Pegasus Descending

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Extract

CHAPTER 1

In the early 1980s, when I was still going steady with Jim Beam straight-up and a beer back, I became part of an exchange program between NOPD and a training academy for police cadets in Dade County, Florida. That meant I did a limited amount of work in a Homicide unit at Miami P.D. and taught a class in criminal justice at a community college way up on N.W. 27th Avenue, not far from a place called Opa-Locka.

Opa-Locka was a gigantic pink stucco-and-plaster nightmare designed to look like a complex of Arabian mosques. In the early a.m., fog from either the ocean or the Glades, mixed with dust and carbon monoxide, clung like strips of dirty cotton to the decrepit minarets and cracked walls of the buildings. At night the streets were lit by vapor lamps that glowed inside the fog with the dirty iridescence that you associate with security lighting in prison compounds. The palms on the avenues were blighted by disease, the fronds clacking dryly in the fouled air. The yards in the neighborhoods contained more gray sand than grass. Homes that could contain little of value were protected by bars on the windows and razor wire on the fences. Lowrider gangbangers, the broken mufflers of their gas-guzzlers throbbing against the asphalt, smashed liquor bottles on the sidewalks and no one said a word.

For me, it was a place where I didn't have to make comparisons and where each dawn took on the watery hue of a tequila sunrise. If I found myself at first light in Opa-Locka, my choices were usually

uncomplicated: I either continued drinking or entered an altered state known as delirium tremens.

Four or five nights a week I deconstructed myself in a bar where people had neither histories nor common geographic origins. Their friendships with one another began and ended at the front door. Most of them drank with a self-deprecating resignation and long ago had given up rationalizing the lives they led, I suspect allowing themselves a certain degree of peace. I never saw any indication they either knew or cared that I was a police officer. In fact, as I write these words today, I'm sure they recognized me as one of their own—a man who of his own volition had consigned himself to Dante's ninth circle, his hand clasped confidently around a mug of draft with a submerged jigger of whiskey coiling up from the bottom.

But there was one visitor to the bar whom I did call friend. His name was Dallas Klein, a kid who in late '71 had flown a slick through a blistering curtain of RPG and automatic weapons fire to pick up a bunch of stranded LURPs on the Cambodian border. He brought home two Purple Hearts, a Silver Star, and a nervous tic in his face that made you think a bee was buzzing around his left eye.

Like me, he loved Gulf Stream Race Track and the jai alai fronton up the road in Broward County. He also loved the craps table at a private club in Hollywood, a floating poker game in Little Havana, the dogs at Flagler, the trotters at Pompano, the Florida Derby at Hialeah, the rows of gleaming slot machines clanging with a downpour of coins on a cruise to Jamaica.

But he was a good kid, not a drunk, not mean-spirited or resentful yet about the addiction that had already cost him a fiancée and a two-bedroom stucco house on a canal in Fort Lauderdale. He grinned at his losses, his eyes wrinkling at the corners, as though a humorous acknowledgment of his problem made it less than it was. On Saturdays he ate an early lunch of a hamburger and glass of milk at the bar while he studied the *Morning Telegraph,* his ink-black hair cut short, his face always good-natured. By one o'clock he and I would be out at the track together, convinced that we knew the future, the drone of the crowd mysteriously erasing any fears of mortality we may have possessed.

On a sunny weekday afternoon, when the jacaranda trees and bougainvillea were in bloom, Dallas strolled into the bar whistling a tune. He'd picked three NFL winners that week and today he'd hit a perfecta and a quinella at Hialeah. He bought a round of drinks for the house and had dinners of T-bones and Irish potatoes brought in for him and me.

Then two men of a kind you never want to meet came through the front door, the taller one beckoning to the bartender, the shorter man scanning the tables, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the bar's interior.

"Got to dee-dee, Dave. Call me," Dallas said, dropping his fork and steak knife in his plate, pulling his leather jacket off the back of his chair.

He was out the back door like a shot.

He made it as far as a lavender Cadillac where a man as big as the sky waited for him, his arms folded on his chest, his wraparound mirror shades swimming with distorted images of minarets and broken glass sprinkled along the top of a stucco wall.

The two men who had come in through the front of the bar followed Dallas outside. I hesitated, then wiped my mouth with my napkin and went outside, too.

The parking area had been created out of crushed building material that was spiked with weeds. The wind was blowing hard, and the royal palms out on the boulevard thrashed and twisted against a perfect blue sky. The three men whom I did not know had formed a circle around Dallas as though each of them had a fixed role he had played many times before.

The driver of the Caddy had the biggest neck I had ever seen on a human being. It was as wide as his jowls, his tie and collar pin like formal dress on a pig. He chewed gum and gazed at the palm trees whipping against the sky, as though he were disengaged from the conversation. The man who had spoken to the bartender was the talker. He wore polyester sports clothes and white loafers and looked like a consumptive, his hair as white as meringue, his shoulders stooped with bone loss, his face netted with the lines of a chain-smoker.

"Whitey is supposed to carry you for sixteen large?" he said.

"That ain't his money. He's paying a point and a half vig a week on that. No, Dallas, you don't talk, you listen. Everybody appreciates what you did for your country, but when you owe sixteen large, that war hero shit don't slide down the pipe."

But the man who caught my eye was the short one. He seemed wrapped too tight for his own body, the same way a meth addict seems to boil in his own juices. His mouth was like a horizontal keyhole, the corner of his upper lip exposing his teeth, as though he were starting to grin. He listened intently to every word in the conversation, waiting for the green light to flash, his eyes flickering with anticipation.

The consumptive man rested his palm on Dallas's shoulder. "*What?* You think we're being hard on you? You want Ernesto to drive us out in the Glades so we can talk there? Whitey likes you, kid. You got no idea how much he likes you, how kind you're being treated here."

"You gentlemen have a problem with my friend Dallas?" I asked.

In the quiet I could hear the palm fronds rattling above the stucco wall, a gust of wind tumbling a piece of newspaper past a spiked iron gate.

"No, *we* don't got a problem," the short man said, turning toward me, the sole of one shoe grinding on a piece of broken mortar. His hair was peroxided, feathered on the back of his neck. He wore platform shoes and a dark blue suit that was cut so the flaps stuck out from his waist, and a silver shirt dancing with light, and a silk kerchief tied around his throat. His eyes contained a cool green fire whose source a cautious man doesn't probe.

"Dallas has a phone call," I said.

"Take a message," the short man said.

"It's his mother. She really gets mad when Dallas doesn't come to the phone," I said.

"He's a cop," the driver of the Caddy said, removing his shades, pinching the glare out of his eyes.

The short man and the man in polyester sports clothes took my inventory. "You a cop?" the short man said, smiling for the first time.

"You never can tell," I replied.

"Nice place to hang out," he said.

"You bet. If you want a tab, I'll talk to the bartender," I said.

The short man laughed and accepted a stick of gum from the driver. Then he stepped close to Dallas and spoke to him in a whisper, one that caused the blood to drain out of Dallas's face.

After the three men had gotten back into their Caddy and driven away, I asked Dallas what the short man had said.

"Nothing. He's a jerk. Forget it," he said.

"Who's Whitey?"

"Whitey Bruxal. He runs a book out of a pizza joint in Hallendale."

"You're into him for sixteen grand?"

"I got a handle on it. It's not a problem."

Inside the bar, he pushed aside his food and ordered a Scotch with milk. After three more of the same, the color came back into his cheeks. He blew out his breath and rested his forehead on the heel of his hand.

"Wow," he said quietly, more to himself than to me.

"What did that dude say to you?" I asked.

"One-one-five Coconut Palm Drive."

"I don't follow," I said.

"I have a six-year-old daughter. She lives with her grandmother in the Grove. That's her address," he replied. He stared at me blankly, as though he could not assimilate his own words.

DALLAS INVITED ME to his apartment the next evening and cooked hamburgers for us on a hibachi out on a small balcony. Down below were blocks and blocks of one-story houses with gravel-and-tar roofs and yards in which the surfaces of plastic-sided swimming pools wrinkled in the wind. The sun looked broken and red on the horizon, without heat, veiled with smoke from a smoldering fire in the Glades. Dallas showed me pictures of his daughter taken in Orlando and in front of a Ferris wheel at Coney Island. One picture showed her in a snowsuit sewn with rabbit ears that flopped down from the hood. The little girl's hair was gold, her eyes blue, her smile magical.

"What happened to her mom?" I said.

"She took off with a guy who was running coke from the Islands in a cigarette boat. They hit a buoy at fifty knots south of Pine Key. Get this. The guy flew a Cobra in 'Nam. My wife always said she loved a pilot." He turned the burgers on the grill, his eyes concentrated on his task.

I knew what was coming next.

"Had a note under my door from Whitey this morning. I might have to take my little girl and blow Dodge," he said.

I cracked a beer and leaned on the railing. In the distance I could see car lights flowing down a wide bend in an expressway. I sipped from the beer and said nothing in reply to his statement.

"I made a salad. Why don't you dump it in a couple of bowls?" he said.

The silence hung between us. "I've got a couple of grand in a savings account. You want to borrow it?" I said, then raised the bottle to my mouth, waiting for the weary confirmation of the frailty and self-interest that exists in us all.

"No, thanks," he said.

I lowered the bottle and looked at him.

"It's just a matter of doing the smart thing," he said. "I got to think it through. Whitey's not a bad guy, he's just got his—"

"What?" I said.

"His own obligations. Miami is supposed to be an open city. No contract hits, no one guy gets a lock on the action. But nothing goes on here that doesn't get pieced off to the New York families. You see my drift?"

"Not really," I said, not wanting to know more about Dallas's involvement with Miami's underworld.

"What a life, huh?" he said.

"Yeah," I replied. "Make mine rare, will you?"

"Rare it is, Loot," he said, squeezing the grease out of a patty, wincing in the flare of smoke and flame.

I washed my hands before we ate. Dallas's work uniform hung inside a clear plastic dry cleaner's bag on a hook in the bathroom, the logo of an armored car company sewn above the coat pocket.

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BUT DALLAS DID NOT BLOW DODGE. Instead, I saw him talking on a street corner in Opa-Locka with Ernesto, the leviathan driver of the lavender Cadillac. The two of them got in the Caddy and drove away, Dallas's face looking much older than he was. Twice I asked Dallas to go to the track with me, but he claimed he was not only broke but entering a twelve-step program for people with a gambling addiction. "I'll miss it, but everything comes to an end, right?" he said.

Spring came and I disengaged from Dallas and his problems. Besides, I had plenty of my own. I was trying to get through each morning with aspirin, vitamin B, and mouth spray, but my lend-lease colleagues at Miami P.D. and the cadets in my class at the community college were onto me. My irritability, the tremble in my hands, my need for a vodka collins by noon became my persona. The pity and ennui I saw in the eyes of others followed me into my sleep.

I went three weeks without a drink. I jogged at dawn on Hollywood Beach, snorkeled at the tip of a coral jetty swarming with clown fish, pumped iron at Vic Tanney's, ate seafood and green salads at a surfside restaurant, and watched my body turn as hard and brown as a worn saddle.

Then on a beautiful Friday night, with no catalyst at work, with a song in my heart, I put on a new sports jacket, my shined loafers, and a pair of pressed slacks, and joined the crew up in Opa-Locka and pretended once again I could drop lighted matches in a gas tank without consequence.

That's when I got my second look at the short man who worked as a collector for Whitey Bruxal. He stood in the open doorway, scanning the interior, forcing others to walk around him. Then he went to the bar and spoke to the bartender, and I heard him use Dallas's name. The bartender shook his head and occupied himself with washing beer mugs in a tin sink. But the collector was not easily discouraged. He ordered a 7-Up on ice and began peeling a hard-boiled egg on top of a paper napkin, wiping the tiny pieces of shell off his fingernails onto the paper, his eyes on the door.

Stay out of it, I heard a voice say inside my head.

I went to the men's room and came back to my table and sat down. The collector was salting his egg, chewing on the top of it reflectively while he stared out the front door into the street, his shoes hooked into the aluminum rails of the barstool. He wore stonewashed jeans and a yellow see-through shirt and a porkpie hat tipped forward on his brow. His back was triangular, like a martial arts fighter's, his facial skin as bright and hard-looking as ceramic.

I stood next to him at the bar and waited for him to turn toward me. "Live in the neighborhood?" I asked.

"*Right,*" he said.

"I never did catch your name."

"It's Elmer Fudd. What's yours?"

"I like those platform shoes. A lot of Superfly types are wearing those these days. Ever see that movie *Superfly*? It's about black dope pushers and pimps and white street punks who think they're made guys," I said.

He brushed off his fingers on his napkin and pulled at an earlobe, then motioned to the bartender. "Fix Smiley here whatever he's drinking," he said.

"You see, when you give names to other people, it's not just disrespectful, it's a form of presumption."

"'Presumption'?" he replied, nodding profoundly.

"Yeah, you're indicating you have the right to say whatever you wish to other people. It's not a good habit."

He nodded again. "Right now I'm waiting on somebody and I need a little solitude. Do me a favor and don't piss in my cage, okay?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," I said. "Were you in 'Nam? Dallas was. He's a good kid."

The collector got off the barstool and combed his hair, his eyes roving over the crooked smile on my face, the booze stains on my shirt, the table-wet on the sleeves of my new jacket, the fact that I had to keep one arm on the bar to steady myself. "I stacked time in a place you couldn't imagine in your worst dreams," he said.

"Yeah, I've heard the bitch suite up at Raiford is a hard ride," I said.

He put away his comb and looked at his reflection in the bar mirror. His cheeks were pooled with tiny pits, like the incisions of a

knifepoint. He placed a roll of breath mints by my hand. "No, go ahead and take them. Gratis from Elmer Fudd. Enjoy."

MY TENURE WITH the exchange program was running out in June, and I wanted to carry good memories of South Florida back to New Orleans. I boat-fished out of Key West in the most beautiful water I had ever seen. It was green, as clear as glass, with pools of indigo blue in it that floated like broken clouds of ink. I visited the old federal prison at Fort Jefferson on a blistering-hot day and swore I could smell the land breeze blowing from Cuba. I slept in a pup tent on a coral shelf above water that was threaded with the smoky green phosphorescence of organisms that had no names. I saw the ocean turn wine-dark under a sky bursting with constellations and knew that the truth of Homer's line would never be diminished by time.

But wherever I went, a frozen daiquiri winked at me from an outdoor bar roofed by palm fronds; beaded cans of Budweiser protruded from the ice in a fisherman's cooler; a bottle of Cold Duck clamped between a woman's thighs burst alive with the pop of a cork and a geyser of foam.

Delirium tremens or not, I knew I was in for the whole ride.

During my last week in Miami, I drove up to Opa-Locka to pay my bar tab and buy a round for whoever was trying to escape the noonday heat. The bar was dark and cool inside, the street out beyond the colonnade baking under a white sun. I knocked back a brandy and soda, counted my change, and prepared to go. Through the front window I could see dust blowing along the pavement, heat waves bouncing off a parked car, a bare-chested black man drilling a jackhammer into the asphalt, his skin pouring sweat. I ordered another brandy and soda and looked at the order-out menu on the bar. Then I tossed the menu aside, dropped a half dollar into the jukebox, and kicked it on up into overdrive with four inches of Beam and a beer back.

By three-thirty I was seriously in the bag. Across the street, I saw an armored car pull up in front of the bank. It was a shimmering box-like vehicle with a red-and-white paint job that pulsed in the heat like

a fresh dental extraction. Three armed guards piled out, opened up the back, and began to lift big canvas satchels with padlocks on the tops onto the pavement. One of the guards was Dallas Klein.

I crossed the street, my drink in one hand, shading my eyes from the glare with the other.

"Where you been, fellow? I've had to knock 'em back for both of us," I said.

Dallas was standing in the shade of the bank, the armpits of his gray shirt dark with moisture. "I'm on the job, here, Dave. Catch you later," he said.

"What time you get off?"

"I said beat it."

"Say again?"

"This is a security area. You're not supposed to be here."

"You've got things mixed up, podna. I'm a police officer."

"What you are is shit-faced. Now stop making an ass out of yourself and go back in the bar."

I turned around and walked toward the colonnade, the sun like a wet flame on my skin. I looked back over my shoulder at Dallas, who was now busy with his work, hefting bags of money and carrying them into the bank. My face felt small and tight, the skin dead, freeze-dried in the heat.

"Something wrong, Dave?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah, my glass is empty. Double Beam, beer back," I said.

While he poured into a shot glass from a bourbon bottle with a chrome nipple on it, I blotted the humidity out of my eyes with a paper napkin, my ears still ringing from the insult Dallas had delivered me. I looked back out the window at the armored car. But the scene had suddenly become surreal, divorced from any of my expectations about that day in my life. A white van came out of nowhere and braked behind the armored car. Four men with cut-down shotguns jumped out on the sidewalk, leaving the driver behind the wheel. They were all dressed in work clothes, their hair and facial features a beige-colored blur under nylon stockings.

"Call nine-one-one, say, 'Armed robbery in progress,' and give this address," I said to the bartender.

I unsnapped the .25 automatic that was strapped to my right ankle. When I got off the barstool, one side of the room seemed to collapse under my foot.

"I wouldn't go out there," the bartender said.

"I'm a cop," I said.

I thought my grandiose words could somehow change the condition I was in. But in the bartender's eyes I saw a sad knowledge that no amount of rhetoric would ever influence. I walked unsteadily to the front door and jerked it open. The outside world ballooned through the door in a rush of superheated air and carbon monoxide. The street I looked out upon was no longer a part of South Florida. It was a wind-sculpted place in the desert, bleached the color of a biscuit by the sun, home to carrion birds and jackals and blowflies. It was the place that awaits us all, one we don't allow ourselves to see in our dreams. The .25 auto felt as small and light as plastic in my hand.

I positioned myself behind one of the Arabic columns under the colonnade and steadied my automatic against the stone. "Police officer! Put down your weapons and get on your faces!" I shouted.

But the men robbing the armored car did little more than glance in my direction, as they would at a minor annoyance. It was obvious their timing on the takedown of the car had gone amiss. The van had arrived seconds later than it should have, allowing the guards time to start carrying the canvas money satchels inside the bank. The car guards and the elderly bank guard were down on their knees, against the wall of the bank, their fingers laced behind their heads. The robbers simply needed to pick up the satchels that were within easy reach, head out of Opa-Locka, and dump the van, which was undoubtedly stolen. A few minutes later, they could have disappeared back into the anonymity of the city. But one of them had gotten greedy. One of them had gone into the bank to retrieve the satchels there, racking a round into the chamber of his shotgun.

A teller was already pushing the vault door shut. The robber shot him at point-blank range.

When the shooter emerged from the bank, he was dragging two satchels that were whipsawed with blood, his pump propped against his hip.

"I said on your faces, you motherfuckers!" I shouted.

The first shotgun blast from the robbers on the sidewalk patterned all over the column and the metal door of the bar. A second one caved the window. Then the robbers were shooting at me in unison, blowing dust and powdered stone in the air, peppering the metal door with indentations that looked like shiny nickels.

I crouched at the bottom of the column, unable to move or return fire without being chewed up. Then I heard someone shouting, "Go, go, go, go!" and the sounds of the van doors slamming shut.

It should have been over. But it wasn't. As the van pulled away from the curb, I was sure I heard the robber in the passenger seat speak to Dallas. "You're a joke, man," he said. Then he extended his shotgun straight out from the vehicle and blew most of Dallas Klein's head off.