

A Cold Mind

Chapter 1

Roland Silva was driving, a wrist draped limply over the steering wheel as he slouched against the door so his face caught the full blast from the air conditioning vent. He was eating crushed ice from a Pepsi cup.

"Kothman must've drawn this cruiser on the swing shift," he said sourly. "The air coming out of this thing smells like a sewer."

Peter Walther shook his blond head. His lanky frame was also slouched against his door, while his eyes scanned the small wood-frame houses in the smutty darkness. Even at the end of his shift, when the last thing he wanted was to stumble onto a drunk or a family brawl, he conscientiously watched the serrated edges of the shadows where ninety percent of everything that shouldn't happen took place.

It was less than an hour before they were due in and Walther's and Silva's meandering drift through the barrio of Magnolia Park never strayed far from the lights of Navigation Boulevard, the umbilical cord that connected them to the downtown police station, nearly five miles away.

The two men had been partners for the past nine months, long enough to have a baby, Walther thought, and they had learned each other's moods and flash points. Recently Lenny Kothman, a cocky cigar-smoking bear of a patrolman who could throw a softball like a cannon shot, had become Silva's thorn in the flesh. Ever since Kothman had learned that Silva, who usually knocked everything out of the park during their

Saturday afternoon games, couldn't hit what Kothman had come to call his "greaser ball," the thorn had worked itself into a festering sore.

"You know," Walther said, his voice bouncing back at him from the window in front of his face, "you've gotten so you blame everything on Kothman."

Silva looked at Walther sharply and lowered the volume on the radio.

"What do you mean by that?" he snapped.

"I'm just saying it's noticeable," Walther said.

"Shit." Silva shoveled the last chunk of ice into his mouth and tossed the empty cup onto the seat. He chewed furiously, sulking as they cruised past the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church.

Walther smiled to himself. This time when they reached Navigation, Silva would make a violent left turn and roar into the lights of the main thoroughfare, driving the speedometer needle to ninety in a surging release of pent-up frustration before he slowed to the legal speed. That would put them a third of the way to the carpool and Silva would feel better for it. Little things meant a lot to him.

But instead of turning, Silva calmly continued on Seventy-sixth Street toward the smelly crotch of the wharves that lined the Turning Basin of the Houston Ship Channel. When Walther looked questioningly at him, Silva shrugged and said, "A little variety."

The streets became tighter nearer the public wharves. Tankers and freighters draped with sparkling lights lay in the docks and waited at a distance in the basin, their exotic voyages having come to an end amid the rancid stench of the chemical plants across the harbor and the oily fumes of diesel fuel from the barges that plowed the bayou. A ship's horn groaned across the channel.

"You picked a real scenic route for variety," Walther said. "And you made a big mistake."

"Naw, we'll just make a quick turn. Won't stop for nothing less than a cutting or shooting in progress."

They crept along a potholed street where darkened storefronts were crowded against silent bars whose neon signs were dark in this last hour before daylight. A single, sallow-faced whore watched them with dopey

eyes from a doorway that emitted soft, hazy blue light.

Silva followed the street to the last warehouse on the west end of the basin and then turned back along the wharf fronts, playing his spotlight over the rusted warehouses, where even the newer buildings seemed aged and decayed from the constant assault of acidic air and brine.

At the far end of the headlight beams, they saw something move in the weeds at the base of one of the loading docks. Silva threw his lights on bright and accelerated as Walther sat up in his seat. They both watched as a rangy cur came out of the shadows and loped across the street in front of them, his head held high with a ropy wad of viscera dangling from his mouth as he disappeared down the sloping embankment toward the channel.

"Mother Mary," Silva said in disgust. "America the Beautiful."

And then suddenly the woman came at them out of the weeds from the direction opposite the warehouse. Her eyes were wild and rolling, her mouth flung open, making a gaping black hole where her face should have been. She ran directly at the headlights.

"Goddamn!" Silva yelled, hitting the brakes. They felt a slight shudder against the front fender and Walther leaped out of the car, leaving his door open, as Silva slammed the gears in reverse.

Before Silva could get out, he saw Walther jump backward into the glare of the headlights, his hands fumbling for his revolver. A dark gash glistened high on his left cheek, his face registered astonishment. Then the woman was up, staggering in a flurry of wild hair and fluttering skirt as she bolted into the dusty weeds toward a chain link fence that ran out from the last warehouse along the top of the sandy embankment above the channel.

Silva swung the spotlight in her direction and jumped out as Walther, regaining his presence of mind, buttoned the strap on his revolver and plunged after her.

Running flat out, the woman smashed headfirst into the fence as if she hadn't seen it. It knocked her down but she was up instantly, running halfway between the fence and the dead end street. Suddenly she careened blindly into the fence again.

"What the hell's *wrong* with her?" Silva yelled.

Walther was on her before she could get up a second time and was struggling to pin her down in the weeds and sand when Silva got to them.

"Cuff her ankles," Walther yelled as he pinned one of her thrashing arms under his left knee and snapped his cuffs on her other wrist. Blood poured from his cheek and dripped off his chin into the woman's hair.

Silva grunted as he finished with her feet and stood up.

"Shit, man. She cut you real bad!" he gasped, looking down at Walther. "Where's the knife?"

Walther shook his head. "No knife," he said, checking the cuffs. "She bit me."

"She *bit* you?"

"Yes, dammit," Walther said impatiently. He was breathing heavily and had sat back on his knees to look at the writhing woman and catch his breath.

"Wonder what she took? Ten to one it's angel."

"I don't know," Walther wheezed. He took his handkerchief from his hip pocket and touched it to his face. There was a raw depression; she had actually bitten away a part of his cheek. He felt queasy, light-headed.

As the two of them watched, the girl gasped and began to convulse. Walther quickly rolled her over on her side and tenderly pulled her hair away from her face. Strings of saliva streaked his hands and matted in her hair with his blood.

For the first time, they got a good look at her. She was a Mexican girl, maybe twenty-five years old, with strong Indian features. It was hard to tell if she was pretty. Her face was pulled into a distorting rictus as she choked on her saliva, which poured from her mouth in curious overabundance. Suddenly her head arched back in seizure and the muscles in her throat jerked taut.

"Hey, man!" Silva stepped back. "She's checking out!" He wheeled around and ran back to the unit radio.

Walther, still straddling the girl on his knees, watched intently. He tried to check her tongue but she tore at him again, viciously, bringing blood from a bite to the outside of his hand below his little finger. He swore, confused. Tentatively he put his other hand on her shoulder and then gripped her tightly as if to reassure her, to tell her she wasn't alone.

Silva had turned on the flashers to make it easier for the EMS to find them, and the cherry light hit the girl's face every other second like the pulsing bursts from an inner fire that threatened to consume her.

"I don't know," Walther said out loud to no one. "I don't know." He had forgotten about the wound in his cheek and the entire left side of his face was slick with blood, which was still splattering the girl's face and hair, unnecessarily soaking her with gore.

The voices on the radio barked dispassionately, harsh with static. Far away in the sparkling city, a siren stretched across to them.

In the darkness twenty yards away where the fence ended and the embankment fell to the muddy channel, the cur returned. Half crouched in the dry weeds, his bloody muzzle raised slightly, he scanned to and fro in the night air for some clue to explain the strange scene he watched in the flashes of red light. Suddenly he snuffled, the short hair along his bony spine rose all the way to the back of his neck, and he turned warily and disappeared down into the dark margins toward the water.

Chapter 2

Stuart Haydon stood back from the sluggish green water of Buffalo Bayou and watched the bars of early-morning sunlight break through the pines and play across the white coveralls of the three men as they wrestled the woman's body onto the bank. A thin, steamy veil hung over the water. Haydon thought of the Lady of the Lake. Modern version.

He glanced over his shoulder at the three figures standing silently in the damp grass a few yards up the gentle slope. Leo Hirsch was supposed to be getting statements from the two boys who had found the body, but now that the woman was stretched out on the bank, the three of them had turned to look at the soaking corpse. One creamy breast lolled seductively out of the woman's shirtwaist dress and the soggy skirt was bunched up around her waist, revealing the patch of matted black hair between her long waxen legs. A dark smear of bayou mud crawled up the inside of one thigh.

The police photographer, who had gotten several shots of the body while it floated in the water, now circled the dead woman like a vulture, concentrating with voyeuristic thoroughness as he moved in for close-ups. When he finished, the coroner's assistant, with a peculiar sense of decency, put a small towel over the woman's face. Haydon looked behind him again. "Talk to them, Leo," he scolded, and walked over to the body and squatted down. The coroner's investigator was trying to unwad the dress from around her waist.

"Just leave it that way," Haydon said. "You see anything? Ligatures? Maybe something we should look around for?"

"Nope." He was a young man, pudgy, with a razor haircut stiff with hair spray and a wispy mustache that would never be anything but wispy. "And it doesn't look like she was knocked around." He picked through her stringy hair. "Probably hasn't been in the water more than three or four hours. Her fingers and the soles of her feet are wrinkled, but she hasn't

soaked up much. She's in good shape."

"Okay. Go ahead and load her in the van before the reporters show up."

Haydon watched them get her onto the stretcher and cover her with a disposable paper sheet, which quickly soaked up the water on her body in dark spreading blotches. They strapped her down and started up the slope through the greenbelt of pine trees that separated the bayou from the homes just above them; the ambulance was parked on a dead-end street up there. Haydon turned and stared at the edge of the brackish water where it disappeared into a swampy stand of cattails. His eyes narrowed in preoccupation, not really seeing what they were looking at as he stood alone on the wet grass where the woman had lain in a death sprawl of mute provocation.

Abruptly he reached down for a dried pine branch that lay near his feet and proceeded to walk along the bank, probing idly in the heavy grass and cattails. There was no telling where she had gone in. Probably not here. He looked across to the dense woods on the other side. Houston's fifteen-hundred-acre Memorial Park lay straight ahead. He could hear the traffic on Loop 610, which cut across the western edge of the park six or eight blocks away through the forest.

He threw down the stick and walked over to Leo and the boys. The two kids looked to be about twelve years old. They were dressed in the uniform of the upper-middle-class Tanglewood adolescent: Adidas jogging shoes, Izod tennis shorts, and imitation Oiler football jerseys.

"Rickey here was just explaining how they came to find the 'deceased,'" Leo said, and winked at Haydon. "This is Detective Haydon," he said to the boys. "Why don't you start over, Rick?"

"Yes, sir," the boy said. He looked at Haydon from under a shock of woolly blond hair that badly needed cutting and gave a smart-ass little grin. Haydon took an instant dislike to him. "We were hunting frogs along here." He held up a sharpened bamboo stick. "There's lots of them in the bayou. We use them for experiments."

"What kind?"

"Just ordinary old frogs. I don't know."

"I mean what kind of experiments."

"Science experiments," the second boy said. His voice was deep and somber. He wasn't grinning.

"This is Doug," Leo said.

"We were just walking along over there," the first boy continued, "sneaking up on them, when we saw this paper plate floating under the water. We started throwing our javelins at it until we finally hit it."

"Only it wasn't a paper plate," Doug said grimly. "It was her buttocks."

"Buttocks?" Leo raised his eyebrows.

"Right," Rick said. "I speared her in the butt." Leo made a note and shook his head.

"Course I knew it wasn't a paper plate then," Rick continued quickly. He didn't want the story to get away from him. "So I jabbed it again and then pushed hard. That's when the back of her head came out of the water." He imitated the way she leveraged to the surface by stiffly bending over at the waist and coming up slowly with a frozen expression. "Her hair had been tangled in some of those reeds or something and when I pushed, it pulled her loose or something."

"Then we went up to my house because my mom's gone out to the airport, and we called the police," Doug said.

"Why didn't you go to Rick's house?" Leo asked. He referred to his notes. "It's closer."

"No way," Rick said.

"His mom's super strict," Doug said. "She wouldn't have let us come back down to watch."

"Did you get a look at the woman's face while she was on the bank over there?" Haydon asked.

They nodded, a little embarrassed because her face wasn't what they remembered most about her.

"Had you ever seen her before?" Only Doug nodded.

"You know her?" Leo asked. He drew a line across the bottom of his notepad.

"No, sir. But I know where she lives."

"Where?"

"Up there on Pinewood."

"The dead-end street?"

"Yes, sir."

"You live close by?"

"Yes, sir. On Pine Hollow."

"Does she have a family? Any children?"

"I don't think so. I don't think she's married."

"Why's that?"

"Well . . . I see lots of men there, you know. I think maybe she's divorced."

"Maybe," Haydon said. Kids don't miss a damn thing, he thought. "I guess we parked right across from her place, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir."

Without saying anything further, Haydon turned and started up the dark path made by the stretcher bearers in the dewy grass. The others followed.

When they got to the barrier at the dead-end street, a television cameraman was filming the coroner's assistants as they closed the back door to the van and walked around and got inside. The cameraman followed them a little ways as they drove off. A young woman in a snappy summer suit stared after them, her hands on her hips in a petulant stance. Behind her, a man with an unkempt beard leaned against a rusty Volvo, grinning. When he heard the two detectives and the boys approaching, he turned toward them. His grin widened when he saw Haydon.

"I told her it'd be you," he said to Haydon, who ignored him and kept walking.

The girl turned around and Haydon recognized the new anchorwoman from a local television station. She strode decisively toward him and introduced herself as she extended her hand. Haydon stopped, shook her hand, and nodded.

"You're Detective Haydon?" she asked. He nodded again.

"Can you tell me what's going on here?" She gestured toward the bayou with her stenographer's pad.

Haydon shook his head.

"Oh, come on now," she said, forcing a smile. "You can't expect to keep something like this a secret. What happened here?"

"You know as much as I do at this point," he said. "Sergeant Haydon," she said. "I don't even know if it was a man or a woman under that sheet, for Christ's sake. Those assy coroner's assistants wouldn't tell me anything." She couldn't hide her exasperation.

"That's right," Haydon said, and walked past her toward his unmarked car.

The bearded reporter laughed. "I told ya," he said to the girl. "Nobody talks on Haydon's cases."

"Now wait just a damn minute," the girl said to Haydon's back. "You don't control the coroner's office. You've no jurisdiction." She followed him a few steps before Hirsch and the two boys pushed past her as they followed Haydon up to the car. "Hey, you two. Boys. Did you see what happened down there? Want to be on television tonight? Hey!" She turned to the cameraman. "Bennie, shoot their backs!" she snapped.

The strobe lights came on and Haydon whirled around. "Bennie! You like your job? You want to keep it?"

The lights went out.

"Bennie!" the girl shrieked. "Shoot them! Turn the goddamn thing *on*."

"There's nothing to *shoot*," the cameraman argued defensively. "Four backs. What's that?"

"You little prick!" the girl screamed, flinging her steno pad down on the pavement. "You just lost your job anyway."

The newspaper reporter threw back his head and crowed and slapped the hood of the Volvo.

The girl stormed past the cameraman and got into the television station's white compact, marked with giant red call letters on its doors. She slammed the car in reverse, swiveled backward up the hill, and roared away.

"You silly bitch," the cameraman yelled. He shot her the finger when there was no chance of her seeing it. "She don't know her hole from an ass in the ground," he said.

The reporter was still laughing as he motioned for the cameraman to get into his car. They drove away together, waving to Hirsch as they passed the two detectives and the boys, who had not missed the import of

what had happened. When Haydon spoke to them, they listened with new attentiveness.

"That's her house over there?"

Doug nodded. So did Rick, though he didn't know.

Haydon opened the car door and slid under the steering wheel. He radioed the station for the resident listing and computer name check, then stared across at the house as he waited for the information. Leo thanked the boys for their help. He gave each of them one of his cards and told them to call him if they thought of anything else the police might want to know. They walked away up the slight incline of the street, glancing back once before they disappeared around the corner.

"What do you think?" Leo asked as he looked around at the thick woods that provided seclusion for the surrounding homes. The woods were a desirable amenity much touted by the realtors.

"She wasn't wearing any underwear," Haydon said, still looking at the house.

"Yeah. I half expected to find them stuffed in her mouth."

"Lewis said she hadn't been in very long. Maybe we should drag the bayou along here." Leo shrugged.

The night's coolness was quickly fading to warmth. In half an hour you could call it hot and in another hour you could call it sweltering. Above them the Gulf clouds drifted swiftly inland from the coast, fifty miles away to the southeast. It wasn't going to rain, but by noon the stifling humidity would make you wish it would.

Leo pulled off his sports jacket and threw it across the hood of the car. He wiped his oily forehead with a handkerchief and took out a pack of Certs. He'd been eating breath fresheners like candy since he'd quit smoking.

Haydon remained on the car seat, staring out the opened door. He wore a parchment-colored suit by Uomo with a crisp white shirt and a dun tie. Later in the day, when the heat would be lethal, he might remove his coat, but the tie would stay firmly knotted. There were streaks of gray at the temples of his sable hair and if you looked closely, concentrating on the brown eyes flecked with amber, you would see the beginnings of creases angling in toward the outer corners, which turned downward when he

smiled-which, lately, was seldom. He was olive-complected, with a good straight nose, and a mouth that could not be described as either full or thin. He was exactly six feet tall, and lean.

Leo turned to Haydon. "Why didn't you take the promotion?"

Haydon continued to stare across the street, but Hirsch thought he saw a flicker of a smile rise, then die out, at the edge of his mouth. "I miscalculated," Haydon said. "I thought you'd ask me in the car on the way over here."

"I'm learning restraint," and Hirsch grinned. At twenty-six, he was ten years younger than Haydon and looked even younger, with his penchant for Bass Weejuns and Oxford cloth button down shirts. He wore the same Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses he had worn in college and was typical of a new breed seen with increasing frequency in the police academies. He hadn't stumbled into police work on a fluke, like many of Haydon's contemporaries. Rather, he had deliberately anticipated his career by taking a degree in psychology and two years of criminal law at the University of Texas Law School before he entered the academy. His attitudes about law enforcement were more like the Peace Corps attitudes of the Kennedy era than those of the men who had come out of the academies in response to the rampant rebellion of the sixties and seventies. Haydon did not answer Hirsch's question or even act as if he remembered what they had just said. Then, just as Hirsch was about to ask him again, Haydon said, "I thought I'd wait until I was forty."

"What?"

The radio hissed and Haydon leaned over and turned it up. Homicide's air frequency was separate from that of the rest of the department; the transmissions were usually informal and quite clear.

"Haydon?" Lieutenant Dystal's voice was slow, with redneck intonations. "I got a resident for you. A baby doll named Sally Steen. Forty-two years. Got a purty long sheet for prostitution. Mostly high-class call girl stuff. Looks like Ed Mooney's dealt with her more'n anybody else in Vice. I guess he could give you a good rundown on her."

"Could you get me a printout on her and leave a message for Mooney to call me?"

"Will do."

"Would you also get the paperwork started on a search warrant so we can go through her place over here?"

"Okeydokey."

"We're going to see if anyone's home. If not, we'll go down to Ben Taub and see what happened to her."

"See you later," Dystal said, and the radio went dead.

Nobody answered the doorbell. Leo prowled around the edges of the house, trying to look in the windows without success. The place was expensive. If Sally Steen had bought it with the rewards of her profession, it was a cinch she didn't spend her time hanging out on street corners.

Reluctantly, the two detectives left without even sticking their heads in the door.

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