

SNAKE

EYES

BY

SONNY GIRARD

# CHAPTER ONE

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*new york city*

The phone's shrill metallic echo barely dragged Neil DiChristo out of his Remy Martin sleep. His eyelids fluttered painfully and, except for his hand reaching for the receiver, his body remained numb. Neil was, however, jolted wide awake by the voice at the other end:

“My name is William Wallace, of the FBI. In about twenty seconds your doorbell is going to ring...”

A flood of gut-wrenching memories coursed through Neil's mind, from the times his late father had been roused from their East Harlem apartment to just the month before, when Manhattan North's gambling squad had wrecked his own midtown luxury pad: broken doors, ripped upholstery, rolled up rugs.

No matter how many times the thirty-five year old bookmaker had been through it before he still couldn't immunize himself against the physical effects of the arrest procedure. His chest would still be racked by painful spasms of dry-heaving; his stomach would still twist into knots, turning his next few bowel movements to water; his right eye would still twitch for a day or two after he had been released on bail and had restored his apartment to some semblance of order.

No, it never got any easier.

Neil dropped the phone and jumped from the bed. He scooped his plaid boxer shorts and started for the front of the apartment, trying to slip into the garment and reach the door before it wound up like a scatter rug in his foyer – not an easy task when hung over from the night before, fifteen pounds overweight, and gagging from anxiety.

He glanced back at Candy, infant peaceful in her slumber, one exposed breast staring at him as he ran from the room. No time to cover her up.

Aware of how many Bellinis Candy had consumed only a few hours earlier, Neil figured she'd probably sleep through the whole thing anyway, unaware of the free show she was about to give.

Six of them rushed through the door like gangbusters, the lead man pinioning Neil against the beige grasscloth wall with a .357 Magnum while his fellow officers checked closets, rooms, and behind furniture for other victims to abuse.

What the hell did they think they would find at 6:50 in the morning, Neil wondered, another goddamned Apalachin Convention?

From where he stood, Neil could see a burly, crew-cut agent stopped dead at the bedroom door – Candy'd got him.

As each of the intruders came to a halt near the first man their original buzz of communication lowered until it became complete silence, not one of them wanting to disturb the twenty-two year old blonde's entertaining pose.

As Neil would expect, the entire team of agents wound up in that twelve by sixteen room, quietly conducting their business within view of the circular mattress. They looked around like children in a toy store, nudging each other with their elbows to check out the mirrored ceiling, Igor (Neil's three-foot-tall robot that stood by Candy's side of the bed, still holding near empty glasses of cognac and champagne-peach mixture on a tray), and Candy's red bikini panties hanging off the brass bedpost. They sniffed like dogs at the lingering scent of last night's sex and musky perfume that emanated from her body.

The agent who had been first into the apartment stood slightly taller than Neil, with black wavy hair cropped short and acne-scarred cheeks. His .357 was now holstered, but his eyes were drawn – to Candy's full, coral-tipped breast.

*Jerkoff!* Neil thought.

While still staring at Candy, the agent whispered, "Any guns here, bub?"

"No," Neil answered quickly – maybe too quickly. He coughed and choked a bit, then added, "...None."

In spite of the palpitations in his chest and pressure on his throat that made it feel like it was about to shut down, Neil found amusement in the lawman's distraction. Amazing what a tit could do. Maybe he could find a way to take advantage of it, he thought, while nervously running his fingers through dark hair that used to be called a mop, but now had to be blown and sprayed stiff each morning to conceal an ever-expanding forehead. His eyes, normally large golden-brown pools, were pindots, darting back and forth, scanning the nightmarish scene for even the slightest possibility of escape. His tongue felt swollen and dry; his palms were cold and clammy. His balls had skipped up inside his body.

The agent turned to Neil with a skeptical expression on his pockmarked face. "No guns?"

"Search if you want...I can't stop you...but I'm telling you honestly, there's nothing here."

Neil doubled up gagging; some of it authentic and some to keep from looking directly at the agent. If the man believed him and didn't bother to search the room, at least he wouldn't be charged with the football betting slips that lay in his night table drawer or the .38 Smith & Wesson he kept tucked between the mattress and boxspring – after all, it was still New York.

When Candy shifted position, exposing her other breast in the process, all conversation stopped.

*Didn't they ever see a great pair of tits before?* If only she'd kick the covers off some more and show a little of that reddish-brown bush, Neil continued thinking, he'd probably be able to stroll out unnoticed.

Still wearing only his undershorts, Neil bent toward the plush ivory carpet where the phone had fallen.

"Okay if I call my lawyer?" he asked, on his way down.

"No! Don't pick up that phone!"

The agent's harsh tone brought the hairs on the back of Neil's neck to attention.

"Whattaya mean, I can't call?"

"I thought I said it in English," the agent snarled. "Just leave the phone where it is. You'll have plenty of time to make a call later...that is, if you still want to."

Neil suddenly realized how foolish he'd been to let them in without question. What if they were assassins instead of FBI men? Although, on a quick second thought, Neil realized that if that were the case, he'd already have been dead.

"Hey, you guys got a warrant?"

Silence.

"C'mon, c'mon," he pressed. "Either I'm under arrest and gotta go with you, or I'm not. An' if I'm not, you could leave the same goddamn way you came in."

"We fully intend to, bub – only with you."

Now Neil sensed that other danger that had crossed his mind and been dismissed; felt a physical menace he hadn't lived with since his childhood in East Harlem's last white stronghold, where, vastly outnumbered by black and Hispanic street gangs, he, like his other few *paesani* in the small Italian ghetto that bordered Pleasant Avenue, had two choices: grow up tough – or not at all.

*Fuck!*

Maybe these guys really were out to snuff him, but didn't want to do it there? he thought, while struggling to regain the half-step of survivor's instinct he'd lost while living an overindulgent life on Central Park South.

He reached again for the phone.

The FBI man stepped down hard on Neil's hand. He pressed the open end of his revolver against Neil's head. "If you insist on giving us a problem, bub, there are other ways of taking you – and Miss Bigtits, here."

Neil wanted to scream out in pain, but knew that if he did Candy would be in danger too; as long as she slept they'd probably leave her alone – at least he hoped they would. He bit down on his lower lip.

The agent lifted a hunched-over Neil to his feet as easily as if he were handling a five-foot-ten inch sack of goosedown then holstered his gun again.

"I don't know what you got on your mind, there, bub, but we're law, not some of your goombahs looking to stuff you in a trunk." He put a hand on Neil's shoulder.

"Trust me, bub, you're as safe as you've ever been – or will ever be."

Frantically, but only as loud as a whisper would allow. Neil said, "TRUST YOU? You crash my house, shove a gun up my nose, stomp my hand into a fuckin' pancake, and then tell me to trust you?"

Angry veins pounded along Neil's forehead as he struggled to keep his voice down. "...Either you're one sick fuckin' piece of work, or you sure as hell think I am!"

When Candy rolled over onto her stomach, ending the free show, it was the agents' cue to move their operation into the oriental-style livingroom; the lead agent pushing Neil ahead of him.

Neil took a quick inventory of the black-lacquered tables, floral-print sofa, and jade figurines that decorated the area. Nothing appeared to have been destroyed or damaged, though a delicate paper and wood shoji screen had been knocked askew and leaned against the wall. He was almost bursting to set it in its proper place, legs in each mark in the rug – put his world back in order.

"Like you were told on the phone, bub, we're with the FBI," the agent said. He flipped open a beat up leather card case displaying his identification: *Francis Steven Licata*. "Right now, we've got someone waiting for us who wants to talk to you."

Neil's hand still ached from being stepped on. He flexed his fingers to assure himself they weren't broken.

"I don't talk to cops," he said. "You guys should know that by now. Anything you gotta say to me you could call my lawyer and tell him. If you need his name and number, I'll give it to you."

"I don't think you'll want Mr. Einhorn involved once you talk to the man who's waiting for us."

The agent collected the suit, shirt, and shoes Neil had scattered when he'd chased Candy to bed the night before. "Get dressed," he said, while shoving them hard against Neil's chest.

"You got a warrant, or not?"

"We don't need a warrant to pinch you for the gun or drugs."

"Drugs?! What the fuck are you talking about?!" Neil snapped. Even if they knew about the .38 under the mattress, they were way off base with narcotics; he had never even touched a drug stronger than a Sinutab. Could it be they were pinching the wrong guy? he wondered.

"The gun and cocaine I'm gonna plant on you," Licata replied. "...The ones I'll swear I saw you holding outside, in the street, before I chased you in here. Makes everything legal."

"I was here all night! I got a witness!" Neil squealed, his mind a dizzying swirl as it tried to sort out what was happening.

"If you're talking about the milk machine in there, bub, the way she sleeps she wouldn't know it if she had the entire Fifth Infantry crawling up between her legs. Besides, we can just as easily pinch her too." Agent Licata gave Neil another shove. "Now get dressed!"

Neil wasn't about to give up. He hadn't recently been proposed as a new made member of the Florida Crime Family for nothing. Although he'd never measured up to the toughguy reputations of most other mob associates, his intestinal fortitude and crafty thinking – not to mention his late father's wishes...and mob relationships – had earned him a shot at membership.

Now, using those talents, he first made sure the imminent threat of physical danger seemed gone, then shifted to his next priority: to jockey into a position where he could get immediate legal assistance.

In his best defeated pose, shoulders stooped and head hanging, Neil said, "Okay, okay, you win." He slipped into his wrinkled sharkskin suit then pulled a Gucci billfold from the right rear pocket of his slacks.

"Just let me give my girl some cash an' I'll go quietly."

"You're going quietly anyway," Licata said. "But, if you're so concerned, we'll leave it for her." He yanked the wallet away, opened it, and checked the contents: only money, a New York State Driver's License, and a few paper fortunes from Chinese restaurant cookies.

Neil snatched back the wallet. "Whattaya wanna do, kiss her goodbye for me too?" It sickened him that some broken-down federal lackey had touched the item he kept his money in, and, more important, the Oriental fortunes, which would now be worthless. He hoped it wasn't an even worse omen than the actual arrest and all that would normally follow in its wake.

His back to his captors, Neil fingered the currency in the wallet until he found what he was looking for: a half of a hundred dollar bill with instructions written on the back to call Joel Stanley Einhorn, Attorney at Law, in order to collect the missing half and another four hundred. By prior arrangement, when the lawyer received a call for the hundred, he would immediately know that the FBI had arrested his client, and would begin a search for him at all federal holding spots. If, on the other hand, the call came to retrieve half of a fifty, Joel Einhorn would check the New York State system instead.

In the bedroom, the MTV Candy had insisted remain on all night pumped out some throbbing rap tune about “bitches” and “muffunkers.” Neil shook his head at how she could love that irritating nigger shit the way she did, then placed the half-bill, written-on-side face down, on the nighttable near her head. No one would move to collect and spend the five hundred dollars faster than Candy – God bless her!

When he bent and kissed the sleeping girl, she responded with a dreamy, “Mmmm,” and snaked a hand up to his crotch. Be it money or sex, Candy’s radar was second to none. Not exactly qualities to build a lasting relationship on, yet there was something about her that made him toss his better judgment out the window and invite her to move in.

For the first time since he’d met her, Candy’s touch brought no physical response from Neil. He removed her hand from his limp organ and, silently thanking the gods-that-be for his success in slipping the coded bill to her, hurried back to his captors.

Spiriting him out unobtrusively seemed to be second nature to the squad of government men whose very look – football players’ bodies, perennially collegiate faces, and nearly indistinguishable grey suits – should have made them stand out in a crowd of sophisticated New Yorkers starting their day.

Instead, they might have been invisible as they whisked Neil through the lobby, out the front door past the doorman, and into a waiting blue Jaguar XJ6 in less time than it took him to brush his teeth. They were in traffic before the last door closed.

To Neil’s surprise, they didn’t handcuff him. That omission, whether due to sloppy operation or good intent, gave him the first cause for relief since the phonecall had jarred him from his sleep.

Feeling a bit more relaxed, Neil fingered the Jaguar’s supple leather upholstery. “You guys are sure stepping up in class.”

Licata, who sat beside Neil, smiled. “Our DEA brothers took it off some black dope dealer in Riverdale, bub. He won’t be needing it for the next forty-five years or so anyway.”

Neil’s stomach did a quick loop-de-loop.

*Signs all bad. Blue car: blue will make you blue. Car’s owner doing time: bad things rub off...God, show me how to turn this luck around...*

Somehow the signs were pointing to one of those spots that would not be gotten out of easily – if at all. Neil locked his hands and formed his index and middle fingers into the steeple-shape that had seen him through to a come-from-behind victory in Sunday’s Yankee game.

As the Jaguar headed east on Fifty-Eighth Street, Neil’s concern turned to other people. Who else was involved in whatever they were pinching him for? His runners; those basically legitimate workers who turned in sports bets to him? His partners in the

crap game? His immediate mob superior and sponsor for induction into *La Cosa Nostra*, Vinnie the Hook?

*Oh God, not him.*

When he thought about it, Neil realized he didn't even know why he was being arrested. Gambling? Handling stolen goods? Sure, he'd had Cand and some other girls he knew selling blouses that had "fallen off the truck," but why the big production? And why these SuperFeds instead of plain old ordinary "Let's Make a Deal" State cops?

"Hey, where are we going?" Neil asked, noticing that they were about to drive onto the Queensboro Bridge. If they weren't headed for the FBI Building at Third Avenue and Sixty-Ninth Street or the one at Foley Square, in Lower Manhattan, it had to be the Bureau's newer quarters in Rego Park. *Why Queens, though?* he wondered. What the hell had he done there? Did it have something to do with Sid Phillips, over at Carlisle Capital Group?

"...What the fuck is going on? Why're we going to Queens?"

"Just relax, bub," Licata replied. "You'll find out when we get there."

"There" turned out to be a private estate in Glen Cove, Long Island. Green foliage prematurely splattered with burnished reds and golds enveloped them as they drove past an ivy-covered stone wall and along a winding gravel road, finally stopping at a Tudor home that spread wide behind a circular driveway.

Neil wasn't sure if the chill that sluiced through him as they approached the entrance to the grand house was caused by the sharp autumnal weather or his dismal, wintery situation.

Three more agents met him in the cavernous front hallway of what Neil would simply call a mansion. It emanated the kind of elegance he'd only become aware of through movies, magazines, and Robin Leach: thirty foot vaulted ceiling; mahogany-banistered spiral staircase; dazzlingly brilliant crystal chandelier. Somber, earthtoned paintings, each framed in ornate carving and gold leaf, gave the interior a museum-like atmosphere. And the floor: pink-veined marble so pretty it was almost a sin to walk on it.

*Must've cost a fuckin' mint.*

Neil was patted down again, then led through huge, oak, double doors into a library larger than he would ever imagine anyone wanting to own.

*Nobody coulda read all them books.*

On his right, two men sat on the edge of a burgundy leather sofa that perfectly matched the background color of a fringed oriental rug. Both men stood when he entered.

"Have a seat, Neil," the taller of the two said, his open hand indicating the spot on the couch they had just abandoned. Neither one looked like he belonged in that refined, moneyed setting – two bureaucratic fish in unfamiliar waters.

Neil dropped into the sofa, then, feeling himself sinking like a turtle into his shell, moved to the same forward position he'd found its former occupants in; his nervously clasped hands rested on his knees. His fingers once again stiffened to form a steeple.

The agent who had spoken walked to the room's focal point, a large antique-looking desk, and from the near side lifted a manila folder. Unstylishly dressed in a rumpled grey suit, brown and blue rep tie, and thick, horn-rimmed glasses, he massaged his brush moustache before addressing Neil.

“I know you must be a little confused about why we brought you here instead of to one of our field offices, but by the time you leave, nomatter where you’re going, you’ll understand thoroughly.”

“I thought you brought me here to sell me the house,” Neil snapped, more from anxiety than insolence. He wiped his palm on his slacks, and added, “Too bad I’m not in the market for real estate right now.”

The agent forced a smile that stopped at his thin, tautly drawn lips.

What a ball of fire this guy is, Neil thought. *They probably give him a breathalyzer test each morning, just to make sure he’s alive.*

“First of all, I’m Special Agent Raymond Kearney, FBI.”

“No real estate?”

Kearney continued evenly, as though he hadn’t been interrupted. “I’m going to start by letting you know what we know about you, what you’re up against, and what you’ve got to lose. Once I’m finished, someone else will explain what you can do to help yourself.”

It was the same pitch he had heard a dozen different times, Neil thought – only in much less elaborate settings.

“Listen, you guys went through an awful lot of trouble for nothing,” he said. “Even if I knew something that could help you, which I don’t, I wouldn’t rat out guys for a chance to wipe my feet on a fancy rug...or, as a matter of fact, for anything else you guys could offer. You could save all that impressive bullshit for the kids in the park.”

Kearney remained unruffled. “Being a smartass isn’t going to do you much good.”

Neil hated him for being so much in control. *I’d like to see how cocksure you’d be without this army of yours...I’d bust your hole.*

“Aniello Adam DiChristo, AKA Neil...the only child of the late Gaetano DiChristo, a Captain in the old Lucchese, now the Florida, Family, and Bella Kazan, an Orthodox Jewish housewife, who was disowned by her parents when she married your father...sat ‘shiva’ for her and all.”

Neil looked away, his face on fire, his tongue bitter and dry. His right foot shook furiously from side to side.

“...You dropped out of school when you were sixteen, and took your first pinch three months later for possession of gambling paraphernalia. That one was dismissed, just like eight other gambling cases you picked up since. The only conviction you did get was a suspended sentence on an untaxed cigarette charge that was suspiciously plea-bargained down to a misdemeanor in Brooklyn Criminal Court.”

Kearney looked up from the file he was quoting and shot Neil another lips-only smile. “You’ve done a pretty good job of dodging raindrops.”

The muscles in Neil’s cheeks rippled with anger as he glared at the agent.

“...Right now, you have your own sports book, lend some money through Carlisle Capital Group, in Queens, and have a one-fourth interest in a crap game on First Avenue and Eighty-First Street, in Manhattan. You answer directly to Vincent “The Hook” Mazzara, who’s getting ready to move up to being a Captain in the John Florida Family, and since they’re now ‘making’ half-breeds if their fathers are Italian, he’s proposed you for your button. Congratulations, bucko.”

Neil felt a noose tighten around his freedom. Was there anything they didn't know? How many stoolpigeons did they have operating around him? How many guys that he'd shared food, drinks, and war stories with?

*Fuck.*

"You guys are watching too much television again," Neil said. "Either that, or your rats are giving you bad information. Do they wire you in on how many times I wipe my ass each day too?" He glared at the agent standing silently by the door, wishing him away and picturing himself walking out the door.

Special Agent Kearney continued in a steady voice, "I'll tell you what I do know that's interesting. For the last nine months you've been seeing Candace Boudreaux, and unemployed freelance model, and for the last five of those months she's been living with you."

"You should work for the Enquirer."

For the first time Kearney's face hinted at a previously hidden sense of humor, as he added, "Oh, and to show you exactly how thorough we are, Candy's secret wish is that she could carry your 'thing' in her pocketbook and, I quote, '...suck on it all day'."

As quickly as Neil shot off the kid leather cushion at Kearney, the other, younger agent moved in to intercept him and twist his arm into a painful hammerlock.

Just then the door swung open and a soft voice filled the room.

"Gentlemen..."

Everyone stood motionless as an aura of unmistakable authority followed the slightly built, snowy-haired owner of that voice across the library and into the seat behind the desk that, while dwarfing him physically, emphasized his proprietorship of all the grandeur that surrounded them – he just fit.

"Please release Mr. DiChristo," he ordered. Though his voice was gentle, a hardness in his luminous blue eyes left no room for discussion.

Neil's shoulder still throbbed when the young agent let go. He lifted his arm slowly, expecting it to quit on him at any moment. It didn't.

"Have a seat, please, Neil."

Instead of returning to the sofa, Neil defiantly dropped into one of the two leather armchairs that faced the diminutive old man's desk.

"It is highly regrettable that we had to begin our relationship on the wrong foot, Neil, but it seems that there is a slight personality conflict between Agent Kearney and yourself." He smiled warmly.

Good guy, bad guy: the classic police maneuver – he knew it all too well, Neil told himself. One cop would act as the antagonist, threatening and cajoling, only to soften up their victim for his supposedly more compassionate partner.

The difference this time was that this gentleman, and there was no other way Neil could think of him, didn't look like any law enforcement personnel he'd ever seen. Too old, classy, and petite to be, or ever have been, a cop or agent. Besides, the navy, probably cashmere, blazer he wore had to cost as much as any agent's monthly income.

"Would you care for a drink?" the old man asked. Without waiting for a reply, he nodded toward the young agent who had manhandled Neil, then turned back to Neil, and said, "While I cannot offer you Remy Martin, I am sure you will find my Napoleon Brandy quite satisfies your taste for cognac...and relaxes you."

Neil remained silent, the old man's knowledge of his drinking habits not lost on him.

"My name is Karl Brandenburg, like Bach's glorious concertos, and, while I am not an official of any government agency, per se, I am an associate of and advisor to many...I am not an FBI person, if that makes you any more comfortable."

The brandy slid down like silk panties, then ignited in Neil's middle, emanating warmth throughout his body. He remained expressionless.

"As you can see," Brandenburg continued, "there is not much information about Neil DiChristo's life that is secret. Unfortunately, the information gathering process usually infringes on areas that it is not intended to...as in the case of your Miss Boudreaux. You realize, of course, that there is no way to avoid this, and that we generally do not take pleasure in the invasion of one's privacy."

"Yeah, like your agents who used the stuff they learned about Paul Castellano to sell a book."

Brandenburg smiled. "O'Brien and Kurins were not, as you say, my agents." He looked at Kearney, and said, "Had they been in my charge, I might add, I would have seen to it that they were held accountable for what I consider a breach of ethics."

Through his peripheral vision, Neil saw Special Agent Kearney shift uncomfortably at the warning. How did Brandenburg know what was going on before he entered the room? Neil wondered. It had to be bugged. Was there a camera too? Who else was watching? He scanned the room for what could be a two-way mirror, but found none.

"The gist of, or, more precisely, the bottom line to, what Agent Kearney was crudely attempting to relate to you, is that we, and I use the collective we to indicate the People of the United States, can build a fairly strong criminal case against you, which can realistically result in your incarceration for a long, long portion of your remaining years."

"For what?"

"For anything we want."

"You're full of shit!"

"Am I?" Brandenburg asked gently. He smiled, then slid open the desk's top drawer and withdrew a sheet of paper. "This is known as a Form 302. FBI personnel are required to complete a 302 after interviewing each and every potential witness. Are you familiar with this, Neil?"

Neil said nothing.

"Yes, of course you are." Brandenburg placed the paper on the desk between himself and Neil. "Go ahead, read it. You will find it quite interesting."

When Neil refused, Brandenburg retrieved the paper and read it aloud.

According to a two year old FBI interview with someone named Anthony "Tony Boo Boo" Mistretta, Brandenburg said, he had waited in his car at approximately three o'clock in the morning of June 18<sup>th</sup> of the same year, while Neil shot one Edward "Monk" Giufi to death in the latter's apartment house lobby.

Not only didn't Neil know Tony Boo Boo, but he had never even seen Monk Giufi in either of their lives. Through the mob grapevine he had heard the story of Monk's murder; about how a drug dealer had killed the small time hustler in a barroom argument, then dragged the body into the apartment house lobby and fired some more

shots to make it appear as though Monk had died there. He'd also heard that the drug dealer himself had been murdered soon after.

"You're nuts," Neil said. "I never seen either one of these bums."

"Not according to Mr. Boo Boo. He will testify in open court that he has known you for years, and was, in fact, your accomplice in the murder of Mr. Monk. You planned it...excuse me for the pun: executed it...and he drove you from the scene of the crime to your apartment building, across from Central Park."

"He's a fuckin' liar!"

Brandenburg smiled again. "Please, Neil, it is a jury you may have to convince, not me." He withdrew another sheet of paper from the desk's drawer. "This report states that your fingerprints were found on a nine millimeter Beretta 93R, which has been recently discovered and proven to be the weapon used to assassinate the unfortunate Mr. Monk."

Neil bolted from the chair. With two fists firmly planted on the desk, he leaned toward Brandenburg. "That report's a fuckin' lie, an' you're a fuckin' liar! I never touched a goddamned Beretta in my life! You got no goddamned gun with my prints!"

"Sit down," Brandenburg said, his smile replaced by an icy stare.

Neil held his ground for a moment, then, surrendering to the old man's quiet power, returned to his seat.

"Now then, my dear Mr. DiChristo, I assure you that we 'will' produce a weapon, and it most certainly 'will' have your fingerprints on it. Whether you have actually touched it or not is quite immaterial."

Neil felt more intimidated than he ever had before. Though he'd been threatened with phony criminal charges in the past, none but this soft-spoken, well-bred little man had ever convinced him that it could be true – and it scared the shit out of him.

Not that he hadn't prepared himself since his youth for the eventuality of a short prison stay for gambling or some other minor crime. But for murder? No way to prepare for that.

Murder and death, in the life had pushed him into, had been one of those things, like movies, that wove its way in and out of Neil's life while being outside and apart from it. Every funeral or wake he had attended had been like viewing it as a completed project. None of the mostly closed caskets had held really close friends, simply because Neil had never had any really close friends. His most important relationships had always been with females.

No. No way to prepare at all.

*Goodbye Candy...*

*Goodbye Vinnie...*

*Goodbye.*

In a feeble attempt at bravado, Neil said, "Murder's not a federal charge anyway. And in the State, this bum's testimony can't –"

"United States Code, Title 18, Section 1952A," Brandenburg interrupted. "In case you are not aware, dear boy, that is the federal statute covering murder for hire."

"Hire?"

"Also, Section 18-1962, Racketeering and Influence of Corrupt Organizations."

"RICO?"

“I forgot to mention that when Agent Kearney interviewed you, Neil, you admitted – “

“Me?! I never – “

Karl Brandenburg continued as if Neil hadn't shouted loud enough to be heard in New Jersey. "... You admitted having been paid twenty thousand dollars for the murder by your boss, Vincent Mazzara... commonly known as, 'Vinnie the Hook'?"

Neil slumped back in the chair.

"... You also implicated Mr. The Hook in your dice game, your gaming and usury operations, et-cet-era, et-cet-era, et-cet-era."

Brandenburg formed a cathedral-type arch with his fingers. "You do believe we can, and will, convince Mr. The Hook that you are the source of his eventual undoing?" He waited through an unresponsive pause then asked, "Neil?"

Neil looked away from Brandenburg. Not only was this little bastard framing him to spend nearly twenty years in prison, but he'd hand Vinnie what would, at his age, amount to a prison death sentence, while labeling Neil as the informer who put him there. With any kind of luck, Neil thought, someone in prison would kill him quickly and end his misery.

"I know this may sound trite, Neil, but the future is not quite as bleak as Agent Kearney or I have portrayed it to be... there is a way out."

*I knew it!*

Neil jumped from his seat and started toward the two agents who blocked the exit. "Get me out of here!" he bellowed, while holding out his arms to be cuffed.

"Sit down, Neil," the old man commanded.

"Fuck you, Brandenburg. You're probably a great guy to your pals in the senior citizens' club, you got a nice pad to hang around in, and, of course, you're God's Avenging Angel dropped to earth to save America, but, to be honest, I've heard all this bullshit before."

Neil walked back to the desk to physically confront Brandenburg from as close as he dared.

"With all you think you know about me, you old fuck, you don't know anything at all. You could set me up any way you want, but I wouldn't rat anybody out if you stood me in front of a goddamn firing squad!"

"I am well aware of that, Neil, and it was one of the factors that prompted me to choose you from among our group of candidates. Now, please, return to your seat and hear me out."

Neil's anger and frustration were still being vented by way of inane mutterings and mumbling as he seated himself again.

*Candidates? These people are fuckin' nuts.*

When Neil looked down at his empty snifter, his host seemed to read his mind and signaled with an index finger for the young agent to refill the glass.

"Neil, I want you to work with us."

For some strange reason, Neil respected, possibly even liked the persistent old man that sat across the cherrywood desk from him, and tried not to direct any more hostility his way. "I don't know why you insist on wasting both our times. I just can't help you. I mean, every morning I gotta shave this mug, and if I don't like what I see when I do, well..." He shrugged helplessly.

“Neil, believe me, I respect your convictions, and if it were only to ensnare some of your Neanderthal mobster friends I would never have become personally involved. To begin with, my time is much too precious to be bothered with them. Furthermore, we have better informers within your subculture than you could ever be...willing accomplices, some of whom have initiated contact with us rather than us pressuring them for help. Within a few weeks, you will learn of one in particular that will stun you.”

“Who’s that?”

“Please, do not ruin the surprise,” the old man responded. “Wait for the newspapers.”

With that, Brandenburg rose then stepped behind his chair to the stained glass-shuttered windows that overlooked his estate.

“Neil, once more I am going to use the collective we for the American People, and tell you that we need your help.”

He pointed out at some imaginary location, somewhere beyond his private forest of firs and birches, then, with more raw anger than Neil had believed him capable of, continued, “Out there is a man... a despicable man, who has accepted the best this country has to offer and then literally stabbed it in the back.”

When he turned back toward Neil, Brandenburg’s eyes were so aglow with hatred that for a moment it seemed as though they might burst into flames.

“Neil, out there is a Russian operative...one who has probably done more damage to these United States than anyone since the Walkers...and we haven’t been able to get close enough to him to bring him down. You can.”

*Spies...Russians...FBI...probably CIA...* Spies killed. So did mob guys, but at least he knew their ways and danger signs like the palm of his hand. Neil Adam DiChristo hadn’t lived to be thirty-five years old in the mean streets of New York by being stupid. No way. He’d rather take his chances in jail, even stuck with a phony rat-collar, and he told Brandenburg so in no uncertain terms.

“Snitch jacket is the term we use, and, yes, Neil, I understand your concerns implicitly,” Brandenburg replied.

*Big fuckin’ deal.*

“...If I were unable to comprehend, prognosticate, and adjust to the reaction of others I would be of no value whatsoever to the American People.”

Neil had had enough. Unable to restrain his anger any longer, he shouted. “You keep talking about the fuckin’ American People, but you don’t know a goddamned thing about them! You work for the FBI, or the Government, or whoever the fuck, who do nothing but try to give people a new ass if they make too much money. The American People don’t even know who the fuck you are!”

Brandenburg walked around the desk to where Neil was, and sat at the edge of the armchair next to him. When he removed his jacket and began to lean closer, Laurence Olivier in “Marathon Man” replaced Brandenburg in Neil’s imagination. Was Brandenburg going to smack him? Cut him? Inject him with some kind of poison or truth serum? Or was he really going to drill holes in his teeth?

Instead, Brandenburg pushed the white cotton sleeve of his shirt up to the elbow on his right arm. Faded blue numbers on the inside of his forearm stared up at Neil from old, translucent flesh.

Neil blinked twice.

“You see, Neil, whether the American People are aware of my existence or not, I am someone who realizes what the excesses of bad government can do to them. That is why I spend my efforts to preserve one which I consider the best presently available.” He rolled down and fastened the broadcloth while walking back to his original seat.

Neil sat absolutely still. He wanted to do something; offer sympathy, scream, bargain – something.

But couldn’t.

“All I ask of you, Neil, is that you hear me out; let me make my pitch, so to speak, then consider what you have heard. Weigh what I say, then decide what suits both your best interests and those of your country. If you choose to cooperate, I will personally do my utmost to see that your personal risks are minimal, and are substantially rewarded. Should you decide otherwise, I will extricate myself from your situation, and you will become the exclusive province of Agent Kearney.”

*Some choice, sink or sink*, Neil thought.

“Why me?” he asked. “I never met a spy, wouldn’t know one if I tripped over him, and really don’t want to know any. I’m a street hustler, a gambler...a few other little things, that’s all.”

“Neil, my dear boy, please,” Brandenburg said, drawing out the word please, “do not insult my intelligence. You forget that I am aware of the ‘little things’ you do that exceed the area of simply gambling.”

When Neil tried to protest, Brandenburg raised a quieting hand. “I assure you, your diversity of unlawful interests and experience enhances your value to this operation. You see, dear boy, our target, a Russian – former Soviet – diplomat assigned to the United Nations, has demonstrated a sort of sixth sense concerning our attempts to place someone close enough to him to monitor his activities.”

“But I thought there are no more Russian spies,” Neil said. “I see t.v. The Russians ain’t commies no more.”

“Our friends spy on us, for example, the Israelis. And, dear boy, we do the same to them. That is more or less acceptable.”

“This shit is confusing.”

“Politics always is. This is not politics, however. This is personal. We have here a poor excuse for a human being who has absolutely no loyalty. He has been able to change his jacket from pure red to red-white-and blue without suffering in the least for his past transgressions.”

“What makes that so personal?”

Though Brandenburg maintained his physical composure, the red flush on his withered face gave away how upset he had become. “That,” he replied, “is personal.”

“I don’t understand. What did – ?”

“You do not have to understand,” Brandenburg said. “...Just as understanding is not a prerequisite for your blindly accepting and complying with edicts from your Mr. Vincent the Hook.”

“You’re giving me an order?” Neil asked, incredulously.

Brandenburg sighed. “Trust me, Neil,” he said. “The whys and wherefores are deeper than you could ever understand. And, quite frankly, in spite of your present predicament, they are simply none of your business. You either choose to save yourself...or not.”

After a pause that saw him normally pale skin tone return, Brandenburg continued. “Suffice it to say that the man is scum...a profiteer, who will just as easily work with Sadaam or Quadaffi...or anyone else who pays, for that matter...now that there is no more Soviet market. America and her people are expendable byproducts to him. He must be punished, and you, being an authentic underworld figure, are the ideal person to infiltrate his nasty shell and help us do just that.”

“Why don’t you just whack him out?” Neil asked.

Though he hated to admit it, the thought of being involved in the adventure of an espionage plot, especially one that might stop weapons from getting into the hands of a bunch of crazy towelheads, was at very least interesting, and at best exciting. Though he usually didn’t keep up with world events, earlier that year television had dragged him along with Operation Desert Storm, and had had him rooting for Schwartzkopf and the guys as if they were the Jersey Giants. He’d even caught part of the victory parade that had passed along Fifth Avenue that June. Besides, he’d always been fascinated with James Bond.”

“...I’m sure you could make it look like a mugging,” Neil advised, about his suggestion to eliminate the spy. “Or, better yet, just make him disappear.”

Brandenburg smiled again, a knowing, satisfied expression that made Neil realize he’d been hooked.

The old man’s eyes lit up as he answered, “I agree, Neil. Executive Action is the perfect solution. Unfortunately, we are bound by limitations set by those in somewhat higher positions. We spy, they spy...everyone spies. Anyone gets caught, they get expelled. No official operative for any side gets killed.”

“How civilized.”

Brandenburg went on. “It is especially difficult in today’s post-communist, embrace-the-Russians atmosphere. Few realize that for the most part those people running things over there now are the same ones that ran things under the red regime.”

In a resigned manner, Brandenburg clasped his hands together. “But, dear boy,” he said, “those are the rules we must abide by. With your help, if we can catch him involved in some sort of unlawful activity, which I am sure he is, we can expel him with virtually no flap potential, and with assurances that he will be disgraced and, more important to me, punished, to equalize some of his past sins.”

Neil remained silent, realizing that the old man would give up no more information than he himself would if the situations were reversed.

For the next hour, Brandenburg vacillated between recruiter and teacher: first explaining that Neil’s forte, gambling, was their target’s major weakness, next describing, in words Neil barely understood, some of the crimes he suspected his adversary of – theft of specifications for an SID Program laser transformer; passing of information that allowed the Soviets to copy our AWACS radar system; obtaining B1-B bomber plans, which were used to develop the Russian Blackjack model – then back again to the benefit of Neil’s unassailably criminal background.

“...He can check you inside out and never come up with anything but a bad report, which, in this case, is a good report.” Brandenburg let out a small laugh. “Sort of reminds one of Orwell’s Nineteen-Eighty-Four...right is wrong, good is bad. Remember?” He looked at Neil quizzically. “You have read the book?”

“I saw the movie.”

“Of course,” the old man replied, then asked, “Well, Neil, what do you think?”

The fact that he’d been made an offer to save himself was nothing new. There hadn’t been a time that any law enforcement agency had put their hands on him without suggesting a deal. In the past, the defiant young hoodlum had summarily rejected them all. The difference now, and it troubled him deeply, was that he was tempted – tempted to break a code that he’d lived by since he’d been old enough to understand that in his world tattletales, snitches, and rats were punished, abused, and even killed.

“Listen, Brandenburg, much as I’d like to help you, and I really would, being half a rat, by setting up a spy instead of a street guy, is like being a little bit pregnant...there ain’t no such thing.”

Brandenburg laughed. “How profound.”

“And, even if I could live with that,” Neil went on, “I don’t think the people that know me would be so understanding and let me live with that, if you know what I mean. Getting whacked out for helping you bounce a Russkie out of the country don’t make no sense to this kid.”

Brandenburg looked at Neil with a warm, fatherly, superior kind of expression. “What I propose to you, Neil, while not at all commonplace, is not that unusual either. We have a tradition of your people working hand in hand with us when our country was in trouble, especially when they could save themselves from lengthy prison terms. Lucky Luciano did it during World War Two, when he helped set up the invasion of Sicily by issuing orders to their longshoremen from his cell in Dannemora. His reward was deportation back to Italy instead of spending the rest of his life behind bars here in America.”

“That was a different time,” Neil argued, as much with himself as with Brandenburg.

“How about in the early Sixties, when Sam Giancana was JFK’s mafia connection in the plan to eliminate Castro?”

“Yeah, and I see how you guys paid him back,” Neil retorted. “A bullet in the brain ain’t exactly what I consider a reward.” He tried not to show the pleasure he felt at having scored a point over his sophisticated captor.

“I am afraid that was a rather poor example,” Brandenburg confessed. “Let me see, there are some instances I am not at liberty to relate...national security and all that...but I can mention – “

“Don’t bother,” Neil snapped. “I really don’t care who did what. This is ‘my’ life at stake.”

Too many things were spinning around in Neil’s head. What he needed was advice. If only he could confide in his boss, Vinnie the Hook. The old time wiseguy had been a surrogate father to him since his real father had died. No, Vinnie would probably kill him before he finished talking. Maybe jail was a better alternative? But labeled as a rat?

Brandenburg seemed to sense the reason behind Neil’s indecision, and stepped in quickly to sway him. “If exposure is your primary concern, which I imagine it would be, let me assure you that everyone involved on our end will do his or her utmost to protect the secrecy of your mission. Furthermore, once the operation ends, it ends. There will be no grand jury hearings or court trials. All information surrounding this project will be

sealed and deposited in our Top Secret files in Washington. No one will ever discover the role you played.”

“Until one of your agents decides to quit and write a book.”

“There will be no books.”

“Yeah, that’s today.”

“Neil, this is exceptionally important to me,” Brandenburg implored. “And I will extend an equally exceptional effort to protect you if you help.”

Time. Time was what Neil needed. Given a chance to think clearly, he was sure he’d find a way out. Time might even change his luck.

“Damn you, Brandenburg!” he shouted. “You got my balls in a nutcracker here. How the hell do you think I can even think straight, let alone make a deal that involves my whole life?”

Again it was as if the old man had read Neil’s thoughts. “You may have three days,” he said. “...But I assure you, Neil, your options will not increase.”

Three days. Only three goddamned days to figure out the rest of his life – but it was a hell of a lot better than nothing, Neil thought.

“For the next seventy-two hours, Neil, you will be free to come and go as you please. However, you will constantly be under our watchful eye.”

*What else would I expect?*

“...At the end of that period, I will expect your decision.”

Brandenburg’s expression was grave, as he added, “Let me caution you about one point: once you join our operation there is no way out except when it is concluded... hopefully with a great measure of success. If you attempt to either doublecross us, so to speak, or decide to withdraw prematurely, you will be instantly eliminated...you will just know too much.”

Neil felt himself in familiar waters for the first time. “Sounds an awful lot like the mob to me, Karl, buddy.”

“I am delighted to see you have maintained your sense of humor,” Brandenburg replied, with an accompanying grin. “But, if you recall, Neil, I told you that we have a history of having worked together at times, your people and mine.”

“I guess the old saying is true,” Neil said. “If you walk with a crippled guy long enough, you start to limp yourself.”

Neil’s philosophical humor was quickly replaced by the reality of his situation. “Speaking of mobs, we got another problem: I managed to get a message to my lawyer. By now, everybody in the street knows I got pinched. There’s no way I’m gonna leave here an’ try to explain what happened...why I’m out and about with no case pending.”

Brandenburg shook his head slowly from side to side, a look of admiration on his grandfatherly face. “You are much more resourceful than even I gave you credit for. You will make a splendid addition to our team.”

Neil winced at the thought of being included in a law enforcement group.

The old man left his chair and walked to where Neil sat. Face to face, only inches away, his penetrating ice-blue eyes made as much a statement as his words. “Keep in mind, however, that we are always slightly more resourceful.”

Brandenburg glanced at his wristwatch then continued, “At this moment, you are expected at the Federal Courthouse for the Northern District of New York, in Buffalo, where you will be arraigned on an indictment charging you with the interstate

transportation of stolen property...remember the trailer full of coffee beans you sold last year?"

Neil smiled for the first time that day.

The next few hours, all time being subtracted from Neil's seventy-two of supposed freedom, were spent mostly in the air.

By the time he reached Buffalo in Brandenburg's Cessna Citation, a local lawyer was already waiting, having been called by Joel Einhorn, who had been previously informed of his client's whereabouts via a phone call from "...A friend."

Ninety minutes later, released on a twenty-five thousand dollar personal recognizance bond, known as an R.O.R., Neil was on a commercial flight back to LaGuardia Airport.

Soon after he had finally slammed his apartment door shut behind him Neil realized Prince wasn't chanting "Gett Off" at a wall-shaking level, therefore Candy couldn't possibly be home. She was either out collecting her money from Joel Einhorn, or spending it, probably at Sam Goody's.

*Thank God for little favors.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Monday morning came all too quickly for Neil. Could seventy-two hours have possibly passed since his nightmare began?

He paced barefoot over his livingroom's thick forest-green carpet, hands clasped behind his paisley silk boxer shorts, still trying to unscramble his mind enough to plot a clear course of action. Every time he'd fight his way through the confusion to get a solid train of thought going, fragments of Friday's conversation would intrude: Brandenburg indicating a high-level mobster would soon be publicized as having rolled over... *I wonder who it is?* Him, Neil, pleading to be left alone... *Can't they see I don't belong in that league?* Brandenburg's presentation of phony evidence to bury him... *Fuck me in the heart!*

Candy, aware of nothing more than that her boyfriend was out on bail for a manageable criminal charge, slept with her usual intensity at that pre-dawn hour.

Neil's Friday night had been an alcohol escape, an attempt to run away from the life-threatening dilemma that faced him.

It didn't help.

Saturday morning had only found him with only forty-eight hours left to make a decision, and a monster hangover to boot.

Sunday's visit to the Little Italy social club where the Floridia Family headquartered itself did even less for the nerve-wrecked Neil. Far from the familiarity of his associates and their surroundings lending him comfort, he nearly came apart from the paranoia that gripped him. Every eye was an eye that knew his secret; every smile that of a potential assassin.

Now, he could count on one hand the hours that remained. No more time to put it off. Whatever the consequences, a decision had to be made – one he'd have to live or die by.

Neil silently spoke to whatever gods might be listening, took a deep breath, and went to the phone.

"Okay, Brandenburg, you win. When do we meet?" he barked into the receiver, hoping he'd startled the old man out of his silk pajamas. Any tiny bit of satisfaction would do until he found a way out; a way he was confident would eventually turn up.

Time.

"I was hoping you would make the wise choice – in our favor, of course," Brandenburg said, sounding irritatingly wide awake.

*Of course,* Neil thought bitterly. *They'll hang that on his goddamn tombstone – "Of course."*

"I suggest you relax today and wait until this evening for us to meet. Are you familiar with Westchester County? Tarrytown, specifically?"

"Sure, I used to go to the Westchester Premier Theater," Neil answered, referring to the thirty-five hundred seat entertainment showplace that had shut down amid a flurry of racketeering indictments.

“Of course.”

Neil angrily pictured the old man’s smug smiling face as if it were before him; those electric blue eyes twinkling with pleasure.

“Not far from the site of the theater,” Brandenburg continued, “is the Tappan-Hill Restaurant. It was formerly Jay Gould’s residence, and lies to your left as you drive north on Highland Avenue. There will be a reservation in your name for eight-thirty. Please be prompt.”

A dial tone was all Neil was left with. He stared at the receiver for a moment, tempted to dial the number again. Would he get an off-the-hook busy signal, as he suspected?

After a moment’s lapse, Neil hung up the phone, took another deep breath then turned to his next task: getting rid of Candy.

Nothing could have prepared Neil for the sight of the stunning platinum blonde sitting at his reserved table.

This has to be a screw-up, he thought, walking towards her. At any other time Neil would have considered a curvaceous female error, like the one before him, a stroke of amazing good fortune. That night, however, she could only have been a nuisance.

Before Neil could utter a single syllable, the girl, exquisitely clad in a black crepe halter dress and opera length pears, stood, embraced him, and said, loud enough to be heard halfway across the room, “Darling, I was worried that you might have had a problem finding this place.”

She pecked him lightly on his cheek, her musky fragrance overpowering his senses.

Never before at a loss for words with members of the opposite sex, Neil now found himself tongue-tied. To his embarrassment, there was no such reticence between his legs, lending his trousers an obvious bulge.

“Don’t stand there with your mouth hanging open,” the blonde whispered through a broad, toothy smile. “Your staring like that will only attract attention. Sit down.”

“I don’t think I’m on Candid Camera, and I know you’re not Brandenburg in drag,” he quipped after he had seated himself and felt some composure return.

Now Neil was glad he had dressed for power – navy pinstriped suit, white on white shirt, maroon tie – and had had the barber spray every one of his few fine dark hairs into place, mostly to show Brandenburg he wasn’t a broken down valise he’d appeared to be on Friday.

“Don’t tell me you’re my reward for playing ball?” Neil went on, feeling a surge of masculinity.

Her lips formed a strained smile. “No such luck. My name is Dee Lawrence... Special Agent Dee Lawrence... and I’m assigned to be your handling agent for the Bureau. Mr. Brandenburg felt there would be fewer problems this way, just in case someone you know should appear.”

Neil studied the soft lines that surrounded her hard grey eyes. *The original Ice Queen*, he thought. Although, with those good looks...

“We’d be even safer if we met at my apartment,” he said.

“Keep your pants zipped, hot shot,” Dee snapped. “Just so you don’t get any delusions, I want to make it very clear from the outset: you and I are strictly business. You do what you’re supposed to; I carry back reports. End of story.”

The fact that she seemed unnerved by his pass showed promise to Neil. Besides, it felt good not to be the only one squirming.

“What if I run into a problem, who do I call? Brandenburg?”

“Me. You can’t call Mr. Brandenburg anymore. The number you were given has been disconnected.”

Neil smiled. “What about in the middle of the night, when I wake up alone and need somebody to cuddle with?”

“Get a fucking teddy bear,” she whispered angrily. “Listen, DiChristo – “

“Neil,” he corrected. “If we’re supposed to be a hot item, you can’t go around calling me DiChristo...Dee, honey.”

Neil reached out and trapped Dee’s hand in his, knowing full well she would not create a scene in the restaurant. Watching her fume was nearly as exciting as touching her velvety flesh. But not quite.

Just then, the maitre d’ appeared to take their order. The blonde agent sat tightlipped, her cheek color rising to a bright pink, while Neil ordered a sumptuous dinner of cocktail crab claws, roast duckling with orange brandy sauce, and sautéed asparagus. His hand remained firmly planted on hers all the while.

When the maitre d’ turned to leave, Dee Lawrence yanked her hand from Neil’s. She appeared ready to explode.

“Look, this is my first shot at a decent assignment,” she said. “And I don’t intend to let an asshole like you mess it up because you think with your dickhead. Though, if I have to, I’ll walk out right now and let Kearney handle you.”

“If anyone’s gonna handle me, honey, it’s definitely gotta be you.”

“Fuck you,” Dee said. “I hope you get your ass shot off when one of your ‘goombahs’ spots you with Kearney.”

Dee’s correctly assessed possibility shocked Neil back to the grim reality of his situation.

“Alright, I’ll be good,” he said. “...At least for awhile. Now, boss lady, what do I have to do, and how fast could I get it over with?”

“That’s more like it,” Dee said. She reached into a seedpearl-covered clutch purse, withdrew a small envelope, and passed it to Neil.

“In here is all the information you will need for intercourse with our division...” When she saw Neil’s ear to ear grin, Dee caught the double meaning of her words, and blushed bright scarlet. “Fuck you, DiChristo.”

*Oh, I wish,* Neil thought. He said, “Neil, Dee darling.” Smiling, he added, “...It’s fuck you, ‘Neil’.” Normally, he liked his women sweet, both inside and out. Tough talking females, like Dee Lawrence, generally turned him off immediately.

Yet, there was something about her...

Dee looked away from Neil as she spoke. “You’ll find telephone numbers that can be used to reach either Kearney or me at any hour.”

“Not together, I hope.”

Dee shot a look of obvious disgust at Neil, but went on as if she hadn't been interrupted, "There's also a set of numbers for Licata, who arrested you." A slight sneer crossed her face. "You remember him, I imagine. Right... 'bub'?"

Their battle of snide remarks took a time out when a tuxedoed waiter arrived to serve dinner. The waiter's slow, pampering method of service as he set first the crab claws in front of them, then laid a nutcracker just so alongside each plate setting, suited Neil just fine, though he imagined it only annoyed Dee even more. As soon as the waiter left, she got back to business.

"You've also got a list of codes that you'll use in emergency situations, and safe houses where you can surrender yourself if you're in any imminent danger. There's also a thousand dollars to cover your first few meetings with me, and more once you get started and make contact."

Dee slipped a receipt over the table toward Neil. "You'll have to sign one of these each time you get money."

"Sign? Are you out of your mind? That's all I need, is for one of them to leak out and wind up with my people."

"You'll sign under your cryptonym...er, code name: Snake Eyes," she ordered.

Only half-joking, Neil asked, "What is that supposed to mean, that I can't win?" That maybe a bad luck name was what he needed to turn his life around crossed his mind. Gambling sometimes worked that way.

"I don't know what it means," Dee replied. "Someone higher up decided to call this assignment Operation Wager. They named you Snake Eyes and our subject Shitter."

"Shitter?"

"I know your name has something to do with dice, but the other one doesn't make sense to me at all."

Neil laughed at Dee's naiveté. She'd be a piece of cake to work with – and an easy score, despite her frosty attitude and snappy mouth.

"Don't laugh," Dee said. She groaned, "Another fucking male pig."

"Shitter's a horse racing term," he said, while signing the receipt for a thousand dollars. "When a nag runs way out of the money they say he ran in the shithouse, or, in the shitter. It looks like your guys figure neither one of us could win."

Dee Lawrence shrugged. She continued to shovel information to Neil throughout the meal: where to leave messages, how and when to use the electronic recording devices that would be given to him shortly, and signals to use for the team of backup agents that would have him under constant protective surveillance.

"When do I get to see this bum?" Neil asked, over a cup of Café Cognac. "I don't even know him and I hate him already."

When Dee smiled, he thought, *What a beauty. Boy, would I like to...*

"You'll get to meet our man soon enough," she said. "I've got a large manila envelope in my car that has everything you'll need to know about him, including pictures. Take it home, study its contents then destroy everything. You'll learn that in this business you can't be too careful. Mistakes are usually fatal."

Their dinner and conversation over, they walked to Dee's car through the parking lot, close together but not touching.

Neil stared at the flimsy black fabric pulled tightly over Dee's buttocks as she bent and reached under the front seat to retrieve the promised photos and information on their target. The sight of her skirt rising high on the backs of her thighs made him hard. When she closed the door and turned around he was nearly on top of her.

"Neil, please..."

Neil stretched his arms to the car's roof on either side of the blonde agent, leaving her no room to move – other than into him.

"I just think it would be much more comfortable for both of us if we relaxed a little more with each other."

He moved his head slightly forward, his lips a couple of centimeters from her turned face. While he gently nuzzled her hair, he brought his body closer until his erection pressed against her. One of his hands snaked over towards her breast.

"There's a theory I heard once, about how sexual tension makes people do – "

The scream seemed to linger in Neil's throat for an eternity, while blistering pain tore through his body from where Dee's knee had smashed into his testicles.. With the air rushing from him as he doubled up and fell to the ground, came the released howl. A manila envelope hit his face and fell alongside his head.

When Dee Lawrence's tires squealed within inches of where he lay rolling in pain, the only thing Neil could manage was a steady moan.

All he'd wanted was intercourse with her division...