

Heat From Another Sun

Chapter 1

The Old Shamrock Hilton loomed broad and heavy into the hazy night sky like an aging mammoth ocean liner, the soft green sheen of her lighted facade fading toward the top to a shadowed silhouette inset with the amber portholes of her rooms, a grand queen of former times, still grand, still queen.

He looked at the hotel through the sparkling clean windshield as he rested his chin on the steering wheel and listened to Paul Desmond's smooth sax floating through "*Coracao Sensivel*." Below the drift of the music he could hear the girls talking in the back seat in hushed conspiratorial tones. They were speaking what he called Chink-Tex: mostly Chinese peppered with English words and phrases in a distinctly Texas accent. Shit, they were innocents. Two innocents. From his right peripheral vision something pale moved cautiously from behind him. He tensed. A bare leg came over the seats, and an extended toe dangled a pair of panties next to his face. He smiled. A flurry of giggles overrode Desmond's sax. Well, shit, who was really innocent anymore?

He took the panties from the toe and shoved the foot back where it came from. He removed his amber-lensed Carreras and began polishing them with the panties. He held the glasses up to his eyes and then threw them onto the seat in frustration. His eyes were killing him, and he had thought the damn glasses might cut the glare of headlights. They didn't.

Besides, he looked like a pimp wearing sunglasses at night. He just wanted to close his eyes, maybe catch a few Z's, but he was still so damn wired he wouldn't sleep for a week. And part of the reason he didn't sleep was because he couldn't sleep. He was pumped so tight with adrenaline that every time he closed his eyes his mind spit out stop-action stills of the previous two hours, and then he had to open his eyes to stop it. Shit. Just-like-the-movies. It had been one hell of a night. He had never seen anything like it. Never.

The drive-in windows of the bank parking lot were a good place to meet. There were thick hedges and several medians of oleanders to shield them from the traffic on Fannin and Holcombe. The lamps threw their pale light from behind the palms along the street casting needle-shaped shadows on the hood of the car. Natural camo, like the moonlight in Nam. Powell was going to think this was a stupid way to meet, but then, Powell wasn't playing with a full deck, was he. Powell just hadn't been around this kind of thing enough to know when he was into something very heavy indeed. But he would find out.

He reached down and touched the package between his legs in the car seat. Two video cassettes made with state-of-the-art in ENG systems. Hitachi had outdone themselves with this one. Each cassette was sealed in a Ziploc sandwich bag, and the two bags were taped together with fiber tape until nothing showed but the tape. It looked like a bomb, and it was.

Desmond's sax slipped into "Two Part Contention" as Powell's battered cherry Corvette came around the corner off Holcombe and circled the bank toward the drive-in windows. The girls in the back seat quit talking and sat up a little as they watched the car, splattered with primer-gray splotches of Bondo, maneuver between the islands and stop next to their pearl Mercedes. Powell turned off the Corvette's motor and rolled down his window.

He grinned across at them. "Hey, James Bond."

The stupid shit. He just didn't understand. "Can you get into the lab tonight?"

"Sure," Powell said. "Anytime. What's the deal? You been down to tamale land again?"

He ignored the question. "I've got this quarter-inch stuff I want

duped and bumped up to one inch."

"How'd the new Hitachi rig work out?"

"Fine. Listen, I need this done tonight."

"So?"

He didn't know how much to tell Powell. He reached up to the dash and turned off the tape deck. Muffled city noises took over, and he motioned for Powell to lean farther out the window.

"I don't want to give them dupes of these," he said.

Powell just looked at him. A collection of gold chains caught the light below his Adam's apple. Sometimes he wondered about Powell. California kid who was no longer a kid but didn't know it. Lived with an absolutely gorgeous chick who was half his age and twice as smart. He couldn't figure it. Powell had been the one who was really going to make it big, but over the years he hadn't even come close. It wasn't going to end up good for Powell. He'd pissed away too many years.

"I want you to dupe these for me, without them knowing about it. If he asks about it tomorrow, tell him I haven't come in, as far as you know. You haven't heard from me."

Powell licked his lips. Even in the washed-out light of the lamps you could tell his skin had been tanned to leather. The blond beach boy hair looked a little out of sync with the face that was stumbling into forty years and not holding up well.

"What's on the tapes?" Powell asked, his head tilted, his mouth hanging open, slack-jawed.

"This is my own deal, Wayne. It's not for them. I'll pay you separately. This one is just between you and me. You've got the equipment I need. It's like moonlighting."

"You didn't go to El Salvador?"

"Yeah, I did, but this is something else. I do other things too, you know."

"But what about the El Salvador stuff? Don't you have any?"

"Not this trip. Nothing happened."

"But you've already been paid for them."

"Kind of."

"What do you mean, 'kind of'? Money ain't 'kind of.' Money's

payment. You screw around with these people and you could mess up my situation up there. I don't want to lose that kind of dole, man."

Powell's problem was that he was too damn literal. That's the way it had been in film school. At the heart of it all he was never anything more than a good camera mechanic. Absolutely no creativity. But he was a good mechanic.

"Look, Wayne, I'll explain it to you tomorrow."

Powell looked into the back seat of the Mercedes at the two pairs of unsmiling Oriental eyes staring mutely at him from the half-light. He seemed to think it over, and then he shrugged and stuck his opened hand out the window. "What can I say?"

For a split second he almost changed his mind, and then he told himself it would be a mistake to lose his nerve now. He wanted the tapes in the one- inch format, and he wanted to see what a really good technician could do with the enhancement. There was no reason for anyone to think they were anything different from what the others had been. It was like mailing a million bucks in a shoe box. Sometimes routine procedures were the best disguise, and therefore the safest. So long as Powell didn't let them out of his hands. He took the package from between his legs and handed it through the window.

"There's two of them there. Almost a full sixteen minutes. Those new Hitachis only get eight minutes."

"I know that, man," Powell said with tired sarcasm. "You forget who the hell put you onto 'em?"

"Just run them through and see what we get at one inch. Enhance them, whatever it takes. As soon as you get through, call me from up there and tell me how it looks. I'll tell you what to do from there. Okay?"

"Whatever," Powell said.

"And, Wayne. They're special, okay? Hang onto them. Your eyes only, okay?"

Powell didn't seem particularly impressed by that. He started the Corvette, revving the engine cockily as the car's front left fender vibrated wildly where it had been shattered and temporarily patched with gray swatches of unpainted fiberglass. He looked hard at the girls in the back seat of the Mercedes. They simply stared back at him in blank silence.

More revving. More passive staring from the girls. Then Powell popped the clutch and shot away from them in the deafening roar of his exploding engine and the acrid stench of burnt rubber. The 'Vette's tires continued to squeal as he blasted out of the driveway, slamming the rear of the car's chassis against the dip where the cement met the asphalt street. He disappeared into the traffic on Fannin.

The girls burst into screeching laughter and rapid-fire Chink-Tex.

The man was nearly forty years old. It was hard to believe.

Chapter 2

The first thing he had done was to clean out the library. It had taken an entire month. Haydon did not throw things away easily. His desk, files, and bookshelves were filled with esoterica, memorabilia, and items of seemingly small or no importance for which he had formed a sometimes-undefined attachment. Everything with which he surrounded himself was evocative of another space and time, and nowhere was this more true than in the library.

For the first few days he mostly thought about it, randomly pulling from the shelves books that he hadn't looked at in years. He opened the covers and read the owners' names, usually in their own handwriting. He read his father's name, his mother's name, and his own. His father's handwriting was elongated, thin, resembling the kind of decorative script one could learn from books sixty years ago. He often made eccentric remarks below his name and date: comments on the weather the day he bought the book, or if he had successfully concluded a particular case, or if something remarkable had occurred in the news or affected the family. His books were the marginalia of his life. His mother's handwriting was small, clear, and exact. Name and date. Nothing more.

Haydon's own handwriting was stylistically inconsistent, partly because there were books in the library that ranged from his childhood to the present. One could easily distinguish the awkward scrawl of youth and watch it grow steadier through a succession of books. But even as an adult, Haydon's handwriting was always varied in appearance, a fact that privately annoyed him. There had been times when he was going through the family papers after his parents' deaths, that he hadn't even recognized his own letters. In this haphazard fashion, he slowly reacquainted himself with what Thomas Carlyle had called "the articulate audible voice of the Past." He came to view the library itself as an aging personality in whom the key to his own threatened memory was fortuitously secured. This

discovery was immensely calming to him and was a major factor in his emotional restoration, which was to require several months.

After nearly two weeks of this self-indulgent rambling, in which he spent long days reading whatever he happened upon of interest and letting that, in turn, lead him to some other loosely related book, Haydon began a systematic review of the library's contents. He examined every single volume, journal, and pamphlet that crowded the room's shelves, adding notes to their cards in the catalog that had been religiously maintained from the beginning by his father. In this process he discarded a variety of material that had seemingly found space on the shelves solely by virtue of the family's habit of saving everything that loosely could be classified as a book, journal, or pamphlet that fell into their hands. He eventually threw away three large cardboard boxes of useless material, which he dragged out on the terrace for Pablo to haul away.

Finally, he consumed one full week selecting and ordering more books from the list he kept in a spiral notebook. It was nothing less than a bibliographic binge.

Toward the end of the second month, Haydon turned his attention to the long greenhouse that lay just beyond the citrus grove. For a good while it had been at the back of his mind to expand his collection of bromeliads to take up the entire space. So, with the moping assistance of Pablo, who regretted this new enthusiasm that had turned his lazy mornings into a sweating purgatory, he began the renovations. Huge chunks of limestone were brought in to build small outcroppings, and sphagnum moss was carted in by the hundreds of pounds. Electricians came with rolls of wiring, neatly packaged instruments, ladders, and scaffolding and installed the necessary devices to create a hermetically accurate rain forest, complete with varietal wind currents produced by electrically timed fans mounted in the ceiling beside an automated sprinkler system that simulated mists and periodic rains.

He scoured every nursery in the city for varieties of bromeliads that he did not already have and placed orders for others. At the end of six weeks the renovation was complete. Slate paths wound through the length of the greenhouse amid tiers of hundreds of species of bromeliads that fell from the ceiling to the spongy earth. High up, clinging to palms and the

broken stumps of old trees, were the epiphytes, the airbreathers, whose roots served only as a means of attachment while they absorbed food and water through a system of scales common to all bromeliads, and which often gave to their leaves a silvery blue hue. Abundant clumps and clusters of them draped down to the boulders upon which the Saxicola lived, clinging to the crevices and lichen surfaces of the stones. The terrestrials flourished in the boggy osmundine of the greenhouse floor, among them the shimmering Cryptanthus "earth stars," dazzling against the dark green of moss and peat.

By the beginning of the fourth month, Haydon's days had settled into a comfortable regimen. He rose early and exercised briefly on the bedroom balcony over the terrace before going downstairs and out the front gates to jog three miles through the boulevards in the tenuous morning coolness. When he returned, he showered and ate a light breakfast with Nina as he restlessly scanned both Houston dailies with little interest. Eventually, he fell to daydreaming.

While the cooler temperatures of late morning hung in the citrus grove around the greenhouse, he spent his time there, cataloging his new imports and transplanting the pups that sprang up from the older plants. Often in the morning hours he was simply idle and would lie in a hammock in the lime trees and try to think of nothing. It was an objective he seldom achieved.

From lunch until evening, during the hottest part of the day, Haydon worked in the library. As with the bromeliads, he cataloged the new books he had ordered, which came in a steady stream of boxes every few days. He unpacked them, put the empty cartons outside on the terrace, and stacked the new volumes on the refectory table. Then he sat with his back to the French doors, beyond which the summer heat swelled to an intensity so fierce that even the cicadas seemed to scream in defiance of it, and immersed himself in the new books with an exhilaration he had almost forgotten was possible.

Another month passed in the natural cadence that his life had now assumed. The frantic need to stay busy that had obsessed him in the early months gradually subsided and, like a debilitating fever, left him drained and tranquil. But the routine of his days, carefully orchestrated by Nina,

had been regenerative. His anxieties were fewer, less immediate. Those that remained would never go away. They were as much a part of his makeup as the rhythm of his heartbeat. For the first time in longer than he could remember he felt his life coming together with a cohesiveness that long had been absent and, he now realized, had been sorely missed. Nina meant more to him now than ever, for it was she who had patiently and unobtrusively structured his recuperation. After nearly twelve years of balancing her marriage and her career, Nina pushed aside her own work. Commissions from architectural firms were routinely rejected, and for weeks at a time she never walked through the doors of her studio. What work she did, she did at home. She never crowded him; she understood better than he did his need for periods of solitude, but she was never far from reach.

As always, she had seen clearly not only for herself but for both of them. For his present peace of mind, Haydon felt an indebtedness to her of the dearest sort, beyond reason or hope of repayment.

Copyright © 1995 by David Lindsey