

PART I: SETUP

Chapter One

Mitt Hecher and Davey Ross wore impassive expressions that hid machinations lurking behind eyes measuring every patron in the Unicorn Tavern.

"I see one," said Hecher. "The guy at the bar trying to make it with the bitch two seats away."

"Geez, he's pretty big." Ross sounded hesitant.

Mitt, a veteran street fighter, stared at the guy a moment. "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"Oh, man," Davey sighed. He semiconsciously patted the bulges on either side of his chest jacket and took a deep breath. "Okay, let's go."

Mitt and Davey half-resembled a Mutt and Jeff team. Mitt was Mutt, five-foot-six in his bare feet, but with a strong build that was both muscular and wiry. Davey was Jeff, standing ramrod straight at six feet.

Davey's father operated a wholesale fish business and financed a bar in Lake Worth for his son. Hecher hung out there, and after Davey sold the business, they began making the rounds of other watering holes, getting into trouble.

The pair sauntered into the rectangular room, which had a bar on one side and dark wood paneling with Kmart-quality pictures of wildlife on the opposite wall. The room was less than half full. Two thirtyish patrons, a skinny fellow and his overweight, frumpy companion sat kissy-facing at one of two high-tops back of the staple-shaped bar. Two businessman types, one middle-aged and the other older, played cards at a small table. In an alcove that extended beyond the bar, two men dressed in worker's clothes shot pool on the only table.

In the middle of the long row of stools, the big guy half-stood and half-sat, turned toward the woman. Measuring at least six-foot-three, he was large-boned, and Hecher could tell he was strong. His attire suggested a construction worker: flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, scuffed jeans, heavy tan boots with thick rubber soles. Though perhaps only in his early thirties, his passing good looks couldn't disguise the effects of a hard life. A slight paunch had formed, doubtless from drinking a lot of the draft beer that he downed now while talking to the woman.

She wore tight-fitting jeans, sexy high-heeled sandals, and a white blouse with sleeves falling just below softly rounded shoulders. As he talked, she twirled a finger atop a cocktail glass while looking at him with head cocked away, a doubtful smile on a face that was pretty in a plain way.

Mitt nonchalantly walked up to the seat between the big guy and the woman. Davey followed several steps behind.

"My my, look what we have here?" said Mitt, breaking into a cocky smile. "What's a classy dame like you doin' in the slummiest dive on South Dixie?"

The woman shot him a dour look and turned to face the bar.

"Hey buddy, quit buttin' into our conversation," the big man snarled. "Scram."

"Conversation? Seems to me a conversation has to have more than one person, and it looked to me like you were doin' all the talkin', big mouth."

"What'd you call me, you little punk?"

"Ya know, you not only need your mouth washed out, but your ears need cleaning, too. I guess I have to repeat myself." Mitt leaned into the guy. "I called you a big mouth."

"Why, you fucking ..." The guy jumped from the bar stool. Raising his fists, he came at Mitt, who had backed away and assumed the classic crouched position of a karate fighter: left

arm forward at an angle, fist pointing upward, the right arm crossing the midsection, fist ready for action.

The guy threw a right cross at Mitt, who fended off the blow with his left arm and landed a chop in the solar plexus with his right, doubling the man over. Mitt came down hard on the back of the guy's neck, stepped sideways, and took a leaping kick at his kidney. That was the coup de grace, and the man fell to the floor like a spent bull at the hands of a matador.

One of the pool players and two blue-collar types at the bar rushed over and were about to pounce on Mitt. Davey pulled pistols from holsters covered by both sides of his jacket, and pointed them at the interlopers.

"Hold it right there," he yelled. "Any of you guys as much as touch my buddy, I'll blow you away." The three stopped in their tracks.

"Now, get back to what you were doin'. The fight's over. Nobody's gonna get hurt anymore. Mitt's just got a little business to discuss with that poor dude."

The three men backed away. Everyone cowered, afraid to leave with Davey and Mitt still there. The woman at the bar sat staring at them, her hands holding her face in an expression of shock.

Mitt bent over the big guy. "How ya doin', dude?"

He grunted.

"You'll be all right."

Mitt smiled at him. "I'm gonna make you a proposition you can't refuse. You must feel like a real chump, a big lout like you letting a little guy like me beat the crap out of you, right in front of a gal you're trying to score with. Huh? Am I right? That's okay. You're in too bad a shape to talk much."

The big guy nodded and grimaced.

"So just listen to the great offer I'm about to make. You'll never have to worry about guys like me humiliating you in front of a woman you're hustlin' again." He helped the man to his feet.

"Let's go sit at that empty corner table and talk business. Now don't get any ideas about attacking me cuz I'll put you away again. And Davey here might just lose his temper and give you a pistol whipping that would make my karate chops feel like the teacher's ruler."

Holding his midsection, the guy stumbled to the table. Davey put his guns in the side pockets of his pants, his eyes darting from side to side as he watched over the entire room.

"What's your name? I'm Mitt." The karate expert reached out his hand.

"Bill, but I'm not in the mood to shake your hand."

"Okay, okay. You don't like me. You probably never will. Geez, I don't know why. But in time, you're going to appreciate me. Cuz I'm gonna help you. Of course, my services aren't free."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Here's the deal. I own a karate studio in West Palm Beach, only a coupla miles from here near downtown. Hecher Karate. You're gonna learn how to defend yourself with this great martial art and never have to worry about anybody bothering you. I have a special rate going at the moment: three lessons per week for fifteen bucks each. You can come in Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, or twice during the week and on Saturday.

"You might have to save some of that beer money, but you won't want to drink much after you get into this program. You're prob'ly gonna do pretty good after six months, but if you really want confidence about your ability to handle yourself, you might have to stick with it at least a year. Understand?"

Bill glanced at his nemesis and back at the table.

“Now, I’m gonna need payment for the first lesson in advance. So if you’ll please dig into your wallet and pull out a twenty-dollar bill, Bill, we’ll be all set.”

Bill threw a sour look at Mitt, hesitated, and peered up at Davey, who rubbed the bulges in his pockets. Unhurrying, Bill pulled out his wallet and handed Mitt two ten-dollar bills.

“Bill, I got a feeling this is the start of a beautiful relationship. Now all I need is your full name and address and your phone number so I know where to contact you just in case you forget about our little agreement. You’ll need to come in Monday to sign a contract.”

Mitt looked around the room. He walked up to one of the businessmen at their table. “You got a pen and piece of paper I can borrow?” The man shrank back, then scrambled in his pockets for pen and paper.

“Thanks, pal.”

Mitt returned to Bill. “Oh ... uh, please give me the correct info, Bill. Don’t mean to be hard-headed about this, but Davey and me will find you if it’s not right.”

Bill wrote his contact information. “I’m working on a construction crew and can’t come in till after four on Monday.”

“No problem,” said Mitt. “We’ll see you then.”

The two jerked their heads toward the heavy walnut door as it clattered and swung open. Three cops whose uniforms bore West Palm Beach Police insignia charged in with billy clubs, stopped, and surveyed the scene. One walked toward the bar, and the barmaid gestured toward Mitt and his new client.

“Oh, I might’ve known,” said a beefy officer with sergeant’s stripes on both sides of his collar. He walked with a heavy gait toward the table where Mitt, Davey, and Bill sat, the other cops following.

“So whose kneecaps did you break this time, Hecher?”

“Excuse me?” Mitt replied with sarcastic innocence.

“Listen punk, don’t get cute with me,” the sergeant retorted. The street-fighting karate expert appeared not the least intimidated by the hulking form that stood close to him like a Florida brown bear ready to attack.

“What’s goin’ on here? This guy doesn’t look like he’s feeling too good. You beat him up or somethin’?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, we did have a little dustup. Bill didn’t take too kindly to my talking to the broad ... uh, the lady over there at the bar, and I kind of let him know that I didn’t appreciate someone trying to deny my freedom of speech. He apparently saw it differently and took a swing at me, so I had to defend myself. Then these other guys who prob’ly know Bill came at me, and my buddy Davey—he’s got a concealed weapon license—he pulled pistols on them. And that was the end of that. Bill and I are getting along just fine now. Right, Bill?”

Bill glared at Mitt, who returned the look.

“Everything’s okay, officer,” Bill said after a moment of awkward silence.

“You sure you don’t want to press charges?” the sergeant asked.

“Naw, what the heck. Let’s just forget it.”

“See? I’m not even offended that he used my name in vain,” Hecher said with a broad, cocky smile.

“Oh, you’re a barrel o’ laughs,” the sergeant snarled, rocking on his feet with arms bent as though ready to grab the man he despised.

Hecher had earned a reputation for trouble. Police throughout the Palm Beaches had come to dread calls to bar brawls and other fights Hecher was involved in, and would send three officers to restrain him. They’d repeatedly charged him with resisting arrest, along with such crimes as assault, minor weapons and drug violations, shoplifting, and petty larceny.

“You got off lucky this time, Hecher,” the sergeant warned, pointing a finger at the cops’ nemesis. “But one of these days your luck is gonna run out. It always happens to rotten apples like you. Sooner or later something’s gonna happen that’ll put you in the big house for a long, long time, and you’ll think those little stints in the county jail were Bahamas vacations. Mark my words.”

Chapter Two

"Getcha somethin', mister?" asked the barmaid, the sex appeal of her tight, ultrashort shorts and a halter top diminished by a bulging midriff.

"Uh ... yeah," answered the middle-aged man from behind sunglasses. He leaned sideways and turned his hard, pockmarked face from the patron two stools away. "I got a friend with big bucks who's looking for somebody to take him on a boat ride for some fun with a coupla babes. I heard I might be able to find what I'm looking for in this place."

"You heard right. See that good-lookin' guy over at the table close to the stage, sittin' by himself with a beer?" The barmaid nodded in that direction, and the man peered into the smoky haze of the dimly lit room. "Go talk to him. He might be a little unfriendly at first. Be kinda tactful, okay? I don't want no trouble in here."

"You don't have anything to worry about, honey." He smiled. "I deal with surly guys all the time."

Standing near the guy's large square table, he gazed around as if determining whether to stay, doing a half turn that opened his navy blazer and drew the blue shirt tightly over well-defined pectorals highlighting a lean body.

"Mind if I sit down?"

Davey Ross didn't reply for a moment.

"You blind or just pretending like you're some Hollywood glamour puss?"

"Huh? Oh ... the shades. That's funny. I must look pretty weird," he said, laughing as he pocketed the sunglasses. "I forgot to take them off when I walked in. I've got sensitive eyes and have to wear them in bright sunlight."

"So if you're not a Hollywood star, don't stand there like you're waitin' for the cameras to roll. Sit down. You're makin' me nervous."

"I'm Jack." He extended a hand while taking a seat opposite Davey.

"I don't shake hands with guys unless I'm sealing a bet."

"Okay by me. And since I'm not a betting man, we'll just keep our hands to ourselves."

Jack ordered a Jim Beam on the rocks with a splash from the waitress.

"But I do have some business on my mind. The sexpot sitting at the end of the bar—I'd guess she's a stripper and we're going to see her perform."

"Geez, you're a shrewd devil. Don't know how you figured that out. Maybe you got the brilliant idea that a woman wouldn't walk around town in a skirt showing her leg all the way to her ass. You're a fucking genius."

"Oh, hell, my mind is always coming up with amazing insights," Jack said with a straight face. Davey laughed raucously.

"So what's this business you got on your mind? You ain't thinking about any hanky-panky with the dancer, are you?"

"You mean the stripper at the bar?"

"Yeah. But you better quit calling her a stripper or somebody's gonna get pissed off. She's an exotic dancer."

"Uh-oh. She your gal?"

"Nope. She ain't nobody's gal, but she's got the hots for the Great Dane. He likes 'em all and treats 'em good—big bucks for big boobs." Davey laughed short and loud, and heads turned his way.

"Who the hell is he?"

"Guy named Rodger Kriger, and you don't wanna mess with him."

"Why? Is he her pimp?"

"No, and you better not let him hear you say that. He's big—about six-four. But that ain't what makes him dangerous. He's powerful."

"Body builder or something?"

"That ain't what I meant. Geez, what do I hafta do, draw a picture for ya? He's a big shot in this county. He's got a lotta money, lives in Palm Beach. He's on boards and councils and whatnot. You know ... he's in big with the movers and shakers."

"I getcha. Look, I'm not trying to get laid. I'll cut to the chase. I heard Republican politicians from Washington can come down here to this place incognito and get lined up with high-class prostitutes and go out on the ocean in a boat where they don't have to worry about anybody knowing what they're up to. I'm working for some people who sent me down here to make the arrangements for their young client. His old man ordered it. He's a pretty important guy. Pretty *damned* important. Let's just say that when we're talking power, he makes Kriger look like Mickey Mouse."

"Must be his son's graduation present or something, huh? Yeah, I can help you with that. Only thing, I don't know about this incog ... what'd you call it?"

"Incognito. Means anonymous. It's secret."

"Oh, yeah. Well, politicians come down here from Washington all the time for a fling. They've heard about the Shore Club and the two Republican bigwigs who hang out here and set them up. And guess who one of them two fine citizens is. Rodger Kriger. Him and his buddy Barney Robbins. That guy Robbins is so crooked, I don't know how he walks without a crutch. He's on the board that runs Palm Beach—whatever it's called."

"You mean the town commission, or town council?"

"Yeah, town council, I think that's it. Let me tell you, that town is so full of phony bullshitting bastards, it makes you wanna puke." Davey lowered his head for a moment, then raised it. "But hey, why should I complain? These rich sleazebags fatten my wallet when I bring stuff to their parties so's they can get loosened up—if you know what I mean." Jack detected a sly look. "Then they revel like them pagans did back in the Roman days. That's after they hold their charity galas where they show the world how wonderful they are to help the poor slobs who weren't lucky enough to have a rich daddy or never decided to get rich by screwing the other guy."

Davey stared hard at his beer.

"When these politicians come down here, they don't tell nobody they're coming and hardly go out in public, cuz somebody might recognize them and call the paper or TV. They're safe with Kriger and Robbins—Republicans like them. Those two guys set it up so the political big shots can go out on a boat with whores, and a good time is had by all out in the ocean. A lot of privacy out there."

Davey paused to let Jack digest his remarks.

"So is that what you're looking for?"

"Exactly. I need two quality prostitutes and a guy with a cabin cruiser who can take my client out in the ocean with them for two or three hours."

"No problem. Of course, there will be a charge for my consulting service."

"How much do you need?"

"My fee is fifty bucks per item, and there's two items: the boat, and two hookers, which I've got a two-for-one special on at the moment."

"That's not a bad price, considering how inflation's been skyrocketing," said Jack. He pulled a wallet out of his inside sport coat pocket and withdrew two fifties, two twenties, and a ten.

"There. One-hundred-fifty smackers. Now keep your mouth shut." Davey felt the power switching.

“Oooohhh,” he cooed. “You just put a clamp on my mouth. But I’ve gotta ask you not to blab about our financial arrangement.”

“Mum’s the word.”

“Okay. The guy you need to see for the boat is Johnny Traynor.”

“Who he?”

“He’s the captain of Robbins’s boat, and he does the mechanical work too—used to be a race car driver. This boat is a fifty-foot Bayliner—a cabin cruiser big enough so’s your young stud and his two wenches can roll around inside the cabin. He can screw ’em up and down with the action of the waves. A different kind of rhythm method.” Davey let out a guttural laugh.

“So where do I find this Traynor?”

“He hangs out here once in a while. I can give him a call and tell him you want to meet him here. He’s got an apartment a few blocks away. Traynor can get ahold of Robbins, and Robbins will let Kriger know about the plans for the politician’s kid.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Ask Traynor about the girls, too,” said Davey.

“I thought you were going to provide them.”

“I didn’t say that. I’m just making the referral. Wait a minute and I’ll go make a call to Traynor and see if he’s home.” Davey walked to the phone booth in the corner by the restrooms.

Ten minutes later, a tall man with a modicum of belly flab stood searching the dark interior with squinty eyes set in a narrow face.

“Is’at him?” asked Jack?

“Yeah,” said Davey, waving to Traynor. He approached the two men.

“What’s the limp for?” Jack asked.

“Vietnam. Got shot in the foot. Kept him off the racetrack for a while, but it finally healed and he won a few ribbons on the stock-car circuit in Georgia.”

Davey introduced Traynor to Jack. The boat captain’s head was lowered, eyes lifted in what seemed to Jack a weaselly, shifty look. He told Traynor about the boat. The captain went to the phone booth and returned, reporting that Robbins would be able to provide the boat. Kriger would come to the Shore Club in a couple of hours to meet Jack and make the arrangements.

“Go to a restaurant if you haven’t ate yet, or just wait around,” Davey told Jack.

“You going to introduce me?”

“Nah, I gotta go. It ain’t necessary. Kriger’ll be happy to talk to you. You’ll know who he is—big blond dude, only one in the place dressed up.”

“Where do I get the hookers?” Jack asked Traynor.

Traynor smiled smugly.

“I’m a man of several talents. I can see who’s available. Give me your number where you’re staying and I’ll call you. Meantime, talk to Kriger, tell him the date you need the boat.

“Got it.”

Jack and Traynor exchanged phone numbers, and Jack drove his rental car several blocks to the Blue Pelican restaurant on the Intracoastal Waterway. It was unusually balmy for a late autumn evening, and he sat on the patio to watch boats moor at the docks after heading in through the Palm Beach Inlet from short ocean excursions. After a leisurely meal of broiled dolphin, he returned to the Shore Club.

Kriger sat alone at a table in the middle of the room, looking a little bored as he watched a dancer strut her stuff.

“Hi. If I’m not mistaken, you’re Rodger,” Jack said, smiling while extending a hand. “I’m Jack. Johnny Traynor said you could help me.”

“Johnny who? Oh, I know who you mean. That fella who comes around here once in a while. He’s Barney Robbins’s boat guy. So what do you need?”

“The son of a very important Republican politician in Washington is coming down here to celebrate an occasion, and I need to line up a boat with a couple of party girls to go out on the ocean for a good time. Traynor told me how to get the girls, and he said your friend Robbins could provide the boat.”

“Sure can. We’d be happy to help out. Who’s the pol?”

“Can I sit down?”

“Oh, sure. Sorry. Pull up a chair.”

Sitting close to Kriger at a right angle, Jack turned his head to the left and right, then lowered it.

“This has got to be very discreet. Is that understood?”

“Oh, yeah,” Kriger blurted. “All these Washington guys have to keep things on the q.t. That’s no problem.”

“I would appreciate it if you would lower your voice,” Jack said with a little lilt to avoid sounding dictatorial.

“Ooohhh,” Kriger cooed, more subdued. “You seem pretty touchy about this. Sounds like your pol isn’t anybody to sneeze at. How high up is he?”

Jack looked at Kriger hard for several seconds.

“Your lips closed?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” said Kriger, lowering his voice further and bending toward Jack.

“The top.”

Kriger jerked backward.

“You don’t mean ...”

“Yes. The president. Wallace Grey.”