

MOUTHPARTS

Jimmy Dismal was puzzled. The bug's mouthparts weren't right, and he wasn't one to hold back when it came to hinky mouthparts, especially these days.

"Say, fellas," he piped up, "see those mouthparts? Something's wrong here."

Horace looked up, squinting through the thick glasses behind his goggles. "How so?" he asked. He poked at the bug's mandibles with his screwdriver and pried its jaws open. "Looks fine to me. Maybe a little bigger than most, but shit..."

On the bank above them, Scaler hawked a loogie into the swamp and yawned. His neck muscles were tight and he was sick and tired of duck-walking through the mud looking for bug tracks. He hankered for a smoke and a cold beer. He'd found them their bug, hefty fucker too, size of a shoat, and now he wanted a break.

Jimmy pointed. "See there? The edges don't meet up, lip-wise. Got a big ol' overbite right above where the sac should be. Like it's got a wad of dip in there or something. I don't like it."

"Poison sac's right there, just on the bottom instead of up on top," Horace said, prising the bug's mandibles open wider. He leaned in for a closer look. "Hmm, regular one on top, another one under. That's different. See?" He stroked a globule of venom out of the swollen upper sac with the tip of his screwdriver. "Look at that. Juicy sucker. That's what they pay us for. Toad's gonna be busy with this one."

"You sure it's the right kind?"

"Bug's a fucking bug," Horace said. He thumbed into his goggles to wipe away the sweat. "Long as it ain't a spitter, and they're all bred out, dead. Toad won't care, if we sedate it and bag it right."

"Horace, it's moving!" Jimmy yelled. "Watch out!"

Scaler dropped into a crouch on the creek bank and jacked a round into the sawed-off.

Horace lurched backwards and tripped. His goggles were still fogged-up. He fell on his ass and frantically tried to backpedal, but his boots were mired ankle-deep in the mud.

"Scaler!" Jimmy hollered. "Get over here!"

"Ain't supposed to be movin', Jimmy," Scaler hissed. "It's *daytime*."

Jimmy shot him a look. "No shit, Sherlock."

"I can't move!" Horace yelled. "I'm stuck! Hurry the fuck up!"

"Get out of the way, Jimmy," Scaler said. "I can hit it from here."

Jimmy backed away and watched in fascinated horror as the bug jack-knifed and righted itself on its bristled hind legs. It swivelled its massive thorax toward Horace and took an aggressive step forward.

"Oh God," Horace moaned, "don't let it..."

The shotgun roared and missed. A fist-sized gobbet of sludge splattered the saw-grass behind the advancing bug, tearing a gouge in the mud.

"Shit," Scaler said hoarsely, "double-ought-buck. Wrong load." He cracked the sawed-off and shoved a fresh cartridge into the breech.

The bug paused, then crept forward again. Jimmy could hear the clicking of its jointed limbs as it crossed a patch of dead leaves. Beads of moisture oozed from its venom sac and gathered on its mandibles. It was a foot away from Horace's trapped legs, its black eyes wide open and unblinking. It scuttled forward, faster, then stretched its wings and jumped.

It was on him.

Horace screamed. His body bowed in an impossible arc, and his bare feet were torn from his boots. For a brief moment his pumping legs held his grimy feet in the air above his belly like little flags, his toes splayed wide in agony, and then all of his muscles collapsed into disjointed spasm.

"Scaler?" Jimmy took another step back.

The shotgun roared again.

It was dusk, and the light was fading. Jimmy's boat was hidden within a dense tangle of mangroves, moored to the trunk of a bald cypress growing ten

feet from the water's edge. He paused and checked his homemade alarm system before stepping out from the cover of the trees. The length of monofilament he'd stretched across the trail leading to the boat was intact, and the thin layer of dead leaves he'd scattered across the bank was undisturbed. Satisfied, he pulled the boat in close and vaulted aboard. *I'm never going to get this thing paid off, he thought.* He slipped off his backpack and placed it in the shade of a tattered canvas awning that stretched from the wheelhouse to the stern. His eyes narrowed as he calculated the dollar value of the football-sized bulge in the backpack. He wondered what his cut would be. So what if this one was buckshot damaged? Fucking cousin Toad, sitting cozy in his lab all day while Jimmy slogged around like an animal in the swamp. He wouldn't be surprised if the sonofabitch was skimming off the top for himself. Hell, if it wasn't for Jimmy's contacts on the street they wouldn't even have a buyer. He only needed thirty-four thousand bucks and *Isabel* would be his free and clear. And he'd go straight back to freelance game-fishing for rich tourists, with off-season all to himself. God, he missed off-season.

"Ok, Scaler," he called out. "You can come out now. It's safe."

Scaler crept out of the undergrowth and nervously picked his way down the slope to the boat. He held the sawed-off at the ready, but his eyes were huge and frightened. His arms were bloodied by the saw-grass they had forced their way through at a dead run, and his t-shirt was a torn, sweat-soaked mess.

"Give me that shotgun," Jimmy said. He took it, and then helped Scaler climb over the gunwale. "There's bottles of water in that cooler over there," he said, as the man slumped to the deck. He pushed off the bank and fed out line until they were afloat in deeper water some ten yards offshore.

Scaler looked up at Jimmy with haunted eyes. "You maybe got any beer?" he croaked. "I been dreamin' about cold beer ever since..." He shuddered and rubbed his face with his bloody hands. "Ever since...what happened."

Jimmy squatted down, grabbed Scaler's face in both hands, and stared into his bloodshot eyes. "Listen to me. It wasn't your fault. It was on him. We

both know he was fucked. They aren't supposed to be able to move in daylight, you know it, I know it, he knew it. You saved him from dying in a horrible way. I woulda done the same thing for you. So forget about it. It's done." His phone buzzed in his pocket and he stood and fished it out. The sun dipped below the horizon and the water's surface rippled with a slight but welcome breeze. Toad usually called at sunset.

"Dismal here."

"I'm sure it is, Jimmy," a woman's voice on the other end replied. "But it doesn't have to be."

"What? Who is this? How'd you get this number?"

"I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse," the woman said. "You know that movie?"

"Listen, lady, I've had a tough day. So why don't you just fuck off and go bother somebody else." Jimmy ended the call and retrieved the backpack lying on the deck. He climbed the short ladder into the wheelhouse and flipped on the overhead light. His phone buzzed again. He hoped it was Toad. It wasn't.

"What?"

"Jimmy, Jimmy...is that any way to treat your new business partner? Hang up on her? You forget about the horse-head scene?"

He was intrigued despite himself. He opened the icebox and took out two bottles of beer. "Ten seconds. You got ten seconds."

"Bug juice, Jimmy. Bug juice. You can get it, and I want to buy it. All of it."

Jimmy eyed the backpack.

"No idea what you're talking about. Sorry."

"How about this: Mr. Pilar is...retired, you might say. I have arranged to take on his obligations."

Jimmy leaned out of the wheelhouse and snapped his fingers. Scaler looked up and Jimmy tossed him one of the beers. He raised a finger to his lips for silence and waved him away. Scaler nodded and scooted to the stern with the cold bottle pressed to his temple.

The sun dropped below the horizon, and mosquitoes began their incessant whine. Jimmy took a sip of his beer, propping the phone up on one angular shoulder.

"What's this retired bullshit? You know Pilar you know he's not about to fucking retire."

"Knew, Jimmy. Knew."

Jimmy turned slowly and scanned 360 degrees around his boat in the failing light. Nada. Nothing to see, just the wacky lady in his ear on the phone. He looked up. No drone.

"And you are who exactly?" he asked. He took another swig of his beer. For some reason it didn't taste as good as the first one. "Where's Gonzales?"

"Gonzales works for me now. He has been promoted."

"Gonzales is a two-bit hood. What do you mean, promoted?"

"Jimmy, I want to buy quarts, literally quarts, of raw bug juice. Is that so difficult to understand? Pilar is no longer a part of the equation. I am."

"You and Gonzales?"

"He's a useful tool. How do you think I got your number?"

"That cocksucker." He paused and scanned the bank again. "It doesn't come in quarts."

"Well, how much can you get? Litres, pints, fluid ounces, what?"

"Drips and drabs, lady, dribs and drabs." He caught movement in the mangroves out of the corner of his eye. "Think eyedroppers, not turkey basters." He pressed the phone against his leg and whistled to Scaler, pointed to the shotgun. Scaler crept barefoot across the deck and hoisted the twelve-gauge, looking out at the bank. Good, he'd seen it too. "Sorry, miss," he said into the phone, "but I've got to go. Tell you what, I'll be anchored on the south side of Gull Key tomorrow afternoon. Why don't you come by for a little powwow. You can tell me whatever it is you think you're talking about."

"How do I get there?"

"Hire an airboat from the Thousand Islands marina. Ask for T-Bone. He'll know. Gull Key, south side inlet, Toad's place." He killed the call and put the

phone on silent. He looked down and did a double-take. Something inside his backpack was moving.

Toad Welch was safely ensconced in his treehouse on Gull Key well before nightfall, enjoying the slight breeze off the bay. He and Jimmy had spent weeks building it, sawing and hammering a layer of plywood into position between the sturdy limbs of a giant swamp mahogany, by far the tallest thing on the island. Hammock, tarp, mosquito net, tiny deck, canvas chair, cooking shelf, chemical camp toilet, bucket shower...it was home. It made him feel like the TV Tarzan, if he ignored his flabby belly and the annoying prickly-heat rash scouring his crotch. He wished he had a Jane for company, or at least a can of baking soda to soothe the itch. He sighed. His last girlfriend had run off with a Key West yoga instructor, her parting gift a cluster of voracious crab lice entrenched in his pubic hair. His converted shipping-container laboratory down below was way too hot and muggy for a good night's sleep, and he didn't have enough gasoline stashed to run the generator all night. Plus there were no windows. The bugs didn't mind, of course. They liked it in there. In fact, they thrived. And thrived.

His nickname had stuck all through his undergraduate and post-doctorate years, ever since he licked his first Sonoran desert toad as a freshman at Arizona State University. That transformative night led to a PhD in psychopharmacology, a career mired in academic controversy, explosive accusations of inappropriate sexual advances, and the depressing loss of his hair. About his genius there was no debate. His skill in a laboratory was legendary; it was his judgement that was questionable. That and his loose adherence to professional ethics and federal drug laws.

He poured a pre-mixed martini into a thermos cup and stretched out on his deck. It was a spectacular sunset, rippling with golds and pinks that made him think about how lucky he was. He had almost a quarter beaker of distilled venom in the lab safe and enough reagent to turn it into two thousand doses of...what should he call it? It deserved a name, after all the work he'd put into

engineering it. It was way better than the ayahuasca vine he had sampled up the Amazon, and far superior to those bitter peyote buttons from northern Mexico, it kicked LSD on it's ass, and forget about weed, hash or opium...this shit was *dynamite*! Life changing, mind-altering, the best 'doors of perception' high he'd ever imagined...and he was finally going to get the recognition he deserved. Mr. Pilar paid in thick wads of cash, and after that initial taste hit the streets the slimy little bastard was begging for a permanent supply. Half the junkies in Ft. Lauderdale were off the hard stuff and tripping their brains out on Toad's creation instead. He felt good about that, like a public service. Fuck a bunch of Narcan spray, just take a hit of *this*!

He sipped his martini and chuckled as he recalled how it had all come together. A chance meeting with a Costa Rican ethno-sociologist at a medical convention in Miami, a clandestine trip (with sour-faced cousin Jimmy as his bodyguard) to the headwaters of the Orinoco to imbibe fermented insect venom with the tattooed headman of an isolated tribe, the resulting indescribable, incandescent high, the successful retrieval of several live specimens of *Onychocerus albitarsis*, and a solid year of intensive genetic tinkering in the lab. He had done the impossible and engineered a viable population of cross-bred insects that could be milked of their uniquely psychoactive venom. The original 'juice bugs', as he called them, were unfortunately too small to produce more than a measly drop at a time, if that, so he manipulated their DNA, inserted it into the fattest female stag beetles he could find, and induced them to lay their eggs. Genius! A hatch of beefy, venomous, carnivorous juice bugs just waiting to be milked dry every thirty days.

Something rustled in the undergrowth down below and he frowned. The only hitch had been the explosive progression in size from the original batch of bugs to the ones that hatched over the next several generations. From an average of four inches long and just shy of two ounces each, they had increased in bulk to roughly fifteen inches in length and weighed an easy three-quarters of a pound apiece. He had no idea how that had happened. A few of them grew even freakishly larger. It was a biological marvel, but he

didn't waste valuable time worrying about it. He had eight bugs to manage, and the bigger they grew the faster he was running out of laboratory space for the milking prep. He hadn't anticipated their craving for carrion either, which was a huge expense, not to mention their increasingly pugnacious behaviour. He chuckled again. The little rascals had *attitude*! He had spliced a gene or two and enhanced their nocturnal proclivities, at least. They reliably hibernated from sunup to sundown, completely motionless, which made them easier to handle. Transporting and storing meat for them became a problem way out there in the Everglades, so he gradually released a half dozen of them in pairs on some of the remoter, uninhabited keys where they could forage on their own. Of course they couldn't breed, fly, or swim, he'd made sure of that. Plenty of deer, feral hogs, raccoons, rabbits, squirrels and gators for them to eat, plus running wild appeared to enhance the potency of their venom. *Stronger the juice, the less reagent needed, money saved...* maybe they'd even solve the invasive Burmese python problem, who knew? The movement down below came again, and he leaned over the edge of his deck on his pot-belly to take a better look. It was too dark to make out any details, but *something* in the shadows was nosing at the door of his lab. He knew that the pair that roamed free on Gull Key couldn't climb, but still, it was a little creepy...

Jimmy aimed his marine spotlight at the mangrove bank and fired it up. 20,000 lumens at the flick of a switch. Scaler stood ready in the stern with the sawed-off. A boy limped out of the tree-line into the dazzling beam, holding a burlap sack away from his body in one hand and shielding his eyes with the other. His skinny limbs were draped in an oversized t-shirt and cut-off dungarees, ratty canvas sneakers on his feet. He looked about thirteen.

He called out, "Mister, can't you help me? I've got me one, but there's more, and they're following me. I can't swim very good, and I can't climb, my leg...it's all tore up."

Jimmy swept the mangroves with his light. "You alone?" he yelled.

"Anybody else with you?"

"Just me," the boy answered, looking over his shoulder. "Mister, I think I can hear them coming. I'm scared."

"You mean bugs?"

"Yeah, those bugs."

"Okay, you start wading out to me. They don't like water and they can't fly. I'll haul her in closer and you can come aboard. Won't be more than chest deep, don't worry. And keep your shoes on. There's urchins out there."

The boy limped into the shallows, holding the burlap sack high and distant. He sloshed further out until he was waist deep. His eyes were wide and terrified in his grimy face.

Jimmy said, "Scaler, take the light and keep an eye out. They get too close to him, shoot." He grasped the mooring line and pulled it taut. The boat moved slowly shoreward. An ibis voiced a strident alarm call from somewhere in the mangrove tangle.

"There, coming down to the waterline," Scaler whispered. "Two of them."

Jimmy grunted and pulled on the line until he thought his gut would bust. Two? That was weird. He had one in his backpack, the boy said he'd caught one, and that meant there shouldn't be any left alive on the key. Whatever. Damn, he missed Horace. He'd have to ask Toad.

The boat slid toward the bank a foot at a time. The boy was about fifteen feet away when Jimmy heard something massive slither from a mudbank to his left and splash into the black water. The spotlight swung and picked out a triangular disturbance on the surface, headed directly for the boy.

"Scaler?"

"I see it. Gator, big one."

"Shit."

"Yep."

The boy had heard it too, and he churned for the boat, gasping. The alligator surged forward with powerful sweeps of its tail, its snout and eyes now visible in the beam of the spotlight. Its eyes glowed red.

Jimmy hauled on the line for all he was worth and muscled the boat a few yards closer to the frantic boy, but the alligator was gaining.

"Scaler, get ready to shoot it."

"Kid's in the way."

"Fuck!"

The boy was almost within arm's reach. "Grab my hand!" Jimmy shouted. "Come on! Over here!"

The alligator drove straight toward his flailing prey, honing in on the smell of blood from the boy's injured leg. He wasn't in a hurry. It would be an easy catch. He would grab the meat and roll beneath the surface, all the while shaking and tearing it to pieces between his jaws. He had done it hundreds of time, and he knew how it would end. He was hungry, and soon he would be full. He was close, and the membranes on his third eyelids shuttered his vulnerable eyes to protect them as he attacked. He gaped his jaws and hissed as he went in for the kill.

The boy was now chest-deep in the brackish water, but somehow still holding the burlap sack above his head. The boat's hull loomed over him less than a yard away, Jimmy's outstretched hand almost within reach. The gator's mouth opened wide and its jagged row of teeth gleamed in the spotlight as it closed in on him. The boy spun to face the advancing reptile and waited for one terrified second, then lofted the sack into the alligator's gaping mouth.

And all hell broke loose.

Toad was pissed off, half-drunk, and afraid. Harsh voices were raised at the entrance to his lab, and someone with a flashlight was bashing at the padlock with a hammer. The key was securely attached to the chain around his neck, but he didn't know how long the lock's hasp would hold up to a serious beating. He couldn't tell exactly in the gloom, but he guessed there were three of them down there. *Who the fuck were they?* He looked around for anything he could use as a weapon, but aside from his steel martini thermos there was

nothing. He held his breath and hoped they wouldn't shine the flashlight up into his tree.

"The hell with it," someone snapped, "let's go back to the boat. Fucking mosquitoes are driving me nuts. He's gone off somewhere. We'll wait until morning, the little bastard'll show up then."

He followed the flashlight's beam as the three men trooped through the coconut palms toward the inlet, then picked up his phone. He tapped out a text and hit send. He shook his thermos, and was relieved to feel the remnants of a martini sloshing around in its depths.

A scream of agony suddenly split the darkness, and Toad's phone slipped from his hand. It bounced off his flip-flopped foot, skittered across the deck and dropped into the void. *Oh fuck!* Another scream punctured the night. *Oh shit, he thought, it must be Donnie and Melanie!* The first pair of beetles he had released were his favourites, despite their hideously elongated thoraxes and bloodthirsty temperaments, and he had rewarded them with pet names. They were the reason he spent his nights on a platform thirty feet above the island's boggy floor. They were three times the size of cane rats and always hungry. Over the last few months he had listened to harrowing, wet snorts and grunts at night as the ravenous arthropods learned to hunt and feed themselves. It was the stuff of nightmares, but Toad slept well regardless. They were *his* babies after all, and the female's venom sac in particular oozed reliable droplets of primo juice. But, Jesus, they liked to eat.

Gunshots rang out, followed by more screaming, additional gunshots, and then silence. A handful of fireflies flickered past in the darkness and disappeared. He strained to hear what was happening two hundred yards away on the beach but the quiet was absolute. He considered unfurling his rope ladder and climbing down to find his phone, but immediately discarded the thought. No, he would wait until daylight. Whatever had happened was over and done with, and there was nothing he could do at night. Nothing at all. He wished Jimmy was here. Jimmy was as mean as fuck and could handle anything. Toad quietly unscrewed the cap on his thermos with trembling fingers and drained its dregs in one long gulp.

The alligator's jaws clamped down on the burlap sack with a crushing bite strength of 2125 pounds per square inch and ruptured its contents. With one wrenching, sideways shake it sucked the bag into its cavernous throat and swallowed it whole. For a scant second it floated motionless, five yards from the boat, then it reared its leathery head back and bellowed. Nesting shorebirds erupted into panicked flight at the horrendous sound. It bucked and lunged straight up out of the lagoon for half of its twelve foot length, its ridged tail churning the black water into whirlpools. The boat bobbed and swayed in the wake of the turmoil. The gator landed on its back and rolled, hissing and groaning, its unhinged jaws snapping at empty air with vicious snaps of its teeth. Its eyes bulged and blazed like coals in the harsh beam of the spotlight. With one final convulsive shudder it sank in a maelstrom of sea-water foam and disappeared. Scaler watched it go. He shifted mental gears and trained the light back on the two bugs. Their brittle carapaces gleamed as they scuttled back and forth on the beach. They stretched out their stubby wings in a furious display of aggression, but kept to the dry sand a few feet from the water's edge.

Jimmy dragged the shivering boy aboard by one skinny arm and poled the boat out into deeper water. "It's okay," he said. "You're safe now."

The boy was lying flat on his back in his baggy t-shirt like a bedraggled, rain-soaked moth, a bloody rag tied around his right calf. He sat up and peered over the gunwale. "Where's that 'gator at?" he asked. "Sucker was huge. Hide's gotta be worth, what, seven-fifty? Maybe nine hundred? Fucker ate my bug. I want me that skin."

Scaler walked up from the stern, the twelve-gauge in one hand, spotlight in the other. "The 'gator's done for, and the bugs split," he told Jimmy. "Run off back into the brush. Guess they didn't like the light." He looked down at the boy and frowned. "Hey, ain't you Daryl's kid? Daryl Pill?"

"He ain't my real dad. He's a pervert."

Jimmy asked, "What's your name?"

"Taylor." The boy avoided his gaze and looked around the deck. "Who are you?"

"I'm Jimmy Dismal. This is my boat. That's Scaler. He's my tracker."

"I heard about you," Taylor said, "and your loony cousin, too. *Bugman.*"

Jimmy and Scaler exchanged a look.

Jimmy turned back to the kid. "What happened to your leg? I need to look at it, clean it up. You ever had a tetanus shot?"

"Where's Daryl?" Scaler asked. "Or are you out here by yourself?"

"You guys sound just like cops," Taylor said. "But you ain't. I can tell." He unwrapped the rag around his calf to reveal a jagged four-inch gash. "See that? Hog got me. We was gonna use him for bug bait..."

"Nasty cut," Jimmy commented dryly. "Sure it wasn't a chainsaw?" He rummaged through a locker and pulled out a first-aid kit. "We? You and who?"

"Don't matter now. He's gone, the creepy sick bastard. And good riddance," Taylor said defiantly. But he was pale and shaking now.

A little shocky, Jimmy thought. But the boy was holding up pretty well, considering. He finished cleaning the wound, squeezed in some antibiotic, and steri-stripped it closed, then wrapped it tight with a clean bandage. "That'll have to do until we can get you to a doctor." He pointed to the hatch below the wheelhouse. "We'll talk later. Why don't you go in there and grab a bunk, get some rest. There's sandwich stuff in the galley fridge and a head if you need it. I'll be in to check on you directly."

The boy limped away and Jimmy headed for the wheelhouse. He checked the backpack...the dead bug inside wasn't moving at all. *Must have been my imagination, he thought. But it was a strange one, had double venom sacs, Horace said. And why was it hopping around in broad daylight? And now there were more crawling around on the key than there should be...* He fished his phone out and checked his messages. Shit, Toad had sent a text: "GUYS AT LAB W/GUNS."

What the hell? He dialled Toad's number, but was sent straight to voicemail. He typed out a reply: "WTF? YOU OK? ON MY WAY" and sent it, then leaned over the gangway and waved Scaler over. "We leave now," he snapped.

"Two on, two off through the channel. Tide's in, water's high enough. You good with that?"

Scaler nodded. He slotted the spotlight into its bracket and leaned the shotgun against the side of the boat. "That guy Pill is bad news," he said. "Gator poacher from way back. Other shit too. Nasty bastard."

"I wonder how they heard about Toad?" Jimmy said. "All we need is a bunch of loose cannons running around hunting our bugs. Look what happened to Horace, and he knew what he was doing."

Scaler winced at the mention of Horace, then recovered and shrugged. "When there's money mixed in... small town. Secrets don't keep longer than devilled eggs in this heat. That boy's mother, Pill's old lady, she bartends at the Boiled Crab in the marina. Hears everything. Doesn't Toad eat there when he's in town?"

"Fucking Toad," Jimmy said. "He's in some kind of trouble. I'll take the first watch. You go below and check on the kid. See what you can find out." He eyed the shoreline. "Cast us off first."

"I'm not going out there to untie that line, Jimmy."

Jimmy tossed down his Buck knife and Scaler caught it one-handed. "Use this. Hundred feet of perfectly good double-braided mooring line down the tubes." *That's coming out of Toad's share for damn sure, he thought.* He turned to the helm and prepared to get underway. *I should've stuck to charter fishing, I really should have.*

Hector Gonzales was alone in the inflatable dinghy, rowing the ungainly craft away from Gull Key's shore for all he was worth. The breeze was onshore, which wasn't helping a bit. It kept threatening to blow him back to the beach, so he rowed even harder. He was not adept at rowing, and had to constantly look over his shoulder to correct course as he aimed for the running lights on the flashy speedboat they had arrived in. The dinghy was equipped with an outboard trolling motor, but he had no idea how to even start a motor, let

alone operate one. So he had grabbed the oars. *Why had that idiot Barnett parked the goddam thing so far from the beach?* His hand-sewn Italian loafers were covered in swamp muck, and his monogrammed silk shirt was glommed onto his sweating torso like a dish-rag. A revolver was jammed into the waistband of his tailored linen slacks, its hammer digging into a roll of belly fat with each pull on the oars. His doughy palms were already beginning to rub raw, and he was tiring fast. Plus he couldn't get the horrible images of the last twelve minutes out of his head. Barnett's face screwed into an agonised mask as the first *thing* burst out of the tall grass and latched onto his crotch, his guttural screams as he tried to shake it off, Rico's gun blasting and spitting flames into the darkness as another *thing* scuttled toward them, the flashlight falling from Rico's hand, his gut-churning howls as the vile creature hopped up and fastened itself to his face, the two men twitching and collapsing to the ground like rag-dolls, moaning and crying and finally gurgling mindlessly as the *things* sucked at them...and himself bolting helter-skelter through the coconut trees for the beach, firing his gun blindly into the shadows behind him as he ran. He had pounded through the decaying sludge and seaweed to the dinghy, and wrenched his back shoving it into deeper water. After one final heave set it mercifully afloat, he had flopped over the side and lay there on his aching spine, staring up at the stars and gasping for air. *Miss Daphne was going to be pissed, he thought. Royally pissed.* He remembered the look in her eyes when he delivered Mr. Pilar to her, and he shivered. He took a fresh grip on the oars and rowed.

The dinghy bumped into the side of the speedboat, startling him back into the present. He pulled himself alongside and grabbed hold of the ladder dangling from the stern, wincing as his back spasmed. He rose unsteadily and clambered up the ladder onto the fibreglass deck, relief at being safe again washing over him. He didn't notice the unsecured dinghy moving away from the boat until it was too late. The wind picked up and it bobbed like a cork on the waves, drifting further and further into the darkness. And there on the seat was his phone.

Hector's immediate impulse was to jump off the boat and swim to the dinghy...his phone contained *everything*. Phone numbers, emails, secret recordings of illicit conversations, his personal collection of depraved photographs...his entire criminal history was stored in the recesses of that wretched device. But when he looked across the dark water at the disappearing inflatable he groaned aloud, imagining the worst that could happen if he attempted to reach it. *Sharks, he thought. There's probably fucking sharks out there!* He sank to the deck in a miserable heap and wondered what he was going to do. The abyss stared back at him with no answer.

Trevor 'T-Bone' Boone was perched five feet in the air on the elevated pilot's chair at the stern of his airboat, listening to Iggy Pop on his headphones over the 60 decibel roar of the engine. He was a bantam of a man with a shaved head, a fading six-pack, and over-developed calves and forearms adorned with myriad tattoos. He steered into a shortcut only he knew about, entering the mouth of a narrow channel in a dense wall of mangroves. They had been on the water for nearly two hours, and he had to pee. His passenger was strapped into a seat at the bow, her black hair knotted into a braid that swung from side to side as they bounced over clumps of rotting surface roots. She hadn't complained yet. She had chartered him for the day, just her, and she had been very specific. Her name was Daphne, and she was going to meet Jimmy Dismal at Toad's secret hideaway on Gull Key. And that, T-Bone thought, was *very* fucking weird. He cranked the throttle to outrun the cloud of mosquitoes and gnats that swarmed out of the mangroves. He wanted to get to Gull Key, let her have her meeting with Jimmy, and get back to the marina by mid-afternoon. The weather forecast was troubling, with an ominous low pressure system building off the Florida coast. It could organise itself into something ugly by nightfall.

The cut widened and twenty minutes later they emerged onto a broad expanse of open swamp blanketed in stands of sawgrass and lily pads. It was a hot, brassy day. A shell mound in the distance was the only geographic high ground within sight, and T-Bone headed for it. *Time for a pit stop, he thought.*

The mound sloped eight feet above the surface of the swamp, with a gradual incline from a shelly beach to its highest point, where against all odds a scrawny bald cypress tree had rooted itself. T-Bone had used the spot for picnics on Everglades excursions for years. An alligator, roseate spoonbill, or water moccasin was generally to be found sunning itself on the exposed beach, agreeably waiting for the click of tourist cameras. Once he'd seen a ten foot Burmese python swim past, and shot it in the head with his .22. He considered himself a staunch conservationist, and cracked open a Pabst Blue Ribbon to celebrate when it sank below the surface. He shaded his eyes against the glare and did a double take. A half-submerged canoe was beached on the shoreline, and a man was standing beneath the cypress tree waving frantically.

T-Bone throttled down and cut the engine. The silence was a relief as the boat's giant turbo blades whirled to a stop. Momentum carried it forward until its curved hull nudged the beach with an audible crunch. Daphne removed her earplugs, looked over her shoulder, and raised an eyebrow in question.

"What is going on? Are we here?" she asked, looking around dubiously.

T-Bone shook his head. "Nope. Be there in an hour. But that fella looks like he needs help."

"I didn't hire you to pick up hitch-hikers, Mr. Boone."

"Swamp courtesy, ma'am. We look after our own. He'd do the same for us if we were in a jam."

The man scrambled down the slope toward them on uncertain legs, his sneakers sinking into the crushed shell surface of the mound.

"Then again, maybe he wouldn't," T-Bone said under his breath, recognising the approaching figure. Fucking Daryl Pill. He spat over the side and checked that his rifle was in its bracket below his seat.

"Oh man, am I glad to see you!" Pill exclaimed. He stopped on the beach and bent at the waist, heaving with exertion, looking at them sideways. His

face was oily with an unhealthy gloss, like a ripe boil. "I thought I was a goner for sure. Tide come up I'd be drowned dead, or 'gator bait, one. Phewww..."

"What happened to your canoe?"

Pill hesitated, then shrugged. "Sprung a fucking leak is what. Rotten timber, hole in it too, right in the bottom. No idea how it happened."

"What brings you way out here?" T-Bone asked. "Awful long way to paddle a boat in this heat."

Pill slid a sly glance at Daphne, who was sipping from her water bottle, ignoring them both.

"Well, tarpon fishing mostly, you know. Run a couple trot lines. Bigger fish out here. Plus I like me some distance from people."

A muscle moved down T-Bone's jaw and he looked at the sweating man through narrowed eyes. There were two life-jackets lashed to the canoe, one large, the other smaller. "Where's the youngster? Your *step*-son. He come out with you?"

"Taylor? That little sh...nah, that kid's...he couldn't come on this trip." Pill tugged his ratty t-shirt down over his exposed belly and managed a chuckle. "Some bullshit school thing," he mumbled. "I would'a brung him, but, well, he was busy." He looked up defiantly. "Boy don't like to fish anyhow. Always on that damn phone she bought him."

Daphne twisted in her seat and addressed T-Bone. "Can we go now? I have important business with Mr. Dismal. Very important business. Perhaps your ...'friend'...can catch a ride with us to Gull Key and work out some arrangement to get back to wherever he needs to go?"

Pill cracked his knuckles and licked his lips with a lizard tongue. "Gull Key, now that would suit me just fine. Heard of it. Better'n right here, anyway."

"Well, Daryl, I gotta go take a big old yellow, frothy, asparagus-reeking piss. You just set here 'till I'm back," T-Bone said. He turned to Daphne.

"Pardon my French. Ma'am, pit stop here if you'd like. Yonder, behind the tree is where most of the ladies go."

Daphne turned on him with ice in her eyes. "Get me to my meeting, Mr. Boone. I don't have the luxury of time for a 'pit stop'.

After two hours underway Scaler came up to relieve Jimmy at the helm. The channel was choppy, and the wind was picking up as they approached the swamplands to the east. "Kid's asleep," he announced. "Ate half a Spam sandwich and dropped off without saying a thing. I need to get word to his mother, let her know he's okay. Did you know T-Bone used to date her? Way back when, before she started going piggyback with those bikers. Pretty little thing in those days." He eyed the backpack lying on the wheelhouse deck and shuddered. "Creepy goddamned things." He paused, then continued, "I don't think I'm cut out for this line of work, Jimmy. Rather take my chances with the Coast Guard on a few bales of Costa Rican weed. Sorry, but I'm done tracking bugs for you guys."

Jimmy didn't answer right away. He checked the gauges and frowned. He rapped on the the barometer's glass panel with his knuckle and looked up into the night sky. The stars were there, but a ghosting of high cloud was sailing past and making them shimmer. "Barometer's dropping," he said. "Down thirty bars from when we left."

"Been a busy year for storms," Scaler said. "Be cooler if it rains, at least."

"Yeah. Just what we need." Jimmy looked at his watch and said, "I'm going below. We should be there near dawn. I'll see you then. Holler if anything comes up."

Taylor was sound asleep on the starboard bunk when Jimmy entered the small cabin belowdeck. He fixed himself a plate and ate it standing up, watching the sleeping boy. He wanted answers but wasn't certain what the questions were. He lay down on the port-side rack and closed his eyes.

Some time later he was awakened by the boat's engine throttling down and a light knocking on the hatch. He swung his legs off the bunk and stood, rubbing the vestiges of sleep from his eyes. He glanced at his watch. He'd been out for almost a solid two hours, which was a personal record for him. He glanced over at the starboard bunk...the kid was still asleep, his grubby feet

protruding from beneath the sheets. He took a swig from a water bottle on the galley table and climbed the hatchway ladder to the wheelhouse.

"What's up?" he asked, bracing himself against the swell. Thick clouds obscured the stars. It was not long before dawn, but there were no glimmers of light yet from the east. He knew that the open ocean was twenty nautical miles southeast of their position, and that the swamp estuary was an effective buffer against any untoward weather systems, barring a full-blown hurricane.

Scaler pointed to the barometer. "Dropped again. Wind's picking up. I don't know, feels funny."

"What's the radio say?"

"Shit, I thought we weren't supposed to use the radio. Remember? Coastguard can track us, you said. That was three days ago."

"Turn it on."

Gull Key was horseshoe-shaped, with a ridge of forested high ground running along its top like a mohawk haircut, and a west-fronting bay at its bottom. Mangroves and swamp muck filled much of the bay between the inner legs of the horseshoe, which was fringed by a few feet of dirty sand beach. It was an ugly little island, Jimmy thought, but an ideal location for Toad's laboratory. Nobody in their right mind had a reason to go there. The fishing was lousy, the skimpy beach was over-run with land crabs, and the mosquitoes were vicious. It was off the Everglades tourist route by two dozen miles, and only a few old swamp rats even knew of its existence.

Jimmy steered into the mouth of the bay just as dawn was breaking. Red-tinged streaks of light pierced the thickening cloud cover, and he frowned. *Red sky in morning, sailor take warning.* His eyes picked out the low-slung silhouette of a cigarette boat bobbing at anchor a hundred yards offshore.

Scaler had earphones clamped over his ears as he fiddled with the radio dial. "C.G. weather says big tropical low forming, could get gnarly in the next 24 hours," he said.

"Forget that," Jimmy said, pointing. "Get ready for whatever." He turned the wheel and put them on course to come up behind the flashy speedboat's stern.

Scaler nodded, hung the headphones back on the radio, then slipped down the ladder and retrieved the shotgun. He moved noiselessly to the bow and took up a position between the bulkhead and the anchor capstan where he couldn't be seen.

Jimmy dropped the engine into neutral and let their momentum glide them forward. He reached beneath the console and took out the .45 he always kept there. The sun's orange rim swelled above the horizon, and as they approached he made out the gold lettering on the speedboat's stern: *PILAR'S BABYGIRL*.

A man's head appeared at the boat's rail and stared up at them through panicked, bloodshot eyes. A flock of gulls wheeled screaming overhead, and the man ducked, flapping a towel at them with bony arms.

"Help me! These fucking birds are trying to kill me!" the man shouted. "I'm dying of thirst over here! I need food! You gotta help me!"

"Holy shit! Gonzales, is that you?" Jimmy called out. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

At that moment Taylor scrambled out of the forward hatch with half a sandwich in one hand and stomped across the deck in his oversized t-shirt and ragged shorts. He peered at the speedboat. "That's him, sure enough," he said, through a mouthful of Spam and cheese. "That's the fucker told us about the bugs. Said he'd pay us good money."

"You want me to shoot him, Jimmy?" Scaler asked matter-of-factly, rising up with the twelve-gauge at port-arms. "Or we should just let the gulls peck out his eyeballs?"

"Shoot me? Please, for godsake, I been stuck out here all night! I can't even get inside this motherfucker, I don't have the keys!" Gonzales was desperate, and near tears. "You know me, Jimmy. It's Jimmy, right? We've done business together, man. You gotta help me out here..."

Taylor tossed the remnants of his sandwich at the sleek craft and grinned as the seagulls shrieked and dove low in a mad scramble to fight over the pieces. Gonzales fell to his knees and cowered with his arms over his head, frantically reciting scraps of catechism he had long forgotten. "Hail Mary! God,

baby Jesus, save me! Our father Art, up in heaven, you got to save me! Water into wine! For fucking chrissakes get me outta here!”

“Where’s Pilar,” Jimmy asked. “He here with you?”

Gonzalez rose into a half crouch, keeping a wary eye on the seagulls. “I think he’s dead,” he said. “There was a woman...”

“What woman?”

“I don’t know anything. He’s dead, ok? The woman, now she is running things.”

“I thought you were his bodyguard,” Jimmy said. “How did some woman get past you? She pay you maybe?”

Gonzalez shrugged. “Shit happens, man. This is a crazy world, no?”

“And now you’re cruising around in his fucking boat. Way the fuck out here.” Jimmy looked at Scaler. “No dinghy, looks like,” he remarked.

“No keys, either.”

“Guess he’s not going anywhere in a hurry. Let’s go find Toad.”

“Still like to shoot him.”

“That can wait. Throw him a bottle of water. Then later you can shoot him while he’s still alive.”

Jimmy nosed *Isabel* into a narrow inlet where she’d be hidden from view, waited until Scaler tied her off to the surrounding trees, and then led him and the boy inland through the scrub.

Toad awakened to gusty winds and a red dawn beneath an overcast sky. He hadn’t slept well. He popped two Tylenols dry and sucked on an antacid while he waited for his kettle to boil. He wanted to climb down and get his phone to call Jimmy, but he was afraid to. What had happened overnight? Were Donnie and Melanie ok? And those three guys...what had happened to them? Those screams... It was too damn early. He decided he didn’t really want to know. He wrapped his kimono closer and hand-ground the beans for his coffee.

Important to have good coffee first thing was his mantra. It was milking day, and he needed to be sharp.

Then his phone rang.

He plopped onto his stomach and peered over the edge of his deck. He couldn't see it, but he could hear it ringing as plain as day. He had paid a premium for that ringtone online, the sound of an African spur-fowl in full, strident, pre-dawn screech.

He dropped the rope ladder and inexpertly clambered down to the swamp floor in his kimono and flip-flops. He hopped off the final rung and landed crouched in a clump of thistles, just a few feet from the door to his lab. His phone screeched three more times, then fell silent. Where was it? The undergrowth was too thick, and he couldn't find the damn thing. He swivelled his head left to right, gut clenched, and tip-toed to the lab, pulling the keychain over his head. The padlock was warped and torqued from the hammering it had received the night before, and the key wouldn't work. He twisted it feverishly, but the lock refused to open. He heard movement through the palms from the direction of the beach, and he panicked. He looked at the dangling ladder and cursed himself. *Now they'll know about my hideout!*

He turned and ran, eyes squeezed shut, legs pumping furiously, wanting nothing more than to get away from where he was.

And collided full-tilt into Jimmy, who had circled around to the far side of the lab with his phone held up to his ear.

Jimmy grabbed a fistful of Toad's kimono with his free hand and hoisted him an inch into the air. He said, "You never answered your phone."

Half an hour later Jimmy, Scaler, and Taylor were sitting cross-legged on Toad's tree-house deck while he made them a fresh pot of coffee. A heavy wind pressed through the trees from the southeast, gusting from time to time as clouds boiled overhead, enough to make the platform sway.

Toad poured some of the brew into a mug and Taylor reached out to grab it.

"Whoa, are you even old enough to be drinking coffee, sonny?" Toad said. "I don't have any Ovaltine."

Taylor just looked at him with fish-dead eyes and said, "Black, no milk, no sugar, boomer." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out an iPhone. "This yours? Found it downstairs. Crazy ringtone."

Toad relinquished the mug and produced a weak grin before snatching the phone, then turned away and busied himself giving everyone else their coffee.

Jimmy opened his backpack and dumped its contents onto the deck. "Dead bug, Toad. From Tres Key."

The dead insect was the size of a goose, and there was a moment of stunned silence as they all took a good look at it. Its thorax was pocked with oozing shotgun wounds.

Toad recovered first and said, "Tres Key? Dead? Why is it dead? Those two are some of our best producers—"

"It killed Horace."

Toad blinked. "Horace?"

"Yep, jumped him while he was examining it. Yesterday afternoon. It was ugly."

Scaler crossed himself and hid his face in the steam from his coffee.

"Afternoon? How did it jump him in the afternoon? They can't move during the day! I've altered their genetic code. Perfectly. They are strictly nocturnal. You must be mistaken."

"Tell Horace that. And look in its mouth, Toad. There's two sacs in there. I'm thinking only one of them is full of juice."

Toad rolled his eyes in disbelief. "I need to get it into the lab," he said, refusing to look. "This is ridiculous. I need to examine it properly. But the padlock is stuck...those guys last night...hammering, and shooting, and screams..."

T-Bone eased his airboat into Gull Key Bay and powered through the lagoon parallel to the shore, finally grating to a stop on a mostly submerged

spit of soggy beach. A curve in the shoreline hid Gonzales and the gaudy anchored speedboat from their view. Pill jumped off and secured the bow line to the trunk of a downed coconut palm, up to his ankles in muck. Daphne turned and raised an eyebrow.

"Yep, Gull Key," T-Bone said. "Toad's place is a quarter mile inland. Might want to take your shoes off until we get to the dry sand." He looked at the sky and marked the speed with which the clouds scudded overhead. "Let's try to make this quick. The wind's picking up."

A distant gunshot rang out and echoed through the mid-day heat, startling a nearby pair of snowy egrets into noisy flight.

"The fuck was that?" Pill said.

T-Bone unclipped his rifle from its bracket and tucked it under one arm. "Probably nothing," he said. "The lady and I will go take a look. You stay here and keep an eye on the boat." He jangled the keys in front of Pill and then slipped them back into his pocket. "Just so you don't get any funny ideas. There's some jerky and water in the cooler. Stick close until we get back." He stepped ashore and headed toward high ground, rifle in hand.

Daphne removed her shoes and followed him toward the line of trees further up the slope, squelching through the muck, her face a mask of determination. Pill leaned his back against the airboat, chewing on a wedge of jerky, and watched them go with alligator eyes.

"Watch your eyes!"

Jimmy fired his .45 at point blank range and shattered the lab door padlock into pieces.

"Probably just needed a little WD-40," Scaler commented dryly, "but that'll work."

Toad hurried inside to switch the generator on. "Bring me that backpack," he snapped over his shoulder. "I have to find out what's going on with my bugs."

The lab was well-equipped with examining tables, a row of terrariums against one wall, and a waist-high work bench covered with beakers, droppers, microscopes, centrifuges, and assorted other research paraphernalia. The air-conditioner pumped welcome cool air into the room. Taylor handed Toad the rucksack, saying, "Your bug, sire," with a snarky bow, and received a glare in return.

"This is going to take awhile," Toad said. "Why don't you all just wait outside? I don't need any distractions." They ignored him, and huddled closer to the air-conditioner vents while they watched. He pulled on a pair of latex gloves and extracted the dead insect from the backpack. He placed it on an examining table and turned on a magnifying lamp, then pulled the bug's mandibles apart and wedged them wide open with clear plastic shims. The sac on its upper labium was partially deflated, but still plump enough and juicy with venom. Three or four mils maybe, he calculated. About half of what Donnie or Melanie normally produced, but still... The unexpected pouch attached to the creature's lower labium, however, caused goosebumps to rise on his forearms. The sac rippled with row upon row of tiny, gelatinous spheres. Oh my god," he whispered, peering downward. "That's impossible. Eggs."

"Eggs?" Jimmy said. "What do you mean, eggs?"

Toad stood erect and announced, "Never mind that. It's milking day. I need to get Donnie and Melanie in here. Someone needs to find them for me. They're probably upset with everything that has gone on. I can't worry about this right now. This is just...weird. I have to see more data. I need to go through my notes."

"Weird enough that Horace is dead?"

"I might be able to extract some viable juice out of this dead one, that's what I'm saying. And then I have to milk the other two."

"Bugman," Taylor snickered. "Milkman. *Eggman.*"

Toad glared, then turned back to the dead insect, far more disturbed than he let on. *How could it have possibly produced eggs...?*

Jimmy shot Taylor a warning look. *Cool it, kid.*

"Scaler, you think you could track those two bugs down for Toad?" he said. "It's the last favour I'll ask. I know you want out of this, but we're in a little bit of a bind here." A gust of wind roared past the lab, rattling the door. "We need to think about leaving before the weather gets worse, but it would be nice to take as much product with us as we can. Bonus in it for you."

Scaler scratched at a mosquito bite on his arm and avoided Jimmy's eyes. "Well, I dunno, Jimmy. Horace and all. You know...", his voice trailed off.

"I'll do it," Taylor said. "I found one, I can find two more. And this time ain't no `gator gonna get `em."

Scaler snorted. "What, you think you're a cat? Nine lives maybe?"

"No, but I ain't scared of no bugs. And I can track. Probably better than you can, too."

Toad tried to make sense of what they were saying, but couldn't. He had to concentrate on the extremely delicate task at hand. *Alligators?* He shook his head to clear it, and focused. He took a clean vial out of his autoclave, unscrewed its cap and slipped a length of fresh surgical tubing into its narrow neck. Trial and error had taught him that the only reliable way of suctioning the precious venom out of the bugs was by mouth. Even a gingerly squeezed bulb-syringe could create enough negative pressure to rupture the sac and ruin the specimen. He had to siphon the meagre dribbles of juice out himself, like a gasoline thief. It was an art. One mistake, though, and he knew he was a dead man. Neat venom was vicious stuff. It had to be centrifuged with precise infusions of reagent to transform it into a palatable drug. He wiped his brow and pursed his lips around a pipette, inserting it gently into the dead insect's venom sac.

T-Bone and Daphne made it into the welcome shade of the coconut palms and were walking through soft sand toward the lab when they came across the two dead gunmen. T-Bone smelled them first, then heard the multitude of flies buzzing around the corpses. His nostrils flared...no mistaking

that foul, sickly-sweet stench. He thought back to a day when Jimmy had dragged him to safety after they were ambushed and everyone else in the squad was dead, then pushed it out of his mind.

The gunmen's bodies were almost unrecognisable as human because their flesh had dissolved where they been savaged by the bugs, but their guns lay beside them, half buried in the sand. His mind tried to recreate what had happened there, but the soft sand was an unreadable jumble of sign. The oversized tracks of some kind of insect led off into the undergrowth and disappeared. *Shit, Toad's really doing what he said he was going to do, he thought. That crazy bastard.* He looked at the two guns again. *Don't need somebody like Pill getting his hands on these.* "Hold up a second, miss," he said. He stepped off the trail and, holding his breath, retrieved the two pistols. He shoved them into his waistband, then led Daphne on a detour around the two corpses through the grove of trees.

T-Bone put a hand on her shoulder. "Maybe we should go back to the boat and head out," he said. "Something bad has happened here."

She shrugged him off and kept walking, averting her eyes. "I've seen dead people before, Mr. Boone." *My brother, for one, she thought. And the bastards will pay.* "If Mr. Dismal is still alive I need to talk to him."

"Oh, Jimmy'll still be alive," T-Bone said confidently. "Take more than a couple of renegade bug poachers to take him down." *Damn, I shouldn't have mentioned bugs. Shit's getting weird...woman gives me the freaking willies. And those humungous insect tracks...* He double-checked that his rifle had a round in the chamber, then led her back to the path, leaving the gruesome remains behind them. "OK, whatever, you're the boss. Toad's, um, workshop, whatever, it ain't far now. Jimmy'll be there."

Pill was already bored, even though T-Bone and his hoity-toity woman passenger had been gone for less than fifteen minutes. He spat out a chewed wad of jerky, chugged a bottle of water, and decided to explore the beach.

After all he'd been through, it wasn't his damn job to keep watch over T-Bone's airboat. Nobody was going to steal it anyway, not without the goddamn keys.

His cheeks flared hot with anger as he replayed the past two days in his head. *Gonzales said it would be easy! Trap a couple jumbo bugs, bag them and bring them back. Two hundred bucks each. But, no, I had to bring the kid along, try to teach him how the world works. Shit. Just wait until I get my hands on that little fucker again!*

Pill scratched an itch and continued his furious musings as he trudged along the beach. *If he's still alive that is, and I don't really give a shit one way or the other. A bunch of beatings haven't done a damn bit of good. Near wore out a leather belt on the little bastard's backside, and he still talks back. Kid just won't learn. No better than his skank of a mother, that mouthy bitch. Sonovabitch busted a fucking hole in the canoe and ran off, then snuck back and tried to kill me with the hatchet, just because he got his nose out of joint when all I wanted was a nice, sweaty cuddle. What else you gonna do camped out overnight on a fucking deserted key? Always dodging a cuddle, that peckerwood, ever since I first moved in. Wouldn't even sit on my lap for a wiggle, the little ripe-assed puke. I'll take care of him and his mother both, once I get out of here.*

The thought of going back to Tres Key twisted Pill's insides, but he decided that if he had to, then by god he would, man-eating bugs or not. To finish things. Enough was enough. The boy talked too much; he had to go, ripe little ass or not. *The bugs probably ate him, he thought. Save me the trouble. He goddam well deserved it. Shoulda let that hog rip him up even more than it did. Used him for bug bait instead. But if he's still kicking, I'll be the last thing he sees...*

A ten minute walk took Pill around a promontory to the south, and there he spied what appeared to be a brand-spanking-new inflatable dinghy grounded on a mudbar, not more than six yards offshore, and empty. Nobody around. It was equipped with two oars and an outboard trolling motor. *Well, fuck me runnin', he thought. How's that for Pill luck!* He scanned the tree-line

for anyone who might be watching, then removed his sneakers, rolled his dungarees up to his bony knees, and strode out into the murky lagoon.

He stepped on the first sea-urchin halfway to the dinghy, and fell back on his ass with a splash, immediately sinking onto another one. His eyes watered as lightning bolts of pain shot through his body. *Holy fuck! That hurts!* He rolled to one side but the second urchin stayed right there with him, its purple spikes embedded in the jailhouse tattoo etched into his scrawny rump. The spines under his instep dug in even deeper as he windmilled his arms and struggled to stand upright. *Jesus!*

He hopped forward on his good foot the last few feet and curled belly-down over the dinghy's buoyant gunwale, streaks of pincushion agony exploding through his punctured foot and butt. He tore off his manky t-shirt, wadded it up into a thick pad, and used it as a mitt to protect his hands as he worked the stubborn urchins out of his flesh. With only a few spines remaining, he flopped into the dinghy and, cursing, set to yanking them out of his skin one by one with his fingernails, each spine a reminder of every grievance of his miserable life.

That was when he noticed the phone.

"Alrighty then," Jimmy said. "Let's go find those two bugs. Scaler, you track, you lead, you're in charge. Considering what's been going on, I'll be right behind you with my .45."

"Be better with a shotgun, Jimmy," Scaler said. "Harder to miss with a shotgun."

"Well, you missed the last one, as I recall. Not that it was your fault. And anyway, the shotgun's on the boat. It's my .45 or nothing."

Scaler scowled, then shrugged and hitched up his jeans. "Well, if we're gonna go, let's fucking go. Get today over and done with."

"I'm coming too," Taylor told them. "You can't stop me and I sure ain't staying here with *him*." He slanted a scornful look at Toad, who was

meticulously preparing to pipette the bug's venom sac. "Rather get bug-bit, know what I mean? Dude's a freak, and I'm done with freaks. Had my fill with Pill. I want my mom."

"I know your mom," Scaler said. "She's a nice lady. Gives me extra ice-tea top-ups at the restaurant, no charge. Always a kind word."

Taylor yanked the lab door open and stepped out into the midday heat. "Ice-tea refills are free anyway," he said over his shoulder. "She has some wicked problems but I'm gonna help her get over them. And anybody gets in the way..." He stopped talking and froze, pointing.

T-Bone and Daphne emerged from the trees and were walking along the path toward the lab.

Jimmy did a double take. "T-Bone?" What the fuck are you doing here?"

The sweating pair stopped in their tracks and faced the startled group standing outside the lab.

"Jimmy? That you? Lady here says she has business with you, man," T-Bone said. "Thought you knew we were coming. Chartered me this morning, knew where to go, sounded legit to me, so, well...here she is." He paused, then added, "By the way, there's a brace of dead yahoos behind us, maybe halfway to the beach. Something tore 'em up pretty good...pretty ripe by now." He lifted his shirt to reveal the two gun butts in his waistband. "Took these off 'em." He glanced at Daphne and offered a crooked grin. "Told you he was still alive."

"Gonzales's goons," Jimmy said in an aside to Scaler. "Has to be." He turned back and addressed T-Bone, ignoring Daphne, "We didn't come in that way. Anchored further south, cut straight through the scrub, so I guess we missed them. But Gonzales was here already. He's on Pilar's boat right now, scared shitless of some seagulls."

"Those dead men are of no concern to me, Mr. Dismal," Daphne interjected, cool as ice. "Collateral, as they say." She brushed the hair out of her sweaty face and stepped forward to look him in the eye. "As we agreed, I am here to discuss our mutual interests. Or opportunities, actually. And Gonzales?" Her dark eyes narrowed. "I find it disturbing that you say he is here. I did not order him to do that. I will deal with him later."

Jimmy recognised her voice straight away from the phone call. Husky, seductive, and imperious all at the same time.