

The R-complex



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Tom Davis



Old Mountain Press

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Published by:
Old Mountain Press, Inc.
2542 S. Edgewater Dr.
Fayetteville, NC 28303

www.oldmountainpress.com

Copyright © 2004 Thomas H. Davis III
Cover design Gerald Bergstrom

ISBN: 1-931575-46-0
Library of Congress Control Number: 2004098660

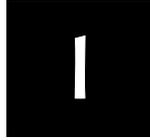
The R-Complex.

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First Edition

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Morris Publishing •
www.morrispublishing.com • 800-650-7888
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

*To our Special Forces soldiers
serving, as always, at the tip of the spear,
seeking to defend the defenseless and to free
the enslaved.*



A TOMBSTONE GRAY SKY loomed over Atlanta's massive Lennox Square Mall while the dank November air clung to holiday shoppers like a chilly shroud. Bill Perry and Jack Holland sat in a Dodge Daytona eyeing a sleek green BMW one row over and two cars to their right. To the casual observer, they appeared to be typical young executives, returning to their office.

Holland reached into the breast pocket of his navy pinstriped Hickey Freeman and pulled out a gold cigarette case.

Perry gave a disapproving look and sighed.

"Screw you, hypocrite. It speeds up my reactions." Holland popped open the case. Several long glass vials filled with white powder lined its left side. The right side contained a rolled hundred dollar bill and a single-edge razor blade.

"I *never* do it before a job." Perry snapped his head to the front, looked at his watch, and nervously tapped his foot.

"Right, you just bug the shit outta me with your whining." Holland removed a vial from the case.

Perry ground his teeth, scanned the parking lot, and glanced at his watch.

"What's your hurry? That bitch won't be back anytime soon. I think you're losing it." Holland poured the contents of the vial into a pile on the right side of the open case. With the razor blade he flattened it, divided it in half, and shaped the halves into long straight lines.

"I don't like it. You keep pushing our luck. It's almost like you wanna get busted." Perry fiddled with the window button.

"So sue me. I want to add a little spice to our lives." Holland placed the open case on the arm rest between the seats, bent down,

and snorted a line. “Oh, yes. Soooo good.” He shook his head, switched nostrils, and snorted the other.

“Can we get on with it?” Perry grabbed the door handle.

“In a minute, dipshit.” Holland threw his chin up and waited for the explosion inside his head.

ANN AND SUSAN exited the mall’s southern wing.

“You’re responsible,” Ann joked, swinging her shopping bag at Susan.

“Me?”

“You!”

“Come on. You love it. You need a sexy nightie—especially now.”

Ann grinned and stared across the sprawling parking lot, trying to spot her green BMW, John’s present to her on her 25th birthday. “There must be six acres of cars. I never can remember where I parked.”

“I’m over there—somewhere.” Susan pointed to the right.

Ann’s face had a vacant yet intent look. She hesitated.

“I just had the strangest feeling that something’s wrong.”

“The baby?” Susan reached for Ann’s arm. “Let’s get you home. I’ll drive and catch a cab back for my car.” She took Ann’s shopping bag and shifted it onto her arm.

“I’ll be okay. Just give me a minute.” Ann’s normally healthy complexion had grown ashen.

ANN AND SUSAN had met last fall when Ann began teaching fourth grade at McNeese Elementary. They became best friends during Ann’s first week after Susan coached her through a hyperactive student, a conflict with Miss Mattes, McNeese’s Vice Principal from the “old school,” and an irate parent.

Ann, a slim blonde with slow purposeful movements was always impeccably dressed and looked the opposite of her friend with wild black hair and tight fitting jeans.

When Ann announced she was finally pregnant after a year of trying, Susan gave her a leather-bound tablet. “You can put down all your feelings. Paint them or write. It’s for the three of you.”

Ann had already written more than twenty pages in the afternoons before John got home. She also had sketched caricatures

and painted on four more. John didn't know about the book. She wanted to surprise him when the baby arrived.

THIS BABY'LL BE a real looker with you two for parents," Susan said, trying to lighten up.

"John brings home something every day. He's already talking 4-wheelers and soccer balls. We'll have to rent space at Stuff-Ease before I ever deliver." Ann laughed.

Ann retrieved her shopping bag and pulled out the gift from F.A.O. Schwartz—a red, white, and blue ball with a bell inside. She jingled it. "You don't need to drive me. I'll be okay. Go on."

"You sure?"

"Sure."

"Call when you get home. See ya." Susan turned and walked down the steps, looking back and waving before she disappeared into a crowd of people.

Ann walked, scouting down each row. *Didn't I park beside a van?* she thought.

She spotted a dumpy gray van. The mural on its side depicted an orange sunset, white palm-speckled beach, and bare-breasted women running from the surf. *How could I miss that?* she thought.

The tail of her BMW suddenly appeared, backing out.

"Hey, that's *my car!*" Ann ran toward the car. "Stop! Stop!"

HOLLAND, THE DRIVER, glanced into the rear view mirror as he backed into the lane. Perry saw the woman ahead waving.

"Trouble!" Perry slapped Holland's shoulder. "Do something!"

Holland squinted. "Shit! Hide your face."

Holland hit the gas. The machine responded. Two seconds later and twenty-five yards from the woman, he ducked his head and edged the wheel right.

"No!" mouthed the woman as the BMW bore down on her. Her ankle turned inward; and she fell left, her head landing parallel to the left front bumper.

"I can't believe that dumbass blonde," Holland hissed. "That'll teach her."

"Jesus Christ, Jack, she's gotta be dead! Did you see all that blood?" Perry's broad face contorted with panic.

"I knew things were going too good. What luck." Holland cut into traffic.

Perry grabbed Holland's right shoulder and twisted the fabric into a knot. "You just killed a woman, and all you can do is whine about your bad luck!"

IT ENDED IN less than the full cycle of a breath. The car raced south down Twenty-Third Street. Ann lay motionless, her blood soaking the pavement of Lennox Square Mall. The baby, not yet dead, lay curled inside her like the bell in the red, white, and blue ball that rolled beneath the dumpy gray van.

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JOHN HEARD THE phone and fumbled with his keys. He dashed across the kitchen and grabbed the receiver.

“John Crown speaking.”

Desk Sergeant Keller, a 25-year veteran on the Atlanta Police force, had made hundreds of calls like this one, but they still hit his gut every time he heard the voice at the other end.

“Is this Ann Crown’s residence?”

“Yes.” John’s left eye twitched.

“This is Sergeant Keller of the Atlanta Police Department.”

“What’s happened?”

“I’m afraid your wife has been involved in an accident. You should come to Grady Memorial. Maybe a relative or neighbor could come with you.”

“Is she all right?”

Keller pushed at the base of his belly. “Your wife’s been involved in a...car accident. She’s on the way to Grady now.”

“Is she alive?” John blurted. “Just tell me that.”

“Medical personnel are with her. That’s all I have.”

John clinched the receiver. “She’s pregnant, for God’s sake!”

“Please come to the ramp on Coca Cola Blvd.”

Keller cradled the receiver, pulled a roll of Tums from his pocket, and popped two.

John stared across the kitchen. Nothing registered, not even the whine of the dead receiver. He imagined the worst. His eyes fixed on a framed picture—the green BMW with the white bow strapped across the hood and Ann poised on the front bumper blowing him a kiss.

John snatched his coat from the chair and sprinted to his black Jeep Cherokee. As he neared the hospital, his stomach boiled. He

had never been inside Grady Memorial, the looming blond brick inner-city hospital, but had only passed by as he cut across town. The emergency entrance appeared. He wheeled left and nosed in beside a dumpster. He half ran past an emergency vehicle with its lights still flashing.

He glanced right and swallowed hard. The vehicle's doors flew open. Two EMT's pulled out a stretcher carrying a young black woman, a blue balloon pumping her thin face, an IV in her wrists. They ran toward the large double doors. John followed only a few paces behind.

"My wife. The police said they brought my wife here. Ann Crown! Her name's Ann Crown," John said to a hospital guard standing just inside the doors.

"She just left." Clemmons tilted his massive head. "Son, she already passed. The doctor just pronounced her. They took her to the Medical Examiner two blocks over."

John balled his fists.

Clemmons raised his huge hand then halted. "I'm sorry."

John stared up into Clemmons' face as his eyes circled with tears.

"Is there a family member...somebody you want called?" Clemmons said.

John shook his head.

"If you think you can drive, go out to Butler," Clemmons said. "It's just two blocks and to the right. The Fulton County Medical Examiner's Building is where they took her."

A numb, empty feeling washed over John. He turned and left.

"Dead. Ann's dead." He could not yet comprehend those words. "And the baby...."

He sat for a moment, too dazed to start the car. Night had settled over Atlanta. He looked up at the hospital windows, bright dots framed with black. A deputy sheriff passed with a man in cuffs who hacked up a wad of phlegm. John finally backed into the street.

"Ann's dead...dead." He made himself say again.

Angling right, John saw the two-story brick building alone on the block across from the Fish Supreme Deluxe near the hospital steam plant.

He parked near a wall. His whole body shook. He lay his forehead on the steering wheel and cried. Finally, he rubbed his eyes on his shirt sleeve and opened the door of his Jeep.

John pressed the doorbell. A full minute passed before the door opened.

“Yes?” a tall black man in surgical greens carrying a clipboard said. “May I help you?”

“I’m John Crown. They sent me here from Grady. They said my wife’s here.”

“I’m Ramon. This way.” The man glanced at the clipboard, stepped back, and waved John into the hallway. He watched through deep blue eyes as John entered.

Ramon led John into a bare waiting room floored in linoleum. A green naugahyde sofa hugged the far wall. A dog-eared *Newsweek* lay on a low table to its front. Hard wooden chairs clustered haphazardly around the room.

“Have you made arrangements?”

“Arrangements? Look, I don’t even know what happened. I got a call. They said my wife had been in an accident. I got to Grady and found out she’s dead. Arrangements?”

“If you have a funeral home, we can call.”

“I want to see her!”

Ramon offered him a glazed look of discouragement, then nodded. “Have a seat.” He motioned toward the sofa then left.

John leafed through a blurring *Newsweek*. He heard a throat clear and looked up.

“Mr. Crown, I’m Detective Sam Hill from Homicide. I know this is difficult for you.”

With his dark hair combed straight back and his weathered skin pulled tight across his face, Sam looked hard and cold at first glance, but his soft brown eyes gave him away.

“Homicide?” John stood.

“Before we talk, can you show me some ID. I have to see a picture ID.”

John pulled his driver’s license from his wallet, Sam glanced at it, then handed it back.

“We’ve confirmed your wife’s identification, so if you’d rather not—”

“I want to see her. What happened?”

“Two men stole her car. The initial report was garbled. We first thought your wife got a good look at them, and they intentionally hit her. That’s why I got involved. But now it appears to be an accident. A witness said your wife stumbled and fell into the path of the car.” Sam waited for the words to sink in.

“Who were they?” John demanded.

“The witness described them as well dressed and in their mid-thirties. Very sketchy. From their MO, it appears they’re members of a car theft ring that’s working the Atlanta area. They steal ’em for parts—mostly customized vans and sport cars like your wife’s. It’s a multimillion dollar business.”

“Damn it to hell!” John faced away from Sam.

“I’ll talk to Ramon.” Sam left.

John’s thoughts flashed to that morning. It seemed far away. He and Ann awoke in the fading dark.

“Do you know I love you?” Ann moved against him, pulling his arm around her.

“I do.”

“Do you know I’ll love you forever and ever?”

“Yes.” Lifting her gown, he kissed her stomach, kissed between her breasts and continued to her neck. His tongue found her ear. He held her face in his hands. “I love you so—.”

Ann leaned into him, nibbling the words from his lips.

An opening door brought John back to the present. Ramon motioned and led him down the hall. Sam followed. They stopped in front of a window. “You’ll be able to see your wife through here.” Ramon nodded to an opening. It looked like the order window at a fast food restaurant. This window with its aluminum edging set in the pale yellow wall would frame his last view of Ann.

Ramon disappeared into the back and lifted the window covering. From where he stood, John could see only the white of the hospital divider used as a backdrop. John stepped forward and saw what appeared to be a large white cocoon.

Ramon lifted the sheet.

John turned and heaved.

A WEEK HAD PASSED since the funeral. John had taken indefinite leave from his job as a software engineer with Data Dynamics. Now, the quietness engulfed him. He sat on an overstuffed sofa, his feet propped on a coffee table to his front. He let his thumb slide down the Yuengling bottle, cutting a wide path through the beads of sweat. He picked up the remote and clicked on the TV, hoping it would distract him. It didn't.

John pushed up from the sofa, sighed, and thought, *There's too much of Ann and the baby around here. I've got to break away. Gotta get it together. Give all this stuff to the Salvation Army.* He paced the living room floor then entered the nursery and looked around as though seeing it for the first time.

He hadn't been in this room since the "accident." Shelves overflowing with stuffed animals lined the far wall. A white bentwood rocker filled the corner to his left. Next to it stood a white wicker dresser. Beside the dresser sat a wicker clothes basket, its top the head of a clown.

The crib with the mobile he bought a week after Ann's announcement sat by the window. He walked over and tapped the mobile. A brown monkey, suspended by his tail, bobbed; a black and white striped zebra galloped; an elephant, with his S-shaped trunk above his head, stomped. All were chased in an endless circle by a golden lion—king of beasts, its legs extended, its mouth open.

What would he have thought? A blur of colors and shapes? Would he have liked it? John's always referring to the baby as "he" had irritated Ann.

"I suppose if the baby's a girl, we'll put her up for adoption?"

"What's that, woman? You don't plan to provide me with a male child to carry on the Crown name? How dare you."

The tease always ended with John holding Ann and assuring her he'd love a girl just as much. He even looked forward to being charmed by a daughter. But now he found himself crying.

This can't go on, John thought, approaching the dresser. He pulled the top drawer open and scooped up an armful of clothes.

"What the...." He set the clothes on the dresser and withdrew a book—a writing tablet. He opened its leather cover and read, "To John from Ann: Thoughts of Love and Silly Things."

The knot in his stomach rose to his throat. The words blurred. He blinked until they cleared. On the next page, a poem:

Memories of You

Memories,
Like ancient ghosts,
Haunt the attic of my mind

Lovers skating
Arm in arm
Across frozen pond

White cotton sheets
Beneath thick quilts
Your body next to mine

Gardenia's scent
Floating
On soft spring breeze

Lazy hum of bubble bee
Foraging nectar
Giving life

Children
Laughing
On crowded playground

Lightning bugs
Twinkling tiny beacons

Leading us
We know not where

Remembering
You, my love,
And the life we shared

His hands shook as he thumbed the pages. A caricature caught his eye. The narrow face flanked by over-size ears and long nose made him chuckle and he thought, *My ears aren't that big.*

He flipped the page. Ann's wide smile filled with teeth, beamed beneath a small nose. An angular jaw jutted out like an awning over overly large breasts. "*That's Ann, all right.*"

John wiped his cheek with his shoulder and turned the page. He shouldn't have. He and Ann stood holding a baby. The baby's hand touched John's chin. Painfully, he turned another page. He was throwing a ball to an excited child—a boy. Ann, leaning against a tree, stood in the background.

John heard a distant scream. It came again and again, echoing through his skull. Dropping to his knees, he tore pages from the book.

"Bastards! Bastards! Bastards! Bastards!" John pounded the floor with his fist. Pain crept into his shoulders.

"I'd like to get one, just one. God, it hurts. Hurts so much!"

John leapt to his feet, dashed to the door, and grasped the knob. Hesitating, he looked over his right shoulder. Through a haze he saw a figure kneeling by the small dresser. The man screamed and tore pages from a book. John stepped outside.

When he returned to the sofa and stretched his six foot two frame its length, he felt as though he'd been in someone else's dream. He glanced at the nursery door and thought of the madman still inside.

"Come on down. Happy Hal's got acres of cars." The TV boomed—channel 17, the super channel. John almost clicked it off before the aerial view of a man standing in a sea of cars grabbed his attention.

The camera zoomed in. Happy Hal Newby swept his arm over the lot. "I've got vans. I've got 4-by-4's. I've got RV's. I've got sports cars. I've got station wagons." A picture flashed on the

screen with each proclamation. “And I’ve got ’em at the lowest prices in the Southeast.”

“How sure is Happy he can make *you* happy? My friends, if I can’t put you in one of these magnificent machines, lunch is on me. How can Happy offer these prices you ask.” The camera panned a row of customized vans. In their windows large price stickers proclaimed low numbers. “I’ll tell you. Volume. That’s it, my friends, volume. I make over a hundred folks a day the proud owners of quality pre-owned vehicles. My customizing shop refits thirty vans before lunch. If you find the car, van, or truck you want, but don’t like the color, I’ll paint it, slap a tag on it, and put the key in your hand by noon the next day.”

John tried again to click the TV off but couldn’t. Happy wouldn’t let him. “We’re open twenty-four hours a day, so y’all come on down to sunny St. Pete. Old Happy’ll make it worth your while. I offer the lowest interest rates and even take cash.” An infectious laugh rumbled from his chest. “And remember, Happy wants to make *you* happy, too.” Happy lunged forward pointing his finger directly at the camera. The picture zoomed out, and the screen filled with cars. The address, and an 800 number flashed at the bottom.

John clicked off the TV. The silence echoed. As he stared at the dull gray screen, his mind wandered back to when he served with Special Forces. He recalled his team sergeant, Brockelman, a quiet, good-natured man and the toughest he’d ever known. Once he’d told the team, “Never let your emotions interfere with your mission. Remember, boys, we don’t get mad; we get even.”

John stood and paced the floor. Something gnawed at him—an itch he couldn’t scratch. He leaned forward, burying his face in his hands. Happy Hal and his customized vans. Buy ’em from Happy and have ’em ripped off in Atlanta. Sam had said that it was big business, selling the parts. Bastards!

John looked up, startled with himself. “They want parts? Great! I’ll give ’em some parts they haven’t bargained for. I’ll booby trap a van and park it where they’re ripping them off. A trap—a rat trap. When the rat nibbles, he dies. But my trap won’t kill quick or clean.”

For the next week John watched and recorded the local newscasts, searched the daily papers, and listened to the police frequency on the scanner he’d bought at Radio Shack.

“That’s the place to start. Perimeter Mall. Now, all I have to do is get the trap and set it.” John reviewed the intelligence he had acquired.

John had uncovered a pattern. The Perimeter Mall was one of three malls that attracted car thieves with the same MO as those who had stolen Ann’s car.

He liquidated enough assets to produce \$15,000 cash, and boarded a bus for St. Petersburg, Florida. At the bus station, he hailed a cab.

“Know how to get to Happy Hal’s?” John’s hand grasped the yellow cab’s handle.

“Who doesn’t? Get in.” The cabby nodded toward the back seat.

As the cab pulled away from the curb, the driver said, “Buying a car?”

“If I can find what I want for the right price,” John said.

“You’ll find what you want at Happy’s, and if the price ain’t right, he’ll make it so. When you see Happy, tell him you talked to his old buddy Donald. He’ll treat you right.”

John saw the enormous car lot two blocks away. The driver pulled to a halt and leaned back. “Biggest son-of-a-bitching lot in the Southeast. Don’t forget to mention me to Happy.”

“Right.” He paid and tipped the cabby.

John walked through the acres of cars until he came to the center of the lot where a large glass encased show room housed Happy’s headquarters.

Before the door closed, a smiling salesman descended on him. “Welcome to Happy Hal’s. Can I show you something? Name’s Doug.” Doug pumped John’s hand.

“Mr. Newby around?” John scanned the showroom floor.

“Over there in the corner.” Doug pointed with his chin. “The one in the green blazer and yellow pants. He’s talking to another salesman. Sure I can’t help?” Doug’s voice trailed down with disappointment.

“Sorry. Wanna talk to the owner. Thanks anyway.”

John walked up to the two men as their conversation ended.

“Okay. Drop another thousand. We gotta move it. Hell. What’s it been—a week?” said Happy.

Robert H. Newby was a good natured man—heavy set, round reddish-face, dark brown eyes, jet black hair. His popularity

stemmed from two things. He possessed an infectious laugh, and he offered quality used cars at rock bottom prices. No one ever walked away from Happy Hal's. They drove.

"Mr. Newby? Ron McNeil from Jacksonville." John extended his hand.

"Pleased to meet ya. Call me Happy. The only one who calls me Mr. Newby is my wife. And if you believe that, it's gonna be a pleasure doing business with you." Happy crushed John's hand and boomed his famous laugh. "What can we do for our friend from Jax?"

"I'm looking for a van."

"You've come to the right place. What'll it be. If I don't have it, like I said on TV, 'lunch is on me.' You see me on TV? You know, you're talking to a movie star. Course I don't tell folks what it cost *me* to be one." Another laugh shook the room.

"Looking for a customized van fully loaded, and in good condition. Oh yeah—gotta have captain's chairs. Cash if the price is right." John glanced at his briefcase.

Happy's interest perked.

"Well, Ron old buddy, the price'll be right. Let's see what's available." Happy placed his hand on John's shoulder and guided him to a desk with a computer.

Happy entered the data. The screen filled with a list of vehicles.

"Today's your lucky day. Just happen to have a few that fit the bill. Better move quick. They won't last." Happy forced a frown and shook his head for effect. "Let's go look."

Happy escorted John to a section filled with vans and RVs. "Here we are. What about this one?" Happy opened the door of a three-year old silver Dodge van. "Let's take it around the block."

Thirty minutes later John signed the papers and paid cash.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Happy." John got his hand crushed and back pounded one last time.

"Pleasure's all mine, Ron. You ever need another one—call old Happy. I'll treat you right. Cash gets red carpet treatment at Happy Hal's. Take care. Have a safe trip, ya' hear."

"Thanks. I will."

John left St. Petersburg on I-75 north. *I'll pick up a license plate before I get to Atlanta*, John thought.

John exited the interstate at Cordele, Georgia, and continued north on 41. He knew this stretch of road well. At one time,

highway 41 provided the main route through Georgia to Florida. Since the interstate opened in the mid 60's, only locals drove it.

A mile north of Vienna, John's hometown, he passed an abandoned car on the shoulder. He pulled onto a dirt road two hundred yards from the vehicle and cut his lights.

Two hours later, John wheeled into his driveway and parked the van in the garage, turned workshop. The large wooded lots in his subdivision ensured privacy.

John had had little restful sleep since getting on the bus over twenty-four hours ago. He fumbled with his keys, missing twice. When he entered, he went directly to the refrigerator, retrieved a beer, and opened it. He crossed the living room and sat on the sofa. Massaging the back of his neck, he pushed the button on his answering machine.

"John. Tom. Mom and Dad wanted me to check on you. See when you'll be coming down. Call."

I'd better get this over with, he thought, punching in his brother's number.

John waited. Tom answered on the third ring. "Hey. It's me."

"Good hearing from you. Mom and Dad have been bugging the hell outta me. You haven't called since the funeral. You okay?"

"Okay as I'm gonna be. How about calling them for me?"

"No way. They wanna hear it from you. You sound tired. Been back to work yet?"

"I'm taking a month or so off. Got some things to do around here."

"The folks wanna come up."

"Not now. I need time. Alone. Think you can make them understand?"

"No, but I'll try. You'll call if you need anything?"

"Yeah. No way would I have made it...." John's voice cracked.

"What's a brother for? Call."

John settled the phone in its cradle and plodded into the bedroom. Without undressing he lay on the bed and looked at the ceiling. "This won't bring you back, but it's something I gotta do."

The pain returned. John cried himself to sleep.

JOHN WITHDREW THE knife from its scabbard. He had bought it at the Fort Bragg PX the day he graduated from Special Forces demolitions training. The Gerber, good for nothing except killing,

served the Special Forces soldier only as an ornament. Regardless of what the general public thought, no one ever planned to get close enough to kill with a knife.

He held the Gerber, point up, its double-edged eight inch blade gleaming. Either side could be used as a razor, even on the most tender skin. Its serrated base could slice through bone as easily as its needle tip could penetrate organs. The gray porcelain-like handle felt comfortable in his hand. The Gerber's maker designed it for penetration—designed it to kill.

John planned a simple trap. After he parked the van, he'd ease the Gerber under the driver's seat, point up. A clamp locked its handle onto the top of a powerful spring. A metal base plate welded to the spring's other end provided a stable platform. A pressure sensitive trigger held the spring compressed. When the victim sat, the trigger released, shoving the knife upward. He'd lock the van and leave it in the parking lot during the day, picking it up early evening.

John reasoned the Gerber would enter the anus, slice up through the rectum, and through the bladder. If he'd calculated its angle right, it also would puncture the prostate and the urethra.

As an added bonus the blade's serrated portion might saw into pubic bone and possibly sever the internal iliac artery. John smiled at the thought. Of course, only a small portion of this had to happen to achieve the desired effect.

4

FOR SIX DAYS John set his trap at Perimeter Mall. Establishing a pattern, he selected the same general area each day. From a thief's point of view, the location was perfect: excellent ingress and egress routes, poorly lit, little pedestrian traffic.

John parked and locked the van by nine a.m. After getting out, he armed the device. In the evening, he would take a cab from a Quick Stop to the mall's parking lot, disarm the device, and drive home. He began to wonder if the plan would work.

"LISTEN UP, KID, ya gotta be careful. Can't just walk up and rip one of these babies off. Gotta have a little class. Keep your mouth shut, eyes open, and do what I say. Wanna be number one in the business? Listen to your old Uncle Bud." Bud Rich, chewing on a toothpick, eyed the Perimeter Mall's parking lot over the steering wheel of a nondescript Ford Fairlane.

Rich's hatchet face was flanked by white sidewalls and topped with a crew cut. His belly, once Marine Corps standard, now swelled from too much beer and not enough exercise. He dressed in the "good old boy" mode: Beechnut hat, red plaid wool shirt, Levis, wide leather belt fastened with a brass USA buckle, dark brown cowboy boots.

At his nephew Tim's request, Rich agreed to introduce his brother's son to easy money work. In the process of stealing cars, selling dope, and procuring children for porn flicks, Rich cleared twice what he could working sixty hour weeks in a well-paying factory job. Tax free, too.

When Tim's father died two months ago, the demand on him to contribute to the family's income increased considerably. His mother's meager salary as a member of Professional Clean barely

paid the rent for the two bedroom apartment he shared with her and his younger brother. Tim, one month a high school drop out, couldn't find a job.

"What we waiting for? It was here all yesterday. The owner probably works in the mall—won't be back till late. We've been sitting here two hours." Tim made and released a fist, as he stared through the Fairlane's bug decorated windshield. A silver van sat two rows away.

Rich popped the door handle and nodded toward the van. "First, we check it out. Never know. That heap might not have shit."

They snaked through the lot pausing by the van—Rich in front, Tim beside the driver's window. Rich faked searching for a lost car.

"Look in here!" Tim leaned close to the window and cupped his eyes. "Stereo, CB, there's the TV that goes with that antenna." Tim pointed at the boomerang-like device mounted on the top.

"Goddamn kid! Cool it." Rich pulled at his cap's bill down, covering more of his face. "Why not let everyone in on it? Maybe put up a son-of-a-bitching sign. Let's go." Rich nodded toward the mall.

They wandered down a few more lanes then circled back to the Fairlane.

"It's loaded. Ya see those leather captain's chairs? Bet we clear three hundred on them." Tim beat the dash like a bongo.

"Quit that crap." The thumping ended. "Okay. One more time. I lead. When we pass the back of the van, you stop—tie your shoe, tighten the other one, stuff in your shirt, shit like that. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"What ya looking for?" said Rich

"Cops, mall security, anyone that might be coming to the van."

Tim rocked his head and recited the lines.

"Right. And if you see something?"

"I whistle." Tim whistled twice.

"Good. Then?"

"We split. Me away from the mall. You toward it. We meet at the Varsity three hours later." Tim raised his eyebrows and flipped his hands, palm up.

"Right. Now, if nothing gets dicked up, I'll pop it before you can cut a fart. When I open the door, walk—don't run—to the other

side.” Rich broke the toothpick in half, dropped it onto the floor, dug out a pack of Beechnut from his back pocket, and pinched a wad. “Ready?”

“Fucking A!” Tim grabbed the door handle.

“Untie your shoe and pull out your shirt shit-for-brains.” Rich rolled his eyes. “Piece of cake. Trust me. We’ll have this baby outta here and gutted in a hour or my name ain’t Bud Rich.”

Rich led. Tim followed. As they approached the van, Rich felt queasy. Something didn’t seem right. His first thought was to call it off, but then his nephew would think he’d lost his nerve.

TIM PROPPED HIS foot on the rear bumper and tied a double knot. His stomach heaved. The hair on his neck pushed against his shirt collar. *Gotta calm down, he thought. Breathe deep. Slow. That’s it. In. Out. In. Out. What am I doing here?*

“Bout got it,” his uncle hissed.

I need money, but not this bad. What’ll Mom do if I get caught? Shit! What’ll I do if I get caught? Wish I’d never got mixed up with Uncle Bud. Dad was right. He’s crazy and no damn good, Tim thought as he ground his fists into the small of his back.

As he stretched to his toes, Tim saw a man walking in his direction carrying a red bag and looking straight at him. *Oh God!* he thought.

Tim tried to whistle but blew dry air. His heart pounded in his ears. Bile burned his throat. He’d opened his mouth to yell when the man halted by a blue Chevy Nova.

Jesus, Tim thought, let’s get this over. What’s taking so long? No way. Never again. Ain’t worth it.

“Done.” Tim heard his uncle say. The knot in his stomach loosened. He headed for the passenger door.

“LIKE I SAID, piece of cake.” Rich’s left foot hit the running board. Grasping the left side of the steering wheel with his left hand, he pulled himself up and onto the seat.

The twang was followed by a dull slap. Rich’s 210 pounds triggered the spring mechanism. The Gerber’s blade sliced through tissue, tore into organs, and sawed across bone.

Rich howled as he arched forward, rose slightly, squeezed his buttocks, then slid down, driving the steel even further into his

body. Then blood and shredded tobacco leaves splattered the inside of the windshield.

TIM PULLED THE door handle. It wouldn't open. *What the...*, he thought. His attention shifted from handle to window.

"Jesus Christ!" Tim dashed around front, stumbling to a halt by the door. His uncle, eyes wide, lips quivering, slumped over the steering wheel. A shred of red tobacco dangled from the corner of his mouth. Blood covered the seat and dripped onto the floor.

Tim, breathing in short shallow bursts, glanced around. He grasped his uncle's shoulders and pulled. He felt resistance.

"What's happened? Oh Jesus. Oh God. What...."

His uncle snatched Tim's shirt, tearing the pocket. He shook his head and moved his lips.

"You want out? That it?" Powered by adrenaline, Tim dragged him from the seat. The knife blade churned inside, then, free of its victim, snapped back to attention. Tim realized what his uncle had tried to say.

He felt his crotch go wet and watched his uncle curl into a fetal position on the gray asphalt, tugging at his leg as the dying man reached for help. Tim jerked back, spun, and ran. Ran hard. Ran to rid himself of what he had witnessed. Ran to absolve himself for deserting his uncle.

MARY JOHNSON SAW a boy run from between her car and a silver van. When she turned between the two vehicles, she saw a man tucked into a ball lying on the pavement. His face was pasty white. Deserted eyes stared past her. Blood pooled at his waist. She screamed and screamed and screamed.

"SAM, THE 911 folks got a hysterical call from Perimeter Mall and passed it to us. Jack took it. Real strange one. Can't half read his writing." Lieutenant Palmer, chief of homicide, extended the paper to arm's length then brought it in close. "Note says something about a knife up somebody's ass? Is this word ass?" Palmer, pointing to the word in question, handed Sam the note.

"Uh huh. That's 'ass' all right." Sam pushed away from the desk. "Been at this too long. Nothing seems weird any more."

"I hear ya. Check it out. Keep me posted." Palmer gave a two finger salute and left.

“Right.” Sam pushed his arm through the sleeve of his gray tweed coat.

Christ. Never a dull moment, Sam thought, as he slipped through traffic. *Knife up the ass. What’s next?*

AS HIS CAB approached the mall, John saw the yellow plastic tape with black letters on it. “Let me off at the corner,” he instructed the cabby.

“What ya think’s going on?” The cabby nodded toward the tape.

“May be a rat got caught,” John said, getting out.

“Huh?” said the cabby, glancing at his fare.

“Nothing.” John paid the man.

TIM RECALLED BEING there only a few days ago—the sleazy apartment off Stewart Avenue. Red, the man his uncle worked for, lived there. His uncle had said that Red acted as a “cut out” in the organization.

When Red had seen Tim, he had grabbed his uncle’s elbow and pulled him across the room. Even in the dark apartment it had seemed to Tim that Red’s wrinkled face, beamed crimson as he harangued his uncle.

Tim wiped his palms on the seat of his pants then stabbed the door bell. *Should’ve changed pants. This piss stinks, and I even gotta go again. What’s wrong with me?* he thought as his bladder strained.

“Yeah, who is it?” said a sandpaper voice.

“Tim, Bud Rich’s partner. Let me in. There’s trouble.”

The door opened the length of a security chain. Blue eyes peered underneath a furrowed brow. “What kinda trouble?”

“Bad.” Tim scanned the street. “Please. Let me in.”

The door closed, then opened, and Red stepped aside. Tim rushed in rubbing his hands on the sides of his jeans. The poorly-lit room smelled of stale beer and cigar smoke. The walls were bare. A TV glowed at a gold Lazy Boy. Beside it lay a pile of crushed Black Label cans. A coffee table in front of a brown hideaway was covered with burns. A family pack of Kentucky Fried sat next to a *Playboy*, its center fold open.

“Goddamn it, son, calm down.” Red closed the door, drained the last half of a Black Label, and belched. “Where’s Rich?”

“Dead—I think.” Tim’s breathing increased, and his bladder swelled. “I gotta piss. Bad!”

“Dead? What the.... Where? When?”

“Hey. I...I really gotta piss!”

“Looks like you already did, and you ain’t doing nothing else till you tell me what happened.” Red slammed Tim against the wall. The dark stain on his crotch grew even larger as Tim began crying.

THE BOY WAS gasping for air and hiccupping so that Red could hardly understand him. When he finally made sense of his babbling, he knew he must call Casa. He hated talking to this man he’d never met. Casa’s voice had an unnerving calmness about it.

Two months ago Red received a white legal-size envelope in the mail, the contents of which he still remembered. Folded inside was a newspaper clipping. The bold caption read, “East Atlanta man brutally murdered.” An unknown caller had phoned the paper. They notified the police. Some small timer’s mutilated body had been found in his apartment. The article went on to explain that the various parts of the victim’s face had been tossed in with a garden salad, covered with oil and vinegar, and set on the kitchen table.

The head of homicide dismissed speculation that a cult had done it. “The place was too clean. Definitely, a professional job,” he was quoted as saying.

At the bottom of the article, scrawled in what appeared to be dried blood was the word “CASA.” Red recalled Casa changing his number about the same time.

How many others received a similar letter? Had Casa murdered the man? Red thought not. A reminder of what could happen. Fear tactic—to keep things straight between them. It worked. At least on him it did.

It took Red two tries to punch the correct number. Casa answered the third ring.

“You ain’t gonna believe this,” Red said. Casa didn’t speak until he’d finished.

“What does the kid know?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. His partner didn’t know nothing. I don’t know nothing. Nobody knows nothing.” Red held his breath,

hoping Casa wouldn't order the boy snuffed. He had never killed and didn't want to, but...

Red reached into his pocket and flipped the switch blade's safety on and off. *What'll I do with the body? Where'll I go? Doesn't Georgia have the death penalty?* The questions ricocheted inside his skull.

"Tell the kid to get himself lost," Casa said. Red exhaled the breath he'd held for the last minute. "Tell him if he ever breathes a word of this, he'll eat his testicles for breakfast. And Red. One other thing. If you're wrong about the kid, you'll join him for breakfast. Understand?"

The voice was unemotional—like a doctor explaining a simple surgical procedure to his patient. Red remembered the clipping. Cold beads of sweat sprouted across his upper lip. "Yeah. Understand."

Red hung up. "Take my advice, son, disappear. Forget this place. Forget me. Forget that scum bag Rich."

"No problem. When the cops come, I'll be the dumbest kid around."

"Cops come? Whatta you mean—cops come?"

"Bud was my uncle. We were his only family. Cops gotta come nosing around."

Red nodded his head. "Right. Be cool, son."

The boy turned to leave. Red eased the knife from his pocket and pushed its button.

LARRY HOUSE FLIPPED his cell phone off. Red was getting shaky. He'd have to be eliminated soon.

Gardner won't want to hear this, he thought, A rival? Disgruntled employee? Revenge? No matter. If he's good—really good, finding and eliminating him would be a challenge.

House smiled at the prospect.