

Prologue

Ocean City, Maryland, May 1963

There were eleven of them. Eleven men who had taken a lifetime of instruction unlike any other. They were at once the past, the present, and the future of their kind. Men who sat in the highest, most rarefied circles of power. Men who controlled the very comings and goings of the world. And like their predecessors, these men had pooled their influence and power and fortunes—their cunning and daring—their intellect and their utter ruthlessness in order to amass the unbridled influence that would be passed down from them to theirs, generation to generation.

They were the power behind governments and corporations and organized crime. The hidden face of political corruption, and the might behind the world's military machines. Winston Churchill once called them the High Cabal. And now, after almost two centuries, they were being challenged, questioned by an upstart who would dare to deny them what was theirs. An upstart who would now have to be either eliminated or purged.

The oval table they sat around—a table with a history as stout as that of the eleven men—was three centuries old. The dimly lit utilitarian room they occupied was unseasonably cold. As the man at the head of the table, a man bred of privilege and entitlement, looked up stoically to speak, the room fell silent. His words, matter-of-fact,

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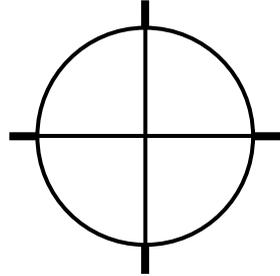
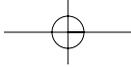
crisp, and clear, were the words of an anointed royal. “Are we of one mind?” he asked, looking slowly around the table.

“One,” came the response of the man to his right.

“One,” echoed the next man.

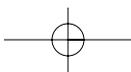
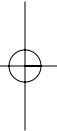
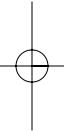
“One,” said the man next to him—and so on the answers came until one by one all eleven men had uttered that same fateful word.

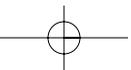
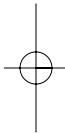
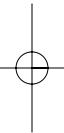
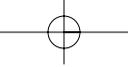
After a moment of silence, the man who had first spoken rose and brought his right hand gently to the table and said, “So it will be.”



PART I

The Find





Chapter**1**

Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel,
Interstate 70,
Colorado Continental Divide,
late August, the Present

Cornelius McPherson loved talking to himself with the rumbling insistence of someone hard-of-hearing, which clearly he was not. He talked to himself in shopping malls, at sporting events, on hiking trails, and in church and once, in a booming voice that startled and unhinged a group of vacationing, camera-laden Japanese onlookers, he held a conversation with himself in the middle of the Colorado capitol rotunda, debating the pros and cons of the Persian Gulf War. More than anything, McPherson loved to talk to himself at work. Talking to himself there, inside a mountain at an elevation of over eleven thousand feet, gave him the in-control, never-alone sense of ease he craved. When you came right down to it—“netted it all out,” as McPherson was fond of saying—he didn’t really talk to himself so much as he recited, mumbled, and hummed, and not just any convenient piece of trendy prose, scripture, or ditty. What McPherson brought forth in all earnestness, more often than not for no ears but his own, was what he liked to think of as the poetry of life. Hymns, nursery rhymes, poems, famous sayings, quotations, and parables all

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fought for space, churning effortlessly and endlessly deep inside Cornelius McPherson's head, nudging, sometimes shoving him through the day.

Everybody's got a song or a rhyme that haunts 'em, McPherson loved to say, and no song, poem, rhyme, or hymn gave McPherson more comfort than the song he was currently humming, the old Negro spiritual "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Just two days from retirement, McPherson was at work and humming that song, doing the same thing he'd been doing for the past three decades and thinking that in less than forty-eight hours he'd be forever free from the cold, dank smells of life inside a tunnel through a mountain. Negotiating his way along a Colorado Department of Transportation tunnel-inspection catwalk inside I-70's Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel, the same catwalk he'd traveled five to six days a week for pretty close to 7,500 days, McPherson found himself smiling and humming to beat the band.

The concrete catwalk, which hugged the tunnel's north wall and stood four feet above I-70's two lanes of westbound traffic, was used for everything from inspecting the tunnel's aging tile walls for cracks to troubleshooting dangerous grout-line water seepage to providing a 1.6-mile-long conveyance along which the tile washers moved their high-powered water-spray equipment once a year.

It was just past 10 a.m., and traffic on the interstate was surprisingly light when McPherson, nodding and swaying to the beat in his head, wrapped up his rendition of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and cleared his throat in prelude to his always slightly off-key version of "Amazing Grace."

Thirty-nine years earlier, high in the Colorado Rockies sixty miles west of Denver in the spring of 1968, all the elements of a classic

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duel between man and the earth had been present when McPherson and fifty other miners had gone underground to begin digging one of the largest automobile tunnels in the world, and clearly the highest. The men were on the front end of a bore into the Continental Divide that started at the eleven-thousand-foot level of Colorado's treacherous Loveland Pass. Known back then, in a reference to the creek that ran above it, simply as the Straight Creek tunnel dig, the job entailed blasting through two miles of mountain, a geologic fault, and a nightmare of fractured and crushed rock to run a road across—or, more accurately, through, as McPherson loved to phrase it—the top of the world.

McPherson, a squat, five-foot-nine, 190-pound fireplug of a black man with a skullcap of wiry gray hair and grainy, sandpaper-textured, dark-chocolate skin, had been a 150-pound wisp of a man when he'd begun his days as a member of a Straight Creek tunnel-mucking team that would spend five years battling a mountain and the sometimes eighteen-hundred-foot-wide geologic nightmare of fractured and crushed rock known as the Loveland Fault.

During the early days of the dig, project delays, worker injuries, and an unending flow of cash to nowhere were par for the course, but McPherson had stuck it out, watching the project move from being the Straight Creek tunnel bore to a hole through the Continental Divide that would ultimately become the continent-cresting, automobile-streaking sky window known as the Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel. By the time the dig was finally done in 1973, it had claimed the lives of seven men, and as many as 1,140 people had dug and dynamited their way through a mountain. Along the way, McPherson had worked his way up from tunnel mucker to drift runner to bulk-rock-loader operator, and from there to his present job

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as the Colorado Department of Transportation's chief Eisenhower Tunnel attendant and troubleshooting walking boss.

Watching the flow of traffic below, McPherson, minus two toes on his left foot that had been there when the Straight Creek dig had begun, broke into a self-congratulatory short-timer's smile. Transitioning from humming "Amazing Grace," McPherson, unmarried, childless, and always a loner, moved quickly into an inner-city skip-rope rhyme: *Once upon a time the goose drank wine, tried to do the shimmy with a monkey on the streetcar line. The streetcar line broke, the monkey got choked, they both went to heaven on a silly billy goat.* After a lifetime of reciting the rhyme, he never missed a word or a beat. Hard hat snugged up and power lamp in hand, he continued walking and scanning the tunnel for burned-out overhead lights, fractured tiles, ventilation problems, and the bane of his existence, eroding grout.

Last night, night before, twenty-four robbers at my door. I got up and let 'em in, hit 'em in the head with a rolling pin. His cadence now on automatic pilot, McPherson scanned the vast catalog of skip rhymes in his head, searching for one that was appropriate for someone just two days away from retirement. Finally he belted out, *The white boys had a rooster, they set him on a fence, the rooster crowed for the colored boys 'cause he had some sense.* He cleared his throat in preparation for a second verse when, without warning, every light in the tunnel blinked out. A fraction of a second later, the five-foot-thick, rebar-reinforced concrete catwalk he was standing on, a 1.6-mile-long virtual seawall, buckled and caved in. Losing his balance as he leapfrogged to a platform of stable concrete a few feet away, McPherson fell to one knee.

"What the shit!" He scanned the darkness with the powerful lamp in his right hand, arcing the light back and forth as warning sirens

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sounded all around him. Twenty yards ahead of him, a tractor-trailer braked to avoid crashing into a half-dozen pieces of catwalk concrete that had tumbled down onto the roadway. The braking semi jackknifed, and its trailer kissed the tunnel's north wall, sending a Fourth of July celebration of sparks shooting up into the darkness.

A horn blast erupted on the heels of the now steady wail of the sirens. Five seconds later there was a second horn blast, and five seconds later another. McPherson's throat went dry as he recognized the blasts and sirens as the synchronized, coded alarm announcing that the Eisenhower Tunnel had been hit by an earthquake.

The tunnel's walls and the I-70 roadway popped and cracked and buckled as McPherson grabbed a piece of the catwalk's railing and chanted, *Apples, peaches, pumpkin pie, all not ready holler, "I!"* For three lingering additional seconds the tunnel walls and the mountain behind them hissed and snapped and groaned. Boulders and rocks the size of small cars, free from a thirty-four-year encumbrance of concrete, rebar, and tile, dribbled down onto the interstate until finally the horn blasts and sirens stopped and the sound of rushing water and the echo of a lone car horn blaring in the distance were the only things McPherson could hear.

As loudly as he dared, McPherson announced to himself, "I'm still alive!" Still hugging the catwalk's twisted hand railing for dear life, he steadied himself on what was now an undulating platform of concrete rubble and shook his head in disbelief. Before he could screw up the courage to take a step, the backup diesel generators sparked the lights back on. The tunnel was filled with a haze of smoke and dust, but he could see the jackknifed tractor-trailer thirty yards ahead of him, and tunnel lights beyond it to the west. A midsized European SUV had slammed into the trailer, nosing its way beneath the rear

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end like a rooting terrier. The trapped SUV and squatting trailer sat cockeyed across the interstate, locked together, blocking the lanes in both directions. Recognizing that both the truck driver and the SUV's driver were at least moving, McPherson exhaled a sigh of relief.

With his view of the tunnel to the west blocked by the semi and a particle-filled cloud of smoke, McPherson turned back to see a drunken conga line of pickups, big rigs, and cars tossed hither and yon on an undulating conveyer belt of roadway that stretched a half mile back to the east portal. A dozen or so dazed-looking people who'd escaped their vehicles were moving through the haze, climbing over stalled cars and trucks and rock, making their way toward the east portal and daylight.

McPherson patted himself down, reassured that everything was still in place. Disbelief filling his voice, he said, "A fuckin' earthquake. Who in the hell would've thunk it?" A cave-in was what old-time tunnel muckers and drift runners like Cornelius McPherson worried about. Oh, he'd heard people talk about the risk of a quake, and he knew that the geologists and engineers who'd designed the tunnel were aware that the Loveland Fault and plate of rock were primed for an earthquake. The tunnel design team simply never could judge for certain how powerful an earthquake to engineer for. *Now ya know, now ya know, now ya know*, McPherson chuckled aloud, aware that he'd just lived through the earthquake equivalent of a hundred-year flood.

Gripped by the uncertainty of the moment, he'd almost forgotten about the walkie-talkie clipped to his belt until a voice he recognized as that of his supervisor, Franklin Watts, crackled on a wave of static: "Corny, you all right in there?"

Breathing hard, McPherson answered, "Yeah."

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“We just had an earthquake. Golden’s already been in touch. They’re reporting a 6.7 on the Richter scale.”

Aware that the National Earthquake Information Center in Golden, Colorado, forty miles and nearly six thousand feet of elevation back down I-70 and the mountain, was linked directly to the tunnel’s command center, McPherson barked, “We got lights in here, and you, Franklin, bless your ever-lovin’, pea-pickin’ Tennessee heart, have got a bunch of hysterical people headed your way, scramblin’ like shit for the east portal. There’s a semi with a sport ute pooched up its ass blockin’ the roadway just up ahead of me.” Barely pausing to take a breath, McPherson added, “We’re ’bout four-tenths of a mile in, I’d make it. Most of the cars I can see are bumper to bumper. A few of ’em are kissin’ a tunnel wall, but I don’t see none overturned. Can’t be certain, though; there’s so much haze and smoke in here. Sure as hell can smell gasoline, though.”

“I’ve got paramedics and a disaster team headed your way. Another one’s headed in from the west. Can we get past your wreck?”

“Nope. That semi’s straddlin’ the whole damn road.”

“Shit! How many people you think you’ve still got in there with you?”

McPherson eyed the crumbled concrete that had been a catwalk, then glanced back toward the line of westbound vehicles below. Counting the vehicles off one by one in his head, he said, “I can only see as far back as maybe fifteen vehicles. Figurin’ two people to a car, and stretchin’ that out a little—not countin’ the folks that hauled ass as soon as things started movin’ and shakin’—I figure maybe twenty, twenty-five.”

“Can you walk any of ’em out?”

“If they don’t all run the hell outta here first.”

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“Then get to it.”

“I’m on it.” McPherson had started to climb over the catwalk’s twisted guard railing when he heard, just barely but perceptibly for an old tunnel rat like him, the unmistakable sound of rushing water. He glanced back toward the tunnel’s south wall. “Hey, Franklin, I got water spittin’ at me from somewhere. Wait a minute—I see it. There’s water gushin’ outta a break in the south wall of the tunnel just up ahead of me. Didn’t see it before, but I sure as hell can see it now. I better check it out.” For the first time since the earthquake had hit, McPherson, iron-willed tunnel rat, miner, and seasoned digger, felt himself shaking. “I think we got a seam break up ahead.” Suddenly his whole body turned sweaty.

“How bad?”

“Can’t tell.”

“Damn! Scratch that victim lead-out we were just talking about,” said Watts. McPherson could picture the other man stroking his chin thoughtfully. “I’ll send Wilkerson in to handle that. If we’ve got a crack in the mountain, we’ve bought ourselves one hell of a problem. See if you can figure out what’s goin’ on with that stream of water. And Cornelius, better make it fast.”

“Is it safe in here, Franklin?”

“The folks who engineered the place claim it is. And she just stood up to a near 7-grade Richter hit, didn’t she? I’d say you’re pretty safe there for the moment. Long as we don’t get another tremor. Take a quick look at our problem. You’re the only eyes and ears I got right now. Then haul ass outta there.”

“Okay. One quick look and I’m gone.” McPherson fumbled with his walkie-talkie, making certain the volume was set on high, clipped it to his belt, took what he hoped wouldn’t be his last look through the

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haze toward the queue of surprisingly orderly people who were making their way over rubble and stalled vehicles toward the east portal, and shouted, pretty certain none of the people could hear him, "Help's on the way!" Hitching up his pants before heading toward what looked to be a gushing waterfall, he swallowed hard as for a fleeting second he brought into focus something he hadn't seen in decades: the unmistakable belly of the mountain he had once cut his way through.

When he got close enough that his legs were being pelted by a shower of ice-cold water, silt, muck, and broken tree roots, he realized that what had seemed to be a massive waterfall from his earlier vantage point was, on closer inspection, simply a fire-hose-sized stream of water spewing from an automobile-sized rhomboid-shaped hole in the south tunnel wall.

Recognizing his mistake, McPherson shook his head. "Shoulda known a real gusher woulda washed my ass outta here by now. Thought you had me, but you didn't," he said boastfully, aiming his words directly at the stream of water and breaking into a chant: "Tried to trick me but you couldn't. I know you did, I know you did. I know you did." With his miner's instincts open full bore, he mumbled, "Goddamn underground spring." Snapping his walkie-talkie off his belt, he barked into it, "Franklin, my water gusher's comin' from an underground spring. I'm sure of it." The sound of water gurgling its way out of the mountain, as if in search of a highway to freedom, had him suddenly recalling the dozens of battles he and other miners had had with underground springs, seepage, and erosion during the first two years on the Straight Creek tunnel dig. "A fuckin' nightmare, and it's back," he mumbled.

Franklin Watts's voice erupted from the walkie-talkie. "Figures." Watts, also a Straight Creek tunnel veteran, hadn't been around for

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the first year of the tunnel bore—the worst year on the dig, old-timers still claimed—but he'd spent the next four years underground, and the dig's blueprint had been stamped indelibly into his psyche as well.

Confident that the rush of water was subsiding and relieved at having pinpointed the source, McPherson said, "I'm gonna check the far side of the hole I got down here."

"Don't press your luck, man," said Watts. "You've told me what I needed to know. Get the shit outta there."

McPherson shook off his boss's order with a defiant nod. Uttering the words in the same cadence that he and his drift-front mining team had once used to get themselves started every day, he chanted, *Fool me once, shame on me, mishandle the mountain, shame on me, rumble-tumble, rumble-tumble, always on me, always on me, get up and go, digger man, digger man.*

The rhyme's simple meaning, a mantra that every miner kept tucked inside the self-preservation corner of his brain—*run for daylight when you hear the unmistakable rumble-tumble of a cave-in*—wasn't lost on Watts. "I said get the shit out of there, Cornelius! You hear me?"

McPherson smiled, knowing he'd won one more tiny battle with the mountain. "Franklin, Franklin, Franklin. Wasn't but a couple'a minutes ago you told me this ol' tunnel of ours was built to stand every shake, rattle, and roll the man upstairs could deliver. But I hear you talkin'. I'll be outta here and up there with you in that warm supervisor's bunkhouse soakin' up the sunshine in two shakes of a tit. Just gotta check out one more thing." Clipping his walkie-talkie to his belt, McPherson walked through what was now only a limp stream of water spitting out of the mountain. Brushing a shower of

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muck off his leg, he worked his way to the middle of the truncated hole in the tunnel wall. A river of tile grout, tree roots, and silt swirled around his feet as a blast of freezing air rushed out of the hole in the tunnel's wall to greet him. Shivering and rubbing his hands together, McPherson cupped a hand above his eyes as he strained to see between two pieces of bowed rebar into the dark hole. "Thought you had me," he shouted into the ten-foot-wide cavern. "You thought you did, you thought you did, you thought you did, rumble-tumble, rumble-tumble, digger man, digger man."

The brief resurrection of his mining glory days quickly faded, and the thrill of his tiny new victory over the mountain was short-lived. Reasoning that now wasn't the time to push his luck, he shook a fist at the cavernous hole, shook his head, and turned to leave. Walking off the length of the hole, he counted off the footage: "Eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Twelve foot long, right on the money, damn!"

Eyeing a crumble of concrete at his feet, he noticed what looked like a stubby tree limb lying a few feet beyond his right foot. Deciding he'd take the limb back as a final souvenir of his nearly forty years of wrestling underground with nature, he stooped to pick it up. It wasn't until he took a knee that he realized he wasn't looking at a tree limb, or a broken support timber, or a fractured bearing joist, or even a misshapen piece of steel I-beam. What he found himself staring at, as his eyes expanded and his spine tingled with quixotic numbness, was a frozen, well-preserved, and amazingly intact human forearm.

A rush of curiosity and then disbelief overwhelmed him as he examined the appendage, turning it gently around in his hands, holding it up to the light, rotating it back and forth. The arm, severed at the elbow, was a darker, almost ebony version of what it had been

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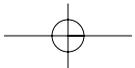
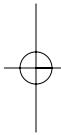
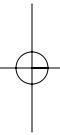
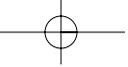
in life, and the remaining skin, patches of it having been stripped away, had the rough, uneven texture of tree bark.

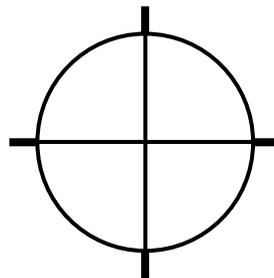
As frigid air continued to rush through the hole in the tunnel wall, the gears in Cornelius McPherson's head ground to a halt, and his whole body suddenly turned numb. It wasn't the air streaming from the belly of an angry mountain that had unnerved him; it was something much more eerie, more unsettling and profound. There was something unmistakably recognizable about the severed arm. Continuing to hold the dark, lifeless form up to the light, he turned it around and around. There was no question about it—it was a forearm he recognized, an appendage stripped from somebody he'd known.

He wanted to say, *No*, wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, *It can't be! It's gotta be some kinda postearthquake mirage*. But there was no mistaking it. The arm bore an immutable and unmistakable signature that told anyone who'd ever seen it before exactly whom the arm belonged to. As dark as it was, and as rough and reptilian as the remaining skin appeared, the red, white, and blue flames that encircled the frozen appendage and the words *breed love* just above the wrist told McPherson that the arm had belonged to one of the five men from his long-disbanded Straight Creek tunnel crew. It was the forearm of the crew's gently spoken, well-mannered rock-hauling truck driver who, in the two years he'd worked with McPherson, had seemed sensitive, secretive, and above all lonely. Cornelius McPherson had known him during that time simply as Ducane. Sad-faced Ducane. And he remembered Ducane telling him in a breathless whisper one night, after they'd spent a weekend drinking and whoring outside the windswept mining town of Hanna, Wyoming—in a voice that had a strange, incisive edge to it—that he knew who had killed President John F. Kennedy.

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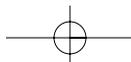
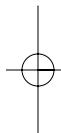
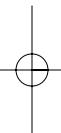
McPherson knelt and laid the forearm reverently at his feet. Shaken in a way he hadn't been for more than thirty years, he pivoted and stared into the dark cavern in the mountain, wondering whether any more of Ducane's body parts were inside. But more than anything, he found himself wondering just how Ducane had ended up trapped behind a wall of concrete, steel, and tile. He continued asking himself that question as he scooped the arm back up and headed toward the east portal, recalling as he slipped his way over boulders and twisted metal, shattered glass and stalled cars, that the man calling himself Ducane, as far as he could remember, had not been injured even once during the Straight Creek tunnel dig. As he stumbled toward daylight, a cold shiver swept through him, and he found himself thinking about the fact that the man called Ducane, the man who'd told him that he knew who'd killed JFK, had simply turned up missing one day thirty-seven years earlier, never again to show up on the job.

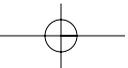
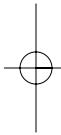
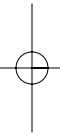
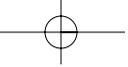




PART II

The Past





Chapter**2****Gary, Indiana, November 1, 1963**

Killing never sits easy with compromise, and Antoine “Sugar Sweet” Ducane recognized all too well that that was what he’d been hired to do—suck hind teat, ride shotgun, and grind it out as a compromise, second-string trigger-pulling alternate in a high-stakes game of murder. Murder that had the potential to alter the very course of U.S. history.

Ducane didn’t like playing second fiddle, never had. Not six years earlier, when he’d been forced to come off the bench to lead his New Iberia, Louisiana, high school football team to a state championship. Not when he’d given up dreams of being an artist after his high school sweetheart had blasted a hole in the psychological armor he’d always used to hold people at bay, leaving him for a Gulf Coast oil rigger. Not during the three years immediately after high school, when he’d boxed his way up the long-rigged, mob-controlled National Boxing Association ladder to become a middleweight title contender, only to get sponged out of the title picture by the Louisiana mob when it was pointed out that he was Creole, not the great Italian Rocky Marciano hope they’d been trolling for. And finally, not even when, as no more than a tagalong wheelman during the fourth in a series of Baton Rouge bank robberies, he’d been ordered in the midst of a robbery gone sour to kill a man and had done his best to oblige.

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As they were racing away from the bank, one of his two cohorts had screamed, “Off the pig!” The man who gave the order had a bullet from the bank guard’s .38 police special lodged in his upper thigh. Sugar Sweet Ducane had dutifully pumped two slugs from his mother’s .32, a gun he’d stolen from her as an inquisitive, morose teenager, into the security guard’s gut. Against the odds, the security guard had lived. The exsanguinating robber hadn’t, but more importantly for the man called Sugar Sweet, in the wake of that robbery he never saw the inside of a police station, much less prison or jail. His mother had connections—important ones—the kind that enabled people like Ducane to forever skirt the law. When all was said and done, Ducane, free as the breeze, had garnered \$13,000, half of the dead bank robber’s take, for staying cool and on point during the shoot-out, his baptism by fire. His reputation had been made as a solid soldier in the underbelly of Louisiana organized crime, someone who was willing to execute an order under fire.

More importantly, pumping two slugs into an overweight bank security guard who would end up losing half his bowel ultimately earned Sugar Sweet Ducane a shot at being onstage in the American crime of the century.

Now, as he sat in Theodosia’s Elbow Room, in the heart of the black community of Gary, Indiana, off center stage for the moment in a spot that afforded him necessary invisibility, all he could think about was the fact that playing second fiddle, no matter the upside, was as thankless and shitty a job as a man could get.

It was a humid, sticky, surprisingly warm Steel City November afternoon. The entry door to the Elbow Room had been propped open, allowing a narrow ribbon of light to dance into the otherwise darkened bar. The burning-coal and sulfur smell of blast furnaces

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and coke ovens churning out steel wafted into the bar, which was linked by a corridor to a liquor store next door. The family-owned bar and liquor store sat just two blocks west of Broadway, the main drag in this city of 180,000.

Antoine eyed the stream of light arching along the floor, sniffed like a bird dog on point at the intruding, acidic, bitter-smelling Steel City air that carried with it the ground-up human smell of mid-twentieth-century American industry at its zenith, and said to the bartender who was standing a few feet away, "How 'bout hittin' me with another JW Black?"

The barkeep, a long-necked giraffe of a black man with a misshapen head and steely gray eyes, grabbed a fifth of Johnnie Walker Black Label from a shelf to his right, half-filled a tumbler on the bar-top without once looking up, plopped a single ice cube into the amber liquid, and slid it down the bar toward Antoine. "You wanna run a tab?" His soft-spoken response was barely a question.

"Nope. Two's my limit." Antoine forced a painful half smile. The pain was courtesy of a barely functional temporomandibular joint that had been crushed in a horseback-riding accident when he was ten. Since then, it had hurt him to smile, chew, or French-kiss a woman. That riding outing had been a birthday gift from his mother, and she'd been so distraught over the accident that she'd had the horse shot and babied Antoine ever since.

Smiling back, the barkeep blinked Sugar Sweet's features into focus, wondering as he did where the man with the light parchment-colored skin, thick, sandy-colored mop of unruly hair who preferred the limes in his drinks on the rot was from. As the barkeep turned and ran a damp, dirty rag down the bar's surface, Antoine asked, "How far's the South Shore Train Station from here?"

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“Dead north up Broadway and just past downtown. Twenty-two blocks on the money.” The barkeep eyed Antoine quizzically. “You headed for Chi-Town?” Antoine didn’t answer, having learned long ago never to share his business with a barkeep. He’d already made three trips to Chicago in the past two days, driving a rented Pontiac, which he’d now returned, the thirty-five miles around the tip of Lake Michigan to the Windy City’s predominantly black South Side. There he had met with the people who’d hired him, scoped out the lay of the land, and purchased the things he needed to simplify and carry out his job. At the end of each of the two days, after practicing and refining his part in a much larger mission, he’d made his way back across the Illinois border to disappear into the bowels of the Steel City.

Only four other people besides Antoine and the bartender occupied the dimly lit bar. A pudgy, nervous-looking white woman sat drinking alone at a table against the wall opposite the bar, several feet from Antoine. Three men occupied another table a few feet from her. Two of the men were dressed in bibbed overalls that fit too tightly. The third, a coal-black man with an elongated, rectangular face, was dressed in a pair of faded jeans that looked as if they’d been washed a thousand times. All of the men seemed intent on applying just enough intoxicating lubricant to their minds and bellies to allow them to suffer through one more eight-hour shift at U.S. Steel.

Antoine scooped his floating, dried-out lime from his drink. As he dipped his head to lap the film of bittersweetness from the drink’s oil-slick-like surface, a thin, brown-skinned man rushed through the door, shouting in a mix of Spanish and English with his right fist raised skyward. “Bitch!” he screamed. “You’re a common whore! Puta! Vete a la chingada! Whore! Whore! Whore!” He’d cocked the

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opposite arm, prepared to strike the woman, whose eyes flashed fireballs of hate when she tossed the drink she'd been nursing into his face. "Coño!" he screamed, toppling the table over onto her.

The bartender, whose move around the bar was fluid and swift, was on top of the man in a half-hair of a second. Twisting the man's right arm behind him and speaking to him in the calmest of tones, the barkeep said, "I told you not to come back in here today, Arturo." The bartender eyed the woman sympathetically as, wrapping his other arm around Arturo's neck, he ushered the now hammer-locked, inebriated Puerto Rican toward the open doorway. "I told you the next time you came in here drunk, I'd call the cops," said the barkeep, sounding as calm as when he'd given Antoine directions to the South Shore station.

Eyeing the largest of the three unruffled men at the other table, he said, "Willie, how about runnin' next door and gettin' me Speed Scott—saw him go in the liquor store a few minutes ago."

The man responded with a look of bewilderment. "You gonna buy Arturo a pack of trouble, you sic a cop like Scott on him."

The barkeep shook his head. "He brought it on himself. Now, hurry up," the barkeep ordered as Arturo, wiggling in defiance at the mention of Speed Scott's name, tried to escape his grasp.

The man named Willie lumbered out the door, and within seconds a short, thick, muscle-bound, fair-skinned black cop in plainclothes sauntered into the bar. "Arturo, you drunk again?" Speed Scott shook his head and glanced in the direction of the woman, who'd barely looked up. "Whiskey and women, whiskey and women," Scott lamented as Antoine moved past him, walking very deliberately toward safety and the bar's open door.

Sugar Sweet's exit was soft and imperceptible, the touchdown of

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a falling leaf. Quickly he was outside, enveloped in daylight and beyond the range of a small-time, small-city cop who could have been his undoing; beyond the battered woman who'd sought out shelter in a bar; and away from detached, intoxicated mill workers and inquisitive bartenders. He'd skirted trouble in less time than it took, as his mother loved to say, for a lecherous Holy Roller preacher to make a date by winking at a woman in the front pew. Striding north up Adams Street, he made his way toward the rancid-smelling rooming house where he was being warehoused, prepared to wait out his date with history or hell.

Santo Trafficante Jr. took a bite of jumbo-sized deep-fried Gulf Coast shrimp and paused to savor the flavor. Then, slapping a fist defiantly into his right palm, he said to one of the men squeezed on each side of him in the back seat of a white Lincoln Continental limo, "Point is, Carlos, you've got us puttin' our future in the hands of some half-breed nigger." Trafficante was a sad-eyed, thin man with a long neck, a flat, prominent forehead, and a gunshot scar on his upper left arm. He controlled all the organized crime in Florida, a state where his long-entrenched family had helped create the language known as Tampan, a cross featuring the Italian and Spanish dialects favored by early-twentieth-century mobsters.

"You're eatin' colored-folks food, ain't you?" countered Carlos Marcello, godfather to the Louisiana and east Texas mafia. Marcello, born in Tunis to Sicilian parents and known in crime circles as "the little man," controlled the lion's share of all gambling in the Pelican State. Leaning back in his seat and smiling, he patted the Cuban cigar in his shirt pocket as he eyed Johnny Rosselli, Chicago's mob boss, who sat on the other side of Trafficante, then popped a shrimp into his

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mouth and studied the undulating line of black faces that looped from the order window of White's Shrimp House, a Chicago South Side soul food legend, to within fifteen feet of their limo. Extracting another shrimp from the grease-soaked, quart-sized carton sitting on the exhaust hump between his feet, Marcello said softly and politely, "Colored people sure can cook, I'll give you that. Shit, I can't tell this shrimp from the ones they fry up down home in Louisiana. It's like they've got a motherfuckin' worldwide franchise." Marcello licked a dollop of hot-sauce-saturated shrimp batter off his thumb and reached for another deep-fried nugget, eyeing it as if it were a prize at the bottom of a box of Cracker Jack. "Umm, umm, umm."

"Don't come in your pants, Carlos," Trafficante said. "This ain't no meat-beatin' contest." Leaning forward and glancing out the limo's tinted window, Trafficante asked their burly driver, "See anything suspicious?"

Incensed, "Handsome" Johnny Rosselli, a sharp-nosed man with a penchant for expensive sunglasses and equally expensive hats, barked, "Goddamn it, Santo, this is my territory!" He swept his right arm around in a quarter circle, nearly slamming Trafficante in the chest. "Colored, white, gentile, Jew, or Jap, I control these waters. Ain't a chance in hell anybody's peepin' our show. Now, would you sit back in your seat, eat your fuckin' shrimp, and try not to ask Tony about security no more?"

Flashing Rosselli a look that said, *Pipe down*, Marcello asked, "Are we here for a fuckin' sparring match or business? I know it's your turf, Johnny. Santo is just bein' thoughtful, and you gotta be thoughtful when you're usin' an outsider on a job like this. No question, we're pushin' the envelope here." On trial in Louisiana for conspiracy and looking uncustomarily hounded, Marcello took a sip from a twenty-

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four-ounce container of lemonade. He'd had to work hard to get away for this meeting in Chicago, and he was teetering on the edge, exhausted from trial prep and a two-year jousting match with the feds, but he had as big a stake in the outcome of their project as anyone, so he was there. "I know Ducane," Marcello offered. "Down my way his rep's fuckin' golden. He's done half-a-dozen jobs for me when I couldn't use boys out of Corsica or the East Coast. He's a hungry dog, one I pretty much raised from a pup."

"Okay, okay. So he's your lovable lapdog." Rosselli stroked his chin thoughtfully. "How much does he know about the whole goddamn plan?"

"Yeah. How fuckin' much?" asked Trafficante, riding a new wave of anxiety.

"As much as he's been told." Marcello bit back the urge to lash out. "He knows he's workin' backup detail on a big-time hit, and he knows who the target is. But he don't know nothin' about anywhere else but Chicago. He's aware that he's fallback and a fallback only, and he knows that the lead singer in this deal is somebody else, not him."

"And he's all right with that?" asked Trafficante, flashing a knowing glance Rosselli's way.

"Yeah," Marcello responded, looking puzzled. "Ornasetti's got him under control."

"Ain't what I hear," Trafficante countered. "I hear that little Creole swamp bug of yours likes struttin' center stage. Hear he's into takin' special bows."

"From who?" Marcello shot back.

"Don't matter from who. What matters is, he may be too fuckin' Hollywood for us," said Trafficante.

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Marcello's face turned salmon pink. "Goddamn it, Santo! I know where you're headed with this. You still want this whole goddamn thing to play out down your way in Tampa. You've been tryin' your best to nose things that way from the beginning. But you know what? Ain't gonna happen."

Trafficante smiled. It was a self-satisfied *gotcha* kind of smile. "And you can bet I wouldn't use a nigger, or some half-breed Creole, or whatever Ducane claims to be—or for that matter anybody without the same bloodlines as me—as backup on a job like this, especially on my own home ground."

"We both know that," Rosselli said, playing peacemaker once again. "You've told us before, Santo, so move off it. Let's say for the moment we all try and be a little objective. Bottom line is, not one of us should be pushin' for Chicago, or Tampa, or any other city, or for offshore hires, U.S. regulars, Chinamen, niggers, or Jews. You think a dog with a thorn in its paw gives one shit about who takes that fuckin' thorn out? Hell, no! And right now we've got ourselves one hell of a thorn-pokin' problem, gentlemen." Rosselli paused for effect. "Or maybe it's just me who's feelin' the pain, and the two of you ain't hurtin' a bit."

"Oh, I'm feelin' it," said Marcello, licking a tenacious piece of shrimp batter from his thumb. "And what I'm feelin' is more and more like that goddamn lyin', pussy-chasin' asshole and his pissant brother need to be dealt with. They're takin' turns puttin' their dicks up my ass. They've got me in fuckin' court, I'm losin' contracts, leverage, and, worst of all, I'm losin' money."

"Same for me," Trafficante chimed in. "Word has it they're planin' on prosecutin' my whole damn family. And Hoover's office ain't been one goddamn bit of help. So much for courtin' that sissy."

"So there you are, summed up all over again," Rosselli said with a

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quick, insightful nod. “It’s shit-or-get-off-the-pot time, in case either of you missed it. We’ve got three shots at solvin’ our problem in just under a month, and the first one’s here in Chicago. I say we stick with what’s been planned. Any discomfort?” Rosselli flashed a quick thumbs-up and turned to Marcello.

Marcello’s thumb rose quickly.

“Santo?” Rosselli’s tone escalated with the question.

Trafficante, who’d been holding out for weeks to have things play out down his way in Tampa, eyed the limo’s plushly carpeted floor, gazed out the tinted window toward the conga line of hungry Negroes still lined up outside the whitewashed cinder-block bunker that was White’s Shrimp House, shook his head, raised a thumb, and said hesitantly, “I guess.”

Antoine Ducane’s trip from Theodosia’s Elbow Room to his one-room walk-up flat in a flophouse on the corner of Thirteenth and Adams in Gary’s red-light district proved to be uneventful. No cops latched on to his tail, no drunks followed him home, and on the way he encountered not one cheating woman. He settled into his room—a dingy ten-by-ten-foot box that reeked of rancid cabbage and stale cigarette smoke—and watched a couple of sitcoms on TV. Bored with the tube, he doodled in a sketch book for awhile, called home to New Iberia to talk to his mother, assuring her several times during the conversation that he was all right, then went back out and trolled Adams Street for a woman to help him take the edge off a strange, sudden, job-related nervousness. He walked the streets for half an hour, a little disjointed, looking for the right kind of woman—slender, big breasts, all legs, and dark skinned—without any luck before returning to his room.

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He sat back on his bed, his head resting against a pillow that smelled of mildew, still uneasy about his assignment, enjoying the last of his favorite snack, a Dad's Old Fashioned Root Beer and a whole-wheat peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. He found himself second-guessing his trip north, the entire sketchy Chicago job, and even his loyalty to the two Carlos Marcello contacts back in New Iberia who'd recommended him for the job.

Over the past ten weeks the Chicago plan, a plan that he knew top-level mafia dons had drawn up to rid themselves of ever-increasing government intrusions on their business, had been seared into his brain. To divert attention from themselves, the crime bosses had called in a collaborator—a trusted but unseasoned Rocky Mountain connection. The man was an eager-beaver, twenty-five-year-old, up-bucking would-be don from Colorado who had been recommended to Carlos Marcello, the driving force behind the plan, by a trusted Las Vegas contact.

The three crime bosses, as far as he could tell, had checked out this fourth collaborator, Rolando "Rollie" Ornasetti, to their satisfaction; anointed him their lieutenant on the street, kill coordinator, and mission director; given the job their stamp of approval; and distanced themselves from the action. In the weeks that followed, Ornasetti, a braggart who never let a day pass without sharing the fact with Sugar Sweet or some other underling that he'd graduated from college at nineteen, that his family had roots in the Rocky Mountain mafia that extended back eighty years, and that his member was ten inches long, had managed to rub Antoine the wrong way. Hoping to make points with upper-level movers and shakers of the organized crime world, the brash Ornasetti had choreographed Ducane through six fully orchestrated trial runs of the Chicago job. It had been

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Ornasetti who'd suggested that Ducane while away his unoccupied time rotting in Gary, rat-holed forty-five minutes away from the kill zone in a firetrap that smelled of boiled cabbage and piss.

It hadn't taken Antoine but a few minutes into their first meeting to recognize what a kiss-ass Ornasetti would turn out to be and peg him as a little fish trying to swim with the bigs. Despite his instant dislike, \$25,000 to play low-risk backup on a kill had proved to be too much of an incentive for him to walk away. Ornasetti's puffed-up, tall-Texan take on the world seemed out of place for a slightly built man from Denver who was barely five-foot-eight, talked with the hint of a lisp, and tended to sound slightly effeminate when he got excited. The fact that he openly coveted the top dog position of his uncle, who was a Denver crime boss, spoke to his lack of loyalty, and that, as much as anything else, rubbed Ducane the wrong way.

It was Ornasetti, not someone above him, who began to refer to their operation as a deception rather than simply calling it what it was—a hit. It was Ornasetti who relished using words and phrases that climbed over the top of what the whole Chicago affair was all about—killing—and Ornasetti who boasted that the job would probably make him.

Antoine complained in one of his frequent late-night calls to his mother, a woman who had worked for decades in the low-tide backwaters of Louisiana petty crime—numbers running, illegal liquor sales, and falsified IDs—that his Chicago job, without detailing the job's specifics, had him dealing with a Rocky Mountain wannabe chickenshit. She assured him that it came with the territory, that some jobs just came with shit-ass bosses.

Sugar Sweet couldn't complain to Carlos Marcello, the man who in effect had okayed him for the job, and he had no way of going up

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or down a chain of command to which he had no real access. Besides, such a maneuver would have demonstrated that he lacked loyalty and juice. He didn't like the idea that he was playing second fiddle to a man he'd never met, someone from overseas or offshore, as best he could tell—even that information was still under wraps. But he had the sense that there was more to the Ornasetti-orchestrated Windy City job than he was being told, and that, in fact, should things go awry in Chicago, a backup plan for another time and place was already set.

He didn't like the fact that he'd amassed a binder full of information on his mark but only a sheet of information outlining the full blown plan. All he really knew was who his Chicago contacts were, where he would be positioned as a shooter, and that when the job was over he'd be wired \$25,000.

Dismissing his concerns with a shrug, his thoughts locked on the money, he dusted the crumbs from his sandwich off his boxer shorts onto the floor. Ignoring the boiled-cabbage smell that seemed to seep from every wall surrounding him, he stretched out, rested his head on the lumpy, musty, poor excuse for a pillow, and drifted off to sleep. Twenty minutes later, an 11:30 phone call jolted him out of a pleasant dream.

"Ducane here," he answered, groggy, fumbling with the receiver.

"R. O.," came Rollie Ornasetti's coded reply. "Our event starts tomorrow, 7 a.m. We just got a package from overseas."

Realizing that the primary shooter had arrived, Ducane said, "I'll be there."

"Good," was the only word Rollie Ornasetti uttered before hanging up.

Ducane sat up, turned on a nightstand lamp next to the bed, and

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scanned the semidarkness of the foul-smelling room, aware that the next day would involve the real thing, not another trial run. For a fleeting moment, he thought about calling his mother. Instead he simply let out a hollow, lost-child's sigh, turned off the lamp, lay back down, and a few minutes later drifted back off into dreamland.