

# 1

O n the phone, Tomlinson said to Ford, “When the deputy’s wife and kids disappeared, moonshiners might’ve dumped their bodies in the lake—it was during Prohibition. It wouldn’t be the first time karma has waited decades to boot justice in the ass.”

“Tootsie Barlow told you that story?” Ford, a marine biologist, was referring to a famous fishing guide who ranked with Jimmy Albright, Jack Brothers, Ted Williams, and a few others as fly-casting pioneers in the Florida Keys.

“His family was involved somehow—the Barlows go way, way back in the area. I don’t know how yet, but I will. He’s in bad shape, so I need to take it slow, but *you’re* the one who told me

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about the lake—Chino Hole. That’s the connection. The access road cuts through Tootsie’s property.”

“I had no idea. He moved to the Everglades?”

“Smack-dab in the middle. One of those little crossroads villages like Copeland or Carnestown. The property’s been in his family for years. I’m driving down this afternoon. Since he quit guiding, it’s probably easier for him to wake up and see sawgrass instead of the Gulf Stream. The endgame, dude, for watermen like us, it can be pretty damn sad.”

“I’ve heard the rumor,” Ford said. “As far as your story goes, I’m still lost.”

“So’s Tootsie. How many fishing guides put away money for retirement? He’s broke, which is bad enough, but now he’s afraid that God has singled out his family for punishment. Like a conspiracy, you know? Not because of something he did, more likely something his father or a relative did. The cops won’t listen, his preacher doesn’t believe him, so who else is he gonna call but the Right Reverend, yours truly.”

Tomlinson, an ordained Rienzi Buddhist priest, seldom employed the honorific “Right Reverend.” The title had been bestowed by a Las Vegas divinity mill after cashing his check for fifty bucks.

“Tootsie wants you to put in a good word with God, I get it. I still don’t see what this has to do with us . . .”

“He wants someone to convince the cops he’s not crazy. And there’s another connection. The deputy who disappeared was J. H. Cox. That ring a bell? It should.”

“When was this?”

“Nineteen twenty-five. A few years earlier, a woman was murdered by a man named Cox. Same area; near Marco Island. I don’t know if it was the same man, but your Hannah Smith is a direct descendant of the woman he killed.”

Mentioning the biologist’s ex-lover Hannah was a calculated risk to catalyze Ford’s interest. In the background over the phone, Tomlinson could hear a steel drum band. “Hey, seriously, where are you?”

Ford, who was in the lobby of the Schooner Hotel, Nassau, Bahamas, said, “I’m in Lauderdale. At a convention for aquarium hobbyists. I’ll get back to the lab late tomorrow. Hopefully.”

“Bahia Mar, Lauderdale?”

“Close enough. Look . . . I’ve got a talk to give and I’m still working on my notes.” As he spoke, the child-porn dealer he’d been tailing stepped to the registration desk. Ford covered the phone and moved as if getting into line.

When he rejoined the conversation, his boat bum hipster pal Tomlinson was saying, “. . . Tootsie’s story is historical fact. I’ve got the old newspaper stories to prove it. In August 1925, Deputy Cox, his wife, and two kids all disappeared the night before a bunch of bootleggers went on trial. Marco Island or somewhere at the edge of the Everglades—get it?—all within a few miles of Chino Hole.”

“Moonshiners would need fresh water,” Ford reasoned while he watched the clerk encode the porn dealer’s room key.

“That’s who the newspapers blamed, but there was other nasty

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crap going on at the time, which I'm just starting to research. You ever hear of the Marco Island war?"

"Come on, you're making this up."

"It *happened*, man. Same time period. A bunch of heavy hitters had their fingers in the regional pie—Al Capone, probably Joe Kennedy, too, but they weren't the worst. The elite rich were stealing homesteads, and smuggling in Chinese illegals to boot." Tomlinson sniffed, and added, "Lauderdale, huh? Dude, the satellite must'a stopped over Nassau, 'cause I swear can I smell jerked chicken."

Ford replied, "Call you back," and hung up as the clerk addressed the porn dealer by name for the third time—standard, in the hospitality business—then handed over a key in a sleeve with the number 803 written on it and circled.

"I'll be checking out in about an hour," Ford told the clerk when it was his turn.

There were ceiling fans in the lobby and panoramic windows, beyond which sunbaked tourists lounged by the pool. A brunette in a red handkerchief two-piece was sufficiently lush and languid to spark a yearning in the biologist—an abdominal pang he recognized as discontent.

*Focus*, he told himself, and returned to his encrypted notes. It became easier when the brunette stood and buttoned up her beach wrap. Every set of poolside eyes followed her to the door.

An hour later, the porn dealer reappeared in the lobby, wearing shorts and flip-flops, and exited toward the tiki bar.

Ford shouldered his computer bag, and crossed the lobby to the elevators.

From the eighth floor, Montagu Bay was a turquoise basin encrusted with slums and ox cart traffic on the eastern fringe. Spaced along the waterfront were resort compounds; postcard enclaves that were separated from Nassau's realities by armed guards and tastefully disguised concertina wire.

The biologist no longer wondered why tourists came to places like this. People seldom traveled. Not really. Travel was too damn unpredictable. Instead, they contrived daydreams. They chose template fictions that matched, or came close enough, to the vacation they wanted to describe to their friends back home.

Near the elevator was a house phone. He dialed housekeeping, and told the woman, "I'm a dope. Can you please send someone up with a key to eight-oh-three? I locked myself out."

"Your name, sir?"

"James Lutz." That was the name the porn dealer was using.

"When security arrives," the woman added, "show them your passport, Mr. Lutz."

"Have him bring a bucket of ice, too," the biologist replied.

He was palming a twenty-euro bill when a kid wearing a name badge appeared, used a passkey, and bowed him into the room. "Hang on, I've got something for you." Inside the closet, as

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anticipated, was a wall safe, which he fiddled with before giving up. “Damn . . . must have punched in the number wrong. What’s the default code? I need my wallet.”

The kid opened the safe, and stepped back in deference to this solid-looking American who exuded confidence, but in a friendly way that suggested he was also generous.

“Thank you, Mr. Lutz,” the kid said, accepting the twenty. No eye contact; he backed out of the room.

“You’re supposed to see this.” The fake passport earned only a dutiful glance.

*He has no future in the security trade, Ford rationalized when the kid was gone. I did him a favor.*

On the other hand, probably not. Child pornography was a billion-dollar international industry. Nassau was the ancillary stronghold for a Russian network that branched into Haiti, Indonesia, and the Middle East, particularly Muslim regions where daughters were treated as chattel. Children provided a steady income to jihadists who enjoyed beheading infidels. When word got out that a low-level dealer had lost incriminating files while drinking at the pool bar, Jimmy Lutz, or whatever his name was, would beg first for his life, then a painless bullet.

If he lived that long.

Wearing gloves and a jeweler’s eyepiece, Ford secured an adhesive keystroke transmitter to Lutz’s laptop. The translucent tape was two inches long and thinner than a human hair. Once mounted on the screen’s black border, it became invisible, which Ford confirmed, before returning the laptop to its case.

Next, the safe. He photographed the contents: a wallet, two passports, a bundle of cash, and half a dozen ultra-secure biometric thumb drives. Three platinum thumb drives, three stealth black. Ford's employer, a Swiss agency, had anticipated this, but had provided him with only four stealth versions. He switched out the three black thumb drives, and repositioned each exactly as he'd found it before closing the safe.

Ford had also anticipated that Jimmy Lutz was in Nassau on a working vacation. On the bed, a Dacor dive bag lay next to a leather suitcase and a valet parking ticket. He unzipped the bag and removed a buoyancy compensator vest attached to a four-hose regulator.

The gear looked new.

Using a multi-tool, he popped a pin, removed the regulator's cover; next, a lubricating seal and the main diaphragm. A stainless valve seat and plunger were cupped within. With a drop of water-soluble glue, he seated an object that would clog the system when it broke free but would dissolve without a trace within twenty minutes. He did the same to the backup regulator, then returned everything to the bag.

There was no such thing as a zero signature robbery unless the victim wasn't alive to report the crime. No guarantees when or if it would happen, but a nice touch if the man had booked an afternoon dive.

When Ford was done, he consulted photos of the room to be sure it was exactly as he'd found it, then cracked the door and eyeballed the hallway.

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Damn it . . . Lumbering toward him was Jimmy Lutz after only twenty minutes at the tiki bar. Maybe he'd left his wallet, or needed cigars. Ford hurried past the bed, pocketed the valet ticket, then exited onto the balcony, closing the curtains and sliding doors.

"You . . . bastard . . . get your hands off me," a woman said from nearby. British accent. She sounded more startled than mad. A neighboring balcony was empty, but billowing curtains suggested the woman was in the adjoining suite. Ford's attention wavered until a slamming door told him Lutz was in the room. Lights came on within, then heavy feet flip-flopped toward him, as the woman, voice louder, threatened, "I'll call the police, by god, if you don't get out of here right now."

Lutz heard her; curtains parted. Ford hugged the wall while the man peered out, his face inches away through the glass. Satisfied the woman wasn't on his balcony, Lutz engaged the dead bolt and swept the curtains closed.

Ford was trapped. He waited, hearing a mix of sounds from the adjoining suite: a clatter of furniture; the woman gasping, "Damn you . . . that *hurts*," and other indecipherable noises that signaled a struggle. Or was it a kinky twosome enjoying rough love?

Inside Lutz's room, a toilet flushed. A door suctioned curtains, then banged closed.

The porn dealer was gone.

Ford grabbed his tactical bag before testing the sliding doors.



Yes, they were locked. He swung a leg over the railing, ignored the dizzying distance to the beach below, and made the long step to the next balcony which was screened by landscape foliage. A potted plant crashed to the tile when he pushed his bag through, then followed. Beyond billowing curtains, through open doors, the room went silent.

Standing, looking in, he was prepared to apologize to the couple until he accessed the scene. A fit man wearing medical whites and a name badge glared back—a massage therapist whose table had collapsed on the floor during a struggle. Askew on the table, still battling to cover her body with a sheet, was the brunette he'd seen by the pool.

“Didn’t know you was there, sir,” the man glowered. “She want to call the constables, fine, but what you think they’ll say? She’s the one requested MY services.”

In Nassau, even extortion threats sounded as melodic as a woodwind flute.

“Are you hurt?” Ford asked the woman. He pushed the curtains aside and stepped in.

She was confused, and mad enough to sputter, “I want this bastard fired. If you work for the hotel, I want to file a—”

“That man don’t work here,” the therapist said. Until then, he’d been backing toward the door. Now, looking from Ford to the broken pottery outside, he figured out the situation. “Yeah, what the police gonna say? This guest hire me, take her clothes off, her own free accord. I already know who they gonna believe.”

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“You cheeky son of a bitch.” The woman tried to scoot away; the sheet fell. She folded her arms to cover herself until Ford yanked the sheet free and tossed it over her. He wore a baggy white guayabera shirt, tails out to cover the waistband of his khaki slacks. Again he asked the woman if she was hurt.

“Who are you?” she demanded. “For Christ’s sake, call the manager . . . or do something. This man tried to rape me.”

“Naw, come on,” the therapist said in a soothing way. “That ain’t true. You want to know the real problem? This fella come here to rob you, that’s what they’ll figure out. Why else he climb over that balcony? You being such a wealthy lady, they’ll know a poor boy like me wouldn’t do nothing so stupid.”

“Bastard,” the woman said, while the man grinned.

“Ain’t you the spicy one,” he countered. “I’m not the type to make trouble, so tell you what. Mister, I’m willing to leave polite-like—but I want compensation for all the fun I missed, plus the coin you lost me. Sound fair?”

“Very fair,” Ford said. He reached back as if for a billfold but came up with a 9mm pistol and leveled the sights at the man’s nose.

“Where do you want it?” he asked.

The massage therapist, no longer smiling, said, “Shit, man. What the . . . Don’t make me take that away from you, ‘cause you won’t like what happens next.”

Staring over the sights, Ford cocked the pistol, and spoke to the woman: “Get some clothes on and call the police, if that’s

what you want. But not from here. There's a house phone near the elevators."

The therapist turned to her. "See there, Miz Cobourg! He plans to shoot me 'cause he don't want witnesses," while the woman asked Ford, "Is it true? The constables won't believe me?"

"Not a chance," Ford said. "You made the appointment through the concierge?"

"Of course," she said, then understood the implications. "Oh hell. Yes, it was a damn fool thing to do, I suppose." She got to her feet with the sheet around her, no longer afraid, just angry and undecided.

"It happens a lot in places like this. If you're worried about headlines, I'd pack your things now and not look back. Or just forget it."

"Who *are* you?" she asked again.

"In my bag, there's a roll of duct tape," Ford replied. Then, to the therapist, said, "Get on the floor or I'll shoot you in the knee."

The woman, kneeling over a tan tactical bag, said, "I shouldn't have come. I didn't think I'd be recognized here."

He waited for the elevator doors to close before dialing valet parking. "This is Mr. Lutz, room eight-oh-three, would you bring my car around? A lady friend will be there in a minute. Please load her bags."

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When Ford stepped out into the salt-dense heat, the brunette, wearing sunglasses and a scarf, was in the left-side passenger seat of a raven blue Range Rover. He folded a twenty-euro note around the valet ticket, and confided to the attendant, “If a man shows up claiming to be me, it’s the lady’s husband. Understand?”

“A jealous one . . . Yes, sir,” the attendant agreed.

Ford added another bill. “Can you blame him? I’ll double this if you give us time for a quiet dinner.”

The woman didn’t speak until they were heading north on East Bay Road. “Did you shoot him?”

Puzzling, the cool way she was handling this, both now and in the room. Instead of hysterics and pointed questions about why he was armed, she remained subdued; no . . . distracted, as if she had more important matters on her mind.

“I taped his mouth, that’s all. I can drop you at another hotel, but that might not be smart. Depends on how the police deal with it.”

“Then what was that noise as I was walking to the elevator? I heard something, a sharp bang or thud. It came from my room. For god’s sake, please tell me you didn’t.”

Ford pretended to concentrate on the road. “If there’s no reason to stay in Nassau, there are daily flights to Cuba. It’s a lot more scenic—and safer.”

She lowered her window, saying, “Dear Jesus, you did. You shot him.”

“You wouldn’t have gotten in the car if you believed that.” He looked over at her profile, the wind tangling her hair. “Or maybe you would’ve.”

“I was unaware I had a choice. A man with a gun comes over my balcony, I assume you’ve been paid to shadow me. A security agent of some sort—who else carries a role of tape and three passports in his bag?”

For a moment, she made eye contact; an up-down sweep, then was done with him. “I’ll admit you don’t look the part. More like a math prof I fancied at university. The type you surprise in the stacks at a library, who spills soup on his tie.” She touched a button and lounged back. Her window slid into place, sealing out the monoxide din of traffic. “Aren’t those always the ones who fool you?”

Ford braked left-footed, swung around a pedicab, and turned abruptly onto Baillou Hill Road, before consulting his mirror. It was four miles to the south side of the island. He drove for a while. “Cobourg—I’m not familiar with the name. What should I call you?”

“I’d prefer you didn’t.”

“For now, at least. He said you’re wealthy. Are you an heiress or an actress?”

Cynical laughter was the response. “Come off it, please. You know precisely who I am. Who hired you?”

He’d been wrong. Her aloofness didn’t signal distraction, nor was she subdued. It signaled *indifference*. A woman who didn’t care what happened. It suggested she was very rich, or had powerful connections . . . or was teetering on an emotional ledge.

Ford’s eyes darted from the mirror to his phone. He touched redial and handed it to her. “A friend of mine should answer.

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When he does, tell him to book two seats for us to Lauderdale and two seats to Havana. The earliest possible flights; doesn't matter which airlines. He's got my name and Amex number. You can text him the rest of your information. He's not the type to carry a notebook."

"Just like that, huh? Four seats, only two people. Are we traveling separately?"

"Stay in Nassau, if you want. Keep in mind police don't report sexual assaults here—not if a tourist is involved. It's bad for the local economy."

Her window scrolled halfway down, then up again. "Filthy little island, isn't it? I was shocked when that clod recognized me. I certainly didn't register under my real name." She paused. "The boy at the valet called you Mr. Lutz. I assume that's not your name. You nicked some poor fool's rental car, didn't you?"

Tomlinson's phone was ringing. Ford heard it while he studied the mirror, where a beat-up white van had joined a black Nissan.

Before putting the phone to her ear, she asked, "Why don't you speak to him? He's your friend."

"I need both hands to drive." He downshifted and accelerated; made a sharp turn onto Cowpen Road, then swung abruptly onto a sand trail that ribboned downward through a landslide of shacks, the Caribbean Sea beyond.

"We're being followed," he said. "Keep your head down while you talk. One of them has a gun."

# 2

Tomlinson had hoped to get his first look at the lake, Chino Hole, and Tootsie Barlow's cabin by now. Unfortunately, Tomlinson, the Zen master, was lost. Alone, too; east of Naples, off a stretch of lonely asphalt, State Road 29, that fishtailed north through sawgrass to Immokalee, then Labelle sixty miles away.

*Break down out here, he thought, something with scales will eat you.*

After a mile of cabbage palms, the sand road was blocked by a rusty chain. No room to turn around because a canal ran along one side, a deep ditch on the other.

He got out and pissed into the ditch, where a stack of railroad

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ties lay among poison ivy. Beyond, through the mossy gloom, several old boxcars had been abandoned. Entangled by vines, the cars resembled huge rock formations.

An old train trestle, he realized. Beyond the chain, the road burrowed arrow straight, but no wider than a cart path, through the trees.

Except for the chain, the area matched Tootsie's description of the road that led to his cabin. In the 1920s, Barlow's family had settled near a train outpost that had prospered until all the big timber was logged out. Then Prohibition ended. With no whiskey or cypress to haul, the Seaboard Line had gone tits-up. In this part of Florida anyway. Until then, the Barlows had been railroad gypsies. So they'd migrated south to Key Largo, learned fishing as a trade, but still owned sixty swampy acres north of Carnestown and Jerome.

Continue driving or explore on foot? Tomlinson was deciding when "Wild Thing" erupted from his phone. Ford's name flashed on the screen.

"How'd your talk go, Doc? If you *gave* a talk."

To his confusion, a woman with a silky British accent said, "Your friend would like some . . . would like . . . he'd like airline seats booked, if you please. Do you have a pen . . . a pen and paper . . . handy?" It sounded as if she were on a roller coaster, the way her voice jumped tracks. Lots of bouncy, banging background noise as if a car were careening down a hill.

He sighed. Welcome to Marion Ford's world.

"Sure," Tomlinson said. "Let me speak to Doc."



“Who? Oh.” She muffled the phone, then returned. “He’s rather busy at the moment—learning to drive, I’m afraid. I’ll try to make this as brief as . . . For god’s sake, *do* slow down.”

“Pardon me?”

“Sorry, sorry. Not you. The roads here are rubbish. Tell me something. Is your friend crooked or is he mad?”

“If you’re not sure, trust me, he isn’t mad. Usually, he’s just . . . well, dull. Why the airline reservations? I’m not his secretary, you know.”

“Has he ever killed anyone? Intentionally, I mean. Oh, brilliant . . . this should be interesting. To the left, for god’s sake . . . Stay to the left!”

Tomlinson replied, “I like your style. Who are you?”

“Never mind that,” she said. “He wants reservations out of Nassau.” Then Ford came on the phone, saying, “This is important. She’ll text you the rest. We’re flying out as soon as possible.”

He hung up.

Tomlinson sat there, thinking, *What the hell?*

The woman’s voice was something he could fall in love with. Understated irony; an amused calm that hinted of lacy lingerie beneath a starched blouse veneer. He pictured her: black high heels and a glimpse of cleavage served with high tea.

Why the hell was she with Ford? The biologist was no barrel of laughs—well, except for the time he’d accidentally eaten magic mushrooms on a piece of baked fish. Psilocybin had unleashed three hours of snappy insights and repartee from a man who’d never limboed in his life. Clearly, the two were in trouble of some

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type. Nothing new there, which was okay. Trouble was well within Ford's wheelhouse. He was a steady, resourceful man.

The only recourse was to stand by and await the Brit's text.

Five minutes passed, then ten. Soon Tomlinson refocused on the chain that forbade entry to the trail beyond. Keep driving or explore on foot?

He locked his van and walked.

After half a mile, the scent of fresh water lured him down a side trail, where a rock wall lay in shambles. The wall suggested the land had once been owned by monied gentry—an old hunting club, perhaps. On a bushy straightaway, the skeleton of a gun stand proved his paranormal powers had synced with the milieu.

*Excellent.*

Walking meditation is not easily practiced aboard a sailboat. Tomlinson took advantage of the terrain. Measured steps and measured breathing. He also made use of a potent doobie secreted in the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt. Soon, swamp maples; rose-colored leaves caressed the senses. Images of men in antiquated topcoats slipped past his eyes, their shotguns held as casually as umbrellas. A steam whistle howled; beneath his feet, the Earth vibrated with the grinding weight of steel on steel. A passing train tugged him out of the past, through a lacy willow curtain, into the present.

And there it was: Chino Hole. The lake was a limestone sink-hole a hundred yards across, the surface glazed by a June blue sky. No remnants of a dock, no structures on any kind, yet a glowering aura clung to the trees. Dragonflies kited; mocking-birds sang. Tomlinson sensed the tranquility was as misleading as the silence that follows a sustained explosion.

Dark events . . . violence. Something wicked had been quieted here by the decades and . . . what else?

Fear. Of course. Fear was always a component. Another more subtle catalyst was tangible yet difficult to isolate.

Tomlinson allowed his senses to blur. When he ceased seeking the truth, the truth flowed in, then through him.

Shame. That was another component. Communal shame. Emotion is energy; ions resonated and took shape as a dome that encased the lake like a bubble. Trapped within were too many shadows to contemplate at one sitting.

He returned to the present, re-lit the joint, and let his eyes roam. The lake was a mirror, its radius halved by the reflection of shimmering cypress trees. At the center was a ring of silver-blue sky, despite squall clouds that threatened from the east. Occasionally fish breached the surface; a slow carousel of tail fins that were unmistakable.

*Tarpon.* Here, in this landlocked lake, thirty-some miles from saltwater, lived a population of saltwater's most coveted sporting fish.

*Doc's gonna love this,* Tomlinson thought. Then stiffened when, behind him, a branch snapped. Bushes rustled and crunched with

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momentary panic. He turned, peering through a fabric of willows. Someone . . . or something . . . had been moving quietly toward him but had stumbled.

“Hello?” He held up the joint as if it were a white flag. “Always happy to share with friends.”

A rock displaced a gathering of shells. Low branches parted with the passage of someone, or something, making a careful retreat.

“Don’t be afraid. Seriously, no one in their right mind’s afraid of me.”

Low branches paused as if to consider.

Storm clouds rumbled from the distance. Then into Tomlinson’s head came a whispered, unspoken reply: *If you run . . . he will catch you.*

The shock this produced was dizzying. “Geezus, dude. That’s some nasty shit to say to anybody. Why would I run? I’m just standing here smoking a jay, enjoying the fish.” Nervous laughter escaped his lips. “Think those are tarpon?”

No response.

“Hey. Who’s gonna catch me? Uh . . . not that I want to meet the guy. It was more of a rhetorical question.”

He looked at the lake and gauged the distance in case he had to swim for his life. A windy dust devil flew toward him, crossing the water with the velocity of a wasp. Nearby, low limbs parted with the crunch of heavy footsteps. Crows spooked into the blue, an array of raven scars.

“Okay, okay, you win,” Tomlinson hollered. “I’ll be showing off now. Sorry if I was trespassing.”

He started up the path, and made it only a few steps, when a voice, neither male nor female, communicated from inside his skull.

*Run . . . He’ll make you scream.*

“Enough with the bullshit! I’m about to piss my pants as it is.” He spun a slow circle while edging his way toward the path. “Who are you?”

*Follow me,* the voice demanded.

“How? I can’t follow what I can’t see.”

*You know. That’s why you’re here.*

“The hell I do. Seriously,” he muttered. He’d been afraid something like this would happen. On the other hand . . . He looked at the smoldering joint in an accusing way. Was it possible he had imagined the voice? A mirage, perhaps, caused by high resin content, low blood sugar, and rumbling thunder?

For sure. There were many times he’d conjured a bipolar exchange with the creature inside his brain—an evil bastard twin who delighted in mayhem.

He tugged at his hair to demand contact. “Gemini scum. How’d you like another round of shock therapy? If I go, asshole, *you’re* stuck for the duration.”

This seemed to work until the voice reached out to him from a stand of cypress:

*Come. You understand.*

No, Tomlinson didn’t, but he followed anyway, pulled along

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as if on a conveyor. A path through the trees was sodden with moss, edged by stumps the size of pterodactyl beaks. Temperature dropped; tendrils of mist twisted in silence. A couple of times, he called out for directions. Pointless. He was traveling parallel to the cart path, which was a comfort of sorts. The road where he'd parked the van couldn't be far.

This was true. He knew it for certain when ahead, among shadows, loomed what appeared to be massive rock formations: The old boxcars he'd seen earlier. Five of the monsters, perhaps more. They lay in a zigzag jumble beneath a cloak of cascading vines. It was if they'd been abandoned after a bad train derailment or jettisoned from the sky.

Chaos, rust, oil, decay. *Scars left from the Industrial Revolution*, Tomlinson thought. *Good riddance.*

As he drew closer, his eyes began to assemble order. Silver light filtered through the cypress dome. Details emerged. The shambles of a rock wall formed a partial circle. What might have been a fire pit appeared, then a communal sitting area. Overhead, horizontal vines turned out to be wires for battery-powered lights. No, not batteries . . . Beneath a collapsed awning was the remains of a generator.

People had lived here, he realized. Families. Railroad laborers, the poorest of the poor, had found shelter and a way to survive. Among the ferns was a rusted tin of baby formula . . . the arm off a wooden doll; a wheel with spokes; many broken bottles.

Tomlinson squatted and held up a shard of embossed glass. The color, purple amethyst, suggested the bottle was very old.

*Won Ton Soy Sauce*  
*Havana, Cuba*

I'll be damned. Chinese condiments from the days before Castro. Long before. Weird. Or was it?

In the shadows, the nearest boxcar squatted on buried axles. Lettering on the side, a faded yellow, showed itself through the vines:

*Sawgrass Clipper*

It wasn't a boxcar. A boxcar wouldn't have been named as if it were a sailing yacht—or a double entendre. But a private car might. Yeah . . . ornate brass molding, green with age, confirmed it had been a plush custom coach. Money, big money, had once ruled this area.

He left the bottle as he'd found it and waded through ferns for a closer look at the area near the coach. Draped above, vestiges of what might have been rags drew his attention. Not rags, really . . . more like pennants strung on wires, but the years had shredded them into streamers. In Tomlinson's mind, silence was displaced by echoes of human activity. It was like stumbling onto the remains of a birthday party decades after the candles had burned out.

Or . . . a religious ceremony. The way the pennants were strung reminded him of Tibetan prayer flags he'd seen while hiking through Nepal.

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*Prayer flags . . .*

This possibility meshed with the soy sauce bottle he'd found. The links were Buddhism and Asia.

He felt an electric chill, and focused on the railroad car. It was the size of a semi-trailer, dwarfing him. He was that close. Nostrials flared, he waited, listened, all senses alert.

A breeze soughed to and fro through ferns and lacy cypress leaves while, overhead, the high tree canopy remained motionless.

There was no wind despite squall thermals inland. So what had caused the ferns to sway with an airless seesaw sound?

Breathing. That's what he heard. Could feel the steady inhale-exhale respirations; a pneumatic rasp amplified by steel walls.

Something was inside the railroad car, hiding. Waiting.

For the first time in many minutes, he attempted communication, backing away as he did. "Hey, man, what . . . who are you?"

A wordless rumble told him, *Open the door. Set us free.*

Tomlinson didn't speak, for there was no need. He only had to imagine his reply, which was, *Never.*

Repeating the word like a mantra, he walked backwards and sidestepped his way to the cart path but kept his eyes on the rock formation of railroad cars.

Not until his van was in sight did he run.