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78,000 words

Angel at the Rainbow Inn

By

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THE VISIT (1)

He awoke, blinked. The dream was gone. Before him stretched a floor-to-ceiling window that served as the room's southern wall. A magnificent forest appeared, not more than fifty feet beyond the glass. He raised his head, propped his elbows against the gurney-like bed and stared at the white sheet covering his body. The room reminded him of a clinic. A door clicked behind him.

"How do you feel?" Riesa stopped at the foot of his bed.

"Where am I? What happened?"

"You're safe." She smiled warmly. She had changed from her sexy outfit of the night before. She stood before him in a plain cotton blouse and jeans. Her scooped bangs combed back off her face made her dark blue eyes all the more prominent and magical. She looked even younger than the twenty-one years he'd guessed she was. "I want to help you," she said.

Traine tried to sit up. There was no pain, only a tightening across his chest; he couldn't fold his body upwards. He leaned back on his elbows. "I don't need any help. I need to get out of here."

"You have a choice to make."

"I don't want to hear anymore bullshit."

"You'll die if you go back to where you were headed."

"Just get my clothes and get me out of here." He jerked his body forward but fell back, as if a string had pulled him. "I think you're crazy. I don't know what your game is but I'm not amused and I'm not interested. You can have whatever cash I've got in my pockets. Just let me go."

"Your life doesn't mean much to you, does it?"

"You don't know anything about me, and you lie through your goddamn teeth! You told me we were going to get coffee."

"I'll get you coffee."

"I only want to get out of here."

"I wasn't lying. You wouldn't understand certain ideas so I use words you're familiar with."

"I'm familiar with the door. Screw your ideas and get my clothes!" He tried again to force himself up, but again the invisible resistance pulled him back. "I'm really getting pissed-off."

She stood mutely, disappointed, unfolding her small, delicate hands. He noticed the silver rings were gone from her fingers. "Someone will bring your clothes. Then I'll take you back to where you were going." Riesa walked to the door. She stopped. "You're not interested?"

"In what?"

"Your life."

"Just get me my damn clothes!"

She closed the door behind her.

Traine stared vacantly, consumed by his anger. He brushed back strands of his long blond hair. His blue eyes, hopeless and sad, shifted to the window and the forest scene. Rays of golden light streamed through the trees. It reminded him of sunlight falling through the clouds at dusk in his teenage years as he surfed the waves off the Malibu coast, and of light shining through the empty apartment windows where, as a child, he'd lived with his mother near the ocean. The anger he felt moments before was gone. He remembered his dream.

The sound of wings, the song of beaks. He clutched his mother's hand. The metal of her rings was the only cool spot he felt along the entire beach. The sand under his bare feet was hot. Sunlight hot against his skinny chest. His eyes burned. He wished he were wearing a pair of sunglasses like the guys they were walking towards had on. Dark wrap-around glasses shaped like the eyes of Spiderman. He smelled the ocean and sweet fragrance of suntan lotion glistening on his mother's skin. The guys lifted cans of beer and smiled. Some were in wet suits, hanging on to surf boards, others wore long faded beach trunks. The chattering, squawking of seagulls mixed with the presence of words and waves tumbling against the shore. He was still close to his mother's legs. A hand reached down and ruffled his hair. He stared at the thick, hairy legs of strangers. Someone handed his mother a can of beer. He wished there was a soft drink for him. He felt his mother's hand on his back. Laughter mingled with her touch. It was a sign he knew. His chest tightened. In seconds her hand would be patting his butt. He felt the touch, the shadow of her face against the sand as she leaned her head close to his ear: Go dig for sand crabs, go build some canals in the sand. Then, quick pats on his butt, the hairy legs swinging to the side, giving him access to leave. It was escape he felt. Escape from the hollowness. Escape to the blinding

light, to the thin rush of wind off the tops of waves and the wet driftwood stick to beat the sand and score it with the shape of snakes.

The door opened and a young woman in a brown tunic approached the bed. She wore no jewelry or makeup. Her brown hair fell in thick braids down her back. She placed his clothes across the foot of the bed and set his boots on the floor.

As quietly as she entered, she left.

When he reached forward to grab his jeans, he felt the entire invisible weight lifted from his chest. He could move freely. He didn't know what she had done, but he attached the return of his physical movement to her visit. He jumped off the bed and slipped on his shirt and pants. He made sure his wallet was still in his back pocket. He jammed his hand into his money pocket and counted out several bills. Every item was in its place, even the cigarette pack and matches. He pulled his socks from his boots and finished dressing.

He walked over to the window and gazed again at the forest. He'd traveled enough in his thirty years of life. He loved the spark of moving about, place to place, seeing different people, how they lived, how they survived, how they held their children and talked to them. For a reason he didn't understand, that interested him most. He spent a lot

of what he called his "off-time" sitting at the beach or on a park bench, watching parents talk to their kids, kick a soccer ball or throw a baseball to an outstretched, wobbly but eager hand, pressed in a glove too big. Sometimes he was stoned and sometimes his reckoning mind was as clear and straight as sunlight through the trees or blades of light shooting off the ocean waves.

For all his wanderings and his own business travels, never had he seen the kind of lush, natural beauty that now presented itself beyond the window. He felt an urge to reach through the glass and touch some part of it, a need to have some stake in its mysterious presence.

He drew a cigarette from his pocket. His gaze fell to the raised letters scrolled on the matchbook cover: "The Rainbow Inn." He thought back to his escape down the hillside, less than twenty-four hours ago.

He was standing alone in his driveway, above the Topanga beach, when it happened. The house behind him was empty. A muffled ocean sound rose faintly beyond the tree-lined cliffs. He set a can of beer on his tool chest and squinted at the sun. In half an hour Brooke would be back to pick up the rest of her clothes. In the past, she'd brought sandwiches from the restaurant or his favorite Caesar salad; but now, finally on her way out of his life, she would be too pissed off and

hurt to extend that kindness. He'd finish working on the car and then call Maryanne. He looked past the driveway to the oleander bushes starting to blossom. Maybe it was her impulsiveness and laughter that aroused him when he thought of her. Or the fact that she was a lonely young woman from Vietnam, a boat baby, with slim wrists, dark gleaming eyes, and, hidden deep within her, a penchant for self-destruction. Annihilation of the soul, his junkie friend, Mousey, had dubbed it.

He'd give her his flight number and hope she'd have the time to pick him up.

He finished off the beer and crunched the can in his rough, square hand. *Manos ruidos* his mother used to call them, *noisy hands*. Always restless, always needing to do something.

He stood by the window with the heat of the glass against his face and remembered every detail of yesterday, how he'd knelt and slid his long muscular body, all six feet two inches, under the '86 Camaro. Salt air had eaten away the red body paint. The wheel wells and oil pan were nearly rusted out. Beneath the chassis, he inhaled the greasy odor of gasoline and mud. He wasn't a mechanic; he was a drug dealer, but his knowledge of engines had helped him out on more than one rough passage in the hills of Mexico.

Traine bought the Camaro with cash from his first big score. That was ten years ago; he'd just turned twenty. The leather seats smelled of weed and ocean air.

He turned his head and glimpsed the steel jack holding up the front end. He'd been under the car countless times with its heavy weight bearing down on his face. The chassis was six inches from his eyes. Death was always that close, he'd come to understand since he began dealing drugs. He ran his hand along the warm driveway cement, groping blindly for a wrench. Brooke would be out of his life soon. She'd already rented her own apartment. Even though they'd lived together hardly more than six months, he'd given her two thousand dollars as a parting gift. "Guilt money," she'd called it, between sobs. He ran his fingers along the safety-break wire. Maryanne was going to be coming down soon to live with him. She had his money, fifty thousand dollars, stashed in her Seattle apartment. *In a bedroom drawer with her silk panties and lingerie.* A drop of grease fell on the blond stubble of his unshaven cheek. He twisted his head. That's when he saw the flat dark shadow on the cement.

He held his breath. Slowly, carefully, he turned his head to the other side. Another shadow darkened the pavement just beyond the right tire. Why hadn't he heard a car approach or the sound of footsteps? He rolled his eyes back.

He could feel the deadly heat of three thousand pounds of steel bearing down on his face. He knew who they were.

"Traine? Traine?" The voice was cool, patient, with a European accent. "You didn't think you could lose us, hiding under that car, did you?"

The shadow on the right side moved. Traine saw a shiny black shoe poking at the base of the jack. He took a quick breath.

"You sure you're not there, Traine?" The voice broke through the silence.

"Yeah, I'm here. What do you guys want?" The black shoe nudged the jack again.

"A few words, Traine. Why don't you crawl out from under there?"

"You may as well get used to crawling. Besides, this ain't no way to carry on a conversation." A Latino voice, loud and corrosive, ripped through the air. "It ain't hospitable, making us stand in the hot sun. Right, Marcus?"

"Yeah, you've got the benefit of a big car for shade."

Traine heard their laughter. He was sure his unexpected visitors were crazy enough to take turns kicking at the jack until either he surrendered or the Camaro flattened him. Castañón, the scrap metal investor, wasn't buying Traine's story that the fifty thousand had been ripped off, or that

Jaye, the Venezuelan contact, was dead. Castañon had sent his goons to collect the money he was certain Traine had kept for himself.

Traine heard the dull thud of shoe leather against steel. His body stiffened. The car wobbled slightly, inches above his blinking eyes. He pressed his shoulders against the concrete and edged forward, hoping the men wouldn't kick him in the groin or crack his ribs as he emerged from under the chassis.

As soon as he cleared the bumper, he rolled sideways and jumped to his feet. A chrome .45 was pointed at his head.

Antonio, the darker, shorter man, came around the nose of the car. He too was pointing a large, muzzled gun at Traine.

"Where's your girlfriend?"

"Working." Traine had seen both men a few times before at Castañon's junkyard, but he'd never given either one more than a passing nod. Marcus had brown hair and gray eyes set in a round Slavic face. A jagged scar ran across his cheekbone, as if someone's knife had slipped, trying to carve out his eye socket. He motioned Traine away from the car.

Traine took a step onto the dead grass. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead."

He drew a cigarette from his shirt pocket. "Why the visit?" Traine struck a match and leaned back on the heels of his boots. *Relax, go easy*, the voice inside him warned. *Don't let the animals know you're frightened, even if they know you're lying.*

"Don't bullshit."

"Mr. Castañon wants his fifty grand."

"That's a lot of money." Traine took a drag off his cigarette. "I wish I had it."

"You gotta do better than wish."

"I told Castañon what happened. Gutierrez ripped off the fifty grand and killed Jaye. I never saw the money again." He couldn't see Antonio's eyes through the gunman's mirrored glasses. He looked over to Marcus. "I was lucky to get out of that banana field alive. Have you guys ever been to Trinidad or Venezuela?" Traine didn't expect an answer. He was hoping he could think of something, some means of escape, in the idle chatter he was trying to generate. "What do you guys do for vacation time?"

"We bury assholes. Guys like you."

Antonio waved his gun. "Hand over the fifty grand and Mr. Castañon will buy us a yacht. Maybe then we can sail to Trinidad."

"I already told him I never saw the money once it left Jay's hand." Traine's voice rose emphatically. "It was a set-up!"

Marcus turned his gaze to the Camaro. "Maybe it's under there; huh, Antonio?"

"Yeah, maybe he was stashing it there, in some secret compartment?"

"Why don't we have Mr. Tranier crawl under the car again and look for it?"

Marcus rammed the heel of his shoe against the jack stem. Steel scraped cement with a yelp. The Camaro lurched. "It would be a shame if he were under it."

Traine looked across the yard. Less than four hours ago he had sat quietly under the shade trees, sipping espresso and reading a letter from Maryanne. The coffee cup was still there, on the table, surrounded by four white patio chairs.

"I've got a letter to prove it," he said.

"Really. From the Pope?" The goons chuckled.

"Let's see it."

Traine turned their eyes to the table. The yard sprawled to a shaggy row of oaks and eucalyptus that fenced the hillside.

I left it on that table. I didn't want my girlfriend to see it."

Marcus nudged Traine forward with the barrel of his gun.

"Let's go."

They crossed hard ground, patched with dry grass and dust. Traine knew there was no reference to money in Maryanne's letter. The single sheet of blue paper was folded under the cup. The cup on the table was close to the trees. Traine dragged on his cigarette.

They wouldn't have an easy shot at him through the trees, brush, and rocks. The whoosh of coastline traffic mixed with the ocean sound. They reached the table and he picked up the letter.

"Who's it from?"

"A friend of mine in Seattle. Jaye's wife told her what happened. She mentions it right here."

Marcus grabbed the blue paper from Traine's hand. Antonio stepped out of the sunlight.

"What's it say?"

Traine was certain the gunman couldn't read Maryanne's scratchy handwriting. His mind raced through the different paths down the hillside, paths he'd taken dozens of times to reach the coast for morning jogs along the beach. If he could get a jump on the gunmen, he had a chance of making it to the highway.

"What's it say?" Antonio repeated, leaning towards the letter.

"She's talking about sucking his cock. She wants to get fucked like a dog."

"Let me see it." Antonio reached out.

Marcus smiled, pulling the letter away. He glanced over to Traine. "You're fucking lucky your girlfriend didn't read this shit. She'd have cut your nuts off. Listen to this." He bent his head again and began reading aloud to Antonio. "'I need your cum inside me. It's like fresh milk that feeds a hungry cat you alone can satisfy. I want you to drive me against the walls and hurt me forever with your love.'"

Traine dropped his gaze to the wrought iron chair. He wasn't listening; and the two thugs, captivated by the lewd prose, didn't hear the white Ford Mustang pull into the driveway and park behind the Camaro. The coast traffic swallowed up the sound. The dealer's heart quickened.

Over Antonio's right shoulder, Traine saw the young, blond woman get out of the car. She wore jeans, a white tank top, and her dark glasses gleamed in the sunlight. He was too far away and too anxious to see if she had noticed him. He dropped his cigarette to the ground. As he stepped on it, he placed his hands on the steel back of a patio chair.

"My girlfriend's home." He said it loud enough for the goons to hear. Brooke had already slammed the car door and was screaming his name.

The two men spun towards the driveway.

Traine lifted the chair. In one violent motion he bashed it crosswise, raking its sharp iron legs across their backs. Antonio screamed. Traine dropped the chair and bolted past the oaks, into the fringe of eucalyptus, knowing he only had fifteen feet of trees before the cliff sheered to the coast. The path he wanted was further north. He knotted his body into a fist and tumbled into the overgrowth. Marcus and Antonio rushed into the woods, firing wildly. Traine scrambled over the hillside jungle of beer cans and broken glass. Nettles ripped at the sleeves of his canvas shirt. He could hear more shots as he reached the path and raced down the slope. The smells of the sea, car exhaust, and hot asphalt stung his nostrils. Nothing was in his mind but the thought of heavy traffic at the foot of the hill. The highway opened up and he darted into the path of speeding cars, hoping the thugs wouldn't shoot into the rush hour crunch. Suntanned girls in thong bikinis formed a loose conga line across the road. A van horn blared. He dashed through the remaining lanes and wove his way into the parade of teenage girls. He shoved his hands into his pockets and gasped for air. His

face felt like a crosshatch of nicks and bruises. His heart pounded. He knew he looked like a crazy man, with leaves in his hair and blood on his cheeks. But he was alive.

He had to get to a phone and let Maryanne know his flight plans had changed. He climbed down a small embankment towards the beach. He saw a woman in a white dress walking her dog and a barrel-chested man in Speedo trunks, standing a few feet into the tide.

He knelt on his haunches at the edge of the wet sand. He washed the dust, sweat and blood from his face. The cold water soothed his wounds. Then he stood and faced the white sky and ocean. A handful of surfers bobbed on the waves. The face of his father suddenly passed through his mind. His father had been a hotshot surfer in his youth. That was the story his mother told him. She even had a photo, along with his own faint memories, to support it. But why bother with him now? Why think of your father when you're running away from death?

He walked down the beach to a massive bundle of rocks and climbed onto a stone perch, shielding himself from the highway. The sun bent through the sky, sending a plane of golden haze across the horizon. Trainee counted the money from his jeans' pocket. He had over one hundred dollars, plus the

hundred dollar note he kept folded in his wallet behind his bank card. Enough to get him to Seattle.

He smoked a cigarette and listened to the waves slapping against the shoreline. A couple of kids climbed over the rocks. Water sprayed their bronzed backs and their slim waists seemed to rise, like golden stems, out of their cut-offs. They laughed, jittered and yelled, and Traine wanted, for just a fleeting moment, to be with them, to be that age, not stuck on the beach by himself while his mother rendezvoused with her collection of surfers, but to be part of a pack, running the sand and the rocks with his buds.

His shoulder ached from the fall down the hillside.

Traine slipped the matchbook back in his shirt pocket. He shook his head at the thought of The Rainbow Inn, dragged on his cigarette and stared at the forest beyond the floor to ceiling window, waiting for Riesa to come back for him. His shoulder still hurt. He remembered when he first bruised it, diving across the floor of a shack in Venezuela.

It had been a simple, ingenious plan. Castañon's brother-in-law was a wholesale fruit vendor in LA's downtown produce district. Traine had flown to Port of Spain, Trinidad, where he'd withdrawn one hundred thousand dollars from a bank account Castañon had set up. From the capital

city, he'd taken a bus ride down the western coast to a fishing village on the Icacos Point, a narrow boot of land stretching towards the northeast coast of Venezuela. He hired a fishing boat that carried him the few watery miles across the Serpent's Mouth to the South American mainland. His guide had steered his boat through a maze of channels, into the hot, humid base of the vast Delta del Orinoco and finally, in the gray dawn hours, to Tucupita, a small river town where Traine met his contact, Jaye. Once they scored the cocaine, they had arranged to return to Tucupita, stuff the cellophane packets into plastic yellow bananas, each marked with a small green sticker, mixed in with huge bunches of fresh bananas, and then ship them directly to the produce wholesaler in LA. From there, Castañon would pick up the stash and distribute it, with the profits eventually split between himself and his brother-in-law. Traine's take was twenty-five thousand dollars. He had never dealt in cocaine before.

That was a month ago. Thirty miles southwest of Tucupita, he and Jaye sat in Jaye's Ford pick-up truck, parked on the abandoned grounds of a banana plantation. Rain clouds squatted low in the sky, making the afternoon heat even more oppressive. Jaye was an expatriate from Detroit, but he reminded Traine of aging surfer pals from his own past. He had thinning brown hair combed straight back, hazel eyes, and

a boyish smile that made everything he spoke of seem natural and available.

"Nervous?"

"Every deal has its downside; just a matter of where it breaks." Traine gave a quick pat to the .38 nestled in his jacket pocket.

Jaye smiled. "Like every woman." He stubbed out his cigarette. "When we get back to Tucupita, I'm going to introduce you to some women who don't know what it means to put a party down. They go until the money runs out. And we're gonna have a lot to keep it going a long time. At least until another military coup." He laughed and shot Traine a look. "You into politics in the states?"

"I'm not into anything but my girlfriend."

"Oh, that's right; you've got a boat chick in Seattle." Jaye laughed again, a big, horsy laugh. It was partly this characteristic of Jaye's, this easy-going camaraderie, that made Traine wary of him. By professional necessity and inclination, Traine was a loner and a skeptic. Jaye spoke fluent Spanish and knew the area. Traine packed the money and the gun. They needed each other.

A black SUV was parked close to the windowless shack. A soft, moaning wind pushed the fronds of a plantain tree against the tin roof. Jaye yanked the truck door open.

Traine looked down at the canvas bag on the floor between his feet. Seventy five thousand U.S. dollars was stashed inside. Jaye had already delivered twenty-five thousand dollars to the cocaine dealers. Before Traine handed over any more money, he wanted to be sure the cocaine was secure in the truck cab. He opened his side door and followed Jaye. After a few steps, his instincts took over. He veered off the path and glanced to the side of the shack. It went back further than he had thought. A tattered piece of blue cloth hung over the low sill of a window set towards the rear. Beyond that was a fence and then a forest of plantain trees. By the time he looked back, Jaye was standing at the front door, waving off a lighted match and blowing smoke from his cigarette. A man leaned in the doorway. He had a thick chest and arms, folded against his flowered shirt. His black hair curled on his forehead and a few days growth of beard made his round face look even darker. Traine could see that the floor of the shack was perched on cement blocks, giving the man the same height as Jaye. Traine figured this was the boss, Gutierrez. As he approached, the man glanced towards him with a friendly smile. His sharp, dark eyes were less a welcome than an opportunity to size-up the *Americano*. Then the man stepped back and Jaye followed him into the shack.

Traine ducked his head under the low doorframe and entered a small dimly lit room.

A kerosene lamp burned on a wooden table. A few long-handled farm tools leaned against one of the flimsy walls. The doorway leading to the rear of the shack was dark and empty. Jaye's introduction, "*Senor Gutierrez, mi amigo, Miguel Tranier,*" promptly pulled Traine's attention back to the dealer. The smile had disappeared from Gutierrez' lips. He nodded. His arms were still folded. Traine was certain he had a Luger stashed in the backside of his belt. He looked over to Jaye. "He's not alone, is he?"

"No."

Gutierrez had spoken only in Spanish to Jaye, yet he appeared to understand the question. He glanced to the empty doorway. "Rafael!"

Traine brushed his arm with a reassuring nudge against the gun in his pocket. The man who appeared in the doorway was about the same height as Gutierrez but at least thirty pounds lighter and ten years younger. His beaked face had a small patch of black hair just below his lower lip. He grinned warmly, as if the visitors were a welcome addition and were not to be concerned with the semi-automatic rifle slung across his undershirt, inches below a thin gold cross.

Traine turned his gaze back to Jaye and Gutierrez. "We didn't drive out here for a cup of coffee."

Gutierrez nodded to his partner. The young man disappeared into the rear of the shack.

"We're set," Jaye said, handing him the truck keys. "Get the money."

Traine left, without a word. The air outside smelled of the imminent rain and was sweet, like a fragrant tropical flower. He walked at a measured pace; he wasn't frightened, but he knew that imbedded in almost every deal was an unexpected moment. When he was thirteen, his mother's boyfriend had offered him five bucks to bike over to a house in Venice and haul back a pound of marijuana. Traine's bike sprung a flat tire on the way. By the time he'd arrived at the house, the connection was gone. "Always make room for contingencies," Tony told him. "You should have had a pump and a patch kit." Traine didn't get the five bucks. It was his first drug deal, his first lesson.

He unlocked the cab door and reached for the canvas bag. The money was stacked in seven bundles, each containing ten thousand dollars. The remaining bundle contained half as much. His instincts told him something in the shack was unrevealed. He didn't like Gutierrez, but he also understood that he hadn't traveled this far to make friends. He peered

through the windshield and saw the front door was still closed, just as he'd shut it on his way out. He ducked down again and drew out two of the large bundles, along with the smaller one, twenty-five thousand dollars in all, neatly wrapped in newspaper. He tucked the three bundles into his jacket, zipped it half way up, and slammed the truck door. It was only fifty feet to the shack, but he knew no one could see him. As he reached the door, he dropped the canvas bag. With the toe of his boot he shoved it under the shack, pushing it behind one of the cement blocks. Then, he opened the door.

Jaye sat at the table and held a small glycerin packet of cocaine up to the kerosene light. "It's all here," he said.

Traine unzipped his jacket and set the three taped bundles on the table. He dipped his hand into a cardboard box, shuffled the packets and pulled out two more. Gutierrez reached over, grabbed one of the bundles and tore off the newspaper. Traine kept his eyes on the glycerin packets. He tapped his finger into the white powder and dabbed his tongue.

Gutierrez opened the second bundle and flipped through the currency numbers, thumbing them like a deck of cards.

"Estos son cientos. Donde esta el resto?"

"He wants to know where the balance of money is?"

"The box goes in the truck; he gets his money."

Jaye looked back to Gutierrez. "*Pacimos la caja en la troca; tu tienes tu dinero.*"

Traine watched a smile fold over Gutierrez's lips. "*El no confia en nosotros.*"

"He doesn't think you trust him."

Traine tossed the glycerin packets into the box. "Tell him, it's just the way I do business." He took a step back, making room between himself and the table.

Jaye started to repeat the message but Gutierrez cut him off. "*Nosotros hacemos negocios diferente.*"

Traine glanced over to the doorway. Rafael was holding the semi-automatic, pointed at him.

He didn't move. He understood enough Spanish to know that Gutierrez had said something about the different way they do business.

Jaye got to his feet. "Get the money now."

"Tell him I don't buy threats."

"They don't play games; this is their way. We're on their turf," he shot back. The boyish glow faded from his lips.

"That money's the only shield we've got. Without it, we might get nothing but a bullet in our heads." Traine looked over to Gutierrez who he was certain understood at least some of what he'd said.

Jaye made a move. "I'll get the money; you stay here."

Traine grabbed his arm. "I've got the keys. The trucks locked." Traine could see the dark glow of desperation creep into Jaye's eyes. He had seen the same look before, in guys who couldn't handle the threat of cops or the long wait for a deal to go down.

"Look, we don't want to fuck this up! These guys don't have patience!"

"They can make the deal a lot quicker if they hand over the powder." Traine folded his hands in front of him, with his elbow crooked against the .38 in his pocket.

Jaye jerked his head back to Gutierrez. "He wants the cocaine in the truck. Then you get the rest of the money."

Gutierrez shrugged. The same loose smile came back to his lips. "Ask him if he wants a bullet in his head," he said in Spanish.

"You're a dead man, Traine, unless one of us gets that money."

"I see it like I'm a dead man if I give him the money and he's still got the coke. He doesn't need me then."

"That's the way they do business!"

"This is the way I do business!" Traine raised his voice and jammed his hands into his jacket pockets. His trigger finger slipped quickly into the trigger guard.

Gutierrez shot a look to Rafael. The young gunman stepped forward into the small circle of light, holding his rifle at the level of Traine's chest.

Jaye glared at Traine. "You're a dead man." He drew back, between the table and the wall, closer to Gutierrez. "You should have given them the money." He looked over to the dealer. "*El quiere morir, el esta tonto.*"

Traine didn't like the proximity of Jaye to Gutierrez. He didn't like it either that his partner was calling him a fool and liked even less the Smith and Wesson pointed at him.

Jaye shifted his gaze back to Traine. "Castañon doesn't need.."

He never reached the end of the sentence. Traine's eyes were riveted on the assault rifle. He hadn't seen Gutierrez reach for the Luger in the back of his belt. All he heard was the sharp crack of fire and instantly saw his partner's frozen, open-mouthed face. Jaye crumpled to his knees. His chin rocked the table as his head slammed against it on his way to the floor.

Gutierrez turned to Traine. A smile gleamed in his eyes. "The money, Señor." They were the first English words from his lips. He nodded to Rafael who followed his silent direction to the front door.

Traine paused, weighing in his mind the options left to him. He remembered seeing a window towards the rear of the shack. His shoulders sagged, as if he were going to follow the killer's demand. Then a screaming, wild cry ripped from his throat. His leg flew up, his boot slammed into the table and a shot ripped through his jacket pocket aimed at Gutierrez. The kerosene lamp slid to the floor. Rafael fired into the sudden darkness. Traine dove towards the rear doorway. His chest and shoulder hit the floorboards, he rolled through the passageway. The window was ten feet away, shielded by the wall separating the rooms. Screams in Spanish tore the air, as he scrambled on his hands and knees to the opening. The outside light painted the blue window flap. He flung his body through the opening. A burst of gunfire raked the ground. He leapt to his feet and raced behind the shack, past the broken fence, into the plantain groves.

He kept on running. Fear propelled him deeper and deeper into the interior. He beat away the thick fronds with his forearms and fists. Staggering over piles of rotting vegetation, it seemed to him as if he'd run for miles through the dark rows of trees. Finally, exhausted, he dropped to the ground and leaned his head forward, gasping, sucking in the rank air.

His heart stopped pounding. He stared at the blood on his hands. It was almost impossible to see anything in the gray light that forced its way through the trees. He was certain Rafael could not have followed him.

He dropped his head again and closed his eyes. The face of his mother surfaced. He saw her dancing across a small apartment living room. The memory was so out of place and unexpected that he couldn't let it go. Sunlight streamed through the apartment window, half-open to a soft breeze from the ocean. The tanned legs flowed from beneath a silky black skirt barely long enough to cover her thighs. She swung her ass rhythmically. He remembered how men were always knocking on her door, how all she seemed to care about was keeping young. *The tips are better near the water*, she repeated softly in his mind. Then, for a few moments, the images were displaced by the darkness of sleep.

He jerked his head up and got to his feet. He could hear the light patter of rain against the fronds. Drops of water touched his face and hands. He had no idea how badly he had wounded Gutierrez, or if his bullet had killed him. He figured that Rafael was too young, too scared to stay alone, knowing Traine had a gun and the keys to the truck.

A half an hour later, Traine had found his way back. The SUV was gone. Jaye's truck was riddled with bullet holes, the tires blown out, the inside of the cab torn apart.

When he entered the shack, he found Jaye crumpled on the floor, just where he'd fallen. The table was still overturned. Traine lit the kerosene lamp and went back outside. He dragged his foot under the base of the shack until his boot hit the canvas bag. The money was still there.

He grabbed a pick-ax and shovel from the shack and walked back to the plantain trees. The rain had started to fall harder, but the moon was open between the clouds. The pain in his shoulder flared each time his shovel struck a root or hidden rock. He kept on digging. *Dead people don't leave a trail*, he thought to himself. *Not if they're in the ground.*

He went back and dragged the body to the gravesite. He wasn't certain whether Jaye had been part of a scheme or if Castañon had set both of them up.

He pulled him feet first to the side of the grave. Then he slid his arms under him. The corpse was still loose and warm when he delivered it into the earth. He bent down and folded the hands. He noticed a silver ring on Jaye's finger. He remembered Jaye telling him not to worry. He boasted that he'd bought the ring from an Indian shaman who guaranteed the dark brown stone would ward off evil spirits and good luck

would come to him. Traine shimmied the ring off the damp flesh. *Maybe it was on the wrong hand*, he thought to himself.

He covered the grave with the earth and leaves. "Don't stop at the wrong exit," he mumbled.

The remark, he thought, was stupid and meaningless. It came from the lyrics of a song or from what he remembered of the song; but, for some reason, he felt better, more complete and final, knowing he had buried the man.

Traine walked back, through the rain, up the plantation road to the main highway. He was soaking wet, but the air in the open fields was still warm and fragrant. He flagged down an old truck with one headlight shining through the night. The Indian driver wore a tan fedora-like hat, threaded with red and yellow beads. He leaned his square face, bridged with thick glasses, into the rain-spattered windshield, and never took his shoeless foot off the gas. Traine gave him fifty dollars when they finally screeched to a stop in the center of downtown Tucupita. He was sure the shaman's ring had saved him from a high-speed disaster.

He spent the night at a hotel near the river, rose at dawn, and soon was feeling the fine spray of water on his face as the fishing boat churned up the channel, taking him back, across the Serpent's Mouth, to Trinidad.

He had been set up by Castañon, probably with Jay's help. Once the money had been delivered, he was dispensable, a dead man, and his fee could be forgotten. He changed his flight plan and flew from Port of Spain to Miami and then to Seattle, where he deposited the fifty thousand dollars in Maryanne's lingerie drawer, along with black silk pajamas and silver earrings he'd bought for her in Trinidad.

Now, chased by Castañon's thugs, he was on his way back to Seattle to retrieve the money and see if he and Maryanne could work out a life together.

Traine looked back to the tide creeping up the beach. He dropped his cigarette into the pool of water beneath his boots. The sun had lost its heat, turning the horizon pink and hazy in the distance. Clouds rolled in, spinning like dark hats above his head. It was safe to leave, he thought. He'd walk further up the coast to a shanty bar he'd frequented before. He'd get something to eat, call Maryanne, and check his answering machine.

A twilight breeze blew towards him as he crossed the sand. Through the dusk, he saw the golden eyes of headlights winding down the highway. He was thirty years old, and all he could feel was the ghost of death inside of him. He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. It was his hunger, he reasoned, that made him feel so empty and alone.