock hardware was made from black strap iron. From the looks of it, the pieces could actually have been made in one of the remaining blacksmith shops that dotted the area.

He pushed on the massive door till it swung open and then he entered the quiet, dark coolness that was the Rio Vista Supper Club at midday.

He walked through the dining area and turned right at a hallway. On the wall a small sign indicated the rest rooms were in that direction. Chances were that there was an office down the hallway as well.

Otis was half way down the hall when he heard someone behind him.

“Hey! Where-the-hell do you think you’re going?”

Otis turned to see a man coming down the hallway. The size of the man left no room for anyone else. He stood well over six feet tall and looked to weigh over two hundred pounds. His pounds were not the result of pastries. They were muscle. And he looked like he knew how to use them.

“Uh, I’m Otis Hightower. I have an appointment with...” Even though he had practiced the name, it was as lost to him at that moment as was the name of the first man killed in the War of 1812. He sat the sample case down and began to fumble in his coat pocket for the note pad he carried with the name on it.

“You looking for Mister Skinner?”

“Skinner? Yes, that’s it. Joe Skinner. I have an appointment with him. He called my office and they sent me a letter.” Otis realized that he was rambling. He stopped and took a deep breath. “My appointment was for ten am.” He looked at his watch and saw he was two minutes early. “Is he here?”

“What kind of appointment did you have?” He looked Otis over, and then added, “You a salesman or something?”

Otis picked up his case. “Yes, I sell cards, dice, and punch boards for Saint Louis Games. We’re the biggest—”

The man cut him off in mid-sentence. “Come with me. I’ll take you to his office.”

Together they walked down the carpeted hallway to another corner. This one led to the kitchen which was at the end of it. Just before the doors to the kitchen, was a small door on the left side of the hallway. There were no markings

to indicate what was behind the door, but Otis's guide stopped and knocked.

"Mister Skinner, it's me, Victor. I got somebody out here who says he has an appointment with you." Even though there was no response from the other side of the door, Victor turned to Otis. "Wait here. He'll open the door and let you in." He walked away without giving any indication of how long Otis was to wait.

Otis could hear kitchen noises as the cooks did the prep work for the upcoming evening meals. He knew the club served dinner from five pm until nine. Several months earlier, he and Virginia had dinner here with a friend. Dancing started at nine thirty and lasted until the place closed at one am. There were no hours set for what Otis knew went on downstairs. He'd never been there and had never sold them anything, but all of the salesmen in the company knew the place by reputation.

The air conditioning was another big draw for the Rio. Sitting in the cool comfort of a place like this sure beat having dinner at home with a fan blowing in your face to cool you off.

Otis was standing by the door when it opened. The man who opened it was about the same height as Otis but he looked leaner, almost like a fighter. He was wearing a white shirt, a pair of dark pants, maybe black or navy blue and was holding the last two inches of an unlit cigar in his hand. "You Otis?" He held out his hand. "I'm Joe Skinner." They shook hands and Skinner turned his back on Otis.

"Come on in my office. I got a place you can sit down." Skinner pointed to a large chair along the wall in the office. "Put your stuff down. Ain't no need to hold it all the time. You can trust me." Skinner turned to Otis. "Can I trust you?"

Before Otis could respond, Skinner laughed at his own joke and good-naturedly poked the salesman in the stomach with his fist. "Lighten up. That's a joke. You want a beer or something? I'll have one of the boys in the kitchen bring us a couple of bottles."

The office was well laid out. In addition to the chair where Otis sat, there was a large wooden desk and matching chair that he assumed belonged to Skinner. A wooden file cabinet stood in one corner behind his desk. Next to the chair where Otis sat was a small table. A larger work table sat along one wall. The table was covered with newspapers and magazines, none of which were readable from where Otis sat. The only picture on the walls was one of a younger Skinner in a Marine uniform with several other Marines holding a Japanese flag. On the opposite wall was a large calendar from a beer company. The calendar had a graphic of a near nude woman sitting on a bale of hay enjoying a bottle of beer. Skinner caught Otis looking at the photo. “You in the war?”

“Yeah, I was in the artillery. I made Normandy, first day.” He nodded toward the photo. “Is that you?”

“First Marine Division. I made two landings and then got my ass handed to me when a Jap mortar round went off about three feet from where I was standing.” He stood and walked to the photo. “Three days after this picture was taken, only two of us were still alive. Now there’s only me left.” Both men were quiet for a moment as they both drifted back to their days under fire.

“But, hey, that was then and this is now. We all gotta move on. Right?” Skinner came back from the photo and took a seat behind his desk.

“How much you make a week lugging around all that shit?” Skinner pointed to the sample case and the treasure chest sitting on the edge of the chair.

“I do all right. I mean, I’m not getting rich, but—”

“That ain’t what I meant. I don’t care what you make. I just wanna know if you want to make more?”

“Well, sure. I mean who doesn’t want to make more.” He leaned down to open his sample case. “That’s why I brought my best selection of cards and dice for you to look at.” Otis suddenly blanched. He realized he had mentioned the tools

of the trade for the casino downstairs, but Skinner had not said anything about it or the reason Otis was there.

“I mean, I have a nice selection of...” He looked at the punchboard. “Of punch boards. They all have nice prizes. Here, take a look at this.” He placed the wooden box with the soaps and powders on Skinner’s desk. He was trying to cover his perceived mistake and was making a fool of himself.

“You been drinking already this morning?” Skinner leaned across the desk. “Cause, if you ain’t been drinking, you need to see a doctor or something. You’re as jumpy as a whore in church.”

“No, I’m all right. It’s just that I’ve been on the road a lot lately. I’ve got some new accounts and I’m trying to keep things running smoothly.”

“That’s okay. Just relax. This is a business call. Nothing more. Nothing less.” Skinner hesitated, and then added. “You married?”

“Oh, yes. The same lovely woman for the last five years.”

Skinner smiled remembering just how lovely Virginia was. “You’re a lucky man. I can never seem to keep a woman for more than a year or so.” He and Virginia had been having an affair behind Otis’s back for a little over a year. Skinner knew her time was almost up, but this time the woman he was with was serving a purpose other than a bed-mate.

“Now, Otis, let’s see what kind of cards and dice you have. We need a new supplier.”

This was what Otis lived for. Whenever he got the opportunity to open a new account, he had a five minute pitch that he used. It started with a few questions that no matter how the client answered, Otis had a response. Then he went into two minutes twenty seconds of product line description, another minute of questions and finally the thirty second close and ten seconds to ask for the order.

He had practiced it so many times that when he met other salesmen on the road, he sometimes was asked to give the presentation to them. "Listen and learn," he told them.

It started with him opening a notebook that described the number of people who played cards for fun and the number who played "more seriously" as he like to call it. Since gambling was illegal in each state in his territory, he never mentioned the word just in case he was talking to a police officer.

Before Otis could even tell Skinner how many people played cards for fun, he was interrupted.

"Tell me about your wife."

"Uh, my wife? What do you want to know? Her name's Virginia and she works—"

"Nah, that ain't what I mean. Does she want diamonds and furs and stuff like that? Things that you can't get her on what you make hustling punch boards to gas stations in Alabama?" Skinner stood, came around the desk and sat on the edge facing Otis. "You want to make her happy and keep her that way?"

Otis drew a blank. This sales pitch was not going the way he had planned. As he sat there, he realized nothing was going the way he had planned. "Well, yes, I suppose I do want those things for her. We've been saving to buy a television. We've got an old one I bought at a pawn shop in Memphis, but—"

"You ain't listening, Otis. You wanna do business with us, you gotta listen."

Otis sat back in the chair, and gave Skinner his undivided and quiet attention. "Okay, Mister Skinner. I'm listening."

"You know Mike Robinson? He works for Diamond Distributors. That's where we get our supplies."

Otis nodded. "I met him once or twice. We sometimes call on the same places when they first open. I haven't seen him in a long time. Are you thinking of changing suppliers? If you are—" He reached for his catalog, then stopped himself. "Sorry, old habits are heard to break."

“I’ve heard some good things about you. I want to give you some business.” Skinner waited quietly for a second when he heard a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me, Victor, Mister Skinner. There’s a beer truck driver out here who says he needs to talk to you.” Otis recognized the voice as the man he met when he first arrived.

“Tell him to see me next time he makes a delivery. I’m busy talking to someone important right now.” He smiled at Otis when he said it. He lowered his voice. “I ain’t got time for no truck drivers today.” He reached down and picked up a deck of cards from the open sample case. “How many decks you think we go through a week here?”

“I really don’t know. I’ve never seen your operation, so I can’t even guess.”

“Hey, that’s right. I’m talking to you like you’ve been here a thousand times. Let’s go downstairs and you can see for yourself what kind of place we’re running.” Skinner stood and picked up a lighter. He flicked the top and touched the flame to the cigar he still held. He took one puff, blew out the smoke and looked at the glowing end. “This is a Cuban, Otis. The real thing.”

The two men left Skinner’s office and walked down the hallway toward the stairway leading to the lower level. As they passed the bar area, Otis saw someone in a delivery-man’s uniform talking to the man he had met earlier. It was a heated conversation with lots of arm waving, but Otis knew instinctively that no amount of animation on the part of the driver was going to get him paid. As a fellow salesman he felt sorry for the man and hoped he was not going to be treated the same way.

At the bottom of the steps, Skinner pushed a buzzer and the door was opened by an old man who was pushing a vacuum cleaner across the carpeting. Once he opened the door, he went back to his cleaning and paid no attention to the two men as they walked around the room. The room was about five thousand square feet, with the gambling tables in the

center and a large bar at one end. The bar was massive. The back bar had a series of mirrors in old frames. Each frame had the same style of hardware in each corner as did the front door leading to the Rio. A highly polished brass rail shined near the base of the bar. If it was used as a footrest at night, there was no evidence of it when Otis saw it. Any marks on it had been polished away. At the bar area six tables and chairs surrounded a dance floor. The floor was made of an inlaid dark wood, probably mahogany and very expensive. Otis knew the Rio had a reputation as a place for high rollers. Now he could see why.

“We put this down here about three years ago. We got six tables not counting blackjack. We have three craps and three roulette and nine blackjack tables. We gotta have a few slots for the women who come down here with their husbands and boyfriends. If they ain’t standing beside them at the table being a pain in the ass, they’re over on the wall pulling handles. Either way: they’re happy and that makes us happy.” Skinner motioned with his hand as he described each game. “Here’s what I want you to see. Come with me.”

They walked to the far wall of the room where a combination cashier’s cage and security stand was located. A woman sat inside the cage. She was placing chips in racks and getting ready for the night’s business. “Open the door, Peggy.”

The woman looked up when she heard her name. “Oh, Mister Skinner, how are you today?”

Before he responded, he turned to Otis. “Hold up your hands. Show her they’re empty.”

Otis had done the same thing several times in the past when he was taken into the cage or counting rooms in the various houses he serviced. He held his hands up, turning them to face her and then showed her their backs.

“He’s unarmed and not trying to rob us, Peggy. You can let us in.” Skinner stood by the door waiting for the woman to unlock it. He turned to Otis, “If you tried to get in there without showing her your hands, that little ole’ lady would push a button and have half a dozen goons on you like stink

on shit.” He laughed. “But before they could get to you, she’d probably blow you away herself. She keeps a pistol in her lap whenever she’s sitting down there at the cage. I never tested her, but they say she’s damn good with it.”

Peggy leaned to the right and pulled on the large handle, opening the door for them to enter her world. As Otis stepped inside, he noticed that she did, in fact, have a chrome plated revolver lying in her lap.

“We’re going in the back room. Is that okay with you?” Skinner leaned over and gave Peggy a peck on the cheek.

Peggy was probably in her late fifties and could pass as the grandmother sitting at the end of the pew at church who volunteered to fix the chicken dinner for Sunday. Based on her job and what Skinner said, she’d probably shoot the chicken prior to cooking it.

“You can go back there, but don’t you even think about messing around with anything. I’ve got it all laid out like I want it. You come in here and screw it up and then expect me to know where everything is at all times.” She was smiling, but there was an edge to her voice that said she meant every word.

The cage was about six feet wide and eight feet long. It had a glass front that looked to be bulletproof. The glass was further protected by a steel grate with four by four spaces placed over the entire front. If anyone wanted to break in all he could get was what could be passed out of the cage through a four inch square hole. All things considered, it was probably easier to rob a bank.

A door at the back of the cage directly behind where Peggy sat led to another room. This is where Skinner took Otis.

“This is the supply room for down here.” The room was not much bigger than a broom closet. There was not enough room for both men to stand in it at the same time. Skinner pointed at several boxes on shelves. “This is where we keep our cards and dice and other things we need for the floor.”

Skinner was pointing at several cases of playing cards in individual packs and boxes of loose dice, but Otis Hightower

only saw money. If he could turn this account, he'd have a goldmine, he thought as he counted the number of boxes on the shelves.

"Looks like a decent supply. How long you think this will last?" He tried not to let his voice give away his pleasure in being invited to the room. "You change decks on the tables when the customer calls for it, or do you do it on a regular basis?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Hightower. You ain't been in the place but thirty minutes and already you want to know how we do business." Skinner looked at him, and then broke into a grin. "Hey, I'm just pulling your joint. Relax." He placed an arm around Otis and led him back through the cage. "Let's go back upstairs. We need to talk about something."

On the way back to his office, Skinner opened the door to the kitchen and looked inside. Otis noticed that all the people working in there were Negroes. They were the men and women who got the food ready for the chef who came in later and took over. From the hallway, he could hear them laughing and talking but as soon as Skinner stepped inside the only noise that could be heard came from the pots, pans and other utensils they were using. No one said a word when they saw him.

"Hey Adam, bring us a pot of coffee and some cake or something to eat." Skinner spoke above the noise to an older man dressed in white pants and shirt. He had a chef's hat sitting on a head full of gray hair.

"Be right in, Mister Skinner. We gots a fresh pot and Lucy made some of them little cake things you like. I'll have 'em in there for you and the other gentleman in ten minutes." The old man almost bowed when he spoke.

Without a response, Skinner closed the door and returned to his office.

Once inside, he took his seat behind the desk and motioned for Otis to sit in the chair where he had left his sample

case. As soon as he sat, Otis leaned forward. “Mister Skinner, I can—”

Skinner held up his hand to silence him. “Let’s get one thing straight. Right here and right now. You can’t do shit for me, Hightower. I didn’t bring you here to sell me anything. I brought you here so we can make some money. Together, you and me. You do like money, don’t you?”

Otis gave a little nervous laugh. “Of course, I like money. Who doesn’t?”

Now it was Skinner who leaned forward. “You ever been to Cuba?”

CHAPTER 12

By noon, Big Town was getting crowded. Most of the men were sitting around the wall in small groups clustered around a radio broadcasting a baseball game. The day games started between twelve and two. By the time they were over, the nighttime games were usually well underway. The men who didn't lose all their money on the earlier games stayed. Those who lost and could not come up with more money or credit either left or stayed and played pool for pocket change.

Johnny hardly ever bet on baseball. He'd play a football parlay card in the fall and he always got down on the triple-crown races. Last year he picked the winner of both the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness. He resisted the urge to place it all on the Belmont. The horse he wanted didn't even come close to finishing in the money. By winning both the Derby and the Preakness in a parlay he cleared over seventy dollars.

A thick haze of cigarette smoke hung over the group of men gathered around the radio broadcasting the Yankee's game. Whitey Ford was pitching; Billy Martin had made an incredible play at second base and hit a double and two singles. He and Mantle were swatting balls all over Yankee Stadium.

Johnny walked over to the radio where Henry was booking the game. As he approached, Henry gave a nod to

acknowledge him and pulled a folded newspaper off the chair next to him. Johnny took a seat and watched the action.

A player named Slim tapped Henry on the shoulder and said, "Three fly, two double."

Henry nodded, acknowledging that he was taking a bet that Martin would either hit a fly ball or a double. If he did, the bets would be paid off at a fifty percent return. If Martin hit a ground ball that resulted in his reaching second base, Slim would be one dollar and fifty cents in the hole. He'd make a dollar fifty on the two dollar bet on the double but lose the three on the fly ball. If it was a fly ball that got Martin to second base, he wins both bets for a total of three dollars. Johnny knew that Henry had less than a fifth grade education, but he kept up with the bets placed with him before each batter came to the plate, paid off the winners and figured the odds as he went.

The men heard the crack of the bat as the third pitch was hit. For less than a heartbeat, the outcome of the bet and the payoffs was in doubt. As soon as Mel Allen spoke, Henry started his moves.

"It's a hard hit ball straight to the shortstop. He's going to grab it on one hop and fire it over to first. No way Martin's going to beat this one. That makes it two outs and nobody on." Mel went on to describe his favorite hair tonic which just happened to be a sponsor of the game that day.

Henry had dollar bills folded long ways stuck between his fingers which he pulled out to pay off the two men who won on Martin's ground out. All he had to do was look around and the losers began to hand him the money if they had not done so prior to his taking the bet. Very few men were allowed to bet on credit or without actually handing the bookie the money when they placed the bet.

As soon as the action on the field resulted in the end of a bet, all debts were paid. Losers handed their money to Henry first, and then he paid the winners. It was all an orderly progression perfected after years of daily practice for some of the men.

Each radio broadcasting a game had a similar group of men sitting around it. If there was not one single person booking the game, the action usually went to a single bet on the game as opposed to each batter.

Henry was in his sixties, always dressed in a brown suit with matching tie and wore a brown Stetson hat. He placed his hat on the radio prior to the game and everyone knew this was his area. The radios were territorial. Once claimed, it was reserved for the day.

Hockey Doc was cooking a new batch of hot dogs on the stream table when he glanced up at the large oval mirror hanging over the stairs. The oval mirror was placed in such a way that anyone entering the front door was immediately visible before they even got to the first step leading up to the second floor. As soon as he glanced up, his hand immediately went to one of three buttons beneath the bar. Buttons were placed at both ends and one in the middle for just such occasions. He quickly pressed the middle button and a red light started flashing over the bar and a bell sounded.

In seconds, Henry placed his hands in his pockets and stripped the money from his fingers. Men grabbed pool cues and began to shoot balls on the most convenient pool table.

By the time Detective Brewer got to the top of the steps all he found was a very busy pool room. He walked straight to the bar and stood in front of Hockey Doc.

“If you’re on duty, don’t even ask me for a beer. Even if you’re paying—which I doubt—it’d be illegal to sell it to you, and I don’t want to do anything to break the law.” Hockey Doc wiped the counter with a white towel as he spoke to Brewer.

“If I wanted a beer, I’d come back there and get it myself.” Brewer placed his hand on the towel, stopping its back-and-forth action. “And while I was back there, I’d rip out all those wires to the bell and the light you push whenever a cop comes up here.” He leaned closer. “And then I’d stuff the ends up your ass.”

Both men knew there was a good-naturedness to their comments, but both knew there was a line not to be crossed, except on official business.

“How ’bout fixing me a chili dog and a Coke and bringing it over to me.” Brewer looked around the seats on the walls. “I’ll be over there.” He nodded in the direction of where Johnny sat. “I’ll be conducting an interview with a witness.”

“This ain’t curb service, you know. Since Thomas left, I got nobody to help me out here. You keep your eye on the bar. I’ll set your stuff up here when it’s ready.” Hockey Doc began to swing the towel across the counter top again as a way to stall before preparing the food for Brewer.

Johnny sat on a stool beneath an overhead shelf. The shelf held a radio in a wooden cabinet. The radio cabinet was dark from years of smoke and hands turning it on and off and adjusting the placement so it could pick up the best signal. He was reading the morning newspaper and did not notice Brewer when he approached.

“Well, look who’s here. It’s Atlanta’s very own Boston Blackie, Private Investigator. I figured the Dixie Detective would be out working on another charity case.” Brewer pulled out a chair and took a seat.

“I don’t do charity cases. I have to get paid for the work I do. Unlike some people, I don’t have a cushy job for the city of Atlanta where they pay me to hang out in pool rooms.” Johnny folded the paper and placed it on the chair beside him.

“Is pissing me off something you lay awake at night thinking about or does it just come natural to you?”

“Trust me, Brewer, I lay awake at night thinking about a lot of things, but you are never one of them.”

Brewer was about to answer when he saw Hockey Doc place his chili dog and Coke on the counter and wave to him. The wave was his way of saying, “Here it is. If you want it come get it.” It was now a battle of wills to see if Brewer

broke and went to get it, or Hockey Doc relented and brought it to him. Brewer decided to wait.

“So, when’s the last time you talked to Thomas?”

“You know the answer to that. He left here a few minutes before you came in. I’ve already told you that. I haven’t seen him since that day.”

Brewer was listening but he was watching his food. “Son of a bitch!” was all he said as he stood and walked to the counter.

The chili dog was in a paper container shaped like an open boat. The bun had been steamed and was so soft that with the chili on it, the entire concoction almost draped across his hand as he carried it back to his chair. He placed the Coke bottle on the floor beside his stool. He had to use the fork Hockey Doc handed him in order to eat from the container.

Brewer took a monstrous bite and started talking around his mouth full of food. “Your boy is in over his head on this one. This ain’t a simple murder. It goes much deeper than that.” He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and took a long drink from the bottle.

“I could probably help him out if I knew where he was.” He took the last bit of the chili dog and used the fork to scrape the residue from the container. “I gotta say, this is some good chili.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you on this one. I haven’t seen or talked to him since you were up here before.” Johnny leaned back and placed his feet on the rail at the bottom of the chair.

“You see, here’s the problem. First, I don’t believe you. Second, I don’t believe Thomas. So where does that leave me? I gotta turn someplace else to talk to someone I believe.”

“And who is that?”

“See, that’s another problem. I keep hearing from people I don’t believe any more than I believe you or Thomas. The only thing I know for sure is that you don’t want to get involved in this one.”

“So what do you believe?”

“I want to believe Thomas didn’t kill the guy, but I believe he saw who did. And if he did, he’s in shit up to his neck if they know about it. These are out of town boys who play for keeps.” Brewer pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth. “You know anything about some action down in Havana?”

He now had Johnny’s full attention. Action in Havana meant only one thing and one person. Meyer Lansky.

“The guy was involved with Lansky?”

“Not Lansky. This one was closer to home. He was doing some work for the locals here in Atlanta, coming and going through New Orleans. I’m sure you’ve heard of the Dixie Mafia. The dead guy was either a mule or a bag man for them. I ain’t sure which one yet.” Brewer tapped Johnny on the chest over his shirt pocket. “What’re you smoking today?”

Without a comment, Johnny pulled out his pack and handed it to Brewer. “There’s no reason on God’s green earth for Thomas to be messed up with any of those groups.”

“Alls I’m saying is if you talk to him, tell him I can probably work out a deal if he turns himself in to me. Nobody else. Just me.” Brewer stood to leave.

“Next time you take that high-yeller sister of his to Oakland Park to bang her, tell her that if she’s hiding him and I have to come to her house, I’ll probably not be such a nice guy as I am with you today.”

As Brewer walked by the counter he turned to Hockey Doc. “Ring the bell or whatever you do when I leave. All those low-life’s gotta get back to their ball games. They’ve already missed two innings.” Even Johnny could hear him laugh as he walked down the stairs.

Brewer had not reached the sidewalk outside in all probability when the pay phone in the booth began to ring. Hockey Doc was pulling a beer out of the cooler beneath the bar, so he finished, walked over and answered it. “Big Town. All right, all right, slow down. I’ll see if he’s here.” He held the

phone up and motioned to Johnny without saying anything. This allowed Johnny to take the call or not and the person on the other end could not hear him turn it down if he called out to Hockey Doc.

Johnny slid off the chair and walked to the phone booth. He waited until Doc had stepped past him to enter the booth and pick up the phone. "This is Johnny."

A frantic female voice came over the other end. "You've got to help us. Please. If you don't they're gonna kill my Mama. You've got to..."

Johnny interrupted. "Rachel, is that you? What the hell is going on? Who's gonna get killed?"

"Some men came by here today and said if Mama didn't tell them where Thomas was, they would come back and kill her. They hit her and knocked her down in the kitchen. She lay there till a neighbor found her and had somebody call me at work. I came right home. You've got to help us." Her emotions were alternating between tears and anger. "I still have that money."

Johnny reached into his pack of Luckies and pulled out a cigarette. He tamped the end on the phone and stuck it in his mouth. By cradling the phone between his shoulder and his ear, he was able to pull his lighter out of his pocket and light the cigarette while he still spoke on the phone.

"Okay, slow down and tell me what happened. I want to know it all. Were they cops?"

"Mama said they didn't even try to pretend to be police."

Johnny noticed that, unlike Thomas and most of the other Negroes he knew, she did not pronounce the word as "*po-lice*."

"She said they just came in the house without knocking or anything. They asked her where Thomas was, and when she said she didn't know, one of them pushed her backward and she fell over a chair in the kitchen. They could have killed her, Johnny—" She caught herself and came back. "Uh, Mister Johnny. There was no need for them to do that to her." Her voice calmed as she talked.

“Is she all right? Anything broken or bleeding?”

“No, I helped her up and she can walk okay, but she’s mighty stiff where she fell and then was left on the floor till our neighbor got there and found her.”

Johnny usually went with his gut instincts. He credited those instincts for keeping him alive several times during the war.

He had a gut instinct now. It said hang up. This is not something you want to get involved with. He knew he was going against every survival instinct he had. But, he did it anyway.

“All right, do you know where the Zanzibar Club is?”

“On Decatur Street?”

“That’s the one. Meet me there in one hour.”

He put out his cigarette, left the phone booth, and walked down the steps. He left Big Town and headed for Decatur Street.

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About the Author



Paul Sinor is a published novelist and a produced screenwriter. The first book in his latest novel series was published in March of 2015. His other published works include one novel and a book on marketing screenplays. Eight of his screenplays have been produced as feature films, and he currently teaches screen writing at the University of West Florida in Pensacola. He has a MFA in Creative Writing and is a member of the Mystery Writers of America.

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