

Who Killed Tommie Thierry

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Chapter One

Jonathan Strawn was staring at a blank sheet of paper, waiting for inspiration, something to write that somebody might want to read. Something that makes sense to someone.

The news business waits for no man, no writer's block, no wimps with the blues. You've got to produce, churn it out, meet the deadline, turn it in, go home, go to bed, get up tomorrow and do it all over again.

In 1970s Chicago, Strawn writes about the counterculture, their music, their social mores, morals or lack thereof, their riots in the streets. That's his beat. It's what he does and flatters himself to think he's good at it. That he can write rings around the competition. Bring clarity and insight to a complex subject. Describe and define a social phenomenon that is unfolding as we speak. With eloquence, even poetry. On his better days.

On days like this, he'd rather shoot himself and be done with it. What he wanted to write, he couldn't write. How to say what can't be said? Not safely. Without harming friends. Giving ammunition to the enemy. How to say what you know but can't prove? How to convince yourself it would make a difference even if you did? That it would be worth the heat.

Tommie Thierry's dead. Nothing will change that. No revelation will bring him back to life. No exposé is going to ferret out the rats from their hidey-holes. They're tunnelled in too deep. They live there. You'd only be slumming.

Murder is the worst sin. The most damning accusation you can make. Point that finger, you'd better be on target, have 'em in your sights, dead to rights. You damn well better be able to prove it. Strawn can't. Not yet. Maybe never. But he can try. At least maybe prove it to himself.

Chapter Two

Strawn kept looping back to the coincidence. The big rock & roll enigma. How to explain it? It defied logic, was inexplicable, but there it was: Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, her sometime lover Pigpen McKernan of the Dead, the Doors' Jim Morrison, Alan Wilson of Canned Heat, hell, going clear back in the 1930s to bluesman Robert Johnson, whom some call the father of rock, and now Tommie Thierry, all of them dead at 27. Stars flamed out. Like clockwork. No doubt more to come. But why?

The astrologers had an explanation. Something about 7 year cycles, a series of four of them, Saturn return. Something like that. That treacherous 27th year. Can you make it to 28? If so, you'll probably make it to 56, and onward from there who knows how long? If not, you lived the fast life, not the long one. Makes as much sense as anything else.

Dead of what? The adulation? The pressure? The access to too much too soon? Too much too anytime, for that matter.

What is it like to be a kid, not yet a decade past high school, on stage every night, crowds screaming your name, cats imitating you, chicks throwing their underwear at you, arenas full of people swooning at the sounds you make? To make more money than you ever dreamed possible, sycophants serving your every desire, sex, drugs and rock & roll, as much as you want at your disposal, just for the asking?

Do you die of adulation? Of exhaustion? Of being the center of it all? Maybe that was what killed Jimi and Janis and the rest. Strawn had met them, interviewed them, even partied with them a time or two. He didn't know them well.

But he did know Tommie. And every time he thought of him, dead more than a week now, there was an ache inside him that all these rationalizations and coincidences couldn't quell.

Tommie was given to the same excesses as the others. He suffered the same fate. But Strawn didn't believe that the adulation or the pressure killed him. Didn't buy it was the drugs, although the boy sure did his share.

No, the heartache Strawn felt for Tommie was because he feared what Jefferson Catt told him a couple of days after Tommie died might be true. Catt was with him, was his bodyguard, was responsible for keeping him safe, and so he had reason to make excuses.

But he loved Tommie like a brother. He'd seen him troubled and he'd seen him on top of the world. He'd seen him do dope, including junk a time or two, but he'd never seen him with a needle. He knew Tommie was afraid of a spike. He smoked, sniffed or swallowed what drugs he did, never shot them. And Jefferson told Strawn that night with a quivering voice and a plaintive depth of pain in his eyes that Tommie had been killed. Somebody geezed him after he'd passed out. A hotshot, plain and simple.

Chapter Three

Tommie Thierry was a beautiful guy. That's all you could say about him. Unless you lived under a rock, you noticed that something different was going on. A new thing was happening, something young people shared. It was founded in youth, in exuberance, in naivety, in hope. It was visual, it was cultural, the sound track was monumental. Musicians were the shaman. Shamen. Whatever.

Strawn was no hippie. A little too old. A lot too hard. But he loved the hippies, what they stood for, what they tried to make happen. Peace and love. Who can argue with that? Youth, beauty, vitality, what's not to like? Anti-capitalism, it's a thought. Sex and drugs? That's where the problems began. Political resistance? The death knell.

But when it began, that army of kids coming out of their parents' homes, looking around, seeing themselves and all the others just like them coming out, too, emerging from the blanched out, white bread mediocrity of the 1950s into the searing heat and passion of the 60s and beyond, it was something awesome. It shook the world. It was the youthquake.

Tommie was the image of what you imagined it was all about. He was medium tall and thin with the look of an Indian or a gypsy, maybe, something more exotic than his suburban Indiana upbringing. His face was long, lean and sculpted, his skin olive-toned, big eyes, high cheekbones, thick lips, and long straight hair nearly black and ribboned with stripes dyed in rainbow hues to which an eagle feather was attached at ear-level and hung to his shoulder.

He wore embroidered shirts, brightly colored woven sashes belted around his waist, earrings, bracelets, necklaces, beaded vests and bell-bottom pants of canvas, velvet or leather that draped over his high-heeled boots. Like so many kids, he dressed like a performer. But, he really was one. A helluva performer.

There were many things he couldn't do well, including take care of himself. But when he got a guitar in his hands, the sounds he made would amaze you, pure and simple. When he played he was transported to another place and he took you with him. He was a musician of staggering talent and inspiration who looked and sounded exactly like we want our heroes to be, if musicians are our heroes, and in this time and place, they were.

Strawn first heard him one night in 1966 walking through an alley after dark. Much of downtown emptied out when the offices closed up for the

day. The clean folks in their crisp clothes and new cars headed for the suburbs north of town and nothing was left at night except street people, bums, hippies, the odd folks who lived down there. It was a wonderful place in the dark.

He was going to see Sly King. It was a long walk from the Trib, but the night was warm and the city felt good. The band was rehearsing in the basement of a warehouse on West Lake near the Interstate on the other side of the river. There was a lot of good space to be had cheap over there and hardly anyone to disturb. Even the average bands had pretty nice places to practice.

Sly King was better than average. The place they practiced was very cool. High ceilings, thick wooden columns, walls of brick and stone. It was the foundation of a very big building and they rocked it. There were cement and stone benches, lots of beat up furniture, big screens strewn about on which light shows were projected, and a thick conduit of steel containing big time electricity. From it right now was emerging a sound thundering and awesome.

"That ain't Sly King," Strawn said to himself and hurried through the alley door, down the steps and across the big room just as the song ended and the players were putting down their instruments. The kid with the Stratocaster was unfamiliar.

"Pretty good player," he said to Nicky Soros, who was Sly King himself.

"Yeah, and the moon is pretty high in the sky," said Nicky, shrugging his shoulders and looking sideways at the kid. "Been a lot of good players in this town. He might be the best ever. Be seventeen next week."

That was Tommie Thierry. They all were young, but seventeen was a memory. He was here and not back home in school because the music in him was just too powerful to hold back, even at that age. Some things are so obviously meant to be that all the details shrink away to nothing. Tommie belonged on the stage, the big stage, and that's where he was headed.

Chapter Four

Solomon Gold is a promoter. He books rock & roll. Puts on concerts by the biggest acts in the business, shows that draw them by the tens of thousands at \$10, even \$20 a head.

In 1965, in Chicago, he put on a few shows. Drew a few fans. Made a few bucks. Made a few connections. Kept it up. Kept getting bigger. Now he's as big as they get.

Rock & roll is here to stay. It was meant to be that way. Just needed the right promotion.

Sollie was a short, fat, very bright and very driven Jew. His face was round, his eyes large, his mouth fleshy and given to snarling. When he was younger he was thin but it was hard to imagine now. His appetites were large and, given the resources he had acquired, his belly was enormous.

Success hung on him like slabs of fat on a roast. There would come a time when he exceeded 400 pounds, could barely walk any faster than a slow shuffle, and spent much time rubbing his back against doorposts just to stimulate some circulation in those far reaches of his very corpulent body.

But food wasn't his only area of overindulgence. In an era when drugs drove the agenda in most parts of the business, the bands, the fans, the roadies, the ticket-takers, he never touched the stuff. No alcohol either. His addictions were elsewhere in the panoply of human faults.

He ate like a pig, yes, but he also was all about power and greed. He wanted to have everything in his control, especially the people he worked with and the fans he sold to, like a pasha with the caliphate. He wanted to make all the money, or most of the money, in any deal that came his way. He would fight you for every dime, cheat you out of anything he could just because if he could you deserved it. He squeezed the life out of every dollar he got his hands on.

"I never pay retail for anything," he bragged. Truth was he often didn't pay anything at all. He bounced checks for pizza delivery, ripped off the local street vendors, would stare down a check at a dinner party until somebody else picked up the tab, not once, not often, but always. He was reverentially focused on making any and all costs in every one of life's endeavors your problem, not his.

He also had a taste for gambling, a big taste like all his others, and loved to boast about his underworld associates. He played the tough guy at a time

when all the kids were preaching peace and love. He reeked of self-reference when the kids were saying, "Smile on your brother."

Sollie was conditioned for war. He loved the stress, the anxiety, even the pain, as long as he won the battle. He thrived on out-smarting you, out-toughing you, out-lasting you. Something about being the survivor when the others went under made him feel good, strong, alive. Lunch was always better if it was your lunch he was eating.

He was one of the guys who created the rock & roll concert business and carved up the country, to each a piece of his own. He was very good at it. He could pack a room, an arena, a stadium without fail. His string of successful shows ran on forever.

"55 consecutive sellouts," he was quick to tell you, "and counting. Show me another guy in the business anywhere can say that."

He had an uncanny sense of what was wanted when and where, and once he decided to book it, he never flinched in getting it sold out. Sollie was Chicago like Aaron Russo was New York, Barry Fey was Denver, Bill Graham was San Francisco. He was at least as good as any of them. Ask him.

"He who screams the loudest, longest, wins!" was their mantra. You hear them doing business, you hear every imaginable profanity, obscenity and threat, what passes for poetry in their profession.

"You cunt motherfucker!" Sollie is screaming into the phone, "I'll destroy you! I'll take you apart! Won't be able to find your own asshole. You and your family and your staff and your acts and even your dog: done! In a week, you prick, they won't even remember your name!" He is bouncing up and down in his seat behind his big desk, saliva spraying from his lips, his whole body shaking with fury. Then he relaxes and says matter-of-factly, "Nothing. Just trying to impress a friend."

Jon Strawn was the friend who appeared at his office door, but they aren't friends. Don't much like each other, in fact. Strawn respects his talent, what he's doing to bring the best music to town but thinks Sollie's a pig. Sollie on the other hand treats him like a dog that might bite and so you might as well be nice until it does. Because it might not, too, which would be better for everybody.

"Wassup?" he said as he hangs up the phone and then yells, "Sainty! Sainty, come 'ere, will ya? Sainty, I need a Pepsi." He's whining, being cute, another performance. And in walks a tall, good-looking black woman, who yells at him, "They're right here in the refrigerator, you fat fuck. Why don't you get them yourself?"

"They're better when you get them," he said, then to Strawn, "Want one?"

"I hear you're going to be managing Tommie Thierry."

"Who you hear that from?"

"Never reveal your sources: first rule of journalism. I don't. Is it true?"

"Sure, Tommie, Baby Huey, a few others maybe. Branching out."

"You're a promoter. What do you know about managing?"

Sollie looked at him with amusement. "Jonny, Jonny, I'm disappointed in you, you even bother to ask. I know about managing exactly what I know about promoting: pick good acts, use your connections, work hard, work them harder and you'll all make money. What else I need to know?"

"Business good?" Strawn asked. "Everything going well?"

"Great. Best year ever so far. Why? There a story in here somewhere?"

"Just wondering why the new gig. You haven't got enough headaches booking shows?"

Now Sollie is looking shrewd. He stares at Strawn, cocks his head to one side a bit, lowers his chin almost to his chest and looks up under hooded eyes.

"We've built a circuit now, all across the country. Peter Rudge wants to book The Who, the Stones, a few phone calls, a few contracts and it's a done deal. Very good deal for him, the Limey fuck. Tour the entire United States, one end to the other, sell out every show and not a problem can't be solved along the way. We take care of it.

"Promoters get no respect from the fans. Screaming about the price of the shows, music should be free, that bullshit. These fucking bands don't play for free. Just got a contract from The Who. 30 pages of riders. Used to be we'd get some chips and a case of Bud for backstage. Now it's champagne, French champagne, ten brands of liquor, cases of the most expensive beer and wine, catered meals from the best chefs in the Loop, Persian fucking carpets for the dressing rooms! You believe it?

"If these punk kids knew what we go through to kiss Pete Townshend's ass, they'd treat us better. They got no fucking idea what we've made possible. These bands are getting rich. I mean really rich. And the fans see all the best acts in the best venues. One show after another. We roll 'em through like shit through geese. It don't just happen on its own.

"So, we make a little now, and we're thinking maybe we can do a little better. Use some local bands as opening acts. Then we'll see what happens. You should write what a good thing we're doing for them. Major promoters booking local bands. Graham's doing the same thing. Russo, too."

"Different storyline with those guys."

"How's that?"

"They don't gamble."

Solomon Gold became very attentive. "What?" he said. "What are you trying to say?" His face was flushing, eyes bulging, hands clenched into fists, his very large body bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Say what you have to say, you cunt. But be very careful you know what you're talking about. 'They don't gamble.' And I do, is that right?"

"Sollie, you've been busted for interstate gambling. Prosecutor said it wasn't an isolated incident."

"Yeah, and I paid my fine and we're done with it. Why you bringing it up now?"

"It just seems like an expensive habit."

Sollie backed off and became very still. Quietly he said, "I make money gambling. I'm good at it. Keep it to yourself, asshole. Not for publication, not for attribution. Just telling you so you'll know. Don't be talking out your ass."

Strawn left him standing there, threat thick in the air. What's there to say? Every addict tells you he's on top of it. Every drunk is just a social drinker. Every druggie uses just for inspiration. Every gambler beats the house. I only smoke for relaxation. Quit any time I want. That shit.

Strawn never wrote much about the management piece Sollie was working. Barely a mention. Wasn't sure there was really anything to say. Thought he'd wait to see how it worked out. Whether these guys could book bands and promote shows. Strawn doubted it and his doubts proved out. After a while, it was clear. None of them was any good at it. They were promoters. They could sell the public. They couldn't sell each other. Did them no good. Made them no money except what they stole. Did the bands worse. Tommie worst of all.

Chapter Five

Jefferson Catt was a very tall, very muscular, very black man with an attitude. His face was lean, sharp featured and handsome enough if you looked past the scars and the bad teeth. He had close-cropped hair, a high forehead and cheekbones, a chin that looked like it could stop a truck, a large mouth with thick lips and sometimes a big smile, which didn't necessarily indicate that he was happy. His eyes had that sleepy way of looking you over, sizing you up, weighing just exactly what you represented in his life and precisely how he was going to deal with you. His body carried him with strength and grace, cold composure and a coiled power that he could unleash with devastating results.

He grew up in a military family so he'd been around. He was a martial artist, very good with his hands and his feet. He liked to fight. It gave him the means to express himself with skill and pleasure. He was good at it, so good he never pushed it. He let it come to him.

If they were needed, he was comfortable with weapons, liked the way they felt in his hands, the danger they threatened, the heft they conveyed. He did two tours in the DMZ in 'Nam and never said a word about it unless you happened to ask. Then he'd say little more than, "Yeah, I was there," but the aura of it surrounded him and added to the foreboding he provoked.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, his manner hip and sly, his words well chosen, as often as not expressing ironic conclusions, casually showing his smarts. Not just street savvy, although he was that, but thoughtful, insightful and sophisticated, too. He'd been around and he'd paid attention. He wasn't intimidated and he wasn't out to prove anything, but he clearly wasn't somebody to fuck with.

Jefferson Catt was physically imposing and intellectually surprising. But nobody offered to pay him to think. Unless you paid close attention, you might not notice how smart he was. But his size, his attitude, the way he carried himself, the sense that he could physically destroy anything that got in his way was impossible to miss.

He was big, black, tough, unafraid, a helluva fighter and handy with weapons. That was his image. It also became his profession. Bodyguard. Protection for hire. It suited him.

The times suited him, too. Rock & roll was exploding, the bands getting around, making money, being celebrities, in need of guarding when they're on the road, somebody to look after them, somebody tough but hip, too, not

some fucking ex-cop but somebody who knew how to get down and still keep an eye on things, keep everybody cool. Jefferson Catt was the man.

It wasn't long before he was getting more offers than he knew what to do with. Shit, it was great. Traveling first class, even private planes, suites in the best hotels, good looking women, what's not to like?

He'd done the biggest stars, Mick, Pete, Captain Trips, Steven Stills, Gram Parsons, cute little Linda Ronstadt, cute little Peter Frampton, Stevie Winwood, hell, him and all the other high heeled boys. If they could afford it, he was the guy they wanted. He just had a way about him and the word got around. He was in demand.

It wasn't long though before the promoters took him over. They were taking over everything. It was more efficient. They scheduled the bands anyhow, so it made sense that they schedule him, too. When the show went out on the road, he went along to keep things in order. Less scattered that way.

Plus, they usually had other stuff that needed doing in between tours. Moving cash around, collecting old debts, placing bets, sometimes sending a message that needed some heft behind it.

But the best part of working directly for them, rather than the rockers, was that the promoters had the cops wired. The Man knew who you worked for, he left you alone. Hell, half of them were padding their take-home pay big time moonlighting the concerts, and they cut the promoters a lot of slack. So, they cut him a lot of slack, too. A big advantage when a lot of what you're doing is illegal.

Fact is, all that cover he was afforded made him a little too cocky after a while. He was apprehended in Vegas stuffing a guy into the trunk of a car. The plan was to take him for a ride out into the desert, talk to him about the debt he owed and come to a specific understanding about exactly how it was going to be repaid.

Who knew the guy was a snitch in an undercover drug deal? Who knew the feds had him under surveillance? Who knew they would charge Jefferson Catt with felony kidnapping?

It took a lot of pull to get that one straightened out. Sollie Gold had to call in a lot of chits to get it done. Put him deep in the guy's debt, which wasn't a good place to be.

All of a sudden, the pay got worse and the jobs got dirtier.

Chapter Six

"Sainty," Sollie said, "What're you doing?"

"Working," said Sainty from the reception room, "like what you pay me to do."

"You work too hard."

"Yeah, and you pay me too little. What's your point?"

"Why don't you take off? Call it a day."

"And leave you here by yourself? You might not survive."

"I'll be alright. Go ahead. I'll close up."

"What's going on, Sollie?"

"Nothing. I just want to sit here by myself. Think about things while it's peaceful like this."

"You're not gonna kill yourself or anything, right?"

"Good night, Sainty. See you tomorrow."

She left, took the elevator to the lobby, saw the indicator for the other elevator stop at their floor, felt the lobby phone still warm to the touch, thought about what a sneaky son of a bitch she worked for, shrugged and headed home, early for a change.

Markey came in first, followed by his brother.

"The famous Dice," said Sollie, extended a hand.

"I wanted to see for myself the guy been taking my little brother for such a ride," said Dice, shaking his hand and looking from Gold to his brother and back.

"I've had some luck," Sollie said.

Chapter Seven

Tommie took off. He jammed with all the local hotshots, the best players at the smoky clubs on the South Side, played lead for a while in a damned good local band, making enough of a name for himself that the big guns around the country took notice. He was offered lead in several bands, Chicago, David Bowie, groups of that stature, and turned them down. There was even a rumor the Stones auditioned him before choosing Ronnie Wood, but Tommie said it wasn't true and didn't matter. He wanted to do his own thing his own way. But the offers to record with jazz cats like Herbie Hancock, Weather Report, even Miles Davis, he accepted with pleasure. The word got around.

Finally got his own record contract. At 24, he signed a 3 album deal with Atlantic Records and a series of tours to promote them. The first record he called Public Hair. The cover is a shot of the back of his head, his hair, ribbons, feathers and all, in miniature, superimposed on the groin of a naked woman. It's selling okay, not great.

The tours will help. Another one kicks off tomorrow. He's opening a few of the Stones' shows, a half dozen Pink Floyd gigs, about that many Crosby, Stills & Nash, arena and stadium-size shows, great exposure that should grow the fan base. That, plus a dozen or so small venues where he can headline and fill the room. Half the crowds at those small shows are musicians, come to hear him work his mojo. The kids love him, but the musicians respect him and what he can do with an axe. They know the difference. He's got chops. Like Hendrix, Clapton, Jeff Beck, he's a natural. The professionals come to pay their respects.

He and Strawn are long since pals. Tommie and Strawn's cousin Kelly have been an item for years. Strawn introduced them. He hears from her and he hears from Tommie, maybe more than he wants to know. More than he'd ever write about. There's a fine line there: what's personal, what's the public's interest. Self-censorship based on his integrity. What feels right, what feels like it would compromise their friendship. Sometimes it's hard to know.

She and Strawn were sitting in her home, a small, comfortable cottage in Adams Park that she shared with Tommie. It was afternoon, they were having a late lunch, Tommie was still asleep. Kelly was a beautiful girl, third generation Irish, pale, freckled, red-headed, medium height, well built, and

Catholic. Amidst the usual hippie décor, the posters and tapestries, were iconography of saints and Madonnas.

"I never imagined a musician for a boyfriend. But Tommie is so sweet. Even my parents like him, though they won't say so exactly. Don't like us living together. 'In sin', you know. They pretend he's just a phase I'm going through. This whole hippie thing. 'Pretty soon she'll settle down, marry a boy from the neighborhood. Have a half a dozen kids.' Well, maybe, but I don't think so."

She was a hippie only in the minds of people straight enough not to know the difference, exceedingly modest by the standards of her peers. Christ, she even wore a bra. She might smoke a little reefer and shack with a musician, but it was the traditional side of her that drew Tommie, it seemed, a touchstone to Midwestern standards, a sense of something stable and familiar in the midst of the rock & roll chaos.

Strawn and Kelly had known each other since childhood. In spite of the difference in their age, he had always been fascinated by her. Even as a child, she was striking, not only her looks but her poise, the way she carried herself, dignified and yet casually sexy. She had that allure about her that got plenty of attention, especially from the boys. Strawn remembered his surprise at the jealousy she provoked in him when she began to return their attention. Truth was, he'd always had a thing for her, first cousins or not.

Not that it would go anywhere. Five years between them was too much difference. No playing doctor as kids, no such luck. But they remained close on through their teenage years and even when he was away at college, they managed to see a lot of each other at the holidays and over the summer.

There was just one incident. A summer night when he was at home alone and she arrived late from a date, visibly upset and a little drunk. A local boy she saw occasionally had gotten very aggressive with her, parked in lover's lane a long way from town, a "my way or the highway" proposal that she had to slap down and physically fight off almost to the point of exhaustion.

"The asshole!" she said, entering Strawn's bedroom where he had just fallen asleep and was awakened by her very noisy arrival. "What a pig! What a bastard! To treat me like that. How dare he? I want you to beat him up. Yes! Beat the hell out of him for me. Will you do that?"

Strawn was awake by now, sitting up but, being a guy who slept nude, staying beneath the covers. She railed on, working out her anger and waving a bottle of Jack by the neck, from which she took several steep slugs between rants.

"Want some?" she asked, stumbling a little as she held the bottle out to him. He took it to get it away from her, but had a stiff belt himself before setting it down, feeling a bit unsteady to be awakened by her tirade.

"Kelly, calm down. Tell me what happened. Did he rape you?"

"Ha, not a chance. Not that he didn't try, the bastard. Had his hands all over me.

"Look!" she said, pulling at her skirt, "look at that. He tore it. What an asshole. And my blouse, too. Shit! I want you to break his nose, break his face. God, I'll probably be black and blue all over." And with that, she began taking off her clothes.

"Kelly! Stop that! What are you doing?"

"God, look at my clothes. He really trashed them. I hate boys. They're such pigs."

She continued undressing, throwing her skirt and blouse in a heap and peeling off her slip, then grabbing the Jack for another long pull.

Strawn was speechless. He told himself to speak up, tell her again to stop it, but the sight of her in a very brief bra and panties was more than he could address at the moment. He just stared.

Finally, she stopped ranting and thrashing, stood looking at him for a minute as though just remembering he was there and she was nearly naked, then walked toward him smiling and said, "Why can't they be like you, Jon? A real gentleman? A guy a woman can really care about?" And she slipped beneath the covers.

She snuggled against him, sliding a bare leg between his and wrapping her arms around him. "Kelly," he said, and got no further. She placed a finger over his lips, looked at him with a clarity that belied her drunkenness, and said, "Just kiss me."

And he did. He couldn't to this day remember how long it went on. Not very long, he was certain, but long enough that they were soon enough naked together and very near to going where even kissing cousins are forbidden to go. He came to his senses with the greatest reluctance, doing what he knew he had to do if he was ever to respect himself again. Ever to be able to face her again and claim to be her friend. As he suspected she knew that he would.

They never spoke of it thereafter. She went off to bed and he had a hard on for a half hour at least before he calmed down and drifted off to sleep. To this day, right now in fact as the memory comes to mind, he can clearly remember the sight, the feel, the taste of her, and it always incites a stirring in his groin, a regret, and more strongly a thankfulness that he never did what he wanted so badly to do.

The truth is, he was glad it didn't go any farther, but he was glad too that it had happened, that he had this vivid memory of her naked body pressed against his to summon whenever he wanted, when his thoughts could rumble through what it was like and what it could have been like if he hadn't held back. To imagine having her, at least that once.

Looking at her now, she was still the object of his affection, but it had long since and always after been platonic. The boys had come and gone, a few that were serious and plenty that were just a date or two, and Strawn was alright with it. Maturity, maybe. He was good with being her friend, her confidant, and not her lover. But in private moments of lust, he got a lot of mileage out of the memory.

And now there was Tommie. Her lover. His friend. He was happy they had found each other, that he had a role in bringing them together. They were a beautiful couple, so hip, so happening, so exactly what he believed the times were all about. Different, but traditional, too, in the ways that still matter. And solid, too, at least so far, despite the pressures of the road, the shifting mores, the challenges his odd combination of blazing ambition and naivety presented. She was the safe harbor, he the sailing ship that managed to return to it.

"I believe in family," Kelly said, "as strongly as my parents do. Marriage, too. But there are things I want to do different than the way they do them. I value what they taught me, the values they gave me, but there are things they believe in that don't work for me."

They were sitting on the front porch, the air warming with the coming Spring, the sun just beginning to set out over Lake Michigan. A few puffy clouds drifted past, picking up some color where everything for months before had been grey. A scene ripe for reflection.

"I know they wonder what it's all about, all these changes that are roaring through their lives. My friends don't look like any kind of people they ever knew before. All the costumes, the hairy legs, nipples sticking out. Skirts so short you know the color of their underwear. It's really a challenge for them to accept it all. Much easier to criticize. But they don't, not much. I know they think it will all pass away soon enough, after we all 'grow up'."

"Yeah," Strawn said with a shrug, "lots of changes. Just the sexual revolution alone is a lot for them to absorb. Pretty different world since the Pill."

"Hmm, better too, I suppose. Better for you guys, for sure. All us girls supposed to break free of our inhibitions, put out for you any time you ask."

"Peace and love, you know. No complaints here."

"Maybe no complaints from the ladies either. You ever think of that? God makes all of us curious. Nice to play around a little without getting knocked up.

"Still, you can't help but notice it's the woman has to take the pill. Still up to us to take the precautions. Think they'll ever be a pill for men?"

Strawn looked at her sideways, a smile on his face. She loved being confrontational, intellectually challenging. Always ready to show she's nobody's fool. Not by a long shot.

"For me," he said, "peace and love grew out of the civil rights movement. All that ugliness down South. The Klan, the cops and their dogs, the fire hoses, all that hatred for a bunch of non-violent people marching for their rights. It made you believe there has to be a better way, that people have to stand up and say so. Not let the pigs among us have their way."

"I was a little kid then," she said, "but it seems like it's still happening. Look at the way the protesters are treated. Look at what happened in our kind little town in 1968. Democratic National Convention. Hosted by the good and gracious Hizzoner Richard Daley. Lincoln Park was like a war zone. On national TV, no less.

"And after that very proud episode, what's next? Shame? Remorse? Humility? Don't think so. The Chicago 7 trial. Bobby Seale bound and gagged in the court room. Look what our city's finest did to Fred Hampton. Shot dead in his own bed. For being black and proud. For standing up for his people, people who've been stomped on for 200 years by the power structure. They break down his door and kill him in the middle of the night. Civil rights?

"Here we are, all these years later, has it changed? People are getting beaten for protesting this stupid war. Called traitors and cowards for standing up to the war machine. 60,000 Americans and who knows how many millions of Vietnamese dead, and it just goes on and on. For what? Tell me."

"Yeah," said Strawn, "who are the real cowards and the traitors? We're hanging the South Vietnamese out to dry. Our own allies. Our boys. 5 years they've been at it. Now we're throwing them to the wolves. Another month, we'll be gone and they'll be fucked.

"Nixon's been saying for years we've undermined the U.S. efforts against the Viet Cong. Us nothing little longhair hippie radical freaks. Wasn't for us, the US of A would be riding high like John Wayne in southeast Asia. Those gooks be knowing who's boss."

He looked at Kelly, shrugged, a hopeless gesture, had to add, "Nixon, 'the crook' himself. Resigns and leaves us with 'the Coach.' Gerry Ford,

Michigan lineman and our President. First act as Commander in Chief is to pardon Tricky Dickie. 'No deal was made.' Yeah, right. We're supposed to salute this shit?"

She stood up suddenly, grasping her arms around her, pacing in a circle before coming back to her seat, punching the cushion two or three times, and sitting again.

"Oh, Jon, what a way to spend a beautiful afternoon. Talking all this heartache. All this depression and disappointment. What a world we live in. Think of all that pain, all that suffering. No wonder we want it to change, to be different. You wonder how long this will go on, will we ever say 'enough?'

"Then you meet somebody like Tommie, beautiful, child-like, gentle Tommie. All he wants to do is play his tunes, entertain you, get you high. Make you feel like your life is a dream. The world is a playpen. You can float on a bubble of love and peace. Like drifting through a Parrish painting on a magic carpet. Why wouldn't we want to have it that way?"

"People excuse the meanness," Strawn said, "the phoniness, the money grubbing, 'anything goes long as you win' mentality. They say 'it's always been like this.' People with money have the power, use it to play off the poor against the poor. Hippies, Yippies, Black Power, Brown Power, rednecks, gooks, Catholics, Jews and Muslims, you name it. 'Pawns in the game.' Section them off, put a label on them. Give them reason to hate each other. 'Always been, always will be,' they say. I don't believe it. At least, I don't want to believe it. I want to believe it can be better. That there's a way to a healthier world.

"That's what's so powerful for me about this scene. This place between the generations. It's a turning point, a chance to change the culture. Of course, there are lots of folks who don't want change. The ones with the power don't have much incentive. More than willing to kick you around to make their point. Keep that locomotive running down the track. But there are a lot of us, too, trying to bend those rails, head that train a different direction."

Now he was up and pacing. The porch wasn't large, so the pace took him in circles. He was rubbing his hands together, walking bent forward from the waist, looking a little maniacal. He stopped, looked at Kelly, laughed at himself.

"We're fools, you know. Like in the Tarot. Walking to the edge of the cliff, damn dog nipping at our heels, ready to take that step into the beyond. Guess we better hope for a magic carpet. Otherwise, it's gonna be a long way down."

Chapter Eight

Tommie appeared, sleepy eyed and barefoot, a cup of coffee in his hand. The March sun was just beginning to set. "Good ...what, afternoon?" he said, laughing a little and looking from Kelly to Strawn. "Seems like I slept in."

He kissed Kelly on the cheek, hugged Strawn where he sat, found himself a place to settle. "How're you doing, brother?" he asked.

"Doing well, thanks. Kelly and I were just talking about how you're going to save the world."

"Yeah? What, beat it to death with a Stratocaster?"

They laughed. "Something like that. Maybe shine a little light in dark places."

"Must be talking about the business again. Mighty dark place, it is."

"Sort of like the world itself, huh? Business first, last and always."

"I guess that's true, but what do I know? I'm just a guitar player. Having a great time, you know, pickin' and grinnin'."

"He's always smiling," Kelly said, "like everything's okay. He won't show you the pain. He won't say so, but all the ugliness brings him down. Tommie is a very sensitive guy; he feels things deeply. 'S why he's such a great musician. But the business can be disgusting. People like Sollie make him sick. Literally sick to his stomach. Playing stadium shows and his checks bounce? He doesn't understand it, why they do him that way."

"The thing about Sollie," Strawn said, "is that he's very good at what he does, but he squeezes every drop of blood out of the rock, makes it miserable for everybody. You think about it, the way he operates, you wonder why. He's very smart, hard, proud, even charming when he wants to be, but I don't think he likes himself very much. It's like anxiety drives him and he wants you to feel it, too."

"I don't think he's a very nice man," she said. "Somebody must have hurt him bad when he was young."

"You wonder," he said. "Thing is, he's very funny, quick as a cat, and every once in a while, from out of nowhere, he shows some real empathy for somebody, almost like he's human or something."

"Yeah, sometimes," said Tommie, "but only the really helpless. Unless you're totally powerless, he seems to take you as a threat, always wants to put you in your place. Sometimes you wonder where that place is."

It should have been great, this latest tour of Tommie's and the ones that followed, but it was a grind. The shows were solid, but the road was brutal. Far worse than it needed to be. The advance work was shoddy, the hotels second rate, the transportation commercial.

"The band was pretty good about it," Tommie said. "They just want to play the tunes and go get high after the show. Knock off a couple of new chicks. Live the life. It was new enough to them; they were surprised when they did get paid. 'All this and money, too? Wow!'

"Hard though, sometimes, watching the stars come and go. The Stones have limos, one for each of them. Pink Floyd, too. We show up in a school bus. You think to yourself, 'Hell, I can play as good as them. I want my limo, too.'"

The tour reached a low ebb one night in Florida when the credit cards were rejected, overdrawn the desk clerk said. Tommie looked vacant, wandered around the lobby for a minute and then headed back out to the bus. The road manager threw up his hands and disappeared into the night, swearing mightily, saying he quit. Couldn't take it anymore.

Catt reached Sainty at home and she tracked down Sollie, got him on the line. "Fat man, this is bullshit," Catt said. "We know Atlantic put up the money. Where'd it go?"

"Hold on a minute," Sollie said, and dialed a number on another phone. Catt heard the conversation. Christ! Asking his wife to put it on her personal card. She swore a blue streak at him before giving up the number.

"This can't go on, Sollie. Tommie's getting down, this crap is wearing on him. Supposed to go out there every night and be a star. We can't even pay for his room. 'S what the fuck, man?"

Chapter Nine

Letitia St. Germane was a tall, handsome, very shapely, very proud and capable young woman with dark eyes, high cheekbones, plump lips and caramel colored complexion, straight black hair that may or may not have been processed but you'd never have the nerve to ask her, and more than enough smarts and attitude to get a good looking black woman through the racial hurdles of the 60s. She hailed from a middle class family in upstate New York that knew her as Lettie, but everybody in Chicago from the time she first arrived at the Art Institute called her Sainty, and so she was known when she abandoned her studies and took up with rock & roll.

Shortly after enrolling, she met Cody, a sometime sculptor and pretty good bartender who happened to be a white boy. He did his principal posing as an artist but made his living pouring drinks. Because of the difference in their race, their relationship had a certain veneer of in-your-face hipness that the racial politics of the time made volatile, at least in many circles.

Cody unfortunately was also a lush in a profession where partying hearty was a part of every shift and liquor was always handy. He drank to excess at a time when everybody celebrated getting high, getting off, letting it rip and making no apology. He skated as long as he could, getting a long ways down the road on charm, but could barely hold a job after a while, so severe was his drinking.

It was a drag, dealing with a drunk night after night and soon enough during the daytime too when he often was shitfaced by noon. Sainty loved him. She was loyal by nature. But she was inclined by nature too to take no shit and make no excuses, nor accept them, and soon enough she realized that if there was to be any stability in their lives, she was the one who would provide it.

Strange place to find stability, rock & roll, but she did. She, Cody, their peers to a greater or lesser degree were at the nascent stage of embarking on a career, finding at least a way to make a living other than dealing dope, which was the commercial venture of choice among the hip then, taking those first tentative steps, showing a vague but earnest semblance of being responsible adults. She would make her way. He would sink or swim.

Sollie Gold promoted a small show at the Art Institute with Baby Huey and the Babysitters, the perfect venue for a happening like Huey, who weighed about 300 pounds and played his gigs wearing nothing but a big diaper around the middle of his very large, shiny black body and about his

fat fingers a dazzling array of rings, many of which popped open with the flick of a tiny lever where the bezel joined the shank for access to the ample piles of cocaine they contained beneath the semi-precious stones. Huey might snort four or five fingers a show. He cooked.

He was cooking that night when Sainty and a large crowd of her fellow artists gathered at the show. Performance was happening on stage, but taking root in the audience, too. A small klatch of taciturn, long haired boys, denim clad, Wobblie inspired, leftover political activists from the 50s, the dregs of a marginal but once popular movement on campuses around the country, the Young People's Social League, YPSLs as they were called, were going to "Tom" him.

It was one of their latest stunts, calling out the brothers who weren't radical enough for their taste, were too close to their white oppressors, were maybe making money instead of suffering the black man's fate in capitalist Amerika. Black man ought to sing the blues, protest songs, not this "soul" shit, dressed up like a fool, entertaining the white folks. They had a bucket of white paint and were advancing through the audience toward the stage with every intention of dousing him with their Al Jolson in reverse political stunt, symbolically call him out as a lackey of the greedy promoter Gold, when Sainty got wind of it.

She called them out in the middle of the show, in front of Huey and Sollie and the audience and god himself if he was watching, stopped the show dead in its tracks, unleashed a torrent of expletives and a tirade that made her reputation in the early days of rock & roll and instantly cemented her relationship with Sollie Gold, who ever after would tell anyone who'd listen, saying with great admiration, "That is one bad bitch!"

"You sad little pieces of shit," she yelled at them, pointing them out where they were advancing on the stage, "you worthless, washed up pussies. Who the fuck do you think you are, busting into this show?"

The band was still playing, the crowd mostly not yet aware of the commotion down front, but Huey had his eye on it, watching it go down.

She was in their face now. "This man here," she screamed at them, pointing at Huey, "got more soul in his little finger than any you faggots got in your entire ugly being. Get the fuck out of here, you know what's good for you! You think you're gonna Tom him? Take your sad socialist shit back to your cribs, you pathetic little white boys, before I kick your ass."

The music became very soft now, sotto voce, almost like a quiet little rhythm accompaniment to Sainty's tirade, the musicians digging her moves, vamping behind her, the drummer high hatting her best phrases, kicking the bass drum to put an exclamation point on her every sentence. Huey was

snapping his fingers, rocking back and forth from one leg to the other, a smile on his face, raising his hand just once to his face and inhaling deeply, stealthy as a 300 pound man on stage in a diaper can be.

The YPSLs reacted first with attitude, then confusion, then a growing panic as the crowd began to surround them, growing increasingly hostile to them as Sainty's denouncement took hold. There were no security details in those days, no bodyguards, no off duty cops except maybe a fat old campus cop back stage somewhere eating donuts. Maybe none was needed. Sainty Germane was a one woman wrecking crew that night.

She won over the crowd, many of whom never really knew what happened except that this babe shouted down a group of YPSLs so effectively that she pretty much drove them off campus for good, never to be heard from again. She won over Huey and the band, who loved every minute of her performance, like an unscheduled guest appearance by an unknown artist who rocked the crowd. And, for better or worse, she won over Sollie, who immediately hired her. "Ninety bucks a week and all the Pepsi you can drink," he said. "Ninety-five," she said. He looked at her for only a moment before saying, "Done!" It was the first time in his life he shook a woman's hand on a deal.

She became the gatekeeper. From that time forward, if you wanted something from that office, needed a piece of Sollie Gold, something for his attention, his consideration or his blessing, had some action that might make the grade, some bitch to lay out for apology or restitution, some anything that was going anywhere, you went through Sainty or you didn't go at all.

The egos in the business were huge, the level of maturity mostly minimal, the energy very high and the profanity proficient. Sainty rode herd on it all. She could sweet talk a difficult customer as easily as she could bust his balls. Always a diplomat when it was effective, she never hesitated to lower the boom on the overly pompous, the needlessly difficult, the too cute, the too crude, the too full of themselves to notice who they were dealing with. It was an oversight they only made once. When you pissed off Sainty Germane, you quickly learned what wrath was all about. More than once it was said by people in the trade that like a dying man they saw their life flash before their eyes when she was in their face.

But while she took no prisoners she succeeded because she also was unfailingly loyal to the people who did their job. Humility was exceedingly rare in her business. She rewarded it accordingly. She was a fierce enemy, but you couldn't have a better, truer friend.

"Why are you so down on Strawn?" Sainty said. "I don't get it. He seems like a good guy to me."

Sollie shrugged, tucked his chin into his chest and then thrust it toward her, shaking his head "no," said, "Don't trust him. He's careless sometimes. Says things in his column makes me think he's overreaching. Like he doesn't know who he is, what he really wants. It makes me nervous, a guy like that, like he might say anything, you know?"

"I know he's a good guy," Sainty said. "His heart's in the right place. I think he's just trying to fit in, you know, be hip, make all this shit fit into the idea he has of it. That make sense?"

"Yeah, well, I wish he'd get hip to what's what. Wrote the other day our shows don't work 'cause we make the audience sit and listen when they want to get up and boogie. Just what I fucking need, him encouraging more trouble with the crowd. I got every goon in town working security for me, trying to keep a lid on the crazies, in their seats, keep 'em from rushing the stage, stomping all over each other.

"We got 10,000 people smoking dope, rocking to the best bands, freaks outside trying to break down the doors, screaming 'music should be free, let me in, whee oop, whee oop.' We're always about a cunt's hair from flat out riot conditions and he wants 'em all dancing in the aisles. What the fuck? This ain't a club we're running, it's a concert business, for Christ's sake."

"I can tell you where the disconnect is with the guy, Sollie. He's a true believer. Really! Everybody's talking about being real, don't sell out, free the people, down with commercialism, getting past the almighty dollar, having some kind of artistic integrity, social integrity, something besides whoever makes the most money wins, no matter how they get it. That stuff, yeah, sure, you laugh, the smart guys all laugh their asses off in private, everybody knows better. Except Strawn. He really believes it. That's where he's coming from."

"He's a schmuck. Peace and love and \$5'll buy you a burger. I don't need him fucking with my business over some fantasy he wants to sell his readers."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Sollie. It's not a fantasy to him. He really believes it. Besides, you know you need him, just like he needs you."

"Yeah? What, you sweet on him or something? Maybe it's you needs him. He finally get in your pants?"

"Fuck you, Sollie! Him and every other guy walks through that door has hit on me, everyone 'cept you and that's 'cause the only dick you got's in your wallet. And not one of them gets anywhere. None of 'em.

"I've got to ride herd on this cluster fuck of yours, all these little boys with their big ideas, these rock & roll studs with their high heels and eye liner. Fuck just one of 'em and they'd all know about it like that! Then I'm done for.

"No," she said, shaking her head and looking at Sollie like he needs to hear this, needs to know why she's able to do what she does, run this fucking madhouse while he's pissing away his money on football games and race horses, make the nuts and bolts of this business happen day in and day out for next to no money in a world that doesn't give a shit for women, who they are, what they need, what they do, let alone a black woman in the rock & roll circus, this lily white gangbang where even the few and far between brothers be quick to tell you 'sisters just don't have it together yet,' tell Sollie this shit so maybe he'll get it for once, "no, I don't sleep with any of 'em and that's why they jump when I tell 'em what to do. They're afraid of me. And that's how it's gonna be. You can count on it. But they'd laugh in my face if they knew I could be had. Then I'm just another black bitch with attitude. Dig it. Ain't gonna happen."

Sollie just looked at her, amazed as always by the woman's balls.

Chapter Ten

Strawn is backstage. Another gig, another review. Gets to be a blur. He loves the music, but the business is mean. Culture clash, up close and personal.

Coming in to the arena, he sees the cops working the doors, shaking down the hippies, feeling up the chicks. No bras, sometimes no underwear, a lot to check out there. And busting heads if anybody gives them lip. \$50 an hour each they make. All hail rock & roll. Deliver me from the days of old.

The narcs are in plainclothes, nosing around the audience out front. They bust very few of the dealers at the shows, mostly just watch them working the crowd, keeping tabs. Penny ante stuff, lids and bindles, but it adds up. Plenty of time to catch them off site, drop that RICO bomb on them, bam! Take everything they've got.

The cops know Strawn and he them well enough to nod hello and give each other room. Like Sollie, who employs them, they're wary of the reporter to the degree they fear the press. Not that they'd hesitate to frame him if he fucked with them, but until he does and he hasn't yet, they keep an uneasy truce. Sleeping dogs and all that.

He sizes up the crowd, looks over the stage, the wall of amps at the back, the drum kit on the riser, the baby grand, the racks of guitars tuned and ready to go. Above it, the canisters of lights high in the arc of the roof of this cavernous hall. Before it the rows of seats stretching off into the dim distance. Used to be he'd catch the shows from there, the nose bleed seats, just to write a review of the show they saw, the fans who loved the music but couldn't afford anything closer than the \$5 ticket. His readers. But the crowds are too rowdy now, or maybe he's just too old. Safer backstage, where the comforts are found.

He watches a tall, thin man ease past the guards. No backstage pass, but the roadie who's been waiting for him gives them the sign. They let him through. Long, flowing hair and Poncho Villa 'stache, hipster suit, salmon colored corduroy, thread of kings, you know, wide lapels and bell bottoms, red cowboy boots, embroidered shirt, loosely knotted bright blue tie with red fingerprints on it. Carrying a lizard skin briefcase. Expensive gear, hear?

He and the roadie walk through the crowd of hangers-on, groupies and cops, stop at the dressing room. Have a word with the cop who's working

the door. Stands aside and lets them in. Looks the other way. Another deal going down. Now the band can play.

Chapter Eleven

"It's like this, Sollie. We can't carry you any longer. You asked us to raise the limit and we did. But what did Dice say? Said, don't get in too deep, Sollie. Don't get in too deep. Here we are, you're down a hundred large and you can't pay? A week goes by, you want another week. It's no good, Sollie. This is our business. You're making us hurt."

"Markey, come on. I make that much with one show. You know I'm good for it. Just squeezed this month. I've got a big show coming up later this month, sold out, I've got you covered, swear to God I do. It's not a problem."

"Big show end of the month? That's over 3 weeks away. By then the vig is going to eat your ass, Sollie. I come around for the money, you'll scream like a stuck pig, used to be friends, how can you do this to me?"

"Well," said Sollie, looking up at Markey from his desk with hooded eyes and the beginnings of a smile, "you want to go easy on the vig, 's okay with me."

"The vig is the vig, a bet is a bet. You win, I pay. You lose, you pay me. You can't pay, there's the vig. You still can't pay, I don't want to go there."

"Markey, come on. That's nothing needs to be said. I'll pay you! I'll pay you! In fact, you want to double down on the games this week, I know I've got the over-under nailed. We can wrap this up real quick, you know?"

Markey looked away, shaking his head slightly, trying to hide his disgust.

"I'm a bookie, Sollie, not a gambler. You got to the end of the month, a hundred large and the vig. Please don't make me ask you again."

Chapter Twelve

Kelly called Strawn. "I've left Tommie," she said.

"Should I ask why?"

"Are you surprised?"

"No, I guess not. Just disappointed."

"Then don't ask why. You know why. Ask what you can do to help."

"You know I'd do anything for you."

"Then help Tommie."

"Help him how?"

"Oh god, Jon, I don't know. Just help him. Straighten him out. He's going down fast. Now he's been sleeping with that Italian girl. The bitch! She won't leave him alone."

"Everybody sleeps with everybody these days."

"Not me. And not anybody I'm living with. I don't need someone else's diseases. Besides, this isn't a roll in the hay. It's an affair. Shit! I hate it!"

"Kelly, I know it hurts. And I don't want to make excuses for him. But Tommie's a star. It's rock & roll. These girls throw themselves at the musicians. Rock is cock, forgive my French. And the girls love it. They expect it. Hell, they demand it. Becoming a tradition. The new American standard."

"Sex, drugs and rock & roll, don't you mean? She gives him drugs, too, you know. Hard drugs and lots of them. He's really a mess. I'm afraid for him."

"So you leave him? After all these years?"

"That's unfair, Jon. You know it. I've done everything I can for him 'all these years.' Everything! I'm like his mother, his sister and his girlfriend. But one of his girlfriends I'm not going to be. I told him so. Not one, not number one, the only one or nothing. He just doesn't care anymore."

"That's not true."

"Oh, yeah, he says he does. Begs me not to leave. Swears he'll clean up his act. But the minute he's back on the road, it's the same shit all over again. She gets more of his time than I do, and better time, too. Christ, Jon, he's gone a week and when he gets home, I can smell her on his clothes when I wash them! How's that supposed to make me feel?"

"Where'd she come from anyhow? You know?"

"Who knows where these sluts come from? She just showed up at a gig a while back and never went away. She calls him here! On our phone! 'Hi, it's

Carina,' she says to me, 'is Tommie there?' Sweet as can be. Can you believe it? The bitch. She's shameless and I'm ashamed. And Tommie just acts like a little boy who can't keep out of the cookie jar. You tell me, Jon. Is that the way love's supposed to be? Is it different just because it's rock & roll?"

There wasn't much else to say. Strawn held on to the receiver after they hung up, thinking about Carina Manetti. He'd only seen her once, the night last week when Tommie blew through town, played a gig at the Nighthawk on the South Side, just him and some black dudes cooking up a storm. She was all over him at the break, cooing and cuddling, looking like she owned him. He looked higher and higher as the night went on.

She struck him as a little old for this stuff, closer to his age than Tommie's. Sources said she was related to some gangsters from Cicero. Gambling and loan sharking money. Of course, every guinea in the country is suspected of criminal ties. Whatever the truth, her fixation on Tommie was curious.

Playing groupie for some hippie rock star. What's her angle? Maybe she's working. But working what? For whom? Where did she come from? What's her story? What's she all about? Worth finding out.

Chapter Thirteen

Strawn wants to write about the music. Instead, he mostly writes about the business. It's always in your face. The music is more elusive.

"Writing about music," Duke Ellington famously said, "is like dancing about architecture." He wasn't trying to be funny, just saying what is difficult about describing the arts. Like literature in translation, all those arguments about what is lost. Strawn always gets that same feeling when he talks to musicians about their music. What's there to say? Just listen! That's the attitude they put across.

Some of them like to talk about their work. Some are well spoken, a few even eloquent. Mick Jagger sounds like the prime minister selling the budget to the voters.

But most of them are borderline incoherent, hard pressed to string together a comprehensible couple of sentences. They're like beached fish when they start talking, flopping uncomfortably through their answers, their mouths opening and closing in the indigestible air, and wanting more than anything to return to the unspoken, sound-riddled deep from whence they come.

Yeah, but they need the press and they know it. So they do it. Concerts and radio play sell records. Newspapers, too, in a different way. In spite of all the skepticism this age has generated, especially in the young, people still believe what they read in the paper, if not necessarily true, at least is what's happening. And everybody wants to be happening. Sollie, the bands, Strawn, the paper, the radio, hell, even the cops, city government and the Chamber of Commerce, they need each other. All of them are in it together, like it or not.

So all of them, the bands and the rest when their turn comes, they make the effort to explain themselves and guys like Strawn make the effort to translate. He knew they thought he was a jerk, but he did what he did. They paid him the respect due the newspaper's stroke, the power of the word. Everybody wants to look good in print. That's why they kissed his ass, a little anyway. Otherwise, most of them wouldn't give him the time of day.

There was so much to say, even if the players couldn't get it up to say it. The world was deep in the throes of change. The evidence was everywhere you looked, in everything you heard, in the quiet moments of the soul. There was so much going on and music was its anthem. An entire generation was

marching to it, shaking the foundation their parents built, and all the players were reacting.

Even the hard cases like Strawn could feel the ground moving beneath him, the old ways falling apart, new ways forming. Skeptics were everywhere, but day by day they were proven wrong. This isn't a momentary aberration. It's change. The old ways were being buried. They ain't coming back, seems like.

"Look at it this way," Strawn is saying to Abe Stongel, his editor, a tough old Polish Jew, WWII vet and hard bitten newsman, who needs convincing. "We've had the President assassinated, the whole civil rights movement, Bobby Kennedy, MLK and Malcolm X shot dead, a war that drove LBJ out of office and day by day is making liars of his generals, Nixon and his gang of thieves run the show, get run out of office, crowds of hundreds of thousands protesting, and the thing is: it's all playing out in our living rooms every night, live on TV. Never happened before, the way it's all right in your face."

Stongel sits in a heap. Too many years bending his body to the shape of a chair pushed up to a battered metal desk. He is bald, rumped, his glasses smudged. His white shirt is wet under the pits, the sleeves rolled up, an anchor tattoo showing from his days in the Navy. Smoke rises from his cigarette in an ashtray smothered in butts. The desk is covered with typewritten pages, the stack to the left awaiting his edits, the one to the right covered with red pencil marks. Barely visible is the film of printer's ink and nicotine in which they sit.

"We've had people marching in the streets before, don't kid yourself," he said. "You got this idea this is something historic. It's just life. Report it, but don't make it more than it is. How many times I got to tell you?"

"Tell me as often as you want, it won't make you right. This is it, Abe. It's happening. Signal change. These kids want to kickstart a different world. And there's enough of 'em to take a real shot at it. They might fail. It might not work out like they plan, but the world is going to be different, either way. You may not like it, and you may not know what it is, but you can't pretend it isn't happening."

Strawn's cut a lot of slack for somebody a generation younger than most of his peers at the paper. He'd been one among many young guys trying to make it when he bolted from the pack. He hyped an event in New York to his editors, demanded to go, told them it was the story of the decade. They laughed at him. Told him, "In your dreams." Then woke up one morning and the story broke. Headlines all over the world. For 3 days and a long time thereafter. Woodstock. The Trib missed it. Now he had a column 3

times a week and pretty much carte blanche to cover the stories he wanted. Not to say there wasn't resentment.

"Yeah," said Stongel, handing him the edits, "that's why we got a hippie sympathizer like you on the paper. To tell us ignorant hacks what's what. Make sure we don't miss the momentous events of our time. Man on the moon? Who cares? We got dope smoking kids gonna change the world. Fix everything us old-timers fucked up. Right? BS, Strawn! Gimme the rewrite before you leave."

Chapter Fourteen

When Tommie talked about music, it was full of the excitement he felt when he made it, the identity it gave him, some of the trouble it caused him when he first began to play.

"It's all I ever wanted to do, playing music," Tommie said. "I heard sounds in my head ever since I can remember. Never knew what it was until I got a guitar. Then it all lined up. It was magical. It saved me, you know. Gave me a sense of myself. Like something rose up out of the goo of being a kid, took shape, came together. Like the Creature from the Black Lagoon, a monster was born. Once I got that guitar in my hands, look out! The whole world changed."

It was still the studs, the jocks, the frat rats who got the girls, ran the show in high school. But all that was beginning to change. These runty little guys with long hair and a guitar were all of a sudden what it is. The girls, even some of the happening babes, they were lining up.

"My friend, Bobby, and me, we couldn't believe it. He played the piano. Another guy played drums. We got a couple of gigs playing birthday parties in Indianapolis, stuff like that, some school dance parties and stuff, all of a sudden we were stars. The girls couldn't get enough of us.

"Even the jocks, 'stead of wanting to kick our ass, started talking to us a little, telling us to hang around, show 'em a few chords, like that. We started out playing 'cause we liked it and because it was basically about all we knew how to do. Then, wham, a couple of gigs and we started to see the possibilities."

He laughed at the memory, what it was like to suddenly find a place for yourself that seemed to solve all those questions a kid has when he's trying to imagine how it all fits together and where in it there's a place for him.

"But what really made it happen is the way it made me feel when I played. There's a place inside there's no other way to reach. It's like there's electric wires dangling inside you, giving off sparks, making you jumpy, but you don't know what to do with them. Then, you pick up an instrument - I know it's the same for a lot of other musicians 'cause we've talked about it - you pick up your axe and the whole world changes. Those wires get connected and the surge of energy is so powerful and so pure, like purely you, you know? You all of a sudden have this realization that you aren't just playing music, you are music. When you play, you know who you are. And you like it.

“And then you start plugging that sensation into an audience and it gets to be another thing entirely. Like you and the band and the crowd, you’re one body and the music is your nerves. You hit a certain note, bend it a certain way, and you can feel the crowd hear it, bend with it. It’s hard to explain, but you grow this connection with the people in the crowd and start getting plugged together, and then the energy explodes.

“People talk about how music takes them to a different place, a higher place. But the band gets taken there, too. The crowd is jamming just like the players are jamming. We’re all making it happen together. The energy’s flowing both ways. It’s like you all become one organism and that being, that creature, is the music. That’s how it gets made, or at least how it grows into something magical and god-like.

“Once you’ve had that feeling, it’s all you want to do. I couldn’t imagine any other kind of gig, like anywhere I would fit except playing music. It’s just me.”

Tommie was like a lot of kids who were looking for a new way to do things, a way to live without genuflecting to the dollar like their parents did. Trying to take stock of themselves, find what mattered to them, what gave them a thrill to get up and get after, that feeling of being alive and soaring. Peter Pan for adults.

“Being a musician, getting to play for a living, seems like such a gift. But it’s not like I thought it would be. Not so far. It’s a lot of work to get above the business end of it, just to clear your head enough to play as well as you can. It’s so cool when you get there, to make that music with the band and feel the audience lift off with you. But getting there is brutal sometimes. I wish we could just show up and play. I’d do it for free if I didn’t have to support myself.”

He paused for a minute, looking at Strawn with a sly smile, flicking his eyes briefly at Kelly, who was reclining on the sofa across the room. “But I do. Unless some rich woman comes along, decides to take care of me.” He ducked too late to avoid the pillow she threw, which smacked him alongside his head.

“I really am thankful for this talent I have, for getting to play. There’s nothing to complain about, I guess. I think of the guys working construction, digging ditches, standing in the line at the factory. They pay good money, hard earned money, to come to my shows and you know they think I’ve got it made.

“And I do, I do. But it’s not like they think. Not like I thought it would be, either. The business end of it takes up a lot of time and sometimes it just

sucks the oxygen out of the room. That's when it seems like just another job."

He was quiet for a while then, looking off into the distance, thinking about what was said, how he felt, wondering probably if he'd made himself understood. He and Strawn understood each other as much as any two people do. Far more than writer and subject, musician and fan. They were friends, colleagues of a sort. Witnesses, too, of this seismic shift that was happening.

"My father was an athlete," Tommie said. "Then manager of an insurance company. Pretty straight. I think he was ashamed of me at first. Long hair, the hippie thing. Hard for him to believe we could talk about rejecting all the things he cared about, the stuff he worked so hard for. Money, success, security. They were a mistake?"

"He was a vet, World War II. The war protests pissed him off. Korea, Vietnam, to him it was just another battle between good and evil. Us against the British, the South, the Nazis and Japs, the commies, it was all the same. Who would question our role in the world? He still believed in the US of A, my country right or wrong, love it or leave it, that stuff.

"Now he's got this long-haired kid who can't catch a ball or get a job at the bank, all he can do is make a racket with a guitar. I'm sure he was wondering, 'who is this guy?' It took him a while to get it. 'Music is a job?' I guess when he saw some write-ups in the local paper, he started to realize that some people thought I was pretty hot. This might be something more than just his son being a derelict. Wasn't what he wanted for me, but better than he feared, I guess."

Chapter Fifteen

"We got ourselves a situation, Sollie. Bad situation. My little brother gave you too much slack and now maybe you hanged yourself. Know what I mean?"

"Dice, lookit. There's no helping it. The show got cancelled, singer's sick. They'll make it up. I'll make it up. Just a bad break, 's all."

"No, you lookit! I don't like being fucked with. Period. I don't like guys who don't pay. Period. That means I don't like you, Sollie. And when I don't like people, it makes me want to hurt them. Just like you're hurting me, only worse."

"I understand, believe me, Dice. But you hurt me, makes it even harder for me to get you paid, am I right? Let's think about how to solve our problem."

Dice bristled visibly, looked like he might explode, but said, "Like what? What's the solution when a guy don't pay? Only one I know."

"There's some money in the mail now. Check from a record company. Tour money. Big company, money's good. Be here tomorrow. Soon as I cash the check, it's yours."

"How much?"

"\$25K. It's a start."

"It's a hiccup. You owe us \$200,000, case you need reminding. What else?"

"Dice, let me step in here a minute," said Markie, looking at his brother with deference.

"Why not? You done a great job so far."

"I'm thinking, Sollie, you must have insurance. Am I right?"

"Sure, show gets cancelled, covers the losses, pays the vendors, that stuff. Nothing to me. No insurance on lost profits."

"But what about this tour money? How much more is coming?"

"None," said Sollie, "this probably wraps it up. Records aren't selling, so they may drop him. Tommie Thierry Band. I manage 'em."

"How's that work? They got a contract with the kid. They pay for his tour, the motels, the planes, all that?"

"Yeah, the band, expenses, it's how they promote the record. 'S where the money's coming from. Record don't sell, the tours ain't worth it. They quit paying, drop the act."

"What about accidents, somebody gets hurt? Plane crash or whatever?"

"They insure them. Big investment they have in these bands. They cover their ass big time."

"And what about you? You manage the band. They making you money?"

"The shows break even, if we're lucky. Like I told you, the record ain't selling. I got a piece of that, and there's nothing there. Nothing but headaches so far."

"What about insurance?"

Sollie looked at Markie, whose eyes were narrowing, and then at Dice, who was suddenly all ears. It was like three cars reaching an intersection all at the same time, concentrated energy and terrible expectation.

"I've got a small policy on the band in case something happens to Tommie. Injures his hand, loses his voice, can't play some shows, like that."

"How much?" Dice asked, leaning in toward him so close he smelled his breath.

"Varies with the incident. Max is a quarter."

"Million?"

"Yeah."

Dice and Markie looked at each other, then at Sollie. Markie turned his back and Dice walked to the big window looking out over the Loop and the lake.

"Nice view you got here, Sollie. Though it makes me nervous, such a long way down."

He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, audibly cracking his knuckles and quietly shaking his head.

"So, Markie here is picking up the 25 tomorrow," he finally said. "We give some thought to what to do about the rest. Don't be going anywhere, Sollie, you don't let us know first. And you be certain any other money comes your way, you see it gets to us first thing. We understand each other? Before the groceries, before your mother's birthday present, before the doctor takes a splinter out of your ass. We get the money, right?"

With that, he turned and looked hard at the promoter, his look disdainful, taking his measure, sizing him up like he was making him a suit. Then with a nod to his brother, he brushed past him and they left without closing the door.

Chapter Sixteen

Typical after the show party. Room is packed with chicks, hot ones, ready for anything, pairing off with the band, the roadies, any other male who might be part of the show. They aim high, chase the stars, the Stones, Zep, the Eagles, whomever, and failing that, take what they can get. The Tommie Thierry Band is definitely lower rung if you're a groupie, but here they are in spades.

It's something about the music, balling the people who were up on stage. Failing that, balling anybody who helped to get them there. They want to get next to the magic, take it between their legs. Or maybe they're just here for the drugs. It's definitely about the high, wherever it comes from.

Catt gets his share of attention. Not many "persons of color" on this tour. Especially ones as imposing as him. White girls want to go black, see if it's true you do, you never go back. When Jimi was alive, the Plaster Casters made him a legend for an instrument not his guitar. Big Jimi. That good, no wonder its forbidden. Jefferson Catt is glad to help them come over.

He digs it, but keeps an eye on Tommie, too. Dude has been dragging of late. Bummed by the money hassles. Every night it's an issue, or if not tonight, the next night will be. The anxiety. Hearing too the albums aren't selling like Atlantic had hoped. Might not pick up the option on the third album. Dropping him. Nothing more humiliating among your peers than to be dropped by your label. Means not only you don't sell, but you don't rate enough as an "artist" to keep you on board for the prestige. All that and going through the usual shit that rears up between the leader and the band when they've been on the road too long. The grind.

But he seems upbeat tonight. Hanging with a couple of local musicians, swapping lies and laughing about the road. Same crazies seem to visit every band in one form or another. Whether its New York, Chicago, Miami or L.A., seems pretty much the same. Same chicks, same dealers, same hangers-on. Stories to tell. Digging the little ripples of difference, the high tide of similarity. Makes the grind less personal, knowing it wears on everybody.

The drugs help too. Sometimes. The perpetual party, let the good times roll. On and on. Sex, drugs and rock & roll, that's the formula. Money for nothin' and the chicks for free. Screaming youth. Living in the here and now. No thought for tomorrow. Just rock the Casbah and give thanks for another night at least you ain't a clerk at the gas station. Punching these

cute girls instead of a clock. Sometimes it works out that way. Feels real. Tonight seems to be one of them.

People are out on the lanai smoking big reefers, people are bent over the coffee table snorting long lines of blow. Everybody has a beer or tequila, vodka or wine in hand. The talk is flowing, the laughter peeling, the girls showing ever more skin and the sexual tension beginning to build. What it's about.

Carina Manetti sashays by, her tight ass swinging underneath a very short skirt, long, shapely legs riding very high heels, her long-strapped purse hanging from one shoulder. Catt grabs hold of it, stops her in her tracks.

"Problem?" she says, her eyes wary but not the least intimidated.

"Want to see what you're bringing our boy here, sweetie. Mind if I take a look?"

"Keep your hands off my purse, Catt. I'm bringing him a little something so he can sleep, couple of 'Ludes is all."

"Yeah, couple of 'Ludes, huh? Well, that's okay. Just wondering though, what is it with you, girl? You been here, what, couple weeks now? And it's like you're running the show."

He looked her up and down with what? Interest? Suspicion? Disgust? You couldn't tell with this guy.

"What's your point, Catt? You got something to say, say it."

"Just wondering with the pills and all, you gonna be tucking him in, too? Wouldn't want to walk in on something I shouldn't see. 'Cause I will be checking on him, you know. Real close."

"You do that. Happens that I'm seeing a friend in Santa Monica tonight. Haven't seen her in years. Soon as I get him put to bed, I'm outta here."

"Tommie'll be sleeping alone. I know you'd rather Kelly was back in his life. Maybe she can catch the redeye and tuck him in herself. That make you happy?"

"Now, Miss Manetti, that's not my concern. I don't care if Tommie sleeps with syphilitic sheep, long as he wears a safe, stays clean, all the same to me. But I'm here to protect him, make sure he don't get hurt. So I'm telling you, keep the junk to yourself, hear? He don't need none of that shit right now."

Her eyes narrowed in anger and suddenly she was not very pretty at all.

"You've got some mouth on you, Catt! Syphilitic sheep? You prick! I don't have any diseases. Never have. Never touch heroin either and I don't know where Tommie gets it. Not from me. So, watch how you talk to me, big man. You're not the only tough guy in town."

She turned away and headed through the crowd to Tommie, the big smile back on her face, all of her seductiveness reconvened and working. You'd never know it could be any different.

Chapter Seventeen

It was Kelly calling. "Jon, Tommie just told me the label is dropping him."

"That's what I heard, too."

"Why? I don't understand it. This is the last thing he needs right now."

"Yeah, it's tough. Records aren't selling, so they don't want to spend any more money promoting him."

"I know that, Jon. But why aren't the records selling? Everybody loves him."

"Yeah, live he's a monster and everybody gets it. But the records don't resonate for whatever reason."

"But why, Jon? He's so talented."

"Yeah, he's talented, but his songwriting may not be strong enough to carry the records. When you see him in concert, he blows them away. Everybody gets it. Hell, Tommy could make 'Jingle Bells' scream. But albums are a different matter. Know what I mean?"

"Maybe I'm too close to him. I think it's all great. I love his songs."

"Maybe you are. There's a noticeable difference between the quality of the music and the quality of the lyrics, is what I'm trying to say. Instrumentals rarely make for a top 10 album. It's the lyrics and the melody people remember when they hum it to themselves, not the solos. Song writing is tough."

"Here's an example. One time I asked Keith Richards, 'Who are the really great guitar players today?' He said, 'I don't know their names, but they're all 15 years old.' Meaning there's a lot of awesome players out there and a lot more coming up."

"But if you ask who the great song writers are? The names jump out at you because there just aren't very many of them. Start with Dylan, who is way out ahead of everybody else, and Chuck Berry back in the 50s. Then start ticking off the rest. Brian Wilson, of course, then and now, Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Springsteen, John Fogerty before Creedence broke up, maybe you can name 10 or 20 tops. At least in rock & roll."

"So Tommie isn't a strong enough writer to sell his records?"

"I think that's the problem. Too many of his tunes seem to me to be just a framework to get him to the solos. Nobody can argue with his playing, but the song writing is pretty rough in places, maybe more places than not. The

lyrics? Well, they don't really come to mind and I've heard his songs a hundred times."

"Not memorable, huh?" She thought about it. "Maybe so. It's different for me because I identify with what he says. It's personal. Maybe not so much for people who don't know him."

"He's not the only one. Most of the really good songs are collaborations. Composer and lyricist in some combination or another. Going clear back to the Tin Pan Alley guys, the show tunes, Rogers and Hart, those guys, and the old pop writers like Dozier and the Hollands, and now Mick and Keith, Elton John and Bernie Taupin, I guess maybe Glenn Frey and Don Henley, above all Lennon and McCartney before the Beatles broke up. There aren't many like Dylan, who put it all together by themselves."

"Part of Tommie's problem, I think, is that he's never really ground it out in a band to get to where he is. He was pretty much a star from the get go, and his bands were put together to showcase him. The tunes were like an afterthought. Great players but no writers of note. So the albums suffer."

"Another example of what I mean. I met Bob Dylan one time at a party. Gave me the limp handshake and started to move away. You can't interview the guy 'cause he just plays with you. But I had something I always wanted to ask him about, and he got into it."

"I said, 'Somewhere I read that you said you have thousands of songs you haven't written down yet. How is that possible?' He said, 'The way I think is in verses, so when I see something that gets my attention, it occurs to me like a song.'"

"He thinks like a song writer. He's written hundreds of great songs and has thousands more rattling around his head. Tommie thinks like a guitar player. The lyrics are sort of an afterthought."

"Well, I'm sorry for him," Kelly said. "He wants it so bad, and he's worked so hard to do it his way. This is like big time rejection."

"You and Atlantic both send him packing. He's gotta be hurting."

"Why are you so in my face about it?" she said. "It's the last thing I wanted, to break up. You know that, Jon. I hoped it would slap some sense into him."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, Kelly. You or Atlantic, either. It's just what is. His scene is very different now from when he started, better in some ways, I guess. He's a lot better known. But he's been on a downer mentally. Like he doesn't want to own up to the truth."

"The drugs are affecting his judgment, about you, about the company he keeps. Dragging down his playing, too, sorry to say. Learning to be a star

can be a very hard lesson, especially when they pull the rug out from under you. Got to know how to get up again."

"Yeah," she said, choking up a little, "maybe he'll come around, learn something from it. There's a lot of big name bands that still want him, so he's always got that. Maybe there's still time for us, too. I don't know. I guess it isn't the end of the world."

Chapter Eighteen

"Tommie, darling, take these now, help you sleep. It's nearly 4 o'clock. I need to get across town before the traffic gets rolling."

"Yeah, I'm beat. What are these, 'Ludes?"

"Yeah, two is enough."

"Give me a little taste to go with it."

"I don't have any with me, Tommie."

"Damn! Can't you get some before you go?"

"Not tonight, darling. Catt's already on my case. I told him we're clean. Let's keep that way for tonight. Speaking of which, sounds like him now."

"Let him in, will you? I don't want to get up."

"TT, my man. Anything you need?"

"Not unless you got some smack. Just kidding, Cattman."

"Ha, ha, brother. Best stay off that shit!"

"You say so. Don't seem like I've got much choice tonight."

"Hell, you look to be nodding already."

"Yeah, these 'Ludes are kicking my ass. 'Bout beat anyhow. Catch you in the morning."

"What about you, Miss Manetti?"

"Just about to head out myself. With your permission, of course."

"Give a knock at my room when you're ready. I'll walk you out."

He smiled slightly and left.

She packed the last few things in her suitcase, then removed a bindle from the hidden pocket in her purse.

"Tommie?"

"Umm?"

"You asleep?"

"Umm, fading."

"Here's a little taste, just one."

She helped him sit up in bed, held a spoonful to his nose, watched him inhale it, lie back in bed, go into a nod.

"Good night, Tommie."

He didn't respond.

She gathered her suitcase and bag, left the room and walked down the hall, knocked at Catt's door. "What do you want?" she said when he answered.

"Just going to see you to your car."

"Not necessary. I can find my way."

"How's our boy?"

"Just dozed off."

"No need to check on him again?"

"You want to wake him? Suit yourself. I'm out of here."

Chapter Nineteen

Jefferson Catt eased his way into the room, closed the door behind him, flicked on a pen light and crossed the dark room. Tommie was sound asleep, breathing slowly, 'luded out. Finally felt like his work was done for the night. He crossed the room again to the door, eased his way out, returned to his room, washed his face, brushed his teeth, undressed, climbed into bed and was sound asleep shortly after his head hit the pillow. He had a dream. A bad one.

Carina Manetti turned away from him and headed down the hall. She seemed to float, ghostlike, to the elevator, rode it down to the lobby and walked out the door, across the parking lot to her rental car. She left the lot and headed east for two blocks, then north for a block to a Denny's, where a dark blue sedan with Nevada plates was waiting out back. She pulled alongside, lowered her window and handed a room key to the driver.

"828, end of the hall," she said. "The nigger's in 810."

A man of medium height in a wide brimmed hat pulled low on his brow, a dark colored rain coat and flesh-colored latex gloves let himself in through a side door of the hotel, entered the stairwell, climbed to the third floor and emerged into the hallway. Room 302 was across from him. He walked the length of the hallway, taking note of 310 and 328, to the stairwell at the opposite end, entered it and climbed five flights to the eighth floor.

He waited to catch his breath, listening carefully and hearing nothing but his own breathing and the dim whirr of the air conditioning in the near dawn quiet. He opened the stairwell door, looked down the hallway, and seeing nothing that caused him concern, walked directly across the hall and slid the plastic card through the lock, entered the door quickly and held it so it quietly clicked closed.

He could hear soft snoring, the hum of the mini-refrigerator and nothing else. He flicked on his pen light, scanned low around the room, then again a little higher, saw the tiny beam of light pass over the figure asleep on the bed, pointed the light at the floor in front of his feet, and moved silently to the bedside dresser.

He removed a plastic bag from his pocket, withdrew a small hypodermic needle and a bindle of powder, a plastic cigarette lighter and a flame burnished spoon showing residue in the cup.

He returned the plastic bag to his pocket, set the room key on the dresser, the spoon and lighter on the bedside table and dropped the bindle

on the bed covers. He drew them aside, shook the hypodermic needle and squeezed a drop from it, slipped the needle into the large vein near the ankle bone of the naked man on the bed and plunged a quarter gram of pure heroin into his bloodstream without ever waking him up.

He withdrew the needle, pressed the plunger against the man's right thumb, touched the chamber to his fingers in several places, then dropped it on the floor. He stepped over it carefully and exited the room, walked quietly down eight flights of stairs and along two city blocks to where his car was parked, and saw not a soul. He was having a leisurely late breakfast in Las Vegas before the body was discovered.

Jefferson Catt awoke with a start. He was soaked with sweat, his heart was pounding. He was shaking. It was only a dream, and he was the baddest dude that anyone knew, but he woke up afraid.

Behind the blackout curtains, he could sense the sun was shining. The clock said nearly noon. It was time to get up, time to go to work, time to walk down the hall, knock on the door and quiet the fear. Time to be again the guy that kept the boogiemani away, the guy who is fearless. Time to shake off the night sweats and regain his cool. Time to confirm it was only a dream.

Chapter Twenty

Local Rocker Tommie Thierry Dead of Overdose. So read the headline in the Tribune. Page three, above the fold. The news staff wrote the story. Asked Strawn to write a sidebar. An anguished week later, he still hadn't been able to do it. Couldn't find the words, didn't know what to say.

Kelly was shaken, but unsurprised. "I was so afraid for him," she said. "I could feel the change, the recklessness, more and more these last few months. The drugs were out of control. He was hurting pretty bad, the way everything was going. He finally got what he wanted, but it wasn't what he expected. All those stardust melodies were out of tune. God, I'm so sorry for him. For his family. It never should have happened."

Strawn wanted to comfort her, but he couldn't say what he thought to be true: that Tommie would have never hit bottom like that if Kelly was with him out there on the road, would never have sunk to the depth of depression he was suffering. Would never have fallen under the spell of that skank, Carina Manetti.

Be interesting to see if she shows up at the memorial service. Doesn't lack for nerve, but still. Catt says she's the source of Tommie's smack. Doesn't understand how it went down, but she's in there deep somewhere, he knows it.

Tommie was alive and sleeping when he checked him after she left. No sign of all that drug debris. No naked corpse on the bed with a spike on the floor like they found him the next morning.

A whole lot of junk in his system, but only one needle mark. Signs he'd been snorting it, too, but still, it didn't hold together. Not for Catt. Not for Strawn, either.

The cops were okay with it. Another OD, another dead rocker. Not at all uncommon in Los Angeles, hardly worth noting. They checked the scene, the night staff at the front desk, checked with the band. Checked out Manetti, too, nothing to report. No priors, no evidence of drug use, no prostitution, no nothing.

Of course she has an alibi. Friend she stayed with swears she arrived clear across town about the time the coroner says he died. Of course the boy started using heavily after she arrived on the scene. And of course she just happened to duck out the night it happened, when too much of no good did him in. All just a coincidence, no doubt. Like dying at 27. Tommie Thierry's dead. File closed.

Chapter Twenty-One

Two more weeks, the check arrived. Sollie walked it to the bank, took the \$250,000 in cash. The bank handled lots of his money, cash from the shows, from the promotions, from who knew where. People bought tickets with cash, the bands were always paid in cash, bookies probably paid him in cash, although nobody knew that to be true. Nobody at the bank thought much at all about the transaction, although it was a lot of cash to carry around.

He didn't carry it far. From the alley down the block, a large man with a pock-marked face stepped forward. "For Dice," he said, reaching for the attaché case and grasping it with a large hand, the knuckles deeply scarred. Without another word, he turned and walked away.

Sollie expected to be relieved. Instead, a funk came over him that left him shaken. He felt a hollowness within him, a large, empty place from which the world around him looked distant, strange and menacing. He was light-headed, had a sense of drifting, of falling, of a pulse pounding madly in his temples.

People passed him on the sidewalk, some nodding hello, most hurrying past, rushing on their way through their private lives. Sollie was oblivious. All he could see was the vision of the boy in the casket, his parents weeping, his friends shaken. The worst day of Sollie's life, sharing the sorrow, the sense of loss, the weight of a death that came way too soon. He alone among them knowing why.

He wasn't guilty, was he? He never wanted it to happen. Got caught in a terrible jam, a run of bad luck, a fix that got away from him. The bad guys took control. Then it was Tommie or him. What choice did he have? None. They called the shots and he just held his breath. Handed over the cash when the time came. Lived to play another hand another day. Tommie didn't.

He couldn't catch his breath now that it was done. Until he gave up the money, settled his debt, he managed to pretend that none of it was real, wasn't really happening. He felt the pain of loss with the rest of them, spoke from the heart to the family, to the press. The terrible loss, the awesome talent, the scourge of drugs. Felt the anguish of knowing nothing can be done, the door has closed once and for all. Nothing can change the script.

He participated in the wake, the grieving, as though it was an abstraction in which he gave his all. But always and only with a blind eye to

the truth. Now that truth slammed him, hit him in the chest like a bullet, left him badly shaken and afraid.

All the tough guy talk, the casual stories about guys being knee capped, legs broken over gambling debts or other wrongs, a spiral fracture of the thigh bone that takes six months in the hospital to heal and on the day the guy's released, they grab him in the parking lot and break it again. So he doesn't forget. Gangster lore. It's business. It's about the money. What comes first.

It makes him nauseous now. To have been through it, deep in the maw of the underworld, where people are ground up and spit out like an animal gnashing bones to get at the marrow and gristle, the fat and the muscle, then to pass deep into the entrails of crime. And you, Solie, when you emerge, you are shit! How he feels now, like nothing he's ever felt before. At least not in a long, long time.

There was a time when a little Jewboy got beaten more days than not on the way to school, at the playground, in the alleys near home. "Kike. Hebe. Hymie." He heard it all while they pummeled him, again and again. And he got tougher. And tougher still. Until a time came when nobody tried him anymore, because he was tougher than they were, than any of them. Whatever they said about him now, it was behind his back, never again to his face. Fuck with him, he'd eat their lunch.

He couldn't remember a time since then when he'd been afraid. Until now. Until the shame returned.

His wife kicked him out a few days later, sick of his shit, she said. Got an apartment near the office, 14th floor, on the alley. Lonely place to spend your time. Too many hours watching TV late into the night, wandering out to the balcony, back inside, restless, sleepless, worn out at work. A few shows coming up, nothing too exciting, just the routine. Waiting to come back online, get it up again, get back on top. Waiting.

Then back to the apartment again. Get some chinks, watch the game, the late show, the late, late show, drift off in the chair. Bleary in the morning. Start all over again.

One night like all the others, he unlocked the door and walked inside, a bag of ribs in his hand. Door didn't close behind him. The man with the pock-marked face and another guy came in behind him.

"What?" said Solie. "What is this? I paid him."

He looked at the pitted face, the cold eyes, the scarred knuckles.

"Not enough," said the man. "Didn't pay him enough. You made him do something awful, something he never should have had to do."

He and the other guy each had one of Sollie's arms. They were walking him across the room. They took the ribs from him and set the bag on the table.

"Nobody should have to pay another man's debts for him. Nobody should have to do what he did to get paid. You think he can just forget it?"

They walked him onto the balcony. He never thought to resist. They were making too much sense, these henchmen, these bad guys who came to settle the score. There was a gentleness in the way they guided him, a soft, hypnotic timber to the hit man's voice. Something in the way it was unfolding brought an equilibrium to the scene, a sense of rightness, a peace he hadn't felt in weeks.

"Make it easy on yourself, Sollie. From this height, you won't feel a thing."

They reached the railing and he began to back away, wanted a minute to gather himself, to consider what else might be said, what was left undone.

But a calm came over him. He relaxed, nodded almost imperceptibly, and felt for the first time in his life a weightlessness as they tossed him into the night.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Strawn sat on a park bench by the lake. The wind was soft, the afternoon warm. There were boats appearing to be nearly still far out on the horizon and boats nearer by bouncing in the chop. Big white and brown gulls drifted on the currents of air, sometimes flapping frantically, looking for garbage along the shore.

It is the last day of April 1976. The morning's news played in his mind. One year ago today, he sat on this very same bench. The headlines: America Leaves Vietnam, The Fall of Saigon: Disgrace, Ignominy. Operation Frequent Wind Evacuates Thousands. No headline for the tens of thousands of our allies left behind, shoved from the walls of the Embassy as they tried to climb inside, kicked in the face from the skids of the helicopters they clung to in flight. But story after story of the chaos, the horror, the shame.

Today was an average news day. Nothing earth shaking. Nothing like 'Nam. Nixon reflecting on Watergate. Saying it was a public relations problem that needed a public relations solution. Tricky Dickie: how do you know he's lying? His lips are moving. Norman Mailer said Nixon lies as naturally as most men chew meat. President Carter's First 100 days. Already he's wearing thin. Peanut farmer and nuclear physicist with that goofy smile, turning down the heat. Just the usual stuff. And on page 5, another headline, Solomon Gold: Suicide.

Strawn sits for a long time before rising, stretching, walking off toward the Trib. On the way, he decides to go see Nicky Soros instead, drop by his home, say hello. Time for a friend. Some conversation. Some a ree.

The Sly King himself answers the door, greets him warmly, says, "Wow, man, you never look good but today you look like hell. Yo! You got a bit of bird shit on your shoulder there." Stands aside and ushers him in.

His place was a small cottage just east of downtown, funky and clapboard but nice inside. It was draped with tapestries, Navajo rugs on the floor, scarves over the lamp shades, shelves piled full of books and record albums, with a dozen or so really nice guitars leaning against the walls. There were posters of Dylan and Jimi and Miles, a few prints by Chagall and Miro, and a stereo with speakers the size of a small truck taking up one end of the room. The smell of marijuana was pungent.

He handed Strawn a sheet of paper towel, watched him wipe the white splotch off his shoulder, held out the waste basket for him and rolled his

eyes at the scene. "Having a rough day, brother?" It was a question and statement both.

"You heard about Sollie?"

"Yeah, ol' Solid Gold. Who'd a thunk it? Must of put a helluva dent in the pavement."

"Not funny, Greek."

"Hey, it's a shock, but you guys weren't exactly friends, right? That what's bothering you?"

"No, we weren't friends, but... I don't know, Nicky," Strawn said. "Him and Tommie, I guess I'm just trying to make sense of it all."

Nicky pulled a finger-sized spliff from his shirt pocket, struck a wooden match alight with his thumb nail, lit the number and offered it to Strawn.

"Sense of it?" said Nicky. "Well, brother, that just might be your problem. You think it's like writing one of your reviews, or a magazine article. Who, what, where, why, when, then a nifty conclusion in the last 'graph, tie it up with bows and you got yourself a neat little package."

"It don't work that way, Jon. Not in real life. Not out here where the shit goes down, day in and day out. Out here, none of this stuff makes sense."

"Maybe the yokels believe the shit they read in your paper, but the rest of us had way too much experience with the official line. All the way back to JFK, King and Bobby Kennedy, and Malcolm X, LB-fucking-you-every-which-way-J, Tricky Dickie, all of 'em selling us the American way. Yo brother, the big shit! Camelot? More like Came-a-lot. Those Kennedys be some randy dudes, yes? Civil rights? You bet, 'cept we kill 'em dead for speaking up. Have us a war in 'Nam just because we can. Gonna win it any day now, am I right? Light at the end of the tunnel? General Blessmoreland say so. Who the hell can beat the USA? Not those little gooks in their black pajamas, that's for sure. 'Til they did."

"All that time we been handed the shit and sooner or later it dawns on anybody's paying attention, it's all BS. The news media is part of the problem, not the solution. They just selling the politician's version of the story. And the politician's just pimping for the corporate big shots. A circle jerk's what it is. All the power brokers just stroking each other. Makes the world hum."

"So, my question is, Mr. News Reporter, what makes you think it should be any different with you?"

Strawn's head was buzzing a little. He was holding the joint in front of his face, staring at it like maybe it held the answer, maybe it would talk for him. If nothing else, it sure tasted good.

"Maybe because I'm trying to get at the truth." It sounded hollow when he said it.

"That right? The truth? Well, the problem I see is it's damn hard to get at, and if you do, it's damn hard to tell it without getting stomped on real fast.

"And I gotta wonder how much of it is just illusion. I mean, no offense, Jon, but you work for the guys, seems likely you're at least part way bought in to the crap, you know?

"You really telling us big-eyed readers what you know about the music business? Them entertainers we all be worshiping at the concert hall? For very big bucks, of course, just so we know whose side they on. They're no different than the politicians, telling us what we want to hear, laughing all the way to the bank. Just sing better is all. Makes it more pleasant to be robbed. All this hippie shit sells papers, but is it real? Peace and love? The Aquarian Age. I mean, come on, man. You really believe it?"

"Yeah, I do. I think there's a better way to do things. Doesn't have to be dog eat dog, survival of the fittest, all that sick shit, over and over again, that's what I think it's about. Least for me."

"Hope you are right, Brother Jon. I do hope so. But I have to think you're dreaming. Hippies were done for the minute all you guys started writing about them. Summer of Love? Yeah, I remember. A very long time ago. Woodstock. Monterrey Pop. All that good stuff. Ended with Altamont, didn't it? I think the whole thing ended with Altamont. Death by Angels. Now all these long hairs are just posers. Celebrities, at least in their own minds. Been commoditized."

"Well, what about you, Greek? What do you believe in?"

"See, I try to keep things in perspective, Jon. Just living and loving life, you dig? Got this beautiful pad, some sweeties drop by now and then for fun, a few gigs with the band every now and then, and a lot of good music to keep me high, what I play and what I listen to, both. That's what I learned from those days, what I held on to. Plus this," he said, gesturing with the joint as he took another hit. "I don't need much to get by."

The smoke was thick. The room was cool. Sly and the Family Stone was vamping, playing in the background. Great band. Great song. Thank you (Fallettinme Be Mice Elf Agin). Back before the deviated septum.

"Come on man. Take a load off. Haven't seen you in forever and you don't even get to sit down before I'm busting your balls. Come in to my inner sanctum," Nicky said, mimicking the radio voice.

They moved into the living room, sank into beanbag chairs, lying back, nearly lying down and rising only to pass the joint back and forth, saying

nothing. Everyday People Sing a Simple Song. Dance to the Music. Just listening, in that sweet groove.

The Greek was quietly strumming a Gibson Sunburst, playing along with his namesake. "Got to weigh on you, though. Man, I do sympathize. Tommie and Sollie, back to back like that. Very weird."

A while passed before Strawn answered. They'd smoked enough so that time was suspended, whole worlds floated by between breaths. He wasn't sure if he could say what he suspected without being reckless, defaming the dead. He didn't know anything for certain, maybe not anything at all. Just the thick vapor of suspicion lingering from barely glimpsed facts.

"I guess what keeps coming back to me is they were as different as two people could be. Other than music, they had nothing in common."

"Maybe," Nicky said after a pause, "maybe not. Both were very ambitious. Wanted to be on top. Similar in that way."

"Hmm? Not sure I follow you."

"It's like I was saying earlier. What I believe in: lying low. Keep your head down. Stay out of the crossfire. I've got a nice life here, Jon, 'cause I fly below the radar. Keep it simple. Go my own way."

"Tommie, now, whole other matter. Much more talent and burning with that desire, you know, wants to be heard, wants to play with the best, wants to be the best. A lot of visibility and a whole lotta pressure."

"Tommie was a beautiful soul. Told me once though, now you mention it, he wanted his limousine, too."

"Indeed, a truly beautiful soul and gentle as the breeze. One very fine guy, rest his soul. But maybe not tough enough to play in that arena. Sollie's arena. Know what I mean?"

"Those guys chew you up and spit you out. It's what they do. It's why they do it, for the power. Because they can. Why a dog licks his balls, you know?"

"All those gate crashers, all those years, yelling 'music should be free.' They don't know what they're messing with. I'll tell you what, if you took every dollar in the world and distributed it equally to every person on earth, guys like Sollie would have it all back in 6 months' time. They want it more than we do. That simple. They're willing to do what it takes."

"What I said about the hippies, Jon, it ain't like a lot of us don't have those sentiments. Gentler world, why not? Peace and love, sign me up. Makes me think, though, about a friend of mine. Said to me once, 'Yeah, the USA is the greatest place in the world to be if you're competitive. But if you're not, look out below. The herd will run right over you, never give it a second thought.'"

"Always makes me wonder if, maybe, all us soft hearted fucks, us hippies, just want to lie around smoking and joking, banging the sweeties and making music, lions with lambs, being peaceful, you know. Maybe it's because we're just not competitive. Maybe we just can't cut it, don't want it bad enough.

"Never would have left the cave in the old days. Say what? Saber tooth tigers? I ain't going out there. No fucking way! Staying right here by the fire where it's warm."

Nicky chuckled to himself, amused with the image. Strawn just stared.

"You've always been the philosopher, Greek. The Sly King. So tell me. Nothing ever going to change? Just grab what you can and screw the next guy? Art, music, all of it just a farce. Nothing matters but the money?"

"Hey, Brother Jon, you know I love the music, love the beauty. Never would say otherwise. Just trying to make the point about what it takes. I hear the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, Dylan and my man Sly here, all those cats that made the soundtrack for our time, I love it. But I also know those guys are tough.

"Those little llmey fucks don't weight 100 pounds apiece and they're bad as Muhammad Ali. Same with Dylan. They've got the talent, but so do a lot of folks. Difference is, they've got the cojones, too. They found out what it takes to get there and they did it. More than I could ever do.

"Maybe you can make art, make change. But if you can't hang in there with the big boys, you're just trying to live in a world that doesn't exist. The big boys run the show. Want to make it, you got to make something for them, too. You can't deal with Sollie Gold, how you gonna handle Ho Chi Minh or Joe Bonanno, hell, Walt Disney, some of those cats that wield the real power?"

"So that's it?" Strawn finally said. "Just another rumble in the jungle? Every generation just choosing its poison, how they're gonna dance with the one that brung 'em? Nothing changes except at the top. Discouraging."

The record ran out, the room was quiet. They sat there saying nothing, feeling the buzz, the disconnect between what they felt and what had been said. When you get high, you want to float on big fluffy clouds and see the world's effervescence in hyper technicolor like a beautiful movie rolling out before you. Instead, sometimes, the pit bull bites you in the ass. What can you say? Finally, Nicky began picking out a mournful blues.

"Look, we both know something weird happened to Tommie. To Sollie, too. No telling what, but the one thing for sure is they got in over their heads. Each in his own way, but you cross into a power zone where your circuitry can't handle the amps, and boom! Maybe you OD, maybe you jump

to your death. Maybe something else entirely happened. Who knows? Result's the same."

The Gibson was crying out, blues in a minor chord. The way they felt.

"If freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose, bless the good Mr. Kristofferson, then I would say, Brother Jon, the same could be said for truth. I don't doubt your sincerity. Just your good sense.

"Everybody wants a story they can be comfortable with, something that sits easy on their conscience. There're a lot of good stories out there, starting with the bible and running on down to the daily news. That's the story. But the truth? Pretty elusive stuff, Jon. I don't think much of it gets told. Most of us have too much to lose.

"So, that's the way I think it really is, brother. The big boys do their thing and you guys run around with 'em on the pretext of telling us the story. But that's all it is, is a story, a fairy tale for the schmucks to cuddle up to like a teddy bear, so they think they know what's happening and it's all warm and fuzzy. You just tell us what they want us to hear.

"So she's got her Jesus and he's got the Buddha and those folks got the Magna Carta and them others got the American dream, and people all over the world burn their candles to their idols. You and me? We got John Lennon and Imagine and we burn this good herb and genuflect to the cause. That's what gets us high, keeps us cozy at night.

"But 'make sense'. I don't know that it makes sense, Jon. Any of it. Don't seem to be any nice, neat ending to these things. Tommie, Sollie, you and me. We come and we go. We write a few stories, sing a few songs, play a few tunes, make a few bucks, try to make a life. Who's to admire, who's to blame?

"Every generation tries to make sense of it, got them a philosopher, a sly king like me, stretching back to the beginning of time, and nobody's been able to explain it yet. So much for evolution. No matter how pointless it is, you know a hundred years from now, two guys like you and me'll be sitting around, getting high and trying to fit it all together. I just hope there'll be another cat like Tommie making that sweet music while they talk."

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