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# São Paulo Blues

Jim Chaffee



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For Cleide Messias

Shit in the one hand, wish in other,  
and feel which is heavier.

U. S. MARINE CORPS PROVERB

# 1.

## **AVISO AOS PASSAGEIROS**

**Antes de entrar no elevador, verifique se o mesmo encontra-se parado neste andar.**

**Lei 9.502/11-03-97**

The American stared at the sign he'd puzzled over a hundred times waiting for the slow elevator. Now he smiled at the warning he finally understood. The law forbids stepping into an empty elevator shaft. That's like arresting someone for stepping on a rattlesnake. This sure as hell wasn't Texas.

A moment earlier he'd crossed the lobby carrying a bag of groceries. His perfunctory "boa noite" to the woman behind the desk had returned with a softer "boa noite" minus the angularity of the American accent. She'd stopped trying to engage him in Portuguese, but she threw him an amused smile and her black eyes lit up when she handed him the key to his flat.

He'd walked the few blocks from the supermercado Pão de Açúcar on Avenida Ibirapuera in the waning São Paulo daylight, crossing near the old church square at Avenida Moema, two blocks from his apartment across from the all-night coffee shop Fran's.

In the narrow hallway on the seventh floor a phone rang in one of the apartments. Fumbling with the key, he was surprised it was for him. Only his lawyer knew he was in São Paulo, and he hadn't called since the divorce finalized.

He stepped into the rectangular box of a room. A metal spiral ladder wound up to the bedroom. The kitchen niched into a recess opposite a leather chair and sofa in front of a sliding glass door. Newspapers, magazines, and Portuguese grammar books stacked on a table evidenced the maid's attempt to tidy the place.

He reached the kitchen counter in three steps, set down the bag, and grabbed the phone.

"Ola."

A woman's voice on the other end flavored his name Brazilian and Portuguese. "Mike?" It came out Meekee.

The voice raised no memories. It wasn't as if he knew a lot of women here.

"This is Mike."

He eyed the dregs of a liter of cheap cachaça waiting where he'd left it. The maid wouldn't touch the stuff, like some contagious poison. Grabbing a mug, he poured out the remains of the bottle.

"I need speak with you." A tiny, girl's voice.

"Who are you?"

Dead air. He slid open the glass door and stepped onto the balcony overlooking Avenida Moema. The metal worm of São Paulo's traffic groaned in its evening strangulation.

"Desculpe," she apologized. "I know your friend. She say you help me." Her apology hung in the air.

He stared off into the hodgepodge of buildings, an unkempt urban orchard, by habit searching for clues. A mélange of signs in English and Portuguese screamed for attention.

"She? I don't know any she."

"In building. Proximo. Negro man."

Of course. The he/she distinction kills them. "Eterno Mendes? You mean he."

"Sim. She say you help me."

Eterno Mendes lived two floors up. American mother, Brazilian father, raised in Brazil and Texas, he spoke fluent but studied English. His parents held university appointments in São Paulo and Austin. He and Mike hit it off right away after meeting by chance in the lobby when Eterno helped Mike correct a miscommunication at the front desk. Mike had lived in Austin more than twenty years, building his detective agency there.

"What's your name?"

"Sarah."

"I don't drive, Sarah, but I can get a cab. Where do you wanna meet?"

Silence. Speaking too fast.

"You understand?" he asked. "Voce entender?"

"Please. Speak more slower."

"Sorry. Desculpe. Where to meet? Onde nos meet? Wait." Fuck, he thought, and stepped inside to grab the small Portuguese-English dictionary from the kitchen counter. Meet. Encontrar.

"Onde nos encontrar?"

Before he had it out she broke in. "Lone Star Cafe. In Jardins."

He knew the place. A Texas-style café. More a bar with a few tables and what passed for Tex-Mex food. He'd stopped in once for the novelty. A local chain in Austin used the same name. This one didn't offer chicken-fried steak.

"How will I know you?" He enunciated each syllable with slow precision, but caught himself complicating the question with the modal "will." He tried to rephrase, but she answered anyway.

"I am morena. At the bar, alone."

He knew morena, brunette. Most of the loira were bleached morena anyway, though he'd been told a sizeable Germanic population lived farther south.

"When? Quando?"

"Now."

One of the problems of translation: Não, pronounced now, is no in Portuguese. It had gotten him into trouble before. He guessed from the background clatter she was in the Lone Star.

"Agora?" To clarify.

"Sim. Yes. Here now. I wait."

"I can get a cab, but traffic is bad. Maybe twenty minutes. Vinte minutos"

“Okay. I wait.”

He hung up and stepped back onto the balcony, looking across the street and beyond at the scattered disarray of buildings.

To the right of Fran’s a tinted wall of windows crowded the sidewalk, an office building with ornately arched entrance like a mouth; sprawling around it a tiled moat too shallow for fish reflected weary old structures to the sky. On the block behind rested a white high-rise apartment building left over from a previous generation, tidy balconies and window boxes greenly overgrown. Below him, dilapidated blue awnings reached into the street like beggars’ hands.

At the end of the next block, where Avenida Moema died in Avenida Ibirapeura, a Catholic Church hunkered amidst a tree-lined square, tomb from a gone century.

He slugged back a belt of the cachaça, grimacing. Bad stuff they sold in the grocery for less than a buck.

Across the rooftops a bird sang its name, its lilting, high-pitched voice accusatory. Bem chee vee! Mike knew the bird, the bem-te-vi, ubiquitous in the city.

He’d first heard it at the international airport north of town, Aeroporto Internacional de São Paulo, known to the locals as Guarulhos. Like the moment his wife told him she was leaving for a woman, the airport moment froze in his memory.

Carrying his duffel through the automatic airport doors, windbreaker slung over his shoulder, the bird’s crystalline cry pierced the bustle. The universe froze in place. The bird’s accusation echoed, bem chee vee, the only sound in his head, ringing like a scolding.

Adrift in his first moments in Brazil, a man’s loud voice brought him back to the airport. “Taxi? You want taxi, Senhor?”

“That bird! Hear that bird? What is that bird?”

The man stepped back and scrutinized the lean American with close-cropped, graying hair. “Não entendo,”

he replied, a phrase Mike would soon echo several times a day. Not understand.

The man had pointed to the white taxi at the head of the line and Mike had climbed inside the cramped backseat for his first ride into the city, the bird singing in his head, the man staring after him.

He downed the rest of the clear liquor and stepped inside the apartment, putting the milk and eggs in the refrigerator, setting the new bottle of cachaça on the counter. Lacking dinner plans, a Brazilian version of a taco with a woman for company didn't sound half bad, even in a joint called the Lone Star Café.

## 2.

Mike made his way to a cab stand, crossing Avenida Moema between gridlocked cars to a beat-up white hack. He squeezed into the back seat.

"Jardins," he said. "Lone star café. Voce sabe isto?"

The driver indulged his Portuguese, nodding. "Sim. Alameda Ministro Rocha Azevedo."

Mike guessed that meant he knew where they were going.

The cab crept into traffic, then bullied its way across the line of cars and onto Avenida Ibirapuera.

He sat back on the sun-hardened seat, ignoring the repetitious samba rattling through tinny speakers, and replayed the telephone conversation in his head.

Someone asking for help wouldn't have been unusual six weeks ago, but now it made no sense. In Brazil less than a month, he didn't speak the language. He wasn't sure why he was here, except it was where the dart had landed. And it was a hemisphere away from Texas and his suddenly lesbian ex-wife.

He stared out the smudged window as the taxi crept along Avenida Republica do Libano, trapped in the wedge of traffic beside the fenced Ibirapuera Park. Peering into the dense gloom beneath the canopy of majestic old trees, he considered that he wouldn't venture in there at night without a squad of Marines. People who haven't been to war can't fathom the terror of a hundred yards.

Mired in traffic, twenty minutes had been optimistic by half. It didn't matter. In Brazil time meant nothing.

Eterno Mendes, the one person he knew in São Paulo. Now some woman calls him in Eterno's name. But at least that part made some sense. One night drinking he'd broken his cardinal rule of keeping his personal life personal. He slipped and told Eterno he'd been a detective, adding that he'd quit, cashed out, selling the agency he started more than twenty years earlier.

The sudden spell of loquacity took him by surprise, a disquieting act with an opaque motive as uncharacteristic as losing control. It haunted him afterward. And now here it was back in the flesh with Eterno sending him some girl seeking help. Stupid, unless it bought Eterno something. Or maybe Eterno buying Mike something. He sure as hell seemed preoccupied with Mike's moribund sex life.

In a miracle, traffic cleared and the taxi lurched ahead. It turned the corner before a stately mansion set back from the street behind a spacious, manicured lawn. Lit up so it glowed pink, the white square looked more like a mausoleum than a home.

This building marked the beginning of Jardins Paulista, one of the first suburbs in the flight of wealth from the filth, urchins and disease of poor Italian and Japanese immigrants pouring into center city over a hundred years earlier. One of Eterno's lessons, teaching Mike the neighborhoods of the sprawling megalopolis.

Eterno's stilted English came out as if he read it in his head, formal and precise. Still, it helped Mike settle in. It was easy to spend time with the genial native full of important advice for a clueless American wandering the streets of São Paulo. He gave Mike a crash course in the city, often treating him more like a project than a friend.

But something about the man didn't set right. Always around at all hours, without regular work habits, and yet he drove a new white BMW. Too ready to smile, wearing easy affability like a habit. Like a salesman who won't reveal his pitch.

The taxi stopped in front of the Lone Star. Mike paid the driver and unfolded from the cramped back seat, looking up and down the street, getting his bearings.

Beside the Lone Star a brightly lit grocery store alive with shoppers, one of the Pão de Açúcar blanketing the city. The residential street turned quiet and dark away from the grocery, plenty of open space between buildings like scattered ambush zones. It was one reason he avoided

the upscale neighborhood. He found security in Moema's density. As a bonus, Moema lacked the concentration of American tourists attracting criminals like chum for sharks.

The taxi melted into the stream of cars. Mike turned and passed through the empty patio and stopped inside the doorway, surveying the room. Brazilian country music played in the background, the accordion-laced two-step annoying as hell but at least minus the whiney vocal with a nasal twang.

The whole thing smacked of some Brazilian's version of Texas rustic, including a couple fake beams below a plastered ceiling. Hanging antique-style lamps illuminated the interior with merciless precision, chasing away any hint of gloomy ambience. Old American license plates hung on the walls. One read OKLAHOMA IS OK. None hailed from Texas, but a California vanity plate suspended above the bar bragged HUNG 9. In Brazil that would be centimeters, less than four inches.

Sitting alone at the bar drinking bottled water, she wore a plain blue workout suit, but he made her right away: an escort girl, Brazilian euphemism for call girl. Like off-duty border patrol agents, they stood out like rice in black beans, watching people as though everyone outside their world was alien.

An inner voice had already tipped him. He'd sensed it on the phone, something in her manner, some directness that he'd set aside. Anyway, inconspicuous was impossible. Most of them dressed to avoid notice, saving their wares to exhibit on web sites or in night clubs. It didn't make much difference to Mike. He recognized them.

He approached the bar, scrutinizing without committing to a stare. He guessed around five foot two, maybe ninety-five pounds, leggy, small round breasts. Slight but graced with a woman's curves.

She had a long face with a high forehead bounded by black hair, black beyond dye, cascading below her shoulders and contrasting her pale complexion. High

cheekbones absorbed a generous nose so it didn't detract from her looks, all of it accenting a wide mouth, the sensual lower lip a pout. Green oval eyes watched without looking.

It was the prolonged groove between her upper lip and nose that drew Mike's attention. It made him think of a chimpanzee. He couldn't shake the image. Like the shimmer of water on a desert horizon, the vaunted beauty of Brazilian women often vanished when you got too close.

He recalled the escort girl he'd met at a motel with Eterno's encouragement and under his tutelage, like a rite of passage. A sex goddess on the internet, perfect in every detail, in person she carried an excess of the mundane baggage of reality. Red raised welts from childbirth creased her stomach. Her smile displayed an off-color capped front tooth, and all of them had needed cleaning, black in the recesses of her mouth.

The woman at the bar turned her green eyes on him. They brought him back to the Lone Star. She smiled and patted the next stool. He joined her.

"Sarah?"

"Of course." Her tone made him wonder why he'd asked.

Testing her English, he articulated his question with slow precision, hoping the syntax wasn't too complex. "What is it you think I can do for you?"

"Eterno Mendes say you find people missing."

"Not any more." He waited, then simplified. "Not now."

Her green eyes softened, pleading.

"My friend missing."

"Go to the police."

She gave him a look that needed no translation. "They no help."

They sat staring at each another, then he turned to the bar. "Chope," he said, asking for a draft beer.

The woman behind the bar, another striking brunette he knew wouldn't bear heavy scrutiny, shook her head. "Não tenho."

"Tem Brahma?" He'd forgotten they didn't have draft.

She brought him a large bottle of beer, a glass, and a menu. Sarah took the menu to translate.

"I can read this better than you, Sarah. I used to live in Texas." He caught himself. "I live in Texas," he amended.

After a moment he pointed to the entry for tacos. The bartender went to the window at the end of the bar. Mike turned back to Sarah.

"You live Texas? Where?"

"Austin. You know it?" She gave him with a blank look. He tried Portuguese. "Você sabe Austin?"

"Não," she said. "Não conheço. Know Houston, Dallas."

"It's between them." He wasn't certain she understood and dropped it.

They listened to the hum of the café until a tray crashed to the floor. Sarah jumped like a high-strung cat. Her hand found his forearm. She left it there as though she needed support, a warm, fragile connection. Mike didn't move, sitting silent and watchful. They stayed like that for what might have been a long time before Mike returned to the subject.

"I don't think I can help you," he said. "Não poder ajudar você," he repeated in Portuguese, knowing it was worse than baby talk, hoping it would discourage her.

She leaned closer and looked into his eyes. "I have money."

"I don't want your money."

She backed away and swept him with a bold, measuring gaze. "There is other I can trade."

"I know. But I would just be robbing you."

She removed her hand from his forearm. Mike poured some beer into the glass and stared at the wall behind the bar.

When he looked at her again, tears ran down her cheeks.

"Please," he said, "don't cry."

"Você tem olhos bonitos. Azul muito bonito."

He knew she found something of his beautiful, but even with her deliberate speech he didn't get it all.

"Your eyes blue beautiful," she said.

He did not want her to say that. His brain worked to put a box around this meeting. He couldn't find one to fit.

"Fala, Meekee. Mike," she corrected herself, making his name sound unnatural anyway. "Please, speak."

"Okay, Sarah. You talk. There is nothing for me to say."

She stared at his eyes before speaking again. "Not here. Apartment of Eterno."

"Okay, after I eat my taco."

He ate in silence, Sarah watching.

It wasn't the first time he wished he'd made other dinner plans. He remembered a nasty little client who'd favored the Lone Star Café in Austin. It was during the internet bubble. The client, executive spiritual advisor for a local startup, sought dirt on a colleague. Not long after their meeting the company passed into history, froth of the venture capital people who dried up and disappeared with it.

When he finished eating, Mike paid the bill and they left. They grabbed a cab at the supermarket next door.

It was dark. Traffic hadn't yet freed up.

### 3.

A black giant with shaved head and a mouthful of gleaming teeth, Eterno Mendes stood filling the doorway, a broad swath of ivory smile plastered across his face.

"Come in, Mike. I see you met Sarah." He stuck out a hand the size of a catcher's mitt.

He topped Mike's six feet by at least five inches. With massive arms and legs, broad chest and shoulders matched only by his gut, he seemed as wide as he was tall. His easy smile took the edge off his formidable appearance, but Mike never trusted it. He'd known plenty of men with easy smiles who'd be violent at the drop of a hat.

Sarah all but disappeared in Eterno's hug. He kissed both her cheeks. Mike wondered why they hadn't been together at the Lone Star.

"What does she want from me, Eterno? I tried to tell her I don't work as a detective anymore. Besides, I don't know shit about Brazil. I can ask for my mail now, that's about it. I just figured out that stupid sign for the elevator yesterday."

Eterno laughed. "It would take an American to see humor in that sign."

He turned to Sarah and spoke in Portuguese. "*It's good you got Mike here, Sarah. I knew you could do it. Now we need to work on him.*"

"Come in Mike, we can sit and talk," he said, leading the way inside. "Her missing friend is named Paula. That is all I know."

Mike stood. Eterno occupied most of the leather two-person settee, Sarah swallowed up in the chair beside him.

Mike noted the expression in Sarah's eyes change for Eterno. At the café her eyes danced and sparked, racy, flashing, sometimes aggressive. Now they quieted like a child taking in adult authority.

*"Mike says he cannot help us because he does not speak the language," Eterno said. "He does not know Brazil. He does not want to work as a detective. I think his experience will help. We'll work on him together, okay?"*

Sarah nodded.

Eterno ignored Mike's questioning look. He didn't translate.

"Find out more about her missing friend," Mike said, wandering over to the glass door, turning his back on them to look out beyond the balcony at the same buildings that faced his own apartment, now lit for night.

The two of them seemed more allied than either had intimated. He listened to their conversation, hoping to pick up clues. It was impossible.

"They are lovers, Mike," Eterno said, breaking from their patter. "They sometimes work together as what we call a dupla. They have a web site."

"She have a picture?" Mike spoke without looking at them.

Eterno passed the question to Sarah. She reached into her purse and pulled out a glossy photo and handed it to Eterno. He glanced at it before passing it to Mike.

Mike examined the photo. Staring back at him, a bleached blonde with mouth like a wound crammed with horsey teeth spread across a lumpish face. The nose took up too much territory; the narrow spacing between close-set eyes made them appear crossed.

He looked up from the photo at Sarah, hiding like at child in the oversized chair.

"This is her missing girlfriend?"

"More than girlfriend, Mike. Lover. They are both escort girls. Her name is Paula."

Paula. His former wife Jodi now lived with a woman named Adrienne. Perky Adrienne of the bouncy step. Tennis-playing Adrienne.

"I made Sarah right away, but this one?"

"What about her, Mike?"

"God, Eterno, she's ugly as hell."

"That might be an American perspective. Here, she is blonde. With big tits. Some Brazilian men like that sort of thing. I seem to recall American men like big-titted blondes."

"She's no blonde." Jodi's tow-headed Adrienne kept her hair cropped close.

"It is all about pretend, Mike. Pretend she is blonde. Pretend she is having an orgasm. That you are a hot stud satisfying her." He smiled like a shark.

"How do you know she has big tits? This is a head shot."

"There are other pictures of her on the web."

Mike stared at the photo. "Ask for details. When did she disappear? Days ago, hours ago?"

They jabbered in Portuguese, too fast to pick up anything.

Eterno turned back to Mike. "Two days ago Paula met a client at that motel in Morumbi where you met the hooker. Remember it? The Desiree II."

He remembered. Morumbi sprawls to the west of Moema, a posh district bordered by the Rio Pinheiros, now more concrete canal than river. During one of his tours, Eterno had recited the history of the district that transformed from farm to city only in the decade of the 1950s.

The Desiree II snuggled amidst a strip of offices, bars, and restaurants that sprouted like mushrooms beside the giant mall called Shopping Morumbi. Mike learned about motels the first time they drove past it. He remarked that in the States you didn't see so many motels scattered all over. Eterno had flashed his broad smile and said, "Here motels are not the same as in the States. Here they are only for sex."

Mike stared at Sarah, handing her the photo. "Ask if she checked with the people at the motel."

Turning his back on them, he returned his gaze to the city at night.

He wouldn't forget the Desiree II. That's where he'd met the escort girl with bad teeth and stretch marks after Eterno helped pick her from photos on a web site.

Driving to a bar half a block from the motel, Eterno had got out and Mike drove on alone, pulling the car into a narrow entryway and stopping at a window, showing his identification, signing in. Led to the unit, he parked the car in an attached garage. Someone outside pulled down the door and he made his way upstairs to a room equipped beyond anything he expected. A remote control box positioned a canopy over the heated outdoor pool, hot tub, and sauna. The same box controlled the choice of music, speakers and television channels, including some porn.

A round bed with built in dresser furnished the room. A dressing area beside the bathroom offered a small table and window framing a lazy Susan where food, condoms, and other items were delivered.

The girl showed up after about fifteen minutes. She came up the stairs and rolled the patio cover in place, then walked into the room and stripped. Mike stood, watching, not certain how to proceed.

She returned to the patio and jumped into the pool. He took off his clothes and followed, stood at the edge looking down at her. She stared at his erection and mocked surprise. He sat on the side, feet in the water, and she grabbed his cock, urging him into the pool. She rubbed against him, smiling, then led him to the hot tub. They sat in the bubbling water and she massaged his drooling cock.

She must have sensed his urgency, leading him back to the room where they dried hurriedly and flopped onto the bed. Rolling a condom onto his dick with her mouth, pushing the latex sheath down to the end, continuing with her mouth before mounting him, she had whispered a heavily accented "Fuck my pussy" over and over.

"Mike," Eterno said. Then again, louder. "Mike." The voice intruded on his vision with the rudeness of an alarm clock.

Mike turned and faced them. "Sorry. Did she talk to the people at the motel? I remember a lot of security there."

"Yes, she says she called them. They told her Paula left in a taxi. She —"

"Called them? She didn't go there?"

Eterno glared, but Mike pretended not to notice. He wheeled around, showing them his back, and focused on the window, revisiting the motel.

She had climbed on him and eased down over his erection, staring into his eyes all the while. He sat passive while she rode slowly, clamping his penis with powerful muscles, dragging against his cock as if urging him to orgasm.

He remembered Eterno's advice. "Fuck her ass, Mike. It is part of the deal, a programa completa."

He'd never found willing partners in the states. He whispered in her ear, "Anal."

She dragged her vaginal lips slowly to the head of his cock, pulled free, then moved up higher against him and slid down again, taking his entire erection through her anus and into her rectum without flinching, without missing a beat. She stared into his eyes, picking up the pace, moving faster. He pushed her off and turned her around, rolling her forward, and she kneeled, presenting her raised ass. He rammed through, violent and angry, "You bitch, you fucking bitch" escaping clenched teeth while he tried to shove into her guts. Leaning against her, holding her tits, he fucked her asshole as if trying to reach something far away. She cried out, moaning, chanting with a pronounced accent, "Fuck my ass, yes, yes, fuck my ass," like a mantra to finish him. He throbbed and let go, finished, collapsing on top of her.

Panting, catching his breath, he listened to his heart pounding in his head. She slipped out from under him.

"My money," she said.

Mike rolled over and looked up. She stood above him, fully dressed and unsmiling. He stared for a minute.

"Por favor," she said. "Eu tenho um compromisso."

"What? Otrar cliente?"

"Por favor."

The phone rang. She answered. "Taxi," she said.

Mike pointed to the dresser where he had set three hundred reais. She took the money, then said, "Cinqüenta reais para o táxi, por favor."

Mike stared, slowly understanding. He stood and grabbed his wallet, handing her a five. She shook her head and wagged her finger, reaching into his wallet to take a fifty, then turned to leave.

He removed the condom with care, avoiding the smear of feces adhering to the end of it.

As they'd driven back to the apartment, Eterno had told Mike he needed to learn to make the experience last longer. At least an hour, maybe an hour and a half. Fuck her twice. Mike replied he didn't care to do it again and Eterno had not brought it up again until now, here, with Sarah.

Their Portuguese babble punctured his reverie. He turned back to the room and interrupted it.

"Did she go to the police? Talk to the people at the motel?"

"She cannot go to the police. She insists the motel people told her Paula left in a taxi. Remember, Mike, it's legal here. Everyone registers. For safety, to prevent abuse. Same thing in the hotels."

"How long did she wait before she called the motel?"

"I went over that with her. She says when Paula did not come home after four hours she called."

"Christ, that could have been a different shift."

"They register the girls, too."

"Yeah, but is she sure she talked to the same fucking person who was there when Paula went in?"

Eterno sighed and returned to Sarah. Mike listened, wishing he understood. He thought there were too many words for such a simple question.

"No, Mike, she is not sure. And she did not go to the motel."

"Two days. Ask her if she ever disappears like this."

*"Sarah, Mike wants to know if Paula ever disappears like this."*

*"Of course not. Her sister and her mother have not seen her, either. They are very worried. She doesn't answer her cell phone. Nothing."*

"No, it is not usual," Eterno said.

The room lapsed into silence.

Mike tried to reconcile Sarah's little girl image with the prostitute he had revisited in his head. She avoided his eyes, looking down at the floor.

When she stood to leave, she turned her eyes on him. They glowed with the luster of jade ovals set in her face of alabaster framed with obsidian-black hair. Not the eyes of a little girl.

After she'd gone, Mike picked up the conversation.

"I haven't a clue where to begin, Eterno. I don't know shit about São Paulo."

"You can help, Mike. I need your experience. Leave São Paulo to me."

They listened to the dying din of traffic.

Mike broke their silence. "What's your interest, Eterno?"

There was no response.

"Are you her lover?"

"No, of course not," Eterno shot back. "Sarah is a whore, Mike. What we call a garota de programa. Programa is an entertainment, and has come to mean sexual intercourse, party, trick. So garota de progama is a party girl, a girl who gets money to provide sex —"

"So what is it? If I'm going to get involved, I need to know."

"You will help?"

"Depends on what you tell me."

"Okay, Mike. I am in the business."

"Pimp?"

"No. These girls do not have pimps. Living off prostitutes is illegal. Sarah is a free-lancer. Even the ones working for agencies are like models sent out on gigs. They can choose not to take the job. Many girls will not perform anal sex with men who are well endowed, and sometimes the job ends there. A lot of them will not do anal sex at all. Some do weird stuff. Some go with women, some not. It is their choice."

Mike absorbed the matter-of-fact nature of the business, like any other, no more troubling than the putrid guts of corporations he'd investigated.

"So that's why you're reluctant to go to the cops? You're both in the business?"

"I avoid them if possible, like Sarah. It is not illegal, but the authorities do not love it either."

"So what's your connection?"

"I run a web site. My office is just around the corner. We can walk."

#### 4.

Bathed in the glare of a bulb focused by a hanging silver shade, the two men stood side by side. They wore butcher's aprons smeared blackish red. The fat one bent over the raw wooden table scattered with gray-green pieces of meat shining iridescent in the swaying light, sawing through an extremity. No blood welled into the ragged juncture tarnishing like sliced fruit.

Behind them a warehouse disappeared into darkness, the bare concrete floor strewn with disemboweled leather chairs and a sofa whose flock entrails piled up in fleecy mounds. Two tables lay belly up, legs in the air, stripped of their veneer.

Standing over the carcass like FDA inspectors, the two debated what to do with the largest remaining chunk, a torso, its shriveled breasts splayed flat, the ragged remains of nipples gouges in giant aureoles pointing heavenward.

"Cut it up, también." The fat one's black hair crowned a cherubic face jolly with plump cheeks. His deep voice, close to a growl, spit out the words in a southern drawl.

His taller, slender companion, not so dark-complected, his face pocked red with acne scars, said, "Não. Eu não açougueiro." The words lilted as though he sang the Portuguese.

"No what? Speak English."

"No have word. Cutter of meat. No cutter of meat."

"Butcher," the fat one said. "Carnicero. Nosotros cortamos esta perra."

"Que?" His voice sharp with resentment, the lean man's brown eyes flashed.

"We butchered this bitch. And yes, you are a butcher, my esteemed Brazilian colleague." His lips smiled but his eyes remained cold.

Dead for hours, the exsanguinated corpse bled little during the dismemberment. The head rested on the floor behind the table, staring fish eyed at the ceiling, the face swollen and drab purple from a beating. The skin on the nose peeled back like a ripe tomato bursting in the sun, cartilage peeking through a wide split down the middle.

"Dump her in the river," the fat one said.

"Não. No river."

The fat one stared back. "We're too fucking far from the ocean."

"Find fast in river. Much work próximo river. I know where. Maybe three hours. Grande river próximo oceano. Gone."

Remembering workers along the river, the fat one paused.

"I don't wanna drive three fucking hours with this bitch's body. What if we get stopped?"

The Brazilian breathed scorn. "Who stop us?"

"Police."

"For why?" He emitted a sound resembling laughter, then cut it off. "You no sabe nothing Brazil. Too many traffic beside river. No possible without someone see."

The fat one reconsidered. "Okay. But we're behind schedule and we still don't have shit to show. Miami's gonna be pissed. Maybe we should dump it here in town."

The skinny one grunted and shrugged at the word Miami. "No good. No know nothing Miami. Só Brasil. Find fast. My chefe no want problemas."

"Okay. This time. But I ain't making no habit of driving three hours to dump these bitches in some fucking big river near an ocean. Next one we dump here. Let em find it. And no more furniture. Waste of fuckin time. Lotta goddamn work for nothing."

The Brazilian grunted, staring at his feet. He responded in Portuguese, "*I don't understand everything you say. But mutilated bodies are not good for my boss. The public gets afraid and angry with the police, then the*

*police get angry with my boss. Costs much money for my boss."*

The fat one understood enough to get the gist. He didn't give a shit. He wanted to finish and get the fuck out. Let these small-time Brazilian pissants go to hell. This once he'd compromise.

They wrapped the slabs of flesh in rags and put them in a red metal Coca Cola cooler, packing them with ice. Around midnight they loaded the cooler into the trunk of a silver GM Vectra and drove away from the warehouse.

## 5.

Eterno rented an office in a nondescript box of a building centered in a grassy compound surrounded by a metal fence. Motion activated spotlights followed their progress walking the sidewalk along the perimeter. Dark-suited men on the grounds monitored their progress. Mike accepted it as an aspect of Brazilian paranoia, like the gated housing complexes in the whitest, safest neighborhoods of any American city.

Eterno let himself in the front gate with a plastic card.

Mike read the name Edifício Santa Rita Durão embossed on the lintel above the entryway.

"Who the hell is this character?" he asked, pointing to the name.

"A poet from Minas Gerais," Eterno said. "Also a priest. He first used the word Moema in a poem. Supposedly it is from an Indian word. I recall it means a lie, as in to tell a lie."

Two uniformed guards checked Eterno's pass and identification, recording numbers in a large book, though one greeted him by name. They looked at Mike's Texas driver's license, made him sign in and gave him a temporary pass. Eterno used his card to get through the metal spindle, then showed Mike how to use the pass.

They rode the elevator to the third floor. It opened to pitch black that lit up with motion activated lights, revealing a bare hallway with identical doors displaying numbers and no other identification.

"Hurry up, Mike. These lights are erratic."

Eterno's office was near where the hallway turned a corner. Before he could put his key in the door, the lights went out.

"Shit," Mike said.

With no windows, the hallway reverted to black except for the glow of the elevator buttons behind them.

“Wave your arms around, Mike.”

He did, waving his arms and jumping from side to side. The lights came on and Eterno opened the door to his office.

Mike saw two rooms, one full of cardboard filing boxes, the other housing two computers, some rolling chairs and a desk.

Eterno pulled two chairs in front of a computer monitor.

“This is how it works. I have an adult web site. The attraction is pictures and videos of escort girls. They send me their pictures and their business numbers with ads I run for free. People visiting the site see a single free picture of the girl and her ad. They have to pay to see the rest of the pictures by subscribing.”

“So it’s porn.”

“No more so than Playboy. The girls seldom submit pornographic pictures. Sometimes if they have pictures as a dupla there are lesbian photos. And there are some hardcore photos of porn stars stolen from the web. Let me show you.”

He brought up the site, opening with the usual disclaimer about being of age, in Portuguese. He clicked the big yellow button “ENTRAR” and “BEM-VINDOS” appeared in large script at the top of the page. “Well-coming,” Mike understood. Welcome.

Pictures of women, about twenty of them, rolled down the screen, faces with names, plenty of bottle blondes, here and there a shot of a bare ass with a shaved mons or bare breasts in lieu of a face.

In the middle “Acompanhante da Semana,” with two pictures of a topless blonde above an ad:

**Homens requintados e de bom gosto, venham  
conhecer a doce Alicia. Ligue-me agora!**

**Idade: 18 anos**

**Altura: 1,69 m**

**Peso: 50 kg**  
**Cidade: São Paulo**  
**Fone: (11) 9669-2000**

A line of statistics along the bottom of the screen:  
Acessos (desde Set/97) 3.726.795  
Total de Acompanhantes 293  
Total de Fotos (Acompanhantes) 3.837

Mike stopped reading. He understood enough without knowing how many films, hard core photos, and other stuff was on the site.

"So you don't know these girls," Mike said.

"I never meet them unless I arrange something special for them with a foreigner, which is the way I met Sarah. But the staple of the business is Brazilian men, arranged by phone. Most of the girls do not speak English, so I sometimes handle foreign dates by e-mail. I have someone to handle German and Spanish and Japanese whenever necessary."

"So the office is for these servers?"

"These are not servers. The site is on a commercial host."

"So what's with the office?"

"I keep current addresses and signed releases for the girls here. I have to be up to date on the rights to publish the pictures and ads, or the police can close me down. And they will do it. They check the records. Releases must be renewed once a year. And I use the computers to connect with the service to modify the site, add or remove girls."

"How'd you meet Sarah?"

"I do not think you are ready for that story, Mike. It was something unique."

"Show me Sarah's ad." He stared at the monitor covered with thumbnails of women, their names in blue below their photos. "This all the girls?"

"No, these are the newest or the ones who are most active. They request front page status."

Eterno clicked on the tab labeled "acompanhantes" and a new page opened. A table with buttons filled the screen, selections for a database search engine.

He selected Mulheres, Morena, Todos, Todos, Todos, São Paulo. The screen filled with blue names, links to ads, then thumbnails of photos filled in above the names. It took several minutes for all the photos to appear. There were ninety-six thumbnails of brunette women, mulheres morenas, all from São Paulo. He found a picture of Sarah, clicked the blue link, and her ad appeared.

Wearing a jacket open in front, she was otherwise nude except for black string bikini panties. Her hands covered her small breasts, black fingernails matching the black velvet jacket. Long-waisted, she showed a small tummy with little musculature and a deep, pronounced navel.

"She's no beauty." It popped out of Mike's mouth.

"She is in Brazil, Mike. There is an appreciation of women with small breasts and nice, round asses. No Barbie dolls. Brazilian men like hips and asses. Tits are pretty unimportant, though that seems to be changing. There are never enough blondes. But beautiful brunettes like Sarah do well. She gets plenty of hits. Men pay to see her pictures."

Mike tried to read the ad.

**Se você é um homem discreto, que gosta de aventuras, venha se aventurar com essa moreninha sensual. Atendo em hotéis, motéis e residências 24 horas. Atendo homens, mulheres, casais, e travestis. Atendo grupos de homens, acompanho em clubes de swing. Faço vaginal, anal, oral, dupla penetração e grupo sexo.**

It didn't take much Portuguese to get the gist. Particularly that she entertained every possible gender, men, women and in-between, couples, groups of men, and would go to swing clubs. He passed on to her statistics.

**Idade: 20 anos**

**Altura: 1.60m**

**Peso: 45kg**

**Manequim: 36**

**Cidade: São Paulo**

**Fone: (11) 9121 5254 (11) 9509 9115**

**Clique aqui para ver mais 26 fotos**

Eterno leaned back in the small office chair until it seemed it would topple. When he rocked forward again, he said, "She is adventurous. And she makes a lot of money because of it. She is one of the few girls willing to go to a room with two men. Sometimes more. She seems to prefer men, but she does couples and women and transsexuals, too. She is crazy."

"Dupla penetração. Is that what I think it is?" Mike found it difficult pronouncing the nasal.

"Double penetration. My guess is she likes all this, that it is pleasure as much as work. Not many girls go to her extremes. Most of them say it is too dangerous."

"If I wanted to see more I'd need to pay, right?"

"Yes. But I can give you a password. There is a lot more. You want to see her other pictures?"

"Sure, but I'm talking about people who browse in here."

"They subscribe, paying with credit cards or bank drafts. Sarah is a big draw. She also models for men's magazines and other web sites that don't advertise prostitutes."

"Doesn't that hurt your traffic?"

"Not at all. In fact, it is advertising. Those presentations are tamer than what is on my site."

"Her other pictures, they hardcore?" Mike wasn't sure he wanted to see them, but he needed to know how she displayed.

"No, they are nudes, very explicit nudes. Customers like to see what they are getting into. But all these photos are edited. You learned that lesson."

He entered a password and thumbnails of her twenty-six pictures appeared. Even in reduced scale the detail, color and composition showed professional origins. The poses enticed without vulgarity, yet hid nothing. Eterno enlarged them, filling the screen one by one.

"You edit these well."

"I have someone who takes care of it. The girls provide the originals, though if they ask me I send them to him to take the pictures. He took the ones of the hooker you met at the motel."

"He's a fucking magician."

Eterno laughed. "He is good. You should see what he can do with video. He took the photos of Sarah, but she is a good subject. Instinctive about what works, and without many flaws."

"So you met the one I had and didn't warn me?"

"No, I never met her. We did it all by e-mail. She went to see the photographer and he brought me the finished pictures. He did some editing. He thought she was beautiful, but not so perfect as in the pictures."

"You ever sample these women?"

"They are whores. I do not build relationships with whores. And I am no pimp. This is a web site. The business is photos."

From the edge in his voice Mike decided to back off. He wasn't certain Eterno was so hands off, but he filed away his other questions and shut up.

"Let me show you the pictures of her missing friend. And of them together. Sarah and Paula sometimes work as

what we call a dupla, a female couple. Sometimes the girls are bisexual, sometimes not. If they are, it gets more attention, and they play that up. Many of these girls will not touch other women, even if they work as a dupla. Even when they work couples as clients. They try to work their preferences."

"I thought she preferred men."

"I doubt she cares. Maybe she prefers men. There is not much demand by couples as clients. Or women, for that matter. But she lives with Paula. And they sleep in the same bed, or at least I assume they do. She may not be promiscuous with women. She might prefer one woman as a lover and go for men in her work."

Eterno brought up the pictures of Paula. Besides her misproportioned face, Mike found her fleshy if not fat, with sagging breasts and heavy thighs. He wondered how she looked in person.

The screen jumped to the ad for Paula and Sarah as a dupla. In their photos together, Sarah appeared even more petite. In some they kissed on the mouth. In others they engaged in oral sex. There were photos involving a double dildo. The photo of Sarah on her knees with her back to the camera, her face in Paula's crotch, made him think of Jodi and Adrienne.

He stared in silence.

Eterno said, "There is more. There are more girls missing."

The intrusion burst his vision. Ever since Jodi'd left, he tried to recall their good years, the reasons they'd married. Instead, everything he saw brought up Adrienne. He could no longer remember the woman he'd married, as if she'd never existed.

He met Eterno's gaze. "Why do you think so?"

"I do not keep track of the girls, but sometimes I get a call or an e-mail from a client if a girl never answers her phone. I try to reach her, but there is no response. It has

happened with three girls. But Paula is the first to be confirmed.”

Mike sat with crossed arms, looking through Eterno as if he weren't there. He felt the old familiar tingling in his brain that had first come to him in Vietnam.

He'd been walking point in the Go Noi, patrolling the paddies near the bermed railroad tracks. The tingling started as they approached the trestles. Mike felt the silence: no birds. He stopped in his tracks, waved the squad back, and crouched. The rattle of an AK-47 broke the silence, a premature ambush set off by a nervous enemy soldier. They called in mortars and routed a platoon of NVA regulars, killing several.

After that, the tingling saved his ass numerous times. It served him in the business, looking for missing persons and bail jumpers. It made him wake up, pay attention to something not quite right.

Now what he heard told him something was wrong, but he couldn't quite piece it together. Maybe it was the alien setting, with clues so hard to read.

He focused his gaze, aiming into Eterno's eyes. "So this has been going on a while?"

"It started about a month ago, I think. If a girl drops out for a time, that is one thing. They sometimes take a break, maybe try to get out of the business. Even when they consider their options, it is rare for them to stop answering their business phone. A lot of them love to hear from clients. It tells them they are worth something. When a woman quits the business, she tells her steady clients. She would tell me to remove the ad. People respect this decision."

"You know more. You're not telling me everything."

Eterno sighed. "Yes. Nothing specific. Nothing you can touch. Rumors mostly. But I know some police, and I know of someone who works at a motel with horror stories. And at least three of my girls, not including Paula, have dropped out without contacting me to remove their

photos. That is bad for business. And I doubt the only girls missing are from my site."

"Cops? You know some cops?"

"Yes. I have strong ties at a high level, going way back."

"What do they say?"

Eterno looked down. When he looked up he spoke with a hint of apology. "Okay, you called me. I have one good friend, but at a very high level. I have not yet asked him about this thing."

"Why not? Why me and not him?"

"This business is tolerated, not loved. The government and the media do not like it. They look for reasons to shut it down. It is expensive for me to call on friends for favors. I cannot abuse my friendship."

"Sarah does not want to go the police because she is a prostitute. She could tell them she did something else, but she would need to explain why her friend went to meet a stranger at the Desiree II. Not that it is illegal, but the girls avoid admitting their work to the police. The police know the girls have money, and police always find ways to extort from businesses that are considered shady by the so-called upstanding citizens."

"So why me? Hire someone local."

"I cannot trust a local detective. I think they are all tied to the police. Or else they are tied to lawyers. I pay lawyers enough already. Or else they are crooks. This is for my business. And because Sarah came to me."

"You're an amateur, Eterno. You don't know what you're getting into."

"That is why I came to you. You are a professional."

"Not here. I'm no professional here."

"You are experienced, though. That counts. You have been through these things before."

"A lot of things. Some worse than others."

Mike wore the thousand yard stare of those too long in combat. It crept over his face while he spoke, his gaze

fixed upon some distant landmark of the mind unseen in the room. Then just as suddenly his eyes cleared and focused on Eterno.

"I always work with the police. I am careful, I play by the book, and I stay in control."

"Let me tell you a Brazilian joke about the police. There was an international contest for police to use their unique methods to catch a rabbit, to see who would be fastest. The British used their powers of deduction and caught one by sheer brain power. The Americans caught one with their technology. The Brazilian police brought in a pig, bloody and beaten, screaming, 'I'm a rabbit!'"

Mike didn't smile. He'd been around plenty of people who didn't trust cops.

"So you trust your police friend?"

"As a friend. I know nothing about his methods. I avoid the police, like everyone in Brazil." Eterno paused; Mike waited him out. "Like I said, I know someone who has horror stories. From a woman who works at a motel."

"Second hand, right? You've heard these stories from someone else, right?"

"Yes, but we can meet the source. If you want, we can visit my friend who knows her. She will give us the source. I can call her on the way, but no matter what, we can go. I have a key to her apartment."

"She'll give us the original source?"

"Yes. Do you want to go see her now?"

"Let's go."

"Then you are in?"

"I'm interested. I don't know how deep to get in this."

Eterno looked at his watch. "It is after ten, Mike. It is not the best neighborhood to drive through this late. But tomorrow she will be at work." He stopped as though weighing options. Then he said, "I doubt we will have a problem."

Mike reflected on the comment. "I haven't had a problem yet, and I've been out pretty late at night. On foot."

"Yes, but in Moema, Mike. One of the better neighborhoods in São Paulo. You should not get cocky. It is a very dangerous city."

"I'm never cocky," Mike said. "But I am lucky."

Eterno pulled his mass out of the chair. "Bring it along. We might need it."

## 6.

Eterno made good time in the sparse traffic. He never stopped for red lights or stop signs unless forced to by another driver, slowing instead to watch for on-coming vehicles while rolling through the intersections. At one point he turned to Mike and said, "Red lights in Brazil mean be careful."

Mike knew about the reluctance to stop for fear of car-jacking and robbery, an excuse often voiced in traffic court when confronted by photographic evidence. The words, "It was late and I was afraid" sometimes worked, particularly if uttered by a woman. Intersections notorious for robbery and car-jacking had police presence, red lights flashing, all night every night.

Before long they hit Rua Augusta, a drab street lined with aging concrete buildings and jammed with cars that forced them to wait at traffic signals. Eterno swore under his breath at the drivers ahead who stopped.

Mike had read about Rua Augusta in a guide book. The street winds through many neighborhoods in São Paulo before finishing in one of the best, Jardims Paulista, where it is reborn as Rua Colômbia after crossing Rua Estado Unidos. In Jardims it reflected the soul of Jardims: green spaces, upscale restaurants, swank shops, and large houses scattered among the high rises.

But near its birthplace, where Rua Martins Fontes changes names after crossing Radial Lest-Oest in Bela Vista near São Paulo Centro, there were no high rises. The dark two-lane street lined with decrepit old concrete and brick boxes presented a spectacle of depravity, the air saturated with loud music and louder human voices, the night a carnival of desperate people spilling from bars and sex clubs where men played bingo to win tired whores, the open spaces vacant lots where streetwalkers serviced clients.

The garish parade of trolling prostitutes, cross dressers, and transvestites assaulted Mike's eyes, a far cry from the sanitary world of internet garota de programa.

"This area is famous, Mike," Eterno said, keeping his eyes on the road. "Rua Augusta is a beautiful street, but it is famous only for this."

"I know," Mike said. "I read about it."

"This is not the worst place. On the edge of Moema, on Avenida Indianópolis, there is a strip with she-males."

"I haven't seen anything like this in São Paulo since I've been here."

"It is not common. Most prostitutes work out of clubs or off sites like mine, or with agencies that advertise in tourist magazines. They tend to be invisible unless you search for them."

"It isn't illegal."

"True. But no one likes this strip. Feminist groups have tried to close down these clubs."

"I read about some clubs where they play bingo for prostitutes. On a web site, translated from a newspaper article. One of the prostitutes thought the protestors were stupid. What's the difference? That was her point."

"Exactly."

Eterno turned off Rua Augusta, speeding down a narrow, empty street. Mike saw it as perfect for an ambush. Eterno ignored red lights and stop signs, honking to warn cross traffic, barely decelerating.

They pulled in front of the parking garage of an apartment building. Eterno honked and the large wooden door creaked open. He drove inside, stopped and handed the attendant a five reais note.

The attendant knew him by name. He unlocked the door to the elevator as it descended and the two exchanged Portuguese chitchat Mike didn't try to catch.

"You must come here a lot," Mike said as they rode up in the elevator.

"I do. This woman is a special friend."

"But this isn't the woman who works at the motel, right? Your friend has not seen these things at the motel, right?"

"No. I said that before. The one working at the motel is her friend. She can introduce us to her."

"You haven't met this friend."

"No, I have not met her friend."

Eterno had called on the way over, with no answer. Now they stood at the door, ringing the buzzer. No answer. He used his key.

The place was empty. No furniture, nothing. The bare wooden floors shone like they had been polished. Eterno ran up the spiral stairway, Mike behind him. Upstairs, everything but the threadbare carpet had disappeared.

"This was a fucking furnished apartment!" Eterno's shrill words echoed in the vacant space.

Mike turned on all the lights. He went downstairs and examined the floors, finding scuff marks from the kitchen to the living room, like drag marks. A few dark spots, perhaps blood, lined the tracks.

Upstairs again Mike found scraps of torn fabric. He followed Eterno back down the stairs.

"Any rugs missing?" Mike asked.

Eterno didn't answer. Sweat beaded on his forehead; he looked sick.

"Wake up. Tell me what's missing from the floor. Any rugs gone?"

Eterno stared at him, panic in his eyes. He looked around.

"A large throw rug, I think. Yes, from here, from the bathroom." He walked to the long, narrow bathroom beside the kitchen. "A long throw rug."

"Let's boogie."

Motionless, Eterno stood examining the room as though searching for traces of his friend. Calm but emphatic, Mike took him by the arm.

"Let's go, Eterno. Now. Out of here."

He wiped down the handrail with his shirttails, then repeated the motion for everything else they'd touched. He pushed Eterno out the door, wiping the knobs inside and outside as they left.

"Downstairs, act normal." Mike spoke in a flat monotone.

"They know where I was going."

"Act normal anyway. Just act normal. Don't say shit about this to anyone."

Mike watched Eterno's face go lax as they rode down to the garage in the elevator. When they hit the ground floor, he almost seemed himself.

The car waited in a temporary space outside the elevator. They got in, Eterno smiled at the attendant who opened the garage door, and they drove out.

"She's dead. They took her out in the rug." Mike spoke in a dead calm. He scanned the area around them with minimal head movement.

As they turned onto the street in front of the building a large American sedan picked them up. Eterno seemed oblivious. "What do you mean?"

"She knows something. Knew something. Clean job, too. Somebody killed her, took her out in a rug. Took all the furniture, too. I don't know how the hell they pulled that off. By the way, we're being followed."

Eterno glanced in the rear view mirror.

"Turn up this one-way street," Mike said.

He did, going the wrong way. The sedan followed.

"You like to drive fast?"

Eterno needed no encouragement. He smoked the rear tires and they raced up the one-way street, the big car on their tail.

"Go around the block. Fast."

Eterno turned the corner and then the next corner and the next. The aging Detroit iron had trouble on the turns.

"Keep doing it. He's a shitty driver in a shitty car."

On the third lap they pulled up behind the sedan. It ran.

"Follow him to some light. I want to get a license."

The American sedan screeched to a stop, tires smoking, rocking and cockeyed. Eterno floored the brakes, the little BMW nosing down and sliding straight. Mike was out before it stopped.

He caught the passenger halfway out of the car, slamming the door on him, jerking him into the street and kneeing him in the chest and head so fast he had no chance to moan before Mike ripped the gun from his hand and slammed it into his face. As the man crumpled Mike whirled into a crouch, a two-handed grip on the short-barrel revolver aimed at the car speeding up the street.

Eterno stood beside him. "Jesus, that was fast."

"Let's beat the shit out of this bastard, see if he can tell us what the fuck he was up to."

The man tried to rise to his knees. Mike kicked him in the stomach.

"Next time I'll make sure you sing soprano," he said before remembering he had no chance of being understood.

Eterno lifted the man by his neck and hissed words in his face that made him stiffen, eyes wide.

"Ask him who the fuck he is."

The man mumbled something in Portuguese with policia in it.

Eterno reached inside his shiny gray sport jacket and pulled out a badge. "Cop. Local, not military or federal."

"Ask him why the fuck he was following us."

The man quietly answered Eterno's questions.

"He says he had orders to wait for a white BMW and follow it."

He refused to say more. Mike pocketed the gun and badge, and they left him kneeling in the street.

## 7.

Eterno focused on driving, blocking what had just happened, giving up trying to imagine the next step. It felt like he had jumped into a pool blanketed in flames and now swam frantically underwater to find a place to surface.

Despite his best efforts, the police were involved. The idea of avoiding them suddenly appeared stupid, a strategy with no endgame, a paranoid reflex verging on delusion. His wager on Mike loomed large, costly, the ante bounding from luxury bet to dangerous necessity.

Reluctantly he picked up his cell phone and called his old friend on the São Paulo police force.

*"Bruno, it's Eterno Mendes."*

*"Eterno, it's late. You must have a problem."*

*"I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, but I have an emergency. I ran into an obnoxious cop and kicked his ass before I realized he was a cop. What should I do?"*

*"What happened?"*

He didn't sense this to be a propitious moment to unravel the whole story.

*"You do not want to hear all the details right now. He did not act like a policeman. He asked for what he got. I ended up with his gun and badge."*

Bruno whistled under his breath. *"That will be painful for him. The two things you never lose. You must get them to me."*

*"How do you want to do it? Shall I bring them in to your office?"*

*"No, not to my office. Take them to Captain Ribeiro at my precinct. Say you found them."*

*"Can I find them jogging in Ibirapuera Park in the morning?"*

*"Sure. Captain Ribeiro will be reasonable. Call me later."*

*"I can do that. I need to talk to you anyway."*

*"Call me tomorrow. Eterno, Ribeiro's my man, but I'm not calling him. I'll back you up later if necessary, but for now I don't know anything about it. Understand?"*

*"I understand. I will call tomorrow."*

*"I'll be expecting it. I need to hear everything."*

Mike sat back and stared out the side window, ignoring Eterno's end of the conversation, replaying the scene at the flat in his head, trying to fit it into the same picture with everything else. First Sarah's girlfriend, now Eterno's girlfriend. It was damned close to be a coincidence, even if the set-ups were so different. The tingling in his head intensified, more an alarm than a warning: the whole thing stunk.

When Eterno hung up, Mike asked, "Did Paula or Sarah know your friend?"

"No. They hadn't met."

"I don't trust coincidences, Eterno. Something here is out of whack. Was there any connection between this friend and the women who disappeared?"

"No. It is not possible. My friend worked in a government office, not as a hooker on a web site."

"She didn't have money? Wealthy family?"

"Not to my knowledge. She never spoke of her family. But she rode the bus to work, and I sometimes gave her money to help out."

It didn't seem reasonable she'd be kidnapped for money. But Mike didn't know this culture as he knew border Mexico, where plenty of poor women disappeared.

Even with his pathetic Spanish, Mexico seemed less foreign to him. Maybe because Texas was more like Mexico than most wanted to admit, a third world country compared to California and New York and Massachusetts, its semi-educated populace living on the scraps tossed them by the industrialized states. Better off than Mexicans, but not for any reasons having to do with their own efforts.

Brazil seemed more a mutant piece of Europe, like a translated Portugal set adrift, isolated and out of step with

the century, violent and without rich neighbors to live off, populated by desperate Italian, Japanese, and scads of other immigrants who'd replaced the slaves.

He felt himself falling into the puzzle. Jodi'd always accused him of loving to walk on the edge, wallowing in the low intensity adrenaline drip of discomfort that came from being a little out of his element. Maybe he did seek out the unfamiliar, the off-center. Maybe a legacy of Vietnam. Maybe.

Eterno parked in the garage beneath their building. They rode the elevator to his apartment in silence. Like a wounded bear, he made his way to the sofa, settling as though he'd spent his last reserves of energy, hunkered over, head in hands.

"You have whiskey?" Mike stood in front of him, looking down.

"In the kitchen, under the sink."

Mike found a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black. He set it on the counter and took two glasses from the cabinet. He poured several fingers into each glass and brought them around, handing one to Eterno who cupped it in trembling hands. He knocked back half the liquor. Mike reached around for the bottle and poured more.

"Easy, buddy," Mike said. "The first time is always tough. It's a tough business. That's why I'm careful about getting involved."

"You have been through this sort of thing?"

"More or less. I've seen some rough shit. Bail jumpers are the worst. Missing persons is pretty safe. Runaways, maybe a kidnapping, a kid taken by a divorced parent. Sometimes murder. It never got real personal for me," he lied.

Mike didn't think it the best time to bring up the brutality of Texas. He let that simmer and chewed over his thoughts, thinking about how best to begin. He knew none of what he had in mind would be easy for Eterno.

"This one's weird, Eterno."

"Weird?"

"Weird. People disappearing's one thing. Furniture disappearing, that's another. Its bizarre. It probably means someone's looking for something. How the fuck did they get it out of there? When did they take it? Hasn't anyone missed her?"

He waited for the words to sink in.

"You need to go talk to the manager of the apartments. See what he says. She have a car?"

"Who?"

"Your friend, Eterno. Shit. Wake up."

"No. She takes the bus to work."

"That makes it easier for them. But someone at her job has to know she isn't around. Didn't anyone report her missing? When did you last talk to her?"

Leaning on his knees, Eterno peered into his empty glass. Mike poured another and downed his. He stood, waiting; Eterno seemed to struggle with the question.

"Two days ago, I think. After work. I seldom call her at work."

"Go to her apartment building and talk to the manager. Then call her work. See what they say. Don't let on you know shit about her being missing."

Eterno picked up the glass and drank it down.  
"Okay."

"What about your police friend? What'd you tell him?"

"That I got into a fight with an asshole cop. Before I knew he was a cop I had his gun and badge."

"What'd he say?"

"He wants me to turn it in tomorrow to one of his men, a Capitão Ribeiro. Tell him I found it jogging early in the morning, in Ibirapuera Park. I guess I need to jog in the morning, early, to be seen. Go through the motions."

"Yeah. You've got to hold it together. No backing out now."

"No. Of course not."

"You trust this guy? This cop friend?"

"Yes. I have known him for years. We went to college together. But that is all I will say about it. I do not want to put you two together. At least not now."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not want him to know an American is involved with this. For now, I want him to be unaware of you. I am trying to protect him. And you, too, Mike. I am trying to protect both of you."

"From what?"

"That is a stupid question."

"Why stupid?"

"I do not want to explain that right now. You will understand when you understand Brazil."

"My point, Eterno. I don't know enough about Brazil to get involved in something like this."

Eterno didn't answer.

"What was her name?" Mike asked.

"Whose name?"

"Your missing friend."

Eterno leaned back in the chair and yawned. His head lolled back and he stared at the ceiling. He yawned again.

"Come on, Eterno. Get with it. You asked me to help, and that's what I'm trying to do. I know this sucks. You'd rather sleep. I know. But if you want my help you need to flat get with it."

"Her name was Aline."

"Aline?"

"Aline Maria da Silva. I have known her about six months."

"How'd you meet?"

"She worked for what you would call traffic court. I received a ticket for some little offense, some small thing nobody worries about here. It kept coming back. I got it nine or ten months ago, but it came back every month. I paid it the first time, then I paid it again, to keep from

hassling with it. The third time it came around, I saw it was not going to stop, so I went to court. They sympathized, told me not to pay. Then it came back again, so I had to get it out of the system. I went to the administrative offices for the court. The person who handles that particular problem is Aline. With her help, it took three weeks instead of three months to get it off the books."

"I don't get it. A traffic ticket that comes back?"

"It has to be a fraud. Someone pockets the money. There were about fifty of us there that day with the same problem. Anyway, I asked her to have coffee with me and she said yes. Then we became friends. She gave me a key about a month ago."

"What do you know about her?"

"Not much. I helped her with money a few times. Her salary is small."

"What'd she do for money before you?"

"She had debts. I do not think she was a program girl, if that is what you are thinking."

"And you'd know if she was?"

"Of course."

"You didn't know her that long."

"Long enough."

"You are certain that Sarah and Aline had no connection? You never introduced them or saw them together? Or maybe Aline and Paula?"

"I am positive. They came from different worlds. Aline worked for the government, not on a web site."

Mike didn't press the issue. He found the coincidence difficult.

"What was her friend's name, the one who worked at the motel?"

"She never told me. That was why I wanted to talk to her."

"Which motel?"

"I am not sure."

Mike finished his drink, grabbed a kitchen towel and started for the door. He paused at the dining table. "How do I contact Sarah if I wanna talk to her again?"

"Call her business number. When you talk to her again, ask for her personal number. If I had it at hand, I would get it for you. I have it on file at the office."

Mike took the revolver and badge from his pocket, removed the bullets, wiped it all clean with the towel and placed the revolver, cylinder open, on the table beside the badge.

Eterno stood up. "Be careful with Sarah. She is a whore, which means she is a liar. Do not get involved with her. That would be very stupid. I doubt she is anything like she seems."

"Don't trust her?"

"No. Do not trust her. She might not take what is obvious, but she will take what is most valuable."

Mike took the elevator down to his apartment. It was well after midnight. He would call Sarah in the morning.

Why he should trust Eterno any more than Sarah? They were in the same business. Because Eterno didn't sell his own ass didn't make him any better.

Instead of waiting until morning, Mike called Sarah's number when he got inside his apartment. Instead of a ring, he got her voice mailbox. He didn't understand the brief message, but the girlish tone and languorous pace gave it an intriguing come-hither edge.

## 8.

The fat American awoke as they passed the makeshift shelter at the small fish market outside Peruibe. Greeted by a ghostly vision of boats pulled up onto a flat spot next to the river beside an open concrete slab roofed with corrugated metal, he blinked several times to be certain it wasn't a dream. He struggled to shake off his nap, peeling away the cobwebs as the car crossed the bridge over the Rio Negro.

The Brazilian ignored him, craning over the wheel as they slowed, staring into the moonless night. He stopped, then turned off onto a dirt road not far from the bridge.

The Vectra rocked and bumped along the rutted path beside the river, a painful crawl with the twin beams stabbing the inky dark like two yellow spears. They stopped in a wide clearing before a stand of trees swallowed in a riot of tangled undergrowth.

The American stepped out of the car and heard the sound of waves. In the lightless night he could gauge neither the distance nor the direction to the ocean.

They lifted the cooler out of the trunk. It seemed heavier than when they had loaded it, as if the woman's lifeless pieces had gained weight on the journey.

Guided by the paltry beam of a flashlight, they lugged the long box between them, the hard metal handle biting into the American's tender hand. They struggled along uneven ground. The Brazilian muttered under his breath. The American stumbled and went to one knee, dropping his end, cursing. Manual labor was not in his job description.

They wrestled the cooler to the edge of a bluff overlooking the invisible flow of the Negro. The Brazilian shined the pencil of light over the edge but it fixed nothing, its ray diffusing before it ever found the river. The American heard its murmur mix with the distant sound of waves.

The Brazilian returned to the car and came back dragging a gunny sack, a handful of fine-mesh net bags in his free hand. One by one, he removed the wrapped chunks of meat from the cooler and stuffed them into individual net bags, weighting each with what looked like a cannonball taken from the gunny sack. When he had emptied the cooler, he flung the bags one by one into the dark river, aiming for the middle, waiting for the splash before sending the next. When the pile of parts had been dispatched, he lifted the empty cooler above his head and hurled it into the river.

They returned to the car. The Brazilian slid behind the wheel. The American sat upright, staring dead ahead. As they circled around in the small clearing where the dirt road died before the trees and undergrowth, the headlights traced an arc along the wild vegetation before shooting out into black emptiness like two lost souls seeking their mortal forms.

The American wedged his head between the door and the seatback and fell asleep, snoring.

## 9.

Eterno wore the green sweats he had jogged in at the crack of dawn. He carried a cardboard box that seemed small in his hands, setting it on the table before the desk sergeant as though it were a votive offering.

The sergeant, a swarthy man with a hard look, stared into the open box at the weapon, the bullets, and the badge. His face got harder.

Eterno told the sergeant his name was Eterno Mendes and he needed to see Capitão Ribeiro. He told the sergeant he had found the things while jogging in Ibirapuera Park.

The sergeant said Ribeiro was in a meeting. He escorted Eterno in to see Tenente Mordejai Goldenberg, Ribeiro's adjutante. He set the box on the Lieutenant's desk as carefully as if it were full of eggs, handing Eterno over with few words.

*"Lieutenant, this is Mr. Eterno Mendes. He's here to see Ribeiro. He says he found this gun and badge this morning while jogging."*

He snorted and left without awaiting a response.

A skinny man wearing wire-rimmed glasses perched above a pronounced aquiline nose, Goldenberg sat hunched over his desk, his spindly arms protruding from his gray uniform sleeves like matchsticks. He looked up but didn't rise to shake hands and Eterno sat without invitation in one of the two plastic chairs on the other side of the wooden desk.

Goldenberg looked down at the weapon and bullets like they were dirty. He held the badge up to the light and examined it, then set it on his desk.

The two men sat in silence. Goldenberg stared at Eterno from across his desk like it was a demilitarized zone.

*"Eterno,"* he finally said. *"That is an interesting name. You must get some comments on it."*

*"People sometimes make jokes, but not so often as when I was little."*

The Tenente smiled.

*"Anyway, it is a family name from my father's side."*

Eterno upped the ante on Goldenberg's smile, returning his own in spades.

Goldenberg leveled a steady gaze.

*"How did you happen to come by these things?"* he asked, indicating the badge and gun with a sweep of his hand.

*"I was jogging in Ibirapuera Park this morning and found them by some trees."* Eterno notched up the intensity of his smile.

Goldenberg watched his eyes. He examined every gesture. Eterno, aware of the scrutiny, returned his own deadpan gaze behind a Cheshire cat's smile.

*"What time did you jog?"*

*"Early. I drove there as the sun came up, before the traffic. I think it was around 5:30 when I left. It takes about ten minutes to get there that time of day."*

The Lieutenant's eyes showed disbelief, but Eterno did not care. He was comfortable with his lie.

The two men stared at each other, the prolonged silence an unspoken challenge. Eventually Goldenberg broke off and rose from his chair. Eterno came to his feet and they stood eye to eye, Goldenberg as tall as Eterno.

*"Thank you, Mr. Mendes. We'll see to it that these are taken care of. And please, would you be available to take us to the spot where you found them if it is necessary to pursue this line of inquiry?"*

*"Yes, I will make myself available if you need me. I left my phone numbers at the desk."*

*"Thank you for being so cooperative and for returning these items."*

Goldenberg shook his hand, then walked him to the door. His smile had worn out, but Eterno left his on full bore.

Outside the building, he laughed aloud at the ornate display.

He drove to Aline's apartment building. He found the manager sitting at a small, cluttered metal frame desk. He walked into her office unannounced, catching her by surprise. A small woman, fortyish, with drab, hennaed hair, she looked up when he filled the doorway to her office.

*"What happened to Aline da Silva?"* he asked. He stood at the foot of her desk, intentionally intimidating.

*"Who?"*

*"One of your tenants, apartment 604. Aline da Silva. She is gone without any word. Her apartment is empty."*

*"And you are?"*

*"Eterno Mendes, a friend of hers."*

*"How do you know the apartment is empty?"*

*"I have a key. I was there."*

She looked down at her desk and shuffled some papers, then looked up again. *"Yes, Miss da Silva. She left two days ago. We're refurbishing the apartment."* She smiled at him. *"We changed the lock today, so your key won't work."*

*"She came to you to move out?"*

*"No, not to me. I received notice from the owners. They decided to redo the unit and put in new furniture."*

*"That seems strange. The furniture seemed new."*

*"I don't know why they made the decision."*

*"Who owns the apartment?"*

*"A holding company. I receive their instructions by mail."*

*"She said nothing to me about moving out."*

*"Maybe she didn't want you to know."*

*"Do you have a forwarding address?"*

*"Of course, but I can't give it to you. For all I know, you might be the reason she moved."*

*"I would like to know who owns the apartment."*

*"I can tell you that. But I can't say more."*

She wrote something on a slip of paper. He read the words New Star Flat Service. There was a phone number and an address in the central zone of the city.

*"This is an American name. The company is Brazilian?"*

*"I don't know. I never see anyone, except sometimes a girl comes to check things. But they take my word for the condition of their unit."*

*"How many units do they have here?"*

*"Only this one."*

Eterno left the office without thanking her. He went down to the parking garage.

He sought out the garage manager. Short, slight, wizened with white, wiry hair, he could have been in his seventies. Eterno guessed late fifties if his wrinkles spoke the truth about a harried life. He wore a perpetual expression of concern like a badge of honor. Eterno had seen him around, had noted that people avoided him. He had never spoken to the man, instead nodding a greeting when their paths crossed. Now Eterno approached him.

*"You remember me?"* he asked.

*"Of course. You are Aline's boyfriend."*

*"She is gone. Do you know where?"*

*"No, I learned of it the day they took the furniture. Now they are fixing the walls, redoing the floors, painting. Refurbishing it."*

*"Do you hear anything? No one talks about it?"*

*"No. We were all surprised. Word is she went to live with her mother in Minas Gerais, but she said nothing to us."*

*"Who took the furniture?"*

*"Two men in a white van. Early in the morning."*

*"You saw them?"*

*"Yes. When I came on duty they were bringing down the last items. It was odd, because one of them spoke a little Spanish, not Portuguese. But most of the time he spoke English. He was short and fat. The other man spoke*

*like a Paulistano. But the fat one, he was not Brazilian. He spoke English like an American."*

*"When do you come on duty?"*

*"Five in the morning. That day I was early. It may have been four thirty when I saw them. They were gone by five."*

*"Thank you. I appreciate your help. If you learn anything, please call me. I am worried about her."*

He printed his cell number on a square yellow piece of paper with a sticky edge and stuck it on the window of the office. The parking manager scrutinized the number, then gave Eterno a concerned look.

His cell phone rang as he drove back to the apartment. He picked up and heard Mike on the other end.

"Eterno, I can't get Sarah. Her cell phone is off."

"She is working, Mike. If you are not the first caller of the day, you will have to wait. She stays busy. Leave a message."

"I did. But I don't have a cell. I'll have to wait here for her call."

"Wake up, Mike. She might be making programas all day. Leave her a message to call me. Tell her you need to see her."

"What if she's in trouble?"

"What can you do about it? I will be there soon. Wait for me in your flat. We can go to lunch."

He hung up. With Mike whining about Sarah, he worried he had made a mistake asking for his help, though there seemed no other way. It should not have been a surprise. As an American, Mike knew a violent sex industry. And Americans thought they needed to protect women.

He decided to shower and change before their meeting.

## 10.

Waiting for Eterno, Mike struggled with a paperback on Portuguese grammar, puzzling over the marvel of *que* and *qual* and *which*. *Que* was what, but also *which* when used as an adjective following a noun, while *qual* was *which* when used as a pronoun implying a choice among a group. Having already suffered the torture of *would*, *should* and *will*, Mike's patience wore thin with complications in what he'd hoped would be a Rosetta Stone.

Eterno arrived and Mike put the grammar book away, nixing the idea of asking Eterno. He knew it would lead to an extended disquisition, fueling his frustration and distracting from the business at hand.

Eterno pulled up one of the kitchen chairs, turned it around, and sat across from Mike, resting his elbows on the back.

"I could not see the Captain, but I did get to see his adjutant. Lieutenant Goldenberg. He saw that I lied through my teeth, but we got along fine.

"The manager at the apartment is either a liar or clueless. She told me Aline moved out without notifying her. She says Aline notified the company that owns the flat instead. Now the owners are refurbishing it. She would not give me a forwarding address."

"So I guess you didn't get her mail."

"Of course not. Why?"

"Her cell phone records could be useful."

"I have access to those through her internet account. I have her password."

"We need to look at them."

"I spoke to the manager in the parking garage. He says the staff was surprised to hear she moved. They think she went home to her mother in Minas Gerais. She never mentioned her mother to me."

"Sounds possible."

"The garage manager says movers were there at four in the morning taking the furniture from her flat. There were two of them. One was an American who sometimes spoke Spanish."

"Why would an American be moving furniture in Brazil? Can't pay shit. I guess it's possible. The whole thing could be less than it appears."

"Come on, Mike. Movers at that hour of the day? And what about Sarah's girlfriend, Paula?"

"Maybe she got sick of Sarah and moved on."

"The company that owns the apartment has a weird name. New Star Flat Service. Like it is American, or caters to Americans. But I do not think there are any Americans living in the building. And this company has only one flat there."

"Is that unusual?"

"Maybe. My business is not real estate. Individuals or companies own the flats, like I own mine. Sometimes people rent them or lease them."

"Have a phone number?"

"She gave me both a phone number and an address."

"We can call, but for right now I'd put that on the back burner. What about her work?"

"I have not called there yet."

"Do that now. Then we'll look at her phone records. You get a list of outgoing and incoming?"

"No, only the outgoing calls are listed. Here we do not pay for incoming calls. The caller pays."

"Let's see what's there. Anyway, call her work."

Eterno's cell phone rang. He grabbed it and listened, looking stunned, not saying a word. He grunted, turned off the phone, and set it down.

Mike waited. Eterno stared at the phone.

"That was Bruno, my friend from the police. He says he wants to meet us, that is, me and my American friend. Tonight."

Mike grinned. "You didn't want him to know about me."

"I have no idea how he found out about you. He just said to be there." Mike detected a crack in his composure, his fulsome tone edged with pique.

"He knows."

"That is obvious." The irritation turned to resignation. "He named a little bar in the Interlagos where we sometimes meet. It is a crummy place, but not too loud. It has no clientele we would not want seeing us together." Eterno smiled at some private joke, his white teeth gleaming like a shark. "You might find it amusing."

A poor bairro south of the better sections in the Zona Sul, the Interlagos, named for Avenida Interlagos, belonged to the sprawling neighborhood called Socorro spread out along the Represa de Guarapiranga. Eterno had taken Mike to a restaurant there called Feijão de Corda that specialized in a style of cooking from the northeast. The name literally translated as bean of rope, and Eterno said it referred to a specific kind of climbing bean, but he couldn't translate further.

It didn't matter what it meant. The carne de cabrito guisado appeared in a black pot still bubbling, the tender kid fricasseed in a fragrant sauce. Mike notched the delicacy into his memory beside the succulent roasted goat he'd eaten in Texas and northern Mexico.

What had struck him most was the name of the street: Avenida Robert Kennedy. It branched off Avenida Interlagos and ran alongside the Represa. Eterno enjoyed pronouncing the name for Mike, Guarapiranga, Represa being an artificial body of water backed up from a dam. To Mike it looked shallow and nasty, like a breeding pond for mosquitoes.

He recalled Avenida Interlagos as well as parts of Avenida Robert Kennedy lined with nondescript, ancient looking concrete buildings. He had no recollection of trees

or greenery, not even along the banks of the stagnant Represa skirting the restaurant parking lot.

Eterno stood over Mike, ready to leave. It seemed he had already absorbed Bruno's summons. "Come on. We can go to my office and look at those phone records. I can call Aline's work number from there. Then we can go eat."

"Fine. I want to hear Aline's rumor about the motel. And I want to get hold of Sarah."

Eterno looked away, his eyes focused on a distant spot like he was reading a sign at the edge of the universe.

"Come on, Eterno," Mike said.

"This is what Aline told me. Her friend works in a motel. Checking people in, making sure they get the things they need, checking the rooms after they leave. The girl leaves first. You know how it works. Then the guy checks out and pays at the drive-up window. Her friend told her that sometimes no one checks out. No girl leaves and the man does not check out of the motel."

He paused. He seemed to pick his words with more than the usual care, as if weighing each one before releasing it.

"Instead, an unmarked police car arrives. Two cops, or at least two men in suits carrying badges, go to the room. They find the girl dead and the man gone. They find the man's car still there."

Mike felt a blanket of frost creep across his face. He hardened his features, hiding the lapse, and gazed at Eterno with expressionless eyes, but sensed he'd reacted too late. He swallowed a grimace and made a mental note of yet another lapse.

"I know, you are thinking about Sarah. It cannot be helped. You have to let her do her thing, Mike. After all, Paula was her friend. She knows the risks better than anyone."

Mike started to say something, but Eterno cut him off.

"Let me finish. Aline told me one officer would drive off with the client's car, the other in the unmarked vehicle. They take the body with them. There is no ambulance and no crime scene investigation. The room is cleaned, then immediately goes back into use."

Mute behind a poker face, Mike stared at Eterno. The silence hung between them like a curtain.

"You're right, Eterno." Mike pierced the wordless veil with a tone that graduated from dubious to clipped exasperation. "I'm concerned about Sarah. But your story's bullshit. How do the cops know to show up? Does someone call them? Who? What the fuck does this lady say about that?"

Eterno shook his head. "I never asked."

He scowled at Eterno. "Well, shit, that's an obvious thing to ask. Anyway, the whole fucking thing is hard to believe. No investigation at all? Cops showing up for no reason, removing dead bodies and carrying off all the evidence? Horseshit."

"According to Aline, the police never return. There is no quarantine of the scene. After they finish, they leave."

"Come on, Eterno. When you check in at the motel, they get your driver's license number and the car license. I think they were even filming me."

"That is the odd part. She said rumor has it the men are always different, with fake I.D.s or I.D.s of dead men. The cars are stolen. Or at least the plates."

"You want me to believe the cops are killing these girls? Or they are notified by some mysterious channel? It doesn't wash. Someone has to find the fucking bodies before they can call the cops."

"Maybe someone goes to the rooms and calls the police afterward."

"At each motel? You said Aline's friend works at one motel. Is she the first one in the room?"

"I guess. Maybe. Maybe not."

"What fucking motel does she work at?"

"I am not sure."

"You didn't ask? Shit, what the fuck were you thinking?"

"I guess I thought I would get it later. Maybe the killer calls the police before leaving to taunt them."

"Okay, that could be. So it's a cover up. Some psycho killing whores. The cops keeping it under wraps. That could be. Cops killing whores? I don't think so."

Eterno stood with his hands on his hips, looking down into Mike's eyes. "I do not want to argue the plausibility of anything the Brazilian police might do. But believe me, the sky is the limit."

Mike stood up. "Let's go to your office. Take care of the phone records. Make that call to Aline's work and try to get Sarah. Maybe she'll meet us for lunch. We need to talk to her. She's in danger."

## 11.

Eterno printed the seven pages of Aline's cell phone record. Most of the numbers she'd called began with nine, identifying them as other cell phones.

He printed a second copy and gave it to Mike.

The list was long enough they needed time to analyze it. Mike told Eterno to group the numbers by frequency. Later they would figure out who she called most often and when.

Mike studied the list while Eterno called Aline's office. A woman answered. He recognized her voice.

*"Gloria. You are well?"* He remembered her name because of her simmering hostility and because she was fat.

*"I'm fine,"* she said. *"Who's this?"*

*"Eterno, Aline's friend."*

Eterno mugged for Mike, contorting his face into a sequence of grotesque masks without changing tone or inflection.

Mike grinned, working at not laughing.

*Oh.* She sounded disappointed. *How are you?*

*"Fine. Is Aline available?"*

*"She has not been here for two days."* Gloria sounded peeved. *"She never called in, either. You should know."*

*"I returned from a business trip today. I can call her at home."*

He continued mugging for Mike, twisting his mouth like rubber.

*"Good luck. We haven't been able to get her."*

*"Thanks."*

He crossed his eyes and touched the tip of his nose with his tongue.

*"It's nothing,"* she said.

When he put down the phone, Mike burst into laughter.

"What the fuck was that all about?"

"I hate that bitch. She is a monster. Fat, ugly and mean. No one there has seen Aline in two days."

"As expected. Let's leave the office and apartment to the cops."

"That sounds like a good idea to me. Let me call Sarah and leave a message. Then we can go eat lunch. If she is available she can join us. Is Estalagem okay with you?"

"Yeah, fine."

Sarah answered on the first ring.

*"Sarah. You are well?"*

*"Yes, I'm fine. I'm on my way to a client."*

*"Mike and I are going to Estalagem for lunch and we thought you might join us. Mike has some questions."*

*"I'm busy now. My client is at the Blue Tree Towers near Shopping Ibirapuera. It's close to Estalagem, so maybe after I can meet you. I'll call when I'm finished. Now I need to go. Goodbye. Kisses for you and Mike."*

*"Goodbye. Kisses."*

Mike aped Eterno with a mocking tone. "Tchau. Beijos. Christ, Eterno, I think Brazilians kiss more on the phone than in person."

"That is probably true, Mike. We kiss people on the phone we never want to see in person."

"So's she coming?"

"Maybe later. It depends on how long the client takes and how soon she has another. She is on her way to the Blue Tree Towers on Ibirapuera right now. It would be a couple minutes by taxi when she finishes with him."

"Goddammit," Mike barked. "We could have eaten sooner! I'm fucking starved."

"Listen, Mike", Eterno said. "Let me tell you about how I met Sarah."

Mike's eye's set like flint, the fine network of crows-feet tightening like cracked earth on an alkaline flat.

"I got an e-mail from an American looking for an escort girl, for himself and four friends, for a week. They wanted her to speak some English. And they wanted someone who liked big guys, together, and who would do what we call programa completo. You understand, right?"

Looking glum, Mike nodded assent. Programa completo: oral, anal, vaginal.

"In particular," Eterno continued, "they wanted someone who would deal with picudo and double penetration. All together, any combination, any time, and staying with them for a week. In a suite."

Mike winced. "Picudo. What the hell's picudo."

"Well hung. With a large penis. Understand?"

Mike nodded.

"They were black, too. She had to deal with black men, and she had to be white and petite. That was their fantasy, to have a petite white woman service them for a week. Of all the girls on my site, only Sarah responded.

"I met them when I took her to the suite. I try not to become involved, but I wanted to be involved in this one. It was extreme. I had an interest. There was a lot of money. Sarah's pictures do well on my site. I told you I am no pimp, but this was unusual and I did not mind taking a cut because I put a lot of time into making the arrangements. Sarah could not have communicated well enough to set it up.

"They had a penthouse suite in the most expensive hotel in São Paulo. They were professional football players, and I would guess the smallest one weighed about three hundred pounds. The biggest was huge, maybe four hundred."

Eterno held back long enough for Mike's imagination to paint a vivid picture.

"She didn't flinch when we met them. In fact, she smiled. They said they wanted her to be demure, and she was. She had a bag with her, with some clothes and I

assume some of the tools of her trade, like lubricant and condoms. Anyway, I left her with them.

"After the week was up, I got a phone call from the one who had set it up. I had left him my number in case of any problems. He raved about her. Said she was enthusiastic and up for everything, all the time. Later, Sarah showed me some photos they took with a digital camera. I have them and she wants me to put them on the site. I doubt I will. I can show them to you, if you want."

Mike sat in silence. From the look on his face, the words played in his head like a grainy old black and white porno flick. He had the picture, and Eterno could see it was not easy for him to come to grips with his own confounded reaction.

Eterno waited him out.

"How much did she charge?"

"Four thousand five hundred dollars a person. That is U. S. She took four thousand dollars for each one. I got five hundred for each. If you see her car, you will know where a good deal of that money went. She drives a new Alfa coupe, an expensive car in Brazil.

"I want you to understand Sarah. You need to be clear in your thinking about her. She makes money, but there is more to it than that. It is a pleasure for her. Making money is part of that pleasure."

After a moment, he added, "Now we can go to lunch. Forget this thing."

"You mean like she enjoys this as a sort of perversion?"

"Perversion is not a word I care for. But yes, if you want to use it. Earning money by having sex with strangers gives her sexual satisfaction. At least, that is part of it. The kinkier the better, I think. I would guess she wants to try everything. New experiences."

Mike's eyes bored into Eterno, but unfocused, as if he were blind. Then he snapped out of it.

"Sounds like you were playing the pimp on that one," he said.

"How so? Because I took money to arrange the details? It took many hours to do that. It is not trivial to set up something like that, long distance, finding a girl who is willing. If I were a pimp, I would not care about willing. It would be an assignment. It costs money to handle foreign clientele for these girls. I get no money from their work. I know nothing about their business. My business is the photos. If I go to heroic lengths to arrange something like this, I need to be compensated."

Mike stared at Eterno, not saying a word.

## 12.

It was going on two thirty when they made the short walk to Estalagem. Though the place was deserted the lunch buffet remained intact, the long groaning board of salads and appetizers, the steam tables and clay dishes with fish, meats, pastas, beans, and rice. Only the space for the main attraction, roast beef or pork or a whole fish, stood empty.

Mike and Eterno ordered chope. Before their beers arrived, Eterno left to get a newspaper from the vendor in the square beside the church.

Mike didn't wait before loading his plate. When he got back to the table, Eterno sat hidden behind the *Estado de São Paulo*. The *Folha* lay folded on the empty chair at the table.

"What do we do about Sarah?" Mike asked.

Eterno hid, silent behind the newspaper.

Mike persisted. "She needs protection. She's vulnerable out there. Is there --."

Eterno put down the paper. "This is chato, Mike. Very tiresome. What do you suggest we do? Go on her programas with her?"

"Get her away while we figure out what the fuck's going on."

"So she stops working? You think so?"

"We pay her."

"Not me. You want to pay her for a vacation from fucking?"

"You don't think she'd go?"

"You would have to scare her. Right now she is not afraid. And as I said, there is more to this for her than money."

Mike turned to his plate and ate in silence. Eterno went back to his newspaper.

Mike picked up the classifieds from the *Folha* and glanced at ads for *acompanhantes*, the polite term for

escorts. Both men and women offered themselves, along with the cross-gendered. The first prostitution ads he'd deciphered in the major newspapers seemed incongruous, posted alongside ads for other services, for cars, and for real estate, but later Eterno had shown him a local government-sponsored web site for prostitutes in one of the poorer northern Brazilian states. It was woven into the social fabric.

Eterno went to the buffet. Mike joined him for a second round. When they sat again, Eterno broke their silence.

"We meet my friend in two hours or so. We should leave soon, because traffic is already getting bad, and traffic to the Interlagos is a nightmare."

"Let's call Sarah first," Mike said.

"She said she would call us. I assume she is with her client. It takes an hour to an hour and a half."

His phone rang. "*Sarah. We were just talking about you. We are waiting. Are you coming?*" He smiled at Mike and winked.

Mike's eyes lit up.

"That was Sarah. She is coming here now. It should be about five minutes or so. She was getting into a cab outside the hotel."

Sarah walked in the door while Mike considered how long it would take her. She carried a small black purse and wore a modest pair of slacks and a blouse, her expression businesslike.

Eterno stood as she approached. She leaned into him for a kiss on both cheeks. He asked, "Tudo bem?"

"Tudo," she replied.

She stood looking at Mike until he rose and kissed her cheeks.

She'd showered before coming, he decided. She smelled fresh. She was beautiful, with a glow he hadn't noticed the previous night.

"Tudo bem?" she asked him and he replied "I'm fine."

She sat and ordered juice, a mixture of fruits. The waiter set her bag on a chair and covered it with a cloth.

Mike watched her walk to the buffet, purposeful but with an easy sway, erect, head up. He couldn't resolve that image with the one in his head, a scene he knew had played out moments ago in a hotel room.

"Sarah," Mike said when she set her tray on the table, "you're in danger."

"Que?" she replied, her voice harsh.

"Mike thinks you are in danger," Eterno said. "And he does not make small talk, either."

She turned to Mike. "Por que?"

He didn't want to bring up Aline's disappearance. "Because Paula is missing. And other girls."

Eterno took over. "*There is a strong likelihood that Paula is dead. And there are more missing girls. There are rumors about several missing escort girls. And stories about dead girls at motels.*"

Sarah said nothing. She looked down at her plate and ate with precision, choosing each bite as though screening the individual morsels. Picking here and there, she didn't finish any of it.

She looked at Eterno. "*What do you suggest?*"

Mike waited for Eterno to translate. Eterno told him, "She wants to know what you are suggesting."

"Stop working for a while. Maybe leave São Paulo."

Mike looked at Sarah while he spoke. Her eyes betrayed impatience, as if dealing with a child.

Before Eterno could translate, she answered in English. "I need work." Then: "Have three clients hoje à noite, one amanhã. Oito horas pela manhã."

Mike understood that well enough though the details eluded him. She had several clients lined up.

He signaled the waiter for another beer. "Mais um," he said, pointing at the empty glass.

Before it came, Sarah's phone played the theme from *The Pink Panther*.

"Oi." She sounded cross. "Tudo bem. Sim, vinte minutos." She hung up. "I go now," she said, rising.

"Another client?" Mike asked.

She looked at him as at an idiot. "Need go now."

She was out the door before the waiter returned.

"I told you," Eterno said. "She is a fucking machine. That is what she does. She likes it. I think she likes the suspense."

Mike downed the beer. "What the fuck you talking about?"

"The suspense. Not knowing who will be in the room when she gets there. Lots of girls work in boates, nightclubs that are really just whorehouses. They see the clients, and they decide whether or not they are interested. It is safer. Not Sarah. She is a different animal, even for a hooker."

"Maybe she likes the independence."

"That is part of it. But she goes all over the city, to neighborhoods many people will not visit. Late at night. It is dangerous, and that is part of it. And part of it is that the client does not see her until she arrives. She is like a model, selling her manufactured photos. She likes the idea that some stranger will love her pictures so much, think she is so beautiful, that he pays a week's wages to have sex with her. But believe me, part of it is the suspense. She has no idea who will open the door when she arrives."

Mike wanted another beer, but Eterno signaled for the check.

"We need to go. We should not keep my friend waiting. It will be dark before we get out of there and I hate the Interlagos after dark. People are always being massacred in the bars there. It is a very dangerous place."

Mike wondered how many neighborhoods in São Paulo Eterno didn't consider dangerous. He knew about the kidnappings; people driving fancy cars grabbed on the

assumption they had relatives who would pay ransom, an ear sent to help them make a decision. It created a boon for plastic surgeons. But he thought Eterno exaggerated the danger.

He set two ten reais notes on the table and walked outside to wait, staring at the solid old white church in the square.

### 13.

A tall, slender, fair-skinned brunette, morena clara in Brazil, Marina stood in the doorway of her apartment talking to her daughter Cris. The child asked if they could go to McDonald's when her mother returned. Marina told her they would go if it was not too late, but to order dinner from downstairs before the restaurant closed in case she did not return early. Cris pouted as Marina reached down and brushed the hair from her face.

She rode the elevator to the lobby. Tossing her long, silky hair back over her shoulder with a graceful arc of her head as she exited the building, she hurried toward the waiting taxi, looking straight ahead, unaware of the man standing in the shadows. He sidled up beside her and grabbed her arm. The cabby sped away when his fat companion showed him a gun.

They duct taped her mouth and hustled her across the street, tossing her into the back seat of a silver Vectra. The fat one climbed in beside her.

They took her to the warehouse and tied her wrists and ankles to a work bench. When secured spread-eagle on the table, the tall, lanky one pulled his arm free of the fat one's grip and walked away into the dark recesses of the building.

The fat one cut off her clothes. He smiled at the muffled moans escaping the wide band of silver tape covering her mouth, the lovely tune she'd sung all the way to the warehouse.

He took to his work like a politician takes to lying, setting out vise grips and box cutters as though constructing a meticulous assemblage, arranging and rearranging the tools with the precision of a surgeon. Marina's soft brown eyes followed his movements as he hummed to himself, ignoring her.

When he had placed his tools precisely as he wanted them, he punched her in the face. Blood ran from her nose

and from around the duct tape over her mouth. Marina's scream escaped the moment he ripped off the tape.

He laughed. "Scream all you want, bitch. No one hears."

"Não entendo inglês," she cried. "Por favor, não entendo," she begged.

"Tell her," he yelled into the warehouse.

Soft Brazilian Portuguese floated from the darkness as the other spoke to her. She began to sob.

The fat American's face hovered within inches, his breath a hot spray. He growled, "Tell this bitch I need the fucking pictures. All of 'em. Tell her."

The Brazilian soothed with quiet words.

Marina stopped sobbing and listened. When his words went dead, trailing off into the hollow space of the empty warehouse, she blubbered in a voice edged with hysteria. "Eu não sei o sobre o que o senhor está falando. Por favor, eu não sei. Eu não entendo nada que o senhor está dizendo."

"She say she know nothing. She no understand nothing you say her."

Only Marina's whimpers broke the peace until the Brazilian added, "She no have reason to lie."

The fat American smiled in her face. "Tell the lying little cunt she's gonna give me everything. Tell her she'll be happy to die when I'm done with her."

The Brazilian didn't say a word. He hung back in the darkness, waiting to translate.

The woman sobbed that she knew nothing about Sarah or pictures, repeating the phrase over and over. The American went to work, cutting, tearing, smiling at her. She lost control, screaming, incoherent, shitting herself and pissing until the warehouse stank of fear, feces and urine.

He ripped off one of her nipples with the vise grips and she passed out. He revived her with smelling salts and she came to crying for her daughter and her mother,

passing in and out of consciousness. He heard nothing other than her shrill tone of terror. Moving as if in a trance, alternately cutting, strangling, punching, he played to her terror. He ripped off her other nipple.

In the end he raped her. As he rutted a spasmodic slug, he punched her face into a bloody mass until she stopped breathing. His body jerked and he finished.

They stuffed dead Marina into a garbage can packed with ice, leaving her mess for the Brazilian to clean up.

Now in a hurry to get to Sarah, their sole remaining lead, he ignored the wheedling logic of his Brazilian colleague about the police finding mutilated corpses. The ice was his concession. They left the can near a building in a cluster of others.

To find Sarah they needed to visit Eterno Mendes.

## 14.

Traffic inched through the intersection where Avenida Washington Luis dumped into Avenida Interlagos. Once beyond the bottleneck, it picked up a little and they made it onto Avenida Robert Kennedy, running alongside the sprawling, shallow Represa de Guarapiranga. Eterno turned onto Rua Leonardo de Fassio, one block long and dead-ending in a large, unpainted concrete building topped with corrugated metal at the water's edge.

The sky had turned to winter dusk, overcast and drab.

Mike followed Eterno into the industrial structure. He stood in the doorway letting his eyes adjust to the gloom, hearing the sharp clack of pool balls, stale smoke acrid in his nose.

The shadows coalesced into an open, unpainted concrete box with bare floors. Folding chairs littered the interior. He noted the absence of tables. A long bar with a rail and no stools stretched the length of the back wall. A solitary figure leaned into the bar, smoking and staring into his glass.

A pack of young men clustered around the two old, scarred pool tables. Loud and aggressive, they wore jeans and tight T-shirts, cigarette packs rolled up in the sleeves. Sprinkled amongst them an odd assortment of overdressed boyish girls giggled and trilled with the self-conscious abandon of adolescents. The men postured tough and slammed hard, artless stick. The girls watched, huddled together, cooing like doves, ogling the shooters who feigned indifference.

Eterno made his way to a secluded corner where three folding chairs formed a triangle, facing one another. On one sat a bronze-colored man with medium length black hair tapered off his neck and without sideburns, combed with a precise part on the left side. Dark horn-rimmed glasses obscured his thick black eyebrows but

magnified his doe-eyes. A tumbler rested on the floor beside him; an ash tray perched on his knee. He trimmed the live ash of a cigarette with delicate finesse, as though it were an art form. His khaki slacks were creased, his brown loafers polished, his navy blue shirt starched. He wore khaki silk stockings with embossed lavender bugles.

When he saw Eterno he smiled, but the smile disappeared when he spotted Mike. He put the ash tray on the floor and stood. He was short, maybe five-two.

Eterno introduced him as Bruno Calasans. He spoke little English. He shook Mike's hand without enthusiasm.

*"How are you?"* Bruno asked.

*"I'm fine. And you?"*

*"I have been better. Your parents, are they here or in the US?"*

*"They are in Austin, at the university. Teaching Portuguese this term. They come back in the summer to teach at USP."*

*"Still the same old back and forth. How long will they do this?"*

*"You know, until they retire. It is an odd arrangement, sharing a joint chair."*

"Bruno is an old friend," Eterno said, turning to Mike. "We go way back. We attended university together in São Paulo. He is a commander in the Police Department. He oversees what I think would be the equivalent of several precincts."

Mike nodded. "What's USP?"

"Universidade de São Paulo. Remember? I told you my mother and father were on the faculty, and also on the faculty at UT."

Mike remembered. It was how they struck up their friendship. They had Austin in common. Eterno's American mother and Brazilian father, professors of Portuguese and English. His mother, a well-to-do New Englander, had fallen for the poor black graduate student from Forteleza

when she did a year's postgraduate work at USP. Neither family liked the arrangement.

"This place makes an excellent caipirinha, Mike," Eterno said.

"I'm game."

There were no servers. Eterno went to the bar and returned with three drinks.

Mike downed his. "This is good shit, Eterno. Probably one of the best I've had."

"I told you they were good here. Are you ready for another?"

"I need a pinga straight up, if they have a decent one."

"They keep some very good cachaça here. Even the best is not expensive in this place. But we don't call good cachaça pinga."

Eterno called to the bartender. "Traci, bring a barrel-aged cachaça and a clear cachaça. From São Paulo state. Bring the good stuff."

Bruno motioned to Eterno to lean closer and whispered in his ear.

Eterno laughed. "Bruno says not to fall in love here. Those girls playing pool are not all they appear. Or maybe more than they appear."

Mike took a long look. The entire group looked like it had been plucked from a movie set gone awry.

The bartender lumbered over carrying two bottles. "Fee fi fo fum," she said. "I hear the voice of an American."

Startled hearing a Midwestern twang, Mike turned to look. His curiosity collided with the ugliest woman he'd ever seen. Squat as a barrel, almost no tits and no ass, draped in a thin cotton dress, she looked like a man with long hair, unshaven legs, and huge arms. Her square bulldog's face with round nose centered above brightly rouged jowls smiled all garish lipstick and missing teeth.

Eterno flashed his huge smile. "Traci! Good to see you." He turned to Mike. "Traci was a Marine, Mike. Fought in Vietnam. That was under a different name and gender."

Everyone laughed except Mike. "For real?" Mike asked, unable to take his eyes off the bulldog face that, except for the makeup, belonged on a recruiting poster.

"For real," Traci answered. "Con Thien, Dong Ha, Cam Lo, the Rockpile, the Razorback, Mutter's Ridge before they called it that. Fourth Marines. Got me a short intensive tour of northern Quang Tri Province."

Mike gawked.

"I know I'm beautiful," she said, "so give your eyes a rest. Bein a woman ain't all it's cracked up to be anyhow, sweetie. Sweat running down tween your tits. Panties crawling up your pussy. It can be hell." She displayed a mouthful of missing teeth, laughing a girl's laugh that settled into a kittenish smile.

She poured a shot from each of the bottles. Mike looked at them against what little light was in the place. One was clear, the other tan. He tasted the clear one first and found it sweet, with a burn in the back of his mouth. The aged one wasn't so sweet and had less flavor, but smoother, with less burn.

"I like this best," Mike said, indicating the clear liquor. "Not so smooth, but more character."

Shouting carried over from one of the pool tables. Traci looked at them, her meaty hands on her hips. "Problema?" she growled.

The shouting died to whispers.

Mike stood. He towered at least a head taller than Traci, but she had the weight advantage.

"I served in Vietnam, too," Mike said. "Fifth Marines. Mostly around An Hoa, then later around the Marble Mountains outside Danang. I got there a little before the Fifth came off float. Golf, two-five."

Traci shook his hand with an iron grip. "Ever fuck a Marine, Mike?"

Eterno howled with laughter and Bruno's smile widened, his eyes twinkling like he understood the question. Mike was speechless.

"You like my caipirinha? Come on over to the bar and I'll show you how I make them. It ain't typical. I give it some Marine Corps ingenuity."

"Mike," Eterno whispered as she trudged off towards the bar with a slew-footed shuffle, "Traci is a bona fide war hero."

Mike followed her. "When were you in Vietnam, Traci?" he asked.

She went behind the bar. "Almost three months end of '66. Lasta July, alla August, parta September."

"What happened?"

"You ever wounded?" She looked him in the eyes.

"Nothing serious. I did my full tour. Got a Purple Heart for some shrapnel. They cleaned it out and gave me a week off at First Med."

"I took six NVA rounds, three in my left thigh, two in my right arm, one in my left arm. And a shit load of grenade shrapnel, most in my groin. No vital organs, though. They flew me direct to NSA in Danang, which is how come I kept my leg. The Medical Battalions would've took it. I died on the stretcher there in triage, but the corpsmen brung me back. Left one nut in northern I Corps."

She looked down at the bar while she grabbed a lime and a knife, then looked at Mike, her expression deadpan. "I like to say it started me on the road to girlhood, but that hadn't nothin to do with it. I always wanted to be a girl." She flashed a gap-toothed smile, her eyes laughing. "A tough girl."

"Where'd you get hit?"

"In September. On operation with India. I was with Echo 2/4, but got sent out with India 3/4, to what the gooks called Nui Cay Tre. Corps nicknamed it Mutter's Ridge after that shit, for the CO's call sign. We were out

looking for NVA and found a shit load of `em. They waxed our asses. I got lucky."

Traci grabbed a short, wide glass from behind the bar, all the time looking at Mike. "Where you from, Mike?"

"I've been in Texas the last twenty years or so."

Traci shook her head. "The Big Stupid," she said.

"What?"

"We always called New Orleans the Big Easy, New York the Big Apple, and Texas the Big Stupid. Never hear that?"

"No, can't say I have."

"Maybe I made it up." She smiled like a pit bull. "Or maybe you ain't likely to hear it in Texas."

With fat, masculine fingers she cut the lime into thin slices leaving them joined at the base, placed it in the squat glass, and covered it with a brown syrup from a brown bottle with a yellow label.

"Get this direct from the Big Easy," she said, holding up the bottle for Mike to read STEEN'S 100% PURE CANE SYRUP. "Can't get nothing like it here. Make it in Abbeville, Louisiana."

"You from Louisiana?"

"Lordy no. Don't you know I ain't unlettered? I'm from up north. Just heard about this here syrup. Thought it'd be int'resting to use cane syrup instead of cane sugar in a drink made with cane liquor. Works real good."

"Eterno says you're a war hero. That the business at Mutter's Ridge?"

"Fuck no. That shit was a couple weeks before. With Echo, 2/4. Bunch of Force Recon got their asses in a jam when they found a bunch of fuckin NVA near the Rockpile. Part of Operation Prairie. Anyways, reactionary force of a platoon from Echo went in to bail `em out. The NVA backed off when the platoon come in, and I guess they couldn't find no more trouble, so they was scooting themselves out, being extracted by chopper, when they took fire. About twenty-five of `em was stuck in the LZ getting their asses

waxed. Lieutenant and platoon sergeant was killed right off. Recon team leader took over. A real cluster fuck."

"Cluster fuck? Jesus, Traci, I haven't heard that in years."

She beamed a lipstick smeared smile as broad as her face. In the light above the bar Mike could see her remaining front teeth smudged the same rosy hue as her lips.

As she talked she crushed the sugar-covered lime with a pestle until it made a syrup, added ice cubes and a healthy dose of clear cachaça.

"Anyhow, Echo skipper, Cap'n Lee, come looking for some volunteers to join in a little reactionary force. Seven of us went along for the ride. The fuckin chopper and two Huey escorts was forced down by some nasty ground fire, so me, Lee and one other jackass made off through the jungle. Real FUBAR. Gooks everywhere. NVA mind you, not your local VC. Somehow we avoided 'em and hooked up with the unit. Lee took command. Fought all fuckin night. Next morning Echo and Foxtrot both show up. Gooks are gone. I heard Lee got a Medal of Honor. I got bumped down to a Silver Star."

She stirred the drink and pushed it across the bar to Mike, the wooden paddle resting against the side of the glass.

"I mean, I know I don't rate no Medal of Honor, being enlisted and still breathing and all, but you'd think they'd at least given me a Navy Cross. Would've been fun to tie that fucker around my neck at gay pride parades."

Mike stirred the drink, then sipped it. He nodded. "Good work."

"Thanks." She looked at Mike with one eyebrow cocked. "Not that I was ever gay, mind you."

Baffled, Mike returned to find Bruno and Eterno huddled with heads together, conversing in hushed tones. Mike drank his caipirinha while they ignored him.

When they stopped, Eterno turned to Mike. "Bruno wants to know what you are doing in Brazil."

"I retired. I'm taking a break from the U.S. Staying away from the Big Stupid. You know that."

"The Big Stupid?"

"It's Traci's name for Texas."

"I told Bruno what I think you are doing in Brazil, but he does not understand."

"Nothing to understand. I needed to be somewhere different for a while. I'm a fucking tourist."

"Why are you involved in this Brazilian police matter?"

"What? What fucking police matter? You got me into this, Eterno. You tell him."

Eterno spoke to Bruno, then turned back to Mike.

"This is the story. A pair of killers is working here, one American and one Brazilian. That was why we were tailed by those cops last night."

"I don't think so, Eterno. The guy we shook down said they were waiting for a white BMW."

"So? The cops know what I drive, and I am Brazilian. Turns out they already know we are not the right guys. One of the men who took Aline is a fat Hispanic-American who speaks Spanish some of the time. That is not you. The other is not black, so he is not me."

"How do the cops know all this?"

"The same way I do, I guess. Talking to the garage people at Aline's place. I did not ask Bruno for his sources. As it is, he is going out on limb right now, being here and talking to us."

"So what's in it for him? Don't give me any of this old friend shit, either."

"He thinks I can help. I am already involved in the business. And he trusts me as an outside partner."

"So why the hell are you involved in this?"

Eterno paused before he spoke. "I cannot be sure. At first it was curiosity about the girls, about what Aline had

told me, and worry, too. Hookers from my site disappearing after meeting clients is bad for business. I depend on the girls wanting to show themselves on my site. Then Sarah came to me about Paula. But now I cannot say why. It seems harder than I thought it would be. I guess I need to see it through."

Mike nodded. He understood that feeling.

"What about the missing girls and the motels? What's Bruno say about that?"

Eterno turned back to Bruno and said something in rapid-fire Portuguese, his voice muted. Bruno smoked in his careful way before answering, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling. His answer was long.

Eterno translated. "Bruno learned of it a few days ago. He had to do some digging. It seems there is a special task force of Federal Police running that case, so it is out of the hands of the locals. He is pissed because they are treading on his turf without cooperating or even sharing information."

Mike shook his head, frowning.

Eterno ignored the gesture "Those two we ran into at Aline's were local cops assigned to the special task force."

"What the fuck is this task force for?"

"Seems they are investigating the disappearance of these hookers. Here in São Paulo."

The alcohol slammed into Mike's head, clouding his thoughts, making him sluggish and irritable. Brazil irritated him.

"And they aren't cooperating with the locals? How the fuck can that be?"

"It happens in the U. S., too, I believe."

"Not in my experience, except on TV. The locals and the Feds cooperate in fucking things up."

"This is Brazil. They like to fuck things up without any help. It seems the Feds are covering this up. Maybe they want to prevent panic. Hookers dying like this could

be a big problem. No one likes to admit how many people are dependent on this business for a living. Bruno does not like it either. He is territorial, but he needs to tread with caution.”

Mike’s eyes burned from the cigarette smoke. He wanted to leave, but not until he was certain they had what they needed. He pressed on. “They know Aline was abducted from her apartment, right? Along with the furniture. Have they found her? What about the people who own her flat?”

“They have not found her. Bruno will not say much about the company that owns the flat, except that it is legitimate. But the paperwork is ambiguous.”

“Ambiguous? What the fuck does that mean?”

Eterno started to say something, but Mike cut him off with a wave of his hand. “I know. This is Brazil,” he said, looking down at the floor. He wasn’t sure he wanted to get involved in what felt like the beginning of a serious cluster fuck.

Eterno signaled Traci to make three more caipirinhas. Bruno lit another cigarette.

Mike broke the lull. “How many dead girls they find in the motels? Can we get a list of the names?”

Eterno leaned over and whispered in Bruno’s ear. Bruno sat and smoked, contemplating his smoke rings as they dissolved into the amorphous cigarette haze. He answered with a few quiet words.

“Bruno says he thinks it is eleven. He might be able to get me a list. There is a difficulty, since they have no leverage over the special unit on this case.”

They finished the round of caipirinhas while Eterno and Bruno chatted, ignoring Mike. They lapsed into silence, the only sound the click of balls from the pool table, the hushed giggles and whispers from the gaggle of players and their dates.

Bruno and Eterno stood up, as mismatched a pair as Mike had seen anywhere. They shook hands and then

hugged in a moment of asymmetry, an embrace of walrus and penguin.

Bruno stepped back and took a serious tone with Eterno, looking at Mike. *"Make certain that your friend does not get in trouble. Keep a close watch on him. He is helpless here."*

*"Not so helpless. He disarmed that cop in the street in no time. You would have enjoyed it."*

*"He was lucky it wasn't one of my men."*

*"Your men would not have been there."*

Bruno dismissed the comment with a shrug. He shook Mike's hand with some warmth and walked out of the bar.

"What'd he say?"

"He told me to keep you on a short leash."

"You asked me for help."

"I know. And if something terrible happens, I will be responsible."

"If something bad's gonna happen, you wanna be with me. I'm lucky. People have been trying to kill me since I was nineteen, when I was a Marine in Vietnam. Nothing happens to me."

"Some day your luck will end."

"Maybe. Everyone's luck runs out sooner or later. But more likely yours'll end first. Most of the people who were with me then are dead now."

## 15.

The fat American and his Brazilian cohort sat on the patio at Frans watching the apartment building across Avenida Moema. The Brazilian spotted the white BMW turn onto the one-way street and into the garage. They watched the well-lit lobby through the glass door, but no one approached the front desk. They gave it five minutes, then crossed the street and buzzed. The intercom speaker crackled with a demand that they state their business.

*"To see Eterno Mendes,"* the Brazilian answered.

The man behind the desk called up to 909. Eterno grabbed the phone as he walked in.

*"Two men to see you."*

*"What about?"* Eterno asked, then thought better of it. *"What do they look like? Is one short and fat and the other skinny and tall?"*

*"Yes. That's them."*

*"Tell them I will be down in a minute. Have them wait in the lobby."*

He was putting people at risk, but if they had not shot their way through the glass door to get into the lobby, they would wait. He called Mike, but his phone was busy. Calling Sarah. He gave it a minute and rang again. Mike picked up.

*"Two men are waiting to see me in the lobby. They fit our description of the killers. I will go meet them, but I want you with me."*

*"Better if I take the elevator on down to the garage and come around front to surprise them."*

*"I agree. That is better."*

*"Hold on, I'll be right there."*

At the knock, Eterno looked out the peephole at Mike's grim expression. They took the elevator down. At the lobby Eterno stepped out and Mike continued to the garage.

The pair sat side by side on the sofa, a deadly Mutt and Jeff.

Flashing his big smile, Eterno stuck out his hand. *"How can I help you?"*

They stood up together, the skinny one smiling and the fat one showing him the gun stuck in his waistband under a mustard yellow sport coat.

*"Oh, I see,"* Eterno responded with mock cheeriness.

*"Let's go, motherfucker,"* the fat one said.

*"Where?"* Eterno asked, but the fat one motioned him towards the door.

*"Your office is near, isn't it?"*

Mike waited in the shadows at the end of the steps and smacked the fat one on his ears with open hands, then punched him in the face when he turned around. The Brazilian ran and Eterno chased him. When he darted into the street between cars, Eterno stopped.

Mike had the fat one by the nape, but he came up with a leather sap and hit Mike behind the ear. When Mike went down, he ran. Eterno let him go.

Mike was on his knees. Eterno held his head while he vomited.

One of the duty men behind the desk came out and looked. The other one called the police. People from Frans came out to stare, joining pedestrians who had stopped and formed a crowd.

Eterno helped Mike inside and sat him on the sofa.

The police came and Eterno told them it was an attempted kidnapping. They left without showing much interest.

Mike refused a trip to a hospital, and Eterno and one of the desk men helped him into the elevator and up to Eterno's apartment. He stretched out on the sofa while Eterno made a phone call.

*"Bruno, Mike and I were attacked by the American and the Brazilian."*

*"When?"*

*"Just now."*

*"Why didn't you get police help?"*

*"They came for me in the lobby, so there was no time. The fat one showed me a gun. They wanted to go to my office."*

*"What happened?"*

*"Mike attacked them outside. He scared them off, but one of them hit him with something."*

*"Is he all right?"*

*"I think so. He is lying down. The police came and we told them it was an attempted kidnapping. Which is true."*

*"Mike should see a doctor."*

*"He is being stubborn. He says he is all right, that he has had worse."*

*"Listen, Eterno, a girl was abducted by those two. Outside her apartment. We have a positive ID on them. No white van, though. A car, maybe a Vectra. Her name was Marina Bel. Seems she was a hooker. Sound familiar to you?"*

Eterno thought about it. *"No. I never heard of her. Those two have been busy."*

*"That's for sure."*

Mike groaned in the background.

Bruno continued. *"I've got the list. You'll get a copy tonight."* He paused, then added, *"Why did they come for you?"*

*"I wish I knew. They knew where I lived and they knew I had an office nearby. That was where they wanted to go. I really wish I knew how they knew all that."*

*"You sure it was them?"*

*"They fit the description. The American carried a gun. I hear Mike. I should see how he is."*

*"Go. See to Mike. We'll talk later."*

Mike's head throbbed with every heartbeat, a drum of pain.

*"You up for conversation?"* Eterno knelt beside him.

Mike couldn't sit, but he thought he might be able to listen. He nodded with difficulty.

"Is that a yes?"

He nodded harder, wincing.

"Those two abducted a girl. A hooker I never heard of. Now they show up here."

Mike struggled to speak, his voice barely a whisper. "Aline gave you up."

"For what?"

"They want Sarah."

"For what?"

Mike summoned energy to answer. "Don't know. My gut says so." He passed out.

When he came to he saw Sarah asleep on the chair beside the sofa. He realized this wasn't his apartment. His head hurt, but it no longer throbbed. There remained only a dull ache with a background beat. He took his time sitting up.

Sarah woke and looked at him, her green eyes glowing like backlit emeralds. She sat beside him, pressing against him, warm and yielding, stroking his forehead.

"You are okay?" she asked.

"No. I'm stupid. Fucking stupid. Didn't see the sap. Must be getting old."

"You and me both, love." The word love slipped from her mouth with such ease she might have been saying it all her life. Her words came out like fragile music, gone the moment they left her lips. He wondered if he'd heard it.

"I'm okay. Not the first time I've been smacked silly." He realized she didn't understand. "Não preocupar para me," he said, proud when he realized she understood.

He stood up, wobbled. Sarah rose to steady him, leaning into him, breasts pressed against him.

An envelope lay half under the door, hand printed with large black letters: "ETERNO MENDES, 909." Mike picked it up, reaching over while Sarah held his arm for support.

They trudged single file up the winding stairs to the bedroom. Eterno sprawled on the bed, his giant legs hanging over the edge, naked and uncovered, snoring. Mike shoved his foot. He turned over and snored louder. Mike got rougher, grabbing his leg and shaking him.

"Wake up, Eterno. You've got mail."

Sarah turned on the light. Eterno rolled over, then sat up, shaking his head as if to throw off the stupor. He squinted at them, covering himself with the sheet.

"I see you recovered," he said, wincing at the light.

Mike tried to grin, but it came out a grimace.

"You would not be so happy if you could see the welt on the side of your head."

Mike handed him the envelope and he pulled out a sheet of paper. "This is the list of the girls and the motels. All São Paulo. The Desiree II is on the list. So is Paula." He turned to Sarah. "Paula é morta, Sarah."

Sarah came forward. "Can I see?"

Eterno handed her the list.

"I know these girls." She sat beside Mike on the bed and covered his hand with hers. "I ready go with you."

"Where?" Mike asked.

"Away. Today you say go away."

"Not with me, Sarah. I need to stay here with Eterno and figure out what's going on."

Sarah looked to Eterno, who translated. Then he turned to Mike. "No, she is right. Go with her. She needs protection. I gather the information anyway. We stay in touch through Sarah's cell phone."

"Fala, Mike." Sarah pressed his thigh with her hand. "I go with you."

"Okay, but where? How?"

"Rent a car," Eterno said. "Go to Parati. There are so many tourists they will never look for you there. It is a few miles across the border, in Rio state. A beautiful old colonial city on the coast."

"Sim. Parati. Take my car."

“Não, Sarah. De alguel.”

“Por que?”

Mike broke in. “Trust me, love. It’s safer.”

He called Hertz. They would pick it up at Aeroporto Congonhas tomorrow. First Eterno would leave in the BMW, in case they were watched. Mike and Sarah would take a cab. Sarah’s Alfa would stay in Mike’s space in the garage.

Mike and Sarah went down to Mike’s flat. Mike slept on the sofa, letting her take the bed. Later she came down and helped him up the stairs. He slept like he was dead.

## 16.

They met in the all night lot where they had parked the Vectra, a few blocks from Avenida Moema.

His ears rang from the two-handed smack. Tears clouded his vision. He looked up at the sky and pounded on the roof of the Vectra.

"I'd like to gut that cocksucker."

"Que?"

"Never mind. Não importante."

He felt the swelling on the side of his face where the fist had landed, imagining his face lopsided and purple.

They needed to find some other way to get this bitch Sarah's address. Messing with Eterno was too dangerous. He and his tough friend were on to them.

He wondered who else might be on to them. Like maybe the police. These Brazilian cops walked around armed to the teeth, acting tough, like they'd as soon shoot as talk.

The time had come to call the home office and ask for help. Maybe they could crack the web site or put pressure on someone to find Sarah some other way.

Fact was, he didn't know Sarah's full name. Aline had not given him the full name. He couldn't even be sure Sarah was her real name, though Aline had used it. She'd sung out everything she knew, he felt certain of that. Eterno's apartment, Eterno's office, Marina and her address and phone number. She'd told him Eterno had addresses for all the girls in his office. But he hadn't asked for Sarah's address or family name. As things heated up he forgot to ask. And the bitch died faster than he'd expected.

They drove to the warehouse in silence and parked the Vectra inside, beside the white van.

Hurrying to a small room in back where he had a bed and a phone, he hung the mustard sport coat on a nail in

an exposed stud in the wall, called the office and got a recording. He spoke after the beep.

"It's Frank. I need information. I found out that bitch Sarah is the key. The one on the web site run by that Eternal guy. Mendes. You know. You gave it to me. I seen her picture. Skinny little skank, but I'll examine her. I need her address. Couldn't get it from the bitches I examined. They didn't know shit, except she's the key. I need a address. You got the number. I'll wait."

He hung up and stretched out on the bed in his clothes, asleep and snoring in a flash, smiling a crooked smile.

The Brazilian lay on his back on a cot in a corner of the warehouse. He stared at the unfinished metal ceiling. He closed his eyes and shook his head. A trembling wave ran the length of his body and he shuddered, teeth chattering, arm hair erect with goose bumps. Shivering after it passed, he turned on his side and closed his eyes, his breathing not in the rhythm of sleep.

## 17.

Light seeped through eggshell cracks in his skull, his brain swollen, contused, tender. He dreamed of his brain hammered to mush, pounded with a metal mallet, and the dream roused him sweating, wearing yesterday's jeans and t-shirt.

Sleeping beside him but removed, not touching, Sarah insulated and cocooned in the bedcover, fully dressed. Features warped with the gracelessness of sleep, she lay unaware of herself in the world, at peace like an infant.

Her waifish countenance bespoke an innocence Mike knew was a lie. Or maybe it reflected smothered chastity, inculpable and unblemished at the core of a battered life. Like the conscripted conscientious objector who succumbs to rage and rises to valor in the heat of combat, Sarah might be the ingénue plying her sensual skill with courage from within a pristine inner self.

No matter what the truth, she sold herself to strangers, a piece of ass for hire. He imagined her world, men fat and skinny, old, young, dark, hairy, all of them sporting enormous erections she accepted into whatever orifice they demanded. The idea drove him from the room.

He picked his way down the metal spiral stairway with a white knuckle grip on the railing, feeling the steps with the exaggerated care of a cripple, watching his feet from what seemed an enormous distance, his head floating far above his shoulders. In the kitchen he boiled water and dripped a cup of dark coffee.

It had rained during the night, washing the city clean, water reflecting in scattered puddles attesting to the missed event. Feeling as though his unconscious state had kept him from some important event, a missed ablution, Mike stood on the balcony gazing at the almost iridescent street below.

He studied the green, glass-sided modern structure rising up behind Fran's, growing out of the concrete orchard of tired, old one- and two-story metal- and tile-roofed buildings, surrounded by ominous new skyscrapers and high-rises in drab grays and whites, sad blues and dusty pinks. It stood like a proud young tree, unaware of the infection spreading from the surrounding decay.

He didn't hear Sarah when she padded down the stairs with bare feet. Standing ruffled without makeup in the balcony threshold, hair uncombed, cheeks rosy, lips pale, everything remained in perfect harmony as if she were ready for a photo shoot. Her black, black hair, lashes and brows played against fair skin like a dying swallowtail on the desert sand.

"Bom dia," she greeted Mike, catching him off guard.

"Bom dia," he replied. "You sleep well?"

"Yes. And you? You okay?"

"I'm fine. Café?"

"Sim, por favor."

He boiled more water and heated milk for her coffee, giving her his other mug, pouring another cup for himself. She stood waiting on the balcony. Setting coffee, milk and a box of sugar on the edge, he stood beside her, looking down at the traffic on Avenida Moema.

"You are beautiful," he told her. "Even when you sleep, even when you first wake up."

"Thank you."

He didn't know how much she understood, so he tried again in Portuguese. "Quando você dormir --" he started, but she stopped him, raising a finger to his lips.

"Eu entendo," she said. "Now be quiet."

In the street below, a ragged young man pulled a wooden cart filled with hunks of flattened cardboard cartons and empty cardboard boxes. His black and white spotted dog, head erect and ears cocked, rode atop the heap.

The sun burned its way through the dissolving clouds, the day turning steamy. Mike remembered spring mornings in central Texas, hot, humid nights dawning as early overcast melted into muggy sunshine, the air cooking into a soup heavy as a wet mop.

A flock of bem-te-vi perched in the trees and rooftop antennas, calling their names. Their frantic, high-pitched "bem chee vee!" rose above the drone of traffic like an accusing chorus in a Greek tragedy.

"The day is beautiful," Sarah said.

"Do you like your work?" He tried Portuguese. "Voce gusto trabhalar."

"Of course, no. But necessary. My mother no have money. She keep my son. I am only money. My mother viúva. Wait, I don't know how say in English. Viúva." He handed her the dictionary and she found the word. "Widow."

"Where does she live?"

"São Paulo. Zona Norte. Santana."

"How old is your son?"

"Six."

"His father?"

"Gone. I left. Never married. Together four years."

He did a quick calculation in his head. A six year old son, lived with a man four years. She wasn't twenty. "Your ad says twenty years old."

"Of course not true. I twenty-seven. All escort girls no say right age."

His natural inclination to ask more direct questions about the business and her clients ran up against some internal block and he backed off, keeping them to himself. His reluctance troubled him, at odds with his typical methods, most often described as blunt by friends, hamfisted by others. Maybe what lurked beneath the veneer scared him. Maybe the cautionary approach made sense here, so far outside his element. It added a new dimension, this sudden sensitivity. He put it out of mind.

She seemed far from the prostitutes he'd rubbed against in the U. S. They aged hard; coarse women supporting drug habits, not families. Many of them started as teenage runaways, grown old fast working for pimps who provided them the pretext of love and security they couldn't find at home. Some of them claimed abuse as children. Their tough, hardened shells defined their demeanor, whatever the truth about bruised interiors.

"I hate my work," she said, "but other work no pay."

Mike knew Brazilian wages paid less than subsistence. São Paulo boasted the lowest unemployment in a country with a likely rate of twenty-five percent, but it also boasted the highest cost of living. Somehow enough money circulated to support a large population of prostitutes. As Eterno explained ad nauseum, the demand was local. Tourist dollars played a small part in the Brazilian sex industry.

"How many of your clients are American?"

"No. None. No speak English good."

Mike went inside and called Eterno. "Come down," he said. "I have an idea that might work better than what we talked about last night."

When he arrived, an unsmiling Eterno skipped the greeting and strode across the room.

Sarah reclined on the sofa, staring through the open door to the balcony as if in a trance. He stopped and stood over her, glowering like a genie fresh out of the bottle. She didn't acknowledge him.

"Sarah," he said, "*last night you told us you knew those girls on the list. How?*"

Without bothering to look away from the balcony, she answered in a dreamy voice, "Eu não sei."

Mike knew she'd answered, "I don't know." He didn't understand what Eterno had asked, but he talked fast, his tone austere, his demeanor verging on hostility.

Sarah turned a languid gaze on Eterno, eyes half shut, a hint of a smile flickering about her mouth. She reposed like a liquid person, almost not there, as though melting into the furniture.

"Quantos!" Eterno barked.

Mike understood he wanted to know how much, but he wasn't sure of what.

"Todas elas?" Eterno continued.

All of them, feminine. The list.

"Maybe," she replied.

"Maybe? Maybe! What is maybe?"

"I don't know." She smiled, looking away again as if a distant dream lured her gaze to the balcony.

Eterno stepped toward her, menacing.

In a flash she sat bolt upright. "Me mostre a lista."

Mike didn't know what she said, she spoke so rapidly it sounded like a single word, but her expression was hard, the dreamy smile gone, and her eyes were afire, anger the sole expression he could read. It had happened fast, the change in her voice, from dreamy to nightmarish, harsh and grating with a shrill edge.

Eterno handed her the list and she looked at it. "Não. Meu erro. Desculpe." Her voice regained the dreaminess, but with an acidity that said she had finished the discussion. When Eterno pressed her, she shot back, "Bastante! Chato!"

Mike understood chato. Annoying. He moved between them.

"Let it go. I have another idea."

Eterno looked at him like he was from Mars. He shook his head, snatched back the list and sat down at the kitchen table, as far from them as he could get without leaving the room.

Mike moved to where he could see them both, pausing before he laid out his new plan.

"Shit, Eterno, these two assholes have visited your site by now. So we assume they know what Sarah looks like. Let's not let them see her leave with us.

"We'll go to Sarah's place, you in the Beemer and me and Sarah in her car. You follow us. Then they see you and me leave her apartment together, without her. Except she is hiding on the floor in back."

"Why not hide her in the trunk?"

"We come back here, then you take me to the airport. Sarah shows up an hour later, in a cab."

He stopped. Eterno said nothing.

"Well?"

"It is stupid, Mike. Too complicated. And we do not know how many of them there are."

"Two. That's all."

"How do you know?"

"It's clear. Just two."

"Anyway, they could talk to the people in the garage."

"Tell them not to mention her."

Sarah grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Mike asked, moving to block her.

"I go home. Shower. Come back."

"No. Wait. We are working on that. Too dangerous."

"You come with me. We be okay."

"No Sarah. It's a bad idea." Mike caught her near the door.

"You stop me? No let me go? I go now."

Mike turned to a glowering Eterno for support and thought better of it.

"Okay, Sarah. Wait five minutes. After I shower we go together."

"Okay, I wait."

She parked herself on the edge of a metal chair at the table across from Eterno.

Mike showered, brushed his teeth, grabbed some clean clothes and threw them into a red plastic shopping bag. As he came down the stairs, he saw Eterno at the table, sulking, and Sarah asleep on the couch. He roused her and the three of them rode down to the garage, the only sound the creaking of the ancient elevator.

When they exited, Eterno spoke first.

"You go with Sarah in her car. I will follow from a distance, to see if anyone is following you. Then I will take care of some business. I want to find out about the girls on this list. You take a taxi from Sarah's to the airport and pick up the rental car."

"No rental car," Sarah said. "Take my car."

They both stared at her. Mike tried to say too dangerous, but she gave him the no-no finger wag and shook her head, the final word he'd seen Paulista women give men. It ended the conversation.

Eterno looked down and shook his head. Mike took it that he, too, had thrown in the towel.

As they pulled out of the garage, Mike noticed two men sitting in a car outside Frans. Wearing suits and sunglasses, they looked like bad copies of American detectives from a television series. He guessed they were cops. They let the Alfa go and pulled in behind the white BMW, following it all the way to Sarah's apartment.

Eterno called on Sarah's cell once he was sure they were inside, asking Mike if he had noticed the car. He confirmed he had. They agreed no other car tailed them.