

Dress Blues

By Michael A. Black

I got my first glimpse of the academy across a field and through a row of trees. It was late autumn and the leaves were mostly all gone. There was a high, barbed wire fence next to the road. The area between it and the buildings, perhaps three hundred yards, looked hard and barren.

At the intersection there was a sign: WOODSEN ACADEMY – TURN RIGHT. More buildings came into view after I made the turn. The office sat near the entrance on a black asphalt roadway. A big gymnasium was farther down next to a football field. Two white goal posts stood out, their brightness in stark contrast to the dark gray of the forest that served as a strangely bucolic backdrop. Strange because we weren't really that far from the city.

After being directed to the administration building by the gate guard, an ancient secretary finally allowed me in to see Ben Lane... Colonel Lane, please... the head honcho. Lane's office was Spartan looking. Just the essentials: desk, credenza, and a couple of chairs. The only indulgence was an assembly of photographs along one wall that depicted the man in various military uniforms that must have dated back over a twenty-year plus career. Lane looked pretty much unchanged except for a little heft around the middle and some deeply chiseled lines around his features. His uniform was a dark dress blue type, replete with plenty of gold buttons, stars and an ornate braid strung through the epaulet on his left shoulder. He slipped off a pair of half-glasses after reading Manuel's file.

"Mr. Shade, the young man was s Social Service case," he said. "I'm afraid we often don't have a lot of success with boys in that

category.” He paused and studied me for a moment. “I must admit, I do find this matter somewhat curious.”

“Oh?” I said. “How so?”

“Not so much that the boy ran away,” he answered, “But rather that a private detective would be hired to locate him.”

I compressed my lips into a smile. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, Mr. Shade, as a Social Service case Manuel’s tuition was subsidized by the State. We have a sliding scale that allows for underprivileged families. However, often the boys can not accept discipline and run away.” He looked at me piercingly. “Now how is it that a family in that category can afford a private detective?”

It wasn’t any of his business who’d hired me or why, but for the moment I had to stay in his good graces.

“A friend of the family hired me.”

He regarded me for a moment more.

“Let me guess. Maria Castro?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Colonel, I’m impressed.”

“Actually, it was easy,” he said, with an irritating smugness. “She was the one who set the enrollment up through Social Services, and she’s been calling here constantly for the past three days.”

I thought back to Maria’s impassioned plea to me. “Ron, he reminds me so much of my own *sobrino*. He’s *Cubano*, just like I am. And his mother’s a good friend of my family.” It was always hard to say no to Maria. She’d been my friend for several years, dating back to when I was a cop.

“Any idea where he might have gone, Colonel?” I asked.

Lane pursed his lips.

“He was here such a short time, I hardly got to know him. You can talk to the Squad Supervisors if you want. They work more closely with the boys than me.”

* * *

The big two-story brick buildings were about a hundred yards away from the office. They looked more like jails than dormitories. Chicken wire mesh covered the windows. Manuel’s Squad Supervisor was a young black man named Donald Nash. He was dressed in khakis and periodically shouted out orders to a group of boys who were putting down a coat of wax on the floor. They were getting ready for an inspection, he explained.

“Don’t know how much help I can give you, sir,” he said. “The kid was only here about a week. Disappeared last Friday night.”

“Was he a discipline problem?” I asked.

Nash blew out a slow breath. “Not really. Kept to himself mostly. He was a small kid.”

Suddenly the door opened and a white guy in his thirties appeared in the same type of dress blues that Colonel Lane had been wearing.

“Oh Roland,” Nash said. “This is Ron Shade. He’s a detective looking for that Manuel kid who ran away. Mr. Shade – Roland Roundtree, the Senior Supervisor.”

Roundtree’s dark eyes scrutinized me as we shook hands. His black hair was cut short and slicked down.

“I thought he was a Social Service case,” he said.

I nodded. “Did you get to know him?”

Roundtree licked his lips before he answered.

“Not too well,” he said.

“We can talk to the rest of our boys for you,” Nash said.

The building was set up with upper and lower floors. There was a large room on each level with bunk-beds and lockers. The Supervisors each had their own quarters by the stairwell. The rest of the kids were of little help. Nobody said anything, but I got the impression that they could have told me more if Nash and Roundtree hadn’t been so pervasive.

“Thanks for the help,” I said. “You guys think of anybody else I could talk to?”

“If he was a Social Service case, Odin probably would have interviewed him,” Nash said. “Right, Roland?”

Roundtree stared at him for a moment, then nodded slowly.

“Who’s Odin?” I asked.

“Dr. Odin,” Nash said. “He’s a psychologist who does a lot of work with the school. Handles our problem cases. His office is in the Loop. The Colonel’s secretary could give you his number.”

I was able to set up an appointment with Dr. Herman Odin for three that afternoon. His office was in the North Loop. On the drive back to the city I thought about what I knew so far, and decided that I’d been roped into a near impossible case by doing a favor for a friend. But Maria was a sweetheart and had done her best to steer business my way after I’d gotten kicked off the force. I owed her, so I’d taken the case.

I knew that Manuel’s father had died two years ago, and his mother worked as a seamstress in a dry cleaning shop. The kid had been “in trouble” a few times, and it was decided that he needed some stricter supervision. The Woodsen Academy was suggested by Maria as a more positive environment. Close enough for weekend visits, yet far enough away from the Spanish Tigers, a street gang that Manuel had been hanging around with.

I looked at the picture, a Polaroid of a grinning kid with dark plastered-down hair. He was thirteen, but small for his age. Underdeveloped, Maria had called him. A lamb running with a pack of “Spanish Tigers.”

Dr. Odin’s office was on Wells near Superior in one of the slick new office buildings made of reflective glass and dark brick that had cropped up during the rebuilding phase of the upscale North Loop area. An

equally upscale looking secretary ushered me into a comfortable office area that had a couch, a chair, and a few other items to go with the serene setting. The walls were a light mauve color, the carpet a few shades darker. I didn't want to sit down so I just kept pacing until the door opened and Dr. Odin stepped through from another room. He was a heavily built man in his late forties with dark brown hair and a Freudian style beard. His nose was heavy and broad and when he smiled I noticed that he had small teeth that slanted inward.

"Mr. Shade?" he said. "Why don't you step in here? It'll be more comfortable."

I stepped forward and he apologized, explaining that he'd been with another patient who'd run longer than expected.

"That's perfectly all right," I said. "I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice."

Odin grinned as he sat behind a big gunmetal desk and folded his hands in a steepling gesture.

"Ben Lane gave me a call," he said. "I'm sorry to hear that the young man ran away. Often times boys in that category have a difficult time in a regimented environment."

"That's what he said. Can you give me any ideas about where Manuel might have gone?"

He sighed. "That would be somewhat difficult," he said. "I didn't really have a lot of time to work with him."

"I was under the impression that you'd interviewed him extensively." When his brow furrowed I added, "At least that's what Nash told me."

"Well, it may have seemed that way to him, but often times what seems to be a long interview to a layman really isn't." He removed a pipe from his jacket pocket and began packing it.

"No ideas at all?"

He waited until after he had the pipe going before he answered.

"My best guess would be that he'd return to his family."

I shook my head. "His mother hasn't seen him."

"Perhaps his surrogate family then," Odin answered. "I believe he was affiliated with some gang."

"Right," I said, "The Spanish Tigers."

Odin nodded reassuringly. "I knew it was something like that. Often times they'll see the gang as an extension of their family. Loyalties to their peers in some cases might even supplant that of blood relations."

I was kneading my hands in exasperations and Odin must have noticed. He smiled and said, "I'm sorry that I haven't been much help, have I?"

I stood and thanked him for his time. As we walked toward the door he placed an open palm on my back. "It's too bad we couldn't have reached the boy," he said. "We have had some success with recalcitrant

youths. Why, Donald Nash from the academy is one of our success stories.”

I smiled weakly as I went out. I lived on the far Southwest side and this was way north. The rush hour was just beginning and I had no more leads than I'd had this morning.

* * *

I got up early the next morning and went for my five-mile run. I had a fight coming up in less than a month and was pretty close to top shape. The fall weather was cool and I'd needed my heavy hooded sweatshirt to feel warm. As I was plugging along I couldn't help but wonder where the kid had spent the night. When I finished I called Area One to leave a message for my buddy George Grieves to call me. But, surprisingly, he was in.

“Whatdya want?” he growled into the phone.

“Jeez, what side of the bed did you get up on?”

“I ain't been to bed yet.”

“Working on a big one?”

“Not that it's any of your business,” he said caustically, “but we are. A very prominent citizen got himself killed. Didn't show up for work and they didn't find him till last night. Been dead a couple of days.”

“Sounds like they're pulling out all the stops.”

“Yeah, you know how it is,” he said, his tone softening a little. “The guy was a real philanthropist. Gave to charities, boys' homes, the whole bit. Needless to say, the trail's pretty cold.”

I heard him sigh.

“So what is it you want, Ron?”

“I'm trying to find a missing kid and he's been running with the Spanish Tigers. I wonder if you could make a few calls to the juvenile boys and see if you could get me the inside story.”

He snorted. “You know juvenile records are confidential.”

“So stretch things a little for me. And see if you can put out a type three on any locates for a male Hispanic about twelve – ”

He cut me off: “What the hell! I just get through telling you how I ain't slept in twenty-six hours and all you want is for me to solve your case for you.”

I was trying to think up something to lighten the conversation when he hung up. Real good. I'd managed to offend my best buddy whose help I needed. I was really batting a thousand. After packing my gear I headed for the gym to put in my workout.

* * *

“What the hell's wrong with you?” Chappie, my friend and trainer asked after I'd sparred three desultory rounds. “You look like you're playing around out there.”

I slipped the mouthpiece out. “Sorry. Guess this case I'm working on is getting to me.”

“Either get your head on straight or get it knocked off,” he said. “No room for errors out there.”

After we’d done more work with the focus pads and then on the heavy bag, he sprayed me with water and asked me if I wanted to talk about it.

I gave him a brief synopsis as we headed for the locker room.

“Why not talk to Julio?” Chappie said. “He could probably get a lot farther than you asking questions in that neighborhood.”

Julio was a young Mexican kid who trained religiously at the gym. He worked nights in a factory and usually took his workouts in the morning. I saw him beating out a rhythm on the speed bag. When the round bell rang I approached him about helping me and he quickly agreed. Forty minutes later we were in Manuel’s neighborhood. I sent Julio around with the photo while I touched base over the phone with Maria Castro.

“Haven’t found anything yet,” I said. “How ‘bout his mother?”

“Nothing,” she said sadly. “Oh Ron, do you think it’s hopeless?”

“I still have a few leads to explore,” I lied. Julio walked up and I told her I’d get back to her. “Anything?”

Julio shrugged and shook his head. “Nobody’s seen him lately,” he said. “About the only thing I found out is that everybody calls him *Maraposo*: Little Butterfly.”

“Huh?”

Julio grinned. “He’s always fooling with those butterfly knives, flipping them around like they do in those Filipino movies.”

* * *

After giving Julio a ride back home, along with twenty bucks for his trouble, I grabbed something to eat and pondered my next move. A kid without resources and money wouldn’t last long on the streets. That meant that he’d need to get help from someplace – friends, the gang, worse. As I explored the avenues that teenage runaways usually go down, I was struck with a new urgency.

I decided to do what I usually do when I’m up against a dead end: backtrack from the source. We’d already checked the neighborhood and come up dry. The next logical place was the Woodsen Academy. After a quick thirty-two minute drive I was there. Donald Nash told me that he’d been keeping his ears open, but had heard nothing about Manuel from any of the other boys.

“Roland’s not around,” he said. “Had to take some emergency leave.”

“I see. Well, I appreciate the help.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon checking the gas stations, restaurants, and stores around the area. It seemed logical that Manuel would have skipped to a phone and called someone from the Tigers to come pick him up. He was too far from home turf up here in the

northwest suburbs to stay for long. But nobody remembered seeing him last Friday.

"I probably woulda remembered him," said one of the guys at a gas station. "Not too many Mexicans around here."

As I was driving back south I called Maria at DCFS on my car phone and asked if she could meet me at Mrs. Hernandez's house. Perhaps it was time to begin breaking it to her that this one might not have a happy ending.

* * *

After a forty-minute question and answer session with Manuel's mother, I felt drained. Her constant sobbing as Maria translated to Spanish what I was saying was punctuated by a desperately imploring squeeze of my hand. I felt genuinely sorry for the woman, but didn't think I could take it much farther. We'd driven over in my car so Maria could keep the parking place in front of her house. On the way back she thanked me and invited me up for something to eat.

I was about to take her up on the offer when my beeper went off. It was George's work number. I called him back on the car phone.

"Hey, buddy, how's it going?" he said. I sensed a conciliatory tone in his voice.

"About the same," I answered. "What's up?"

"Say, Ron, I'm sorry I blew up like that at you this morning."

"No problem," I said. "I've been there myself."

"So are you still looking for that Mexican kid?"

"He's Cuban," I said. "But, yes I am"

"Well we had a drive-by shooting and picked up some Spanish Tigers on a sweep. Wanna talk to them?"

I told him I'd be right over, hung up and turned to Maria.

"I've got another lead. Can I have a rain check on the dinner?"

She smiled alluringly. "Sure, Ron. Any time."

* * *

It took me about twenty minutes to drive to Area One. George told me that they'd separated the three gangbusters and had identified the shooter. He was off limits to me, but he agreed to let me talk to the other two.

"I thought you were working on the murder of that very prominent citizen?" I asked as we walked down to the interrogation rooms.

George smirked. "That guy turned out to have a few skeletons in his closet," he said. "Or more appropriately, in his safety deposit box." While I was home catching some sleep, my partners got a court order to go in his box. Guess what was in it?"

"Drugs?"

"Nah. Worse." He glanced at me to gauge my reaction. "Kiddie porn."

I wrinkled my face in disgust.

“Seems this son of a bitch belonged to some national organization of child molesters. After we found that out we decided to put it on the back burner. No real leads anyway.

“I hope it’s worth it,” he said as we got to the interrogation room.

“It sure beats what I got now.”

The room was small and windowless. A young Hispanic kid sat impassively staring down at the tabletop. He couldn’t have been more than eighteen or nineteen.

“Luis,” George said. “We want you to look at this picture.”

I showed him the Polaroid of Manuel. He kept his hands on his lap so I put the picture on the table.

“You know this boy?” I asked.

No answer.

I repeated the question.

“*No hablo ingles,*” he sneered.

I started to say something in Spanish, but George interrupted.

“Ron, what’s wrong with you?” A big grin spread over his face.

“You forgotten the Chicago way to phrase an interrogative?”

He moved quickly across the room and grabbed Luis by the shirtfront, lifting him up and slamming him against the wall with a solid thud. One big hand curled around the Hispanic’s jaw while the other pressed on his chest.

“Listen, asshole, we both know you *habla*, so cut the shit. I don’t like it when someone tries to run a game on me.” George’s big hand moved down to Luis’s throat. “Now answer the man’s question. *Comprende?*”

The dark eyes flashed, but he nodded his head.

George released him and let him slide back down in the chair. I tapped the picture. “Know him?”

“Yeah, I know him,” he said. “He lives in the neighborhood.”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. Manuel, or something,” he said, eyes downcast.

“We call him *Marapasito*.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?”

He rubbed his fingers around the corners of his mouth. “I ain’t seen him lately. Maybe two weeks.”

“Know where he’s at now?”

He shook his head.

His mother’s worried about him,” I said.

“No, man, I told you. I ain’t seen him.”

“He got any friends in the Tigers that’s put him up?” George asked.

Luis snorted. “You got to be kidding.”

After a surprisingly similar repeat with the second suspect, we went downstairs to the break room and I bought us coffee from the machine. George sipped some, then asked me what I thought.

"I'd have to say I believed them. They both knew his street name, and their statements basically confirm with the ones we got in the neighborhood."

"So it's another dead end," he said. "Sorry."

"That's okay," I said. "Sometimes narrowing the field gives you an idea what to look for next."

"A lot of runaways are turning up in the River North area," he said. "Unfortunately, they're mostly into prostitution, drugs, or rippin' off. But how else are they gonna support themselves?" He looked at Manuel's picture again, shaking his head. "You'd better find this kid fast or somebody'll tear him a new asshole. Literally."

I nodded in commiseration.

"You know, there's some priest that lives up there on Wells who runs some sort of a half-way house for runaways."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"I'll see if I can find it."

* * *

The traffic on the expressway was fairly light, and I was up on the north side again in about twenty minutes. After taking another fifteen to find a parking spot I walked over to Father Trip's halfway house. It was just a bit three-flat apartment building with one of those extended corridors as you came off the street. I stepped inside and rang the bell. Presently a big guy with long shaggy hair and a mountainous chest and belly opened the inside door. His eyes looked small behind thick prescription lenses.

"Yeah?"

"I'm looking for Father Trip," I said.

"Who are you?"

I gave him one of my cards. He disappeared inside for a few minutes, then came lumbering back. He swung the inside door open and I went in. Suddenly I felt his big hands grab me and I managed to twist and move out of his reach.

"What the hell?" I said.

"We can't afford to let anyone in here without confirming that he is who he says he is," a voice from above me said. "Franklin will now go through your pockets, and I advise you not to resist. He's very formidable."

I glance up and saw that there was a stairway with a second floor balcony about fifteen feet above us. Someone stood there in the shadows. I could only see the outline. Franklin moved forward, his big arms outstretched.

I was in no mood for some flunky to frisk me, and the frustrations from the investigation boiled me over into a rage. Feigning a submissive grin, I raised my arms. As the big man took another step I moved inside and landed four hard punches to his body. I heard him grunt. He reached out trying to grab me as I backpedaled, brushing his arms away

and slamming a punishing hook into his liver. More air whooshed out of him and he went down on one knee. I resisted the temptation to follow up with a blow to his head for the sake of his face and my hand.

There was a clatter of someone rushing down the stairs behind me. I whirled and saw a young blond man with a priest's collar. He rushed by me to Franklin.

"Father Trip, I presume?"

The priest ignored me. "Franklin, are you all right?"

The big man was concentrating on his breathing. Nothing else mattered. A liver punch does that to you. I knew the feeling.

"He'll be okay," I said. "Now, do we talk or do I take you on for round two?"

"That was uncalled for," Father Trip said, as he stood and faced me.

"Maybe, Father," I said. "But so was trying to search me."

"Why, you got something to hide?"

"I'm looking for a missing kid," I said, showing him Manuel's picture. "He been around here?"

"What makes you think I'd tell you if he had?" he answered defiantly.

"What the hell's wrong with you, anyway?" I said. "We're both on the same side. The kid's mother is worried about him."

The priest seemed to calm down slightly. "How did you hear about this mission?" He gestured as he spoke.

I gave him a brief summary of what I knew. At the mention of Maria's name he nodded slightly, told me to wait, and left the room. I kept an eye on Franklin, who'd regained his feet, but kept a respectable distance.

After a few minutes Father Trip came back.

"I'm sorry for our approach, Mr. Shade, but we have to maintain the strictest confidence, or we'd lose their trust entirely," he said. "I have worked with Maria from time to time on counseling and she did vouch for you."

I nodded.

"May I see the picture again?" he said.

I showed it to him. He studied it intently, then showed it to Franklin. The big man looked down at it and shook his head.

"So why'd you come down on me so hard before, Father?"

"Mr. Shade, we're the last line of defense for those young people who've no where else to go. Their family lives are gone. Many times no one cares about them. We try to give them a place to stay. A shelter while they try to put some sort of order back into their lives." He handed me back the picture. "There are all sorts of predators that lurk in the shadows preying on such youngsters."

"Predators?"

“Twisted, warped people,” he said, “who see children as commodities. To be bought and sold. Used for their perverse purposes. I’m sorry,” he added. “I haven’t seen the boy.”

As I was walking back to my car I turned and began wandering around the area. Destitute street people contrasted sharply with the nattily clad yuppies who strolled affectedly past the rows of brightly lit galleries. Lots of young kids stood around in packs. Some of the girls looked like they should have been in junior high, instead of strutting their stuff on some street corner. There were groups of guys, too, not much older. I stopped and spoke to three of them huddled near the entranceway to an all-night diner.

“You guys seen this kid?” I asked.

“We ain’t causing no trouble, sir,” one said, as they moved away.

As I turned back to resume walking I saw a dark Corvette idling in one of the alleyways. Suddenly I recalled seeing one just like it when I pulled away from Maria’s. I quickened my pace toward the corner to see who the driver was, but he must have seen me coming and was gone with a screech. It was too far to get his plate number. Was I being tailed? If so, by whom? And why?

I turned my attention back to the task at hand. I could spend the rest of the night down here chasing shadows. But I doubted I’d get any information wading in this pool of adolescent desperation and despair. George had suggested I come back to Area One tomorrow and he’d check Manuel’s juvenile file for me. Maybe that would provide me with something new.

* * *

The next morning I found George in his office with a cup of coffee, sorting through a bunch of business cards.

“Any luck?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not so far. What are you doing?”

“Remember that pre-eminent pervert who got killed?” he said. “Just trying to sort out the cards from his Rolodex.” He placed another one down on the desk. “You want me to find out what I can from Juvenile in District Ten, right?”

“I’d appreciate it,” I said, looking down at the last card he’d set down. I pointed to it. “Let me see that one.”

He handed the card to me. It was white with embossed black lettering:

DR. HERMAN P. ODIN, PSYCHOTHERAPY
BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

“Know that guy?” George asked.

“Yeah, he’s the staff shrink at the Woodsen Academy.”

George looked at his notes. “Probably was treating this guy Horkin, that’s the dead pervert, for something or other. The guy had to be warped to have those kind of pictures.”

I bit my upper lip silently as I nodded.

“Say George,” I said. “How was this guy killed?”
“He got knifed in the gut,” he said. “Why?”
“Just wondering.”

* * *

Sometimes you can toss a rock into the bushes and watch what runs out. Other times you have to wade right in there and sort of force the action. Time wasn't on my side. George was about two laps behind me and closing fast, even though I hadn't told him what I now suspected. I had to locate Manuel and sort out the last bits of the puzzle.

When I got to Dr. Odin's office his secretary told me that he was busy.

“He'll see me,” I said. “Tell him it's about Martin Horkin.”

That seemed to perplex her but she picked up the phone and whispered into the receiver. When she put it down she silently ushered me into the same office that I'd been in before. Odin came in shortly thereafter.

“Mr. Shade,” he said cordially. “What can I do for you?”

“Ever hear of Martin Horkin?”

Odin stared at me implacably, then said. “Yes. He was a patient of mine. What of it?”

“Doctor, I've been doing this kind of work too long to believe in coincidences. When I find an unexpected connection I make a point to trace it down to its source.”

“I'm afraid I'm not very good at riddles,” he said. “Now, if you can't be more...direct, I suggest you leave.”

“Did you know that Horkin was a pedophile?”

“I'm afraid that doctor/patient confidentiality would prevent me from answering that.”

I stared at him for several seconds.

“I got a buddy on Chicago P.D.,” I said. “He's investigating Horkin's death.”

Odin swallowed, then said, “So?”

“So, maybe I'll give him a call. He likes coincidences even less than I do.”

When Odin didn't answer right away I thought that I'd blown it and he was going to hang tough. But when I saw a single droplet of sweat trickle down his forehead, I knew I had him.

“What do you want, Shade? Money?”

I shook my head. “I want the kid.”

“If I can get him back for you, can you keep my name out of it?”

“Where is he?”

Odin forced a nervous smile. “In a safe place.”

I thought back to George's comment about phrasing things correctly. Stepping forward, I grabbed Odin's lapels and backed him roughly against the wall.

With one hand pressed against the corpulence of his neck, I spoke low and gutturally. “Now listen, doctor, I ain’t got the time or patience to play twenty questions.” I twisted the knuckle of my other hand into the softness of his temple for emphasis. “Now, once more. Where is he?”

“He’s out at my house,” he grunted. “Please! You’re hurting my head.”

“He okay?” I kept my knuckle there.

“Yes,” he sputtered. “A little banged up is all. I’ve been keeping him sedated.”

* * *

We drove in Odin’s car, a BMW, up north to Winnetka. I let him drive because I didn’t want to take the chance of him jumping out of my Camaro at an inopportune time, leaving me trapped alone in heavy traffic. This way, if he did rabbit on me, I could leave his car for the tow trucks and chase him down. But he’d pretty much cracked. He admitted that he’d become acquainted with Horkin after he was arrested for fondling his young nephew. The relative agreed to drop the case if Horkin would agree to counseling and Odin was selected. The combination of Horkin’s wealth and kiddie porn connections, coupled with Odin’s supply of troubled youth at the Woodsen Academy, proved symbiotic for both men.

“Things were supposed to be controlled,” he said as he drove. I let him talk, even though it was making me sick. “I thought that the kid was drugged enough but something happened. Roland was supposed to be monitoring the situation. Obviously he didn’t.”

Obviously, I thought. So Roundtree was involved too.

“Where that little bastard came up with that knife, I’ll never know,” he said. “We thought we’d cleaned out Horkin’s apartment to make it look like a home invasion. I didn’t want the kid turning up until he’d healed rectally.”

From Sheridan Road we shot down some side streets with huge homes set far back from the street like country estates.

Then we pulled onto a long private drive with an expansive lawn on either side that tapered up to a massive brick house.

“How could you afford this?” I said, thinking of Father Trip’s words about treating children like commodities.

Odin didn’t answer.

“Where’s the kid at?” I asked as we pulled to a stop behind a dark Corvette in front of the three-car garage.

“He’s in a specially built room downstairs,” Odin said.

“That your car?” I said, indicating the ‘vette.

“It’s one of them.”

“Anybody else inside?”

He shook his head. “Shouldn’t be.”

“Good,” I answered. “Cause you’re going in first.”

I hustled him to the door, then forced him against the frame. As he struggled with the keys and the alarm system I took out my Beretta. The door flipped open and we went inside. Odin began talking with exaggerated loudness. As we pushed toward the downstairs, I heard a TV.

“You sure no one else is here?” I nudged him with the barrel.

“Shade,” he continued loudly. “You’ve got to believe me, this wasn’t my fault.”

Suddenly he was twisting away from me and yelling that I had a gun. I gave a quick look around and saw a man’s outline in the darkened lower section of the house.

An orange flash exploded from the silhouette.

Another!

I took cover by the stairs, trying to keep an eye out for Odin too. The shadows moved below and I squeezed off several rounds in that direction. The silhouette slumped forward. I waited, trying to clear my head of the ringing. No movement from downstairs. I saw a light switch on the wall leading down to the lower area. Scanning the adjacent room it seemed clear, except for one of Odin’s legs. He was lying prone on the floor. I took the chance and switched on the light with a quick snap of my hand.

The downstairs brightened, and I saw a man curled forward groaning over a dark, spreading puddle. It was Roland Roundtree, but he wasn’t wearing his dress blues.

“Roundtree, toss away the gun and I’ll call an ambulance.”

He did.

I went in to check Odin. His arms and legs were twisted at an odd angle as he lay very still. Stepping over him I saw that a stray bullet had caught him just under the jaw line. Probably fired from below. Going down the stairs, gun first, I retrieved Roundtree’s weapon, a thirty-eight snubnose. A couple of my rounds had gone right through a leather sofa and hit him in the legs. Another had hit his shoulder. He must have played hooky during his class on taking ballistic cover.

His head rolled slightly as he looked at me.

“You said you’d call an ambulance,” he groaned.

“I will. Where’s the kid?”

He pointed toward the wall. There was a solid-looking metal door. After checking him for more weapons and scanning the rest of the downstairs, I went to the room. It was locked, but Roundtree had the keys in his pocket.

I opened the door and saw that it was a small windowless room. The kid was there, his legs and hands cuffed. The leg irons were secured to a heavy daybed by a longer length of chain. He looked thinner than in the picture and had some noticeable facial bruises. His dark eyes widened when he saw me, and he struggled to stand.

“You from the cops?” he asked.

“I’m a friend of Maria Castro and your mother,” I said. There was a phone in the other room and I wanted to call for the police and paramedics. “Sit down, Manuel. I’ve got to make a call.”

He sat on the edge of the bed, a tough-guy sneer annealing itself over his features.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said. “I’m here to help you.”

He snorted derisively. “I’ve heard that shit before, man. And don’t call me Manuel, that ain’t my name no more.”

I picked up the phone and began to dial. *El Mariposito* leaned forward and buried his head in his hands, too proud and defiant to let me see the tears.

The End