

CHAPTER 9

UPPER TERRA

The drive to Cocoa from Hollywood can primarily be made via three different roads. It all depends on how much time one has to kill. The slowest drive is up the ocean path of A1A. The ocean route provides a scenic view of the coastline, coastal cities, and tourist traps that dot the way. The middle of the road method is Highway 1. Once a primary artery, it is now a secondary path. Many hucksters are on this road. There are tons of pawnshops changing past treasures to cash for not much money.

The fastest way is the interstate. The stores are bypassed for speed. The drive up from Hollywood is a couple hours long. For Aug to be at Upper Terra at ten, he had to leave Hollywood fairly early, and the interstate was the best route north. He wondered if he could “live through this” un-Hole-ly CD in his disc player for the drive.

Augustus subscribed to the theory that a condemned man should dress his finest for the execution. The finest gold pinstriped suit was worn. A refined purplish black paisley tie was worn. Black cufflinks and polished wingtips completed the ensemble. Well, sort of. The black eye and bumped head were the final complement to the wear. Well, sort of. The final complement was the giant black-and-white panda bear completely filling up the passenger seat. Mr. Panda elicited hoots and honks from many passing vehicles enamored with their brief view of his charm.

Up to this point, all of the dealings between Aug and Joe Kahn had been by remote. Now they were to meet. Augustus was steeling himself for the meeting. No niceties were really expected. While driving, a continuous mental review of the intended script for today occurred.

The billboards along the way amused Aug. Every few miles, the Ron Jon Surf Shop advertisements kept announcing the countdown in miles to the store at Cocoa Beach. Twenty-four-hours-a-day sales of surfing merchandise. There were attractive women in bathing suits adorning each ad. How Aug wished he could walk into this dream of unreality. The billboards said fifty, then thirty-two, then eighteen miles. Finally, there was an off-ramp advertising that the beach mecca was ten miles away. His eyes drifted to the dash, and he noticed it was a steamy ninety degrees outside.

I-95 exits at 520. The 520 runs across to 1. Just off 1 South is Factory Street, so appropriately named. On the north side of the street is a small factory, thirty thousand square feet, the Upper Terra Mint. The company operated as a job shop making specialty runs of goods. Inside the walls, small presses operated, forming metals and plastic into various decorative or commemorative products. From what Aug had gathered, it was a sleepy company that laid low. To Aug, this meant that illegal things went on behind closed doors.

When he pulled into the parking lot, he was presented with glass doors framed by large glass panes. There was fairly new lettering above the glass, announcing:

UPPER TERRA MINT

Smaller panes of glass were on the sides of the building, shaping the office area. Venetian blinds were down. So much glass created to let the sun in only for the sun to be blinded by the blinds.

The parking lot was fairly empty. There were a Cadillac and an Alero parked up front and a couple of pickup trucks parked at the side parking area of the building. The loading docks were on the side of the building, and one of three bays had a moderate-size truck parked against it. It looked like some steam was coming out the roof at the back end, but he couldn't be sure. What he could

be sure of was that there was little sign of life showing. The place looked and sounded dead.

A pretty little blond named Gayle acted as the receptionist. Undoubtedly, she was a graduate from the local high school up the road. Gayle was the only person in the front office. She bounced up and down in her chair, swinging one leg while chewing gum and talking on her cell phone and twirling a finger through her hair. Aug found this impressive. She could do four things at once.

Gayle saw Aug approaching, and she rapidly finished her call. Aug entered the front reception area that was glassed off from the rest of the office. Her head rapidly turned to check her desk mirror, and then she smilingly stood to greet Aug. "Hi there, Mr. Valentine!" she said in a perky voice. "Welcome to the Upper Terra Mint."

Aug was amused by the late teen's greeting. He took a long look at the strategically placed name tag. "Hello, Gayle. It is my pleasure to be here."

Gayle tried to be adult, but she came off as a youngster who got big thrills with sneaking into bars and drinking. She giggled at Aug. "You look cute there, mister," she said as she pointed at his eye.

Aug told her, "You don't look so bad yourself, sister."

Gayle giggled some more, and her eyes got big. She was getting a big thrill from checking him out. Her mind immediately thought of deeds of great importance. She had to get on her cell phone and call her girlfriends and talk about the arrival. But first she had to let Aug in. The door was opened into the office area. "Please come in, Mr. Valentine. Mr. Khan is expecting you."

There were a half a dozen cubicles in the office area that were empty. The PC monitors were darkened. Gayle led Aug to a modest-sized office with nice mahogany furniture and wooden chairs with thick leather coverings. He also saw that Saint Andrews and the Island Green adorned a couple of walls. Drawn blinds covered the windows. Joe Khan occupied this office. Aug took a seat, and the door was closed.

"Mr. Joseph Kahn," Aug said with arm extended, "Augustus Valentine. It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. I wish we were making our acquaintance under a different circumstance, that the situation was not so knotty." They shook hands. Each man exerted a firm grip.

Joe Khan was shorter than Aug, coming in at five foot seven. He looked mean. Tinted Cazal glasses covered his eyes and prevented Aug from seeing clearly into Joe's glaze. Joe's hair was thick. His jaw was set. His skin had the look of someone who golfed every day. The short-sleeved shirt was a solid green that must have cost thirty dollars at Sears. Aug mentally envisioned where the "Love Mom" tattoo was.

Joe eyed him over. "Nice shiner. I guess that's where you claim they hit you when you lost my goods, eh?" He paused. "Now! Cut the crap. You lost my goods, and now I got a factory shut down because you fucked up. I want to know. What are you doing about getting me my goods back?"

Aug relaxed back. "Well, the insurance claim is being processed, but I am not sure how long it will take to get a claim through." He leaned forward and bent his head down for a second—momentarily noticing that the carpet was quite old—before turning his head back up and looking at Joe. "But the insurance really isn't the issue here, is it? And neither is idling the factory, is it? I had a little chat with my uncle before coming up here, and he told me what the issue is. The issue is the disappearance of what was surreptitiously inserted in the stolen shipment. That's what the issue is, isn't it? The insurance money will cover some things, but I don't think it will cover what we are talking about here now, will it?" He leaned back.

Joe leaned back in his chair. "Yer right. The insurance won't cover what was stolen." He leaned forward and opened a desk drawer and produced a handgun. Joe shut the drawer. He pointed the gun at Aug's head. "But I was lined up with people and places and a schedule to do something with those goods, and now all of our plans are messed up. And the people who put up the money are none too happy about your fuck-up. Now, I think either someone at Trove or, maybe, maybe even you stole everything. And I want to make it clear to you that I expect my goods back ASAP." He pulled the trigger.

Click!

The hammer came down on an empty chamber. Aug's sphincter loosened up very slightly.

Aug looked deliberately at Joe. "Me? You think maybe I stole everything? Hey! I didn't even know what was hidden until yesterday. Heck, I just got back

in the US. I've been away for a couple of weeks." He paused. "Are you looking to hang this around my neck?" Augustus could see the wheels turning.

The line of questioning from Joe began. "Let's get this straight. You run an import business. Correct?"

Aug had his eyes on the pistol as he answered, "Yes."

The next logical question came. "And you brought in a shipment of goods destined for this building. Correct?"

Again Aug answered, "Yes."

Joe concluded, "Then as far as I am concerned, it's your job to get me those goods!" He slowly opened the desk drawer again and pulled out a bullet and a thin tip white paint marker. Joe proceeded to write the letters *A-U-G* on the .38 caliber projectile. Then he inserted the bullet into the waiting repository in the pistol. The gun was pointed back at Aug's head. "Now, Mr. Valentine, this gun truly has a bullet with your name on it."

BANG!

The pistol moved sideways. A shot fired past Aug's head into the wall behind him. Joe opened the drawer and procured another bullet while he spoke. "Now, let me make this clear. I don't give a shit what you knew or when you knew it. What I want you to tell me is, when are you going to quit screwing around and deliver me my goods?"

Aug stirred after being shaken and rapidly stated, "One week from now."

Joe shook his head no. "That's not good enough," he said.

BANG!

The shot went by Aug's head again. Joe procured another bullet and loaded the revolver.

Aug blurted out, "OK, next Monday. Monday. I'll have you the goods next Monday."

Click!

The gun was fired again, but on an empty chamber. Joe pointed the gun upward and addressed Aug. "Let me repeat this to you so that we are both clear

on this. Next Monday you are going to deliver to me a truck carrying my stolen property. Is that right? Is that what you are promising me?"

Aug answered Joe, "Yes. That is a promise."

Joe stated, "Mister, that is a promise that you better deliver on, or I will personally blow your fucking head off. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir" was Aug's reply. "Yes, sir, I do. Deliver the metals or it'll be a lynch mob for me."

The comment left Joe looking at Aug rather suspiciously. Aug looked around the room. He looked back at the holes in the wall and then back at Joe. "Um," he said, "if there is nothing else, I will show myself out the door. I think I can remember the way." With that, Aug rapidly took his leave. He quickly paced by Gayle who was sitting there with her mouth agape. The gum she was chewing almost seemed visible from the roof of her mouth to her tongue like she had frozen in mid-bubble blow inside her mouth. The cell phone was held in the palm of her hand.

"Don't worry," he advised her as he strode past. "People shoot at me all the time!" Aug thought as he left that maybe he had overestimated Gayle. Right now she couldn't do one thing at the same time.

Aug entered his blue DeVille. When he backed the Caddy out of the parking lot, he noticed a bullet hole in the front window. One of the bullets had evidently come through the office through the window. No wonder Gayle was freaked! Well, better a hole in the pane than pain in his hole. The thought going through his mind was that he had just met a type A personality. That was type A with a capital *A*. Capital *A* for capital Asshole. He did not doubt that Joe had done time for aggravated assault with intent to kill. Too bad he hadn't yet been jailed for more than intent.

He drove out of the Upper Terra parking lot down to Highway 1 and headed north the couple of blocks to where 1 and 520 meet. He took a right down 520 past the Hyundai dealership on the hill. There were two political placards positioned on the lawn. One read, "Jaclyn Colon for Tax Collector," and the other sign said, "Elect Judge Butts." Aug mused a "no wonder J lives in Cocoa!" He turned the corner and pulled into the parking lot of Norman's Raw Bar and Grill. It was time to regain his composure. He knew that there was no way he

was going to be shot in daylight in the office back there, so the show wasn't completely scary. But no matter what, having bullets fly by one's head does have a rattling effect.

After Aug calmed down, he took the drive across 520 toward Cocoa Beach. He crossed the Hubert H. Humphrey Bridge. Plenty of boats adorned the waterway. Then there was the Merritt Island stretch. Traffic was heavy. The mall was on the right, and many chain and local stores dotted both sides of the way. The sun was shining brightly. The day was cloudless. The meeting had been brief, the time was now about eleven. At Banana River Road, he turned left into Island Lincoln Mercury. The time was ripe to see what Jocelyn was up to.

The windows to the car dealership were fronted by shrubs and lawn. The glare of the sun made the glass more reflecting than transparent. After squinting a bit and cupping his eyes, he could see her with some clients. He walked into the anteroom of the front doors. He saw that Jocelyn was with what looked like a father-and-son duo. Her specialty was luxury. She was selling the latest XK8.

Jocelyn's walk was never fast and was certainly not slow. Her movements always swung naturally. Today she was, for a car dealership saleswoman, outrageously dressed in black knee-length boots. Her bottom was framed by a short black leather skirt. Her walk was the sensation of a happy-Slash-sexy riff. It was very bouncy and alluring, yet very sinuous like a snake slithering. She knew her clientele well. Aug enjoyed watching her walk. Her callipygian curvosity kindled cravings.

The Jaguar was a red convertible model. She requested the boys to sit in the car. This allowed her to show off a view of all features.

Junior sat behind the wheel. Aug thought maybe he was a college graduate and daddy was going to treat his son? The males in the car were thrilled as she leaned all over the vehicle, explaining the various features of the ride. Her blouse barely contained her breasts, and they could read the lace stitching on the brassiere. The customers were enthralled, delighting in the statements phrased that surely the graduate knew how to "drive a stick."

The potential customers who came in to the dealership may not all have been capable of purchasing such a vehicle, but in the four years since she had shown up, the humans had flocked in anyway. She was one of those women who ooze sensuality out of every pore. Every word seemed to convey not just a sense of

sex, but a sense of hours of sex. It's a great talent to possess for selling expensive automobiles. And sell she did, so much so that she had earned the right to operate in her own style. Vehicles went out the door, so who cared?

It is said that "people talk," and this is certainly true of men and women. One could use Anne Frank's hiding place or the Jeepers Creepers cellar, place a beautiful woman inside away from any contact, and somehow people will find a way to talk about her. Place her around showy automobiles and a wildfire of gossip is started.

Florida is a land of attractive females. They love to parade around in clothing dictated by heat, which means short, shorter, and shortest. Quite a few are bisexual. Jocelyn was a queen in this land of flesh. She didn't have competition. She had a succession of male and female sexual suitors to choose from. She enjoyed the luxury of choice.

Today she was with a cosmetic surgeon and junior. The doctor was going to buy his son a graduation present, and it was going to cost eighty grand. It was only a matter of time before he asked how much for the extra to make the deal happen, and she wondered if she could make it a double sale. Thinking about the possibilities made it that much easier to enjoy, and she really did like thinking that way. Her motor was already in high gear, but as enjoyable as the sale of a couple of Jag's might be, she doubted this would slake her excitement.

Aug could see what was going on. He didn't mind. The reality did not threaten his ego. We all have to make a living somehow, and nothing lasts forever. So he happened to see this particular display. If he wasn't so early, he would never know, and then who would really care? If a hot babe fell in the woods and there was no soul mate there to see it, did it ever really happen?

For a flash, his rearview mirror morphed into a vision of Ms. America replete with gown and tiara and high heels and roses. The wood was beginning to float. Then Ms. America morphed into a petite blond replete with lush curly hair and a noose around her neck, the cut rope end hanging down the back. His enjoyment disappeared.

He did hate to blow a sale of hers. His presence would not help. What to do? He stepped back out to his car and wrestled out the panda bear. It was time for him to address his business. What better way to be early than with a big bear?

From the parking lot to the door to inside, every head turned to see the spectacle of a pinstripe-suited man with a protruding black eye carrying a cute six-foot white-and-black plush Ling Ling. Inside the dealership, everyone momentarily stopped whatever they were doing and turned and looked before going back to their activities.

Jocelyn had her torso leaning over Dr. Brian Blower as he sat in the passenger seat while she pointed out features in the car. The good doctor and his son Nathan were in gentlemen's club heaven when the commotion of Aug's entrance drew her attention. Various emotions ran through her electrochemical neural paths. Jocelyn was furious because Aug was not supposed to be around until the evening. Jocelyn was confused because Aug never made plans to show up at a specific time and then change those plans. This was out of character. Jocelyn was already excited, and the sudden appearance of her lover gave her a thrill. Jocelyn was extra excited because she was in love with the panda. It was such a killer present. As far as doctor and graduate Blower, she could care less. She was confident that the sale was under her thumb.

"Will you gentlemen excuse me a minute, please, mmm?" She stood up and leaned against the hood of the car, folding her arms and raising her right leg a little to keep the young boys occupied. As old as the father was, he still impressed her as a young boy who happened to be rich enough to buy a luxury vehicle. She could keep their attention without any difficulty while she dealt with the new situation. When Aug got close, she also walked toward him. She was mad, but she couldn't help but smile. He was bringing her such a cuddly, cute big present, he looked so good in the beautiful suit, and he looked so wounded with a black eye. He also seemed to be walking a little stiffly. As they came together, he said, "Happy Valentines Day!" and extended the bear.

She accepted the bear. The panda filled her arms and seemingly dwarfed her. She wanted to give Aug the obligatory and perfunctory hug and peck on the cheek, but the panda was just too big! The plush prevented her from having that reach. With a smile and a seethe, she quietly fired at him, "Thank you, baby! Aug, what are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you until this evening! And it is *not* Valentine's day!" She extended her arms to check out the panda; her smile increased. "But he is soooo cute! He gets a kiss, but you

don't!" With that she gave the bear a light buss, making sure not to get him lipstick stained.

Aug said, "Hello, J!" Her look made him smile just because he was happy to see Jocelyn. He looked into her emerald green eyes. The imperfection in her right eye, a jagged white strip, was pulsing. "Uh-oh, your lightning bolt is flashing," he said.

"I've told you before," she replied in a quiet seethe, "lightning at the eye of the hurricane is the worst lightning there is!" She gave him a mean, pouty, Charmed Ones look. "Now, just what are you doing here?"

Aug tried to be as charming and disarming as he could be. "Hey, what can I say? I had a meeting up the road that I thought would take all day, but it ended rather abruptly. So I decided to come over and see what you were doing. It's been so long since I have seen you, and I thought maybe we could do lunch or you might be able to get away for the rest of the day. Besides, you were mad at me the other night for disappearing on you. And here I really thought you would be happy to see me early! But if you'd rather I drive back to Hollywood and come back later . . ." Aug gave her a pause. "Or maybe you would prefer I go to some place local like the Inner Room or Cheater's and hang out."

Jocelyn smilingly pounced on his remark. "Hmmp! If you hang it out there, you sure as hell ain't hanging it out here tonight!" Her eyes lowered and rose up to accentuate her meaning. They laughed.

Jocy serioused up. "You know, you've said that I'm the one who doesn't do what I'm told to do, and yet here you are hours early. So who's calling the pot black?"

Aug replied, "I just said that I would be here later. I was never told to be anywhere at a specific time. My not doing what I said I would do is not the same as your proclivity for not doing what you are supposed to do."

Jocelyn gave him a bemused look. "WOW! Check out Mr. Vocabulary! *Proclivity*! Well, suppose my proclivity to not do what I am told to do is based upon someone else's proclivity for telling me to do things that means there is a conflict of interest between my doing all the things that everyone tells me to do, which leaves me with the unenviable dilemma of making decisions that make it

appear as if I have a proclivity for not doing what I am told to do. Isn't that the same as you not doing what you say you will do?"

Aug grinned. "I don't know. I guess that makes my head hurt is what it means."

She cradled the bear as best as she could in her left arm so that she could use her right arm to show attention to his injuries. "Oh my god, is that where they hit you?" With mutual concern and sarcasm she said, "You poor thing. Are you sure you're all right?"

He held her hand as she tried caressing his face. "Baby, I'm fine. I'm just a little sore, that's all."

Jocelyn said, "Well, Aug, I'm kinda busy with some customers right now, and I had lunch plans. Why don't you get a coffee or something or check out the movie in the lounge for a little while and let me see what I can do about getting free. OK?"

Aug agreed, "OK, OK. I understand. But you better get free, or I'm not responsible for what showgirl and I end up with!" He smiled and gave her a peck on the cheek. Then he turned and walked away.

Jocelyn watched Augustus stride off. She liked his walk. It was very direct, very efficient, and the slight hitch really gave her a big playful smile. She held the panda in front of her and smiled. The panda *was* super cuddly!

Now it was time to complete the sale. She seductively walked back to the Jag where daddy and son were engaging in a conversation that she was sure she knew about. She carefully laid the panda down on the hood of the car and slowly laid herself down on top of panda. She squeezed him and rubbed on him and then turned her smiling red lips to the boys, saying, "Don't you just like my new plaything? Isn't he so cute and cuddly? Pandas need love too." With that, she slightly but noticeably gyrated her hips on the plush. In her mind, she saw titles to two vehicles appear like magic above their heads. Her lascivious smile grew, knowing that commissions for the upcoming end of July had just increased by two fully loaded Jaguars. This life of rebirth was much better than her life before her death and resurrection.