

THE MARKSMAN

a novel by

K.T. Beck

PROLOGUE

The tarnished brass bell clanked dully as the screen curtain was pushed aside. Moustaf Simi, in the back room re-counting his precious cases of American cigarettes, automatically listened for his eldest son to greet the customer who had just entered. The careless tone of the boy's voice indicated that the customer was a stranger, and there was no need for Simi to make an appearance in the front of the store, beaming an obsequious smile. It was still a little early for that hideous shrew, Mrs. Akady, to make her shrill, daily visit; a visit dedicated, it always seemed, to the simple pleasure of squeezing vegetables until juice ran from the ruptures in the skin, rendering the produce unsellable, suited only to be taken home and eaten quickly, before they rotted in the Turkish heat.

Some days, Simi had visions of shoving a fat turnip through the old hag's tight lips and watching her choke, but the fact that her husband was an official at the docks always spoiled the fantasy. Simi could not afford to have an enemy at the docks. Besides, the Akady's bill was generally paid promptly (though Simi never charged for the ruined vegetables).

Simi went back to counting the cigarettes. He knew exactly how many there were, of course, but the thought of the profit he would turn when Amel arrived later that evening carrying a small satchel full of Lebanese currency almost made his headache go away.

Moustaf Simi could generally count on a headache at some point in any given afternoon. The unrelenting heat, the frustratingly constant noise of

central Istanbul, the smell of automobile exhaust: everything slowly mounted up inside his head until something set it off. Sometimes it would be Mrs. Akady, or perhaps the sight of his daughter flouncing past in her obscenely skin-tight American blue jeans. Today, his temples were already throbbing because his idiot son had dropped a bottle of spice on the floor and then, when it broke, accidentally kicked the cloud of pungent brown powder across the seamed, warped floorboards. The shop had filled with the stinging scent and Simi knew it would take days for the biting aroma to dissipate.

To his credit, the boy had tried as hard as he could to clean the place up, but nothing could be done. The inside of the shop reeked with the stuff, and working in it all day had not only given Simi a headache, but had made his nostrils burn as well.

At that moment, his son stuck his head through the curtain separating the front of the shop from the dark storeroom. He shouted, "It's late, I'm going!" and disappeared.

"Wait!" Simi called to the curtain as it fell back into place, anger welling up inside him. "Damn it, wait!" But the bell hanging over the front door clunked again and Simi knew his son was gone, running down the busy street, dodging delivery trucks and buses full of dour tourists, hurrying to meet his worthless friends.

Simi's anger flew straight to his forehead and roosted there, pecking at his headache like an angry bird. He rubbed his temple and headed for the back of the storeroom, hoping that the customer still out front would not steal him blind in the next few minutes. Near the back door, behind a stack of canned fruits, was Simi's real treasure. Six crates of American aspirin. Amel, the Lebanese, was a good conduit to sell the cigarettes, but these, these were almost literally worth their weight in gold. Simi was cautiously trying to find the right market for the motherlode. Amel was simply too small a fish for a cargo like this.

As he popped open the top crate, reaching for one of the large plastic bottles full of pills, Simi thought about his last big enterprise: those heavy,

green, steel crates that he had held in his shop for two terrifying days. Superstitiously, he did not like to even think of the details. He was never sure exactly what he had been a part of, but he could tell it had been frighteningly big. The lean, unsmiling American had paid him well. Too well. Simi had taken the bag of dollars and put them in his secret safety deposit box at the bank, telling no one, not even his mistress.

He snagged four aspirin out of the bottle and put them in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. He didn't like to think about the boxes, but he liked to daydream about what he was going to do with that money when it was safe to start spending it. Even his fierce headache could not keep his loins from trembling when he thought of how his mistress would react when he showed her some of the cash, and bought her some bauble with it.

Simi's wife was an old woman, as old as he. She had been a good wife and mother and he felt a friendly affection for her. But a successful businessman needed something else in his life, something to relieve the tensions of trying to keep an enterprise alive. It had been a relief to them both when he moved his pillow to another room. And it was exciting to have a woman like Irit to go to.

Irit was no skinny, giggling young girl. Simi could not understand how some of his friends continually made fools of themselves with creatures younger than their own daughters. Irit was young and still firm, but not a baby. She was solid with flesh, a woman that a man could hold onto, and revel in. His fingers felt at home in her ample folds, and her low, womanly laughter excited him in ways he had once thought were only dreams. There was no pretending between the two of them. He enjoyed what her luscious body could do to his sagging flesh, and she enjoyed what his money brought into her life.

Simi swallowed the crumbled pieces of aspirin, automatically checked the heavy bolt on the back door and headed toward the front of the store.

As Simi came in through the curtain, the customer, a dark man in his late thirties, glanced up briefly, incuriously, and then returned to inspecting the row of canned vegetables over the tiny freezer. Simi noted, with satisfaction,

that the man carried a net bag already half full of canned goods. Customers who browsed at length and then grudgingly bought one little item always made Simi feel somewhat cheated.

The storekeeper took up his station behind the counter and idly watched the vehicles inching by outside his door, keeping his eyes politely averted from the customer sauntering through the aisles. The air was still and hot, and there were few pedestrians at this time of day. Simi's eyes itched from the pungent spice. He squeezed them shut, wishing the aspirin would take hold.

When he looked up the customer was standing in front of the counter, regarding him calmly.

"Yes sir," Simi said, forcing a smile. "How may I assist you?"

Simi couldn't keep himself from staring at the man's face. The narrow, dark features, the short-cropped, tightly curled hair and those sharp, black eyes seemed disturbingly familiar. Simi had an excellent facility for recalling faces that he had seen, but could not put a name to this one, so he tried to dismiss the thought as unimportant. A shopkeeper in Istanbul sees a great many faces.

"Please," the man said, his words so gently spoken as to be almost inaudible, "there are no canned peaches on the shelf. Have you any more in the back?"

The oddly subdued voice, and the slightly archaic phrasing surprised Simi. The man looked much more forceful than that, and his clothes were very well cut – not flashy, but quite modern – a lawyer who spoke like a librarian. Simi's headache throbbed again.

"I'm sorry," he said, rubbing his temple. "My son was supposed to restock the shelves before he left. I'm sure we have some more."

Simi stepped from behind the counter, glancing at the front door to see if anyone else was coming in, and pushed the curtain to the rear aside with one hand. As he stepped through the doorway, he happened to notice the small, neat stack of cans on the floor of the shop, out of sight from the counter. Cans of peaches.

Simi took a breath and had begun to turn his head when a bright light burst in his eyes and a wave of pain crashed through his neck. The sheer force of the numbing, nauseating agony turned his knees to jelly instantly and he fell with a jarring thump to the floor. He had never suffered pain such as this. He felt his elbows and knees jerking spasmodically, like a chicken on the block.

Very dimly, behind the curtain of numb sickness that radiated from the base of his skull, Simi was aware of two things: someone was closing and locking the front door of his shop; and the smell of the spilled spice was much stronger with his nose crushed against the floor.

By the time the strong hands gripped his shoulders, dragging him into the storeroom and toward the rear of the shop, Simi had sunk into the pain and was aware of nothing else.

- - -

It was the pounding, rhythmic throb that forced him back into consciousness. Some part of him didn't want to awaken. If I'm dead or dying, he reasoned distantly, why should I let myself feel any more pain?

But the pulse in his head and neck continued and soon the agony led to a strange sort of hope. If I'm aware of the pain, he thought, I am not dead, perhaps not even dying. I am still alive.

His chin was hanging forward and down, digging into his breastbone and, without thinking, he tensed the muscles of his neck to raise his head. The rushing agony made him dizzy and sick enough to gag a couple of times. But he blinked aside the tears and slowly brought his head upright, gingerly turning it from one side to another.

His skull seemed swollen to twice its size and he could feel dried blood cracking on the back of his neck. Slowly, his surroundings came into focus. He was sitting upright in a very small and very dark room which stank of mildew and wet, rusted metal. A single small candle glowed fitfully on a table before him. He could not see the walls of the room, but they felt confiningly close. His breathing echoed slightly as if he were inside a tin box.

He tried to shift his position and realized that he was tightly bound to a

chair, his hands taped straight down at his sides, his legs secured to the legs of the chair. Simi realized that under the heavy, binding tape, he was naked. His testicles dangled through a wide, jagged hole cut through the seat. He could move nothing save his head. He began to learn what fear really was.

He heard movement across the room and a hollow metallic click. A cigarette lighter flashed into life and the big yellow flame hovered over another candle. Once the wick began to burn, the lighter snapped shut and a dark figure set the second candle on the small table near Simi.

The shopkeeper looked up into the shadowed face of the man who had asked for peaches.

“What,” Simi croaked, his tongue thick and dry, “what do you want?”

The man pulled another chair closer and sat down on it, casually crossing his legs at the knee and looking closely into Simi’s eyes. He nodded, satisfied, and relaxed a little, as if they were going to share a friendly chat.

“I want to talk about your business,” the man said, softly.

Simi’s brain spun from confusion, pain and the shock of his injury. He shook his head and winced at the sudden lancing jolt from his neck.

“I don’t understand,” he mumbled, crippled thoughts stumbling through his mind. “You want to talk about my store?”

The man smiled, but there was no mirth in those dark, dark eyes. Seeing himself reflected in them, Simi realized with a stab of terror that inside this metal room he just barely existed, that he was little more than an inconvenience soon to be dealt with.

“No,” the man whispered, his voice only slightly louder than the pulsing roar in Simi’s ears. “I want to talk about your other business. The cigarettes. The aspirin. The green boxes.”

The boxes. Somehow, without actually thinking the words, Simi had known all along that it would be the boxes. Whatever vestige of hope that he had clung to vanished, and with the hope no longer there to cloud his vision he could see clearly. All too clearly. Some trick of the light, some play of shadows suddenly made the sharp, angular face familiar to him.

Simi's eyes widened as the man nodded slightly.

"You!" Simi gasped, unable to control his own mouth. "They said you were dead!"

The man smiled.

"But I saw!" Simi protested. "I saw it on the television. They found you. They said you were dead!"

"And yet I am here," the man said. "Though someone is dead. Someone did indeed die."

Simi swallowed, desperately thinking as quickly as he could.

"Surely you don't think that I had anything to do with any of that? I'm just a shopkeeper. You were...the killing was done so far away. What could I possibly have to do with that?"

"I have wondered myself," the man said. "And that is what I am here to find out. You will tell me about the green boxes."

"The boxes? The boxes were nothing! I don't know what was in the boxes! They were locked. I was paid not to know what was in the boxes. I picked them up at the docks. I stored them. I gave them to the men who came for them. I don't know what was in the boxes!"

Simi wanted to scream, but he could not bring any sound out. He tried to make himself believe what he was saying. It should have been true. He should have no idea what was in the boxes, but he had disobeyed. He had looked. He knew what was in the boxes. He had seen the beautiful things lying in there: symmetrical, sculpted by a master's hand, polished to a glowing sheen.

He knew what was in the boxes and he knew that the dark man knew. This man who up until a moment ago had been dead, just another grisly story on the news programs. A man who Moustaf Simi would never have seen or even thought a great deal about, except for those boxes. And the American. The damned American and his damned dollars.

The dark man stood and pulled two things from his pockets, laying them on the table next to the candles. Simi couldn't take his eyes from what he was seeing. The cigarette lighter had an odd emblem on it: an eagle entangled in

some sort of rope. The knife had a six-inch blade and a well-worn leather handle.

“Ibn,” Simi whispered. “Ibn, please. No.”

Hearing his name spoken aloud the man looked at Simi. For a moment his eyes lost their steady focus and he seemed to stare through the quivering shopkeeper. But only for a moment. Before Simi could take a breath to speak again, Ibn smiled down at him.

“I see that you are afraid of my tools,” Ibn said, a curious intensity in his voice. “You should be. They are going to bring you great pain. I want information and I must be sure that you tell me every little thing you know. This will take a long time. And there must be much blood and suffering. Blood for the soul of the one who died. Suffering for my soul. You will see that I prefer the simpler ways. A small flame. A knife. They are all that I need.”

Simi felt his bowels turn to water and he struggled stupidly in his bonds. He screamed that none of this was necessary, that he would tell Ibn everything he knew freely and voluntarily. His pleas bounced off the cold metal walls and he knew it was useless, but could not stop his own cries. Ibn would enjoy what he was about to do to Moustaf Simi. And with the wisdom born of dying hope, Simi knew that it truly didn't matter which of the two shiny objects lying on the table Ibn was reaching for first.

CHAPTER 1

Chris Jordan scrambled up the steep embankment, careful not to let his rifle touch the ground. As the sun set, the old Virginia hardwoods crowded closer, knitting their limbs into a leafy canopy that blotted out the purple sky. He slapped a mosquito on his neck and remembered another forest – wetter, hotter, alive with stinging insects and the cacophony of jungle life.

He shook his head, forcing the memories down. This forest was quiet. He was only a half hour's drive from the southern suburbs of D.C. and probably only a stone's throw from the nearest house. He glanced back down toward his car to get his bearings. He had found an overgrown dirt lane leading away from the narrow, winding blacktop. When he could see no traffic in either direction, he had backed in just far enough for the underbrush to hide his vehicle from anyone passing by, but not so far as to prevent a quick getaway.

He wiped sweat from his forehead, adjusted the small pack which held his ammunition and telescopic sight, shouldered the rifle and followed the line of the embankment into the forest. With the sun sinking so fast, he was losing his light. He could do the shooting in the dark if need be, but he would be in a hurry when he came back this way.

Get it done, he thought. Get it behind you.

He found the creek, just where the map had indicated it would be. Moving as fast as caution would permit, checking his map often, he found his way to Hollister's house.

He climbed a rise overlooking the property and sat cross-legged on the ground, the barrel of the rifle resting on his thigh. Only fifty yards away, the lights were on inside. Chris could see into both the kitchen and the living room. He pulled the scope out of his pack.

In the large, welcoming kitchen, the woman was serving dinner. Three children moved around the room, their mouths filled with words and laughter that Chris could not hear. Hollister walked into the silent gaiety and kissed his

wife.

Tears filled Chris's eyes. It had been less than a year since his mother had prepared his last home-cooked meal in a kitchen much like this one. Less than a year since he had left for boot camp. Angry at the pain the memories brought, Chris swallowed hard, refusing to cry.

The pieces of his weapon came together as if of their own will. The scope nestled in its mount, the suppressor screwed into the muzzle, the magazine snapped into place. He flipped the bipod legs down and worked the bolt, chambering the first round. As he had done a million times he swung into a prone position, settled the bipod, acquired his target.

The crosshairs centered on Hollister's head.

Chris's neck tingled, each hair standing on end. The sensation of being watched was so strong that Chris almost leaped to his feet and ran away. He didn't turn. He knew better than to look. Lately he had felt the presence of the Watcher more and more often, but there was nothing there. There was nothing anywhere.

Nothing but crosshairs and targets.

Chris blinked hard, his finger already taking up the slack. He swung the rifle past Hollister, past the children's faces, past the mother leaning forward to put food on the table, past light and past shadow and into light again. A mist blurred his vision for a moment and then he could see clearly. Like an eagle sees its prey – from a great distance and yet startlingly close, perspective foreshortened by a powerful lens into a flat plane that held nothing but target.

The first round shattered the window. He let the rifle recoil and fall, as the glass cascaded to the floor. Now there was nothing between his telescopic eye and the target. Nothing between his bullets and their marks. Brightly lit, framed in their own house, completely unprotected. A blond boy, glasses resting on his nose, the bullet hitting dead center. A smaller child, face frozen forever into a quizzical smile, pierced by the next round. The girl, her long hair softly draped over her shoulder, the trigger squeezed and the round already through her and past her. Hollister and his wife. One round for the woman,

switch aim a tenth of a degree and empty the magazine into Hollister's eyes. Those black cold eyes.

Glass exploding, plaster and wood splintering, a house shattered by an onslaught of bullets. Chris emptied his twenty round magazine. Before the pieces could stop falling, he had begun to pick up the hot brass scattered about the grass. Message delivered. As a sort of punctuation, Chris pushed one of the cartridge casings down into the ground. When he stood, he looked behind him. There was nothing there. He felt the loss; he was completely alone. He followed the fading light of the sun back to the road.

- - -

Angled shadows flashed over Chris Jordan's eyes, but he didn't notice them until the road surface changed, and suddenly his car hummed with vibration. He snapped alert, adrenaline jangling his nerves, realizing that he had been, if not sleeping at the wheel, at least beginning to doze. Relieved that he hadn't swerved out of his lane, he forced himself to take a couple of deep breaths.

He shifted his position in the driver's seat, blinking his eyes rapidly, automatically checking the gauges to make sure the old hulk was running properly. Only then did he notice that he seemed to be hundreds of feet in the air, looking down at a vast expanse of water dotted with barges. The Mississippi River coursed inexorably beneath the high arch of the bridge. The steel mesh roadway screamed against his tires.

There had been rain the night before, somewhere in Ohio, and his wipers were too worn to do much more than push the old dirt around. Blinded by the downpour and thick night, he had pulled over in a rest area and caught a few moments of nervous sleep. A black-clad nightmare had shaken him awake and he started driving again just as morning turned the eastern horizon slate-gray.

The girders of the span strobed hypnotically against the smeared windshield. Halfway across the huge river, he checked the rear-view mirror again, as if he could actually tell whether or not he was being followed, and then told himself to stop it. They didn't need to follow him. They knew where he

was going. And why should he worry — it was over. There was no reason for anyone to be interested in him any more. And even if they were, there was always the heavy green box in the trunk. He shook his head, rubbing his tired eyes. Don't be an idiot, he thought.

The rough surface of the bridge buzzed in his ears. He took advantage of his temporary altitude and peered between the girders out over the green plains of Iowa. Trees and fields stretched off to the western horizon, but offered no sense of homecoming. Towering in the distance, he could see a massive black wall; another storm front moving in from the west. As he left the flashing framework of the bridge behind and descended into his home state, he regarded the clouds with some worry. A heavy storm would drive him off the road again. He wanted to make good time. He would not feel easy until he had arrived and closed the door of the house behind him.

An hour later he pulled into a truck stop. Nature was calling, both from his bladder and his stomach. He had not eaten since the day before, as he drove out of Virginia, and that had just been a stale sandwich that he bought from a vending machine in the PX the night before that. He had two military issue canteens full of water when he started driving and they were both empty now.

He parked his ten year old Chevy (“Cash?” the dealer had asked a few days ago. “Seven hundred and fifty.”) and switched the motor off. It died for a moment and then shuddered to a stop.

His legs stiffly complained as he got out of the car, so he took a moment to stretch them out and then walked past a line of semi's and into the truck stop. He pressed past the crowd of boisterous truckers gathered around the young lady at the cash register and headed for the restrooms.

When he came back into the cafe, he slid into a booth, its plastic bench clumsily repaired with red duct tape, and looked around the crowded room, studying the faces. He took a moment to convince himself that no one was watching him.

“Can I help you?”

Startled, he stared up at a middle-aged waitress.

Suddenly realizing that he hadn't spoken more than a dozen words in the last two days, he cleared his throat and said, "Yeah, please. A couple of cheeseburgers and a large Coke."

"Any dessert?"

He tried a smile, just to see if he could still do it. "I'll let you know later."

She nodded and walked away.

He did have dessert and, as he was paying his bill, noticed a small convenience store on the other end of the building. He bought two six packs of cold sodas, a styrofoam cooler, some chips and candy bars.

He marveled at the fact that buying food had never once occurred to him before now. He had had nothing on his mind but driving as far and as fast as he could. He could dimly remember stopping a couple of times for gas, pressing crumpled money into night attendants' hands. Pissing by the roadside when he needed to. Spinning the radio dial to find music and then shutting the thing off when he did. He had only stopped in the rain storm out of absolute necessity. And the nightmares had kept his thoughts occupied most of the morning.

Leaving the diner, he automatically checked the trunk latch, making sure that it was secure. He leaned against the fender for a moment, dreading getting back onto the road. He looked to the east, feeling foolish, but still unable not to. The sky was deceptively clear in that direction.

It's always the blue skies that fool you, he thought. The sky was blue that day in Weapons Training, on the rifle range, when Hollister had watched him shoot and then singled him out afterwards. What could be better than getting that sort of news just as you realize how long a hitch in the Marine Corps really is? God, what a great day that had been. What an exciting prospect.

Chris angrily ran his fingers over his scalp, as if to drive the whole insane thing out of his brain. First order of business, he decided, is let my goddamned hair grow to a civilized length.

He slid into his car. It started with no trouble at all and he drove up the

entrance ramp to I-80, heading west.

Inside the truck stop, a burly man in a red flannel shirt dropped a quarter into a pay phone. He dialed eleven digits, waited a moment, then dialed four more. After another pause, he consulted a little piece of paper in his hand to be sure of the proper code, punched two more digits and hung up. His job was done.

- - -

Chris had never driven across Iowa on Interstate 80 before and the flat farmlands seemed only generically familiar to him until he passed Des Moines. Then, heading into the southwestern part of the state, the land began to fold into hills. Pastures and fields alternated with wooded stretches. Rivers became more plentiful, filling some of the valley floors with slow-flowing, dark water.

He had been born and raised in the northeastern quadrant of the state where the land was relatively featureless and flat – perfect farm country. His grandparents, on both sides, had been from down here. He started to hope that he would remember hills and streams that he and his father had walked along and fished on hot summer days years past.

His car, shivering a little from the effort, topped a hill and the memories started to come alive. Looking down into the valley ahead, he could make out the right-of-way for the old two-lane highway off to the left, angling through the trees, almost completely overgrown now. Only the railroad tracks alongside where the road had run still gleamed like a freshly honed knife blade, polished with use. The creek that flowed at the bottom of the valley, shrouded in thick green shadows, brought a stab of recognition to him. He was getting close.

His car picked up speed, bouncing a little as it crossed the bridge over the creek and the railroad. He took a quick glance to his right, to the north, hoping to see...but the dark stream took a bend to the left and all he saw was flat, gleaming water and a barrier of trees that looked black under the threatening clouds. Even the railroad tracks vanished in the shadows.

At that moment, rain started to fall in big, heavy Midwestern drops, cratering the smears on his windshield. He hesitated before turning on his

wipers, but soon had no choice.

The dust raised by the giant drops choked him a little and he rolled up his window, even though no water was coming in. The car chugged up a steep hill and at the top he saw the sign: "Exit 46 — Hawthorne — 1 mile." The blue symbols for gas and food were posted below.

The rain suddenly fell in sheets and Chris could barely see the road when he reached the exit and left the interstate, coasting down the ramp to the stop sign and then turning right. A slight grade took him up into the outskirts of Hawthorne.

Though he instantly knew where he was, he had rarely approached the town from this direction. On the regular occasions when his parents had driven him down to visit his grandparents, they had taken state highways and entered town on the road from the north. That narrow old two-lane now effectively stopped at the interstate, swallowed by the four-lane efficiency of the modern roadway.

The southern limits of Hawthorne lay about a half-mile north of I-80 and were marked by two gas stations perched like plastic sentinels at the gateway to the town proper. With the rain pelting down, Chris coasted into the station on the left. It boasted a diner and he was hungry again.

He sat in the car for a moment, hoping the rain would slack off a little, but gave it up and ran into the building. Dripping wet, he burst through the door. He nodded at the girl re-filling the sugar dispenser and trotted on into the men's room. He didn't notice her puzzled look as he passed.

When he came back into the diner, she peered sharply at his face, but concealed her questions behind a polite smile.

"Pick your spot," she said, indicating the counter and the small section of booths beyond. The place was empty except for the lean young man in a soiled T-shirt sitting in the booth nearest the door and drinking a cup of coffee. The man gripped his mug tightly, his knuckles rising huge and hard above his grease-stained hands. He stared at Chris without blinking.

Chris met his angry eyes for a second, then turned quickly away and sat

down on a stool at the counter. The girl flipped a menu in front of him and leaned forward, pretending to whisper conspiratorially while making sure she got a closer look at his face.

“It’s all fine except for the special,” she smiled, glancing around the room. “Don’t trust anything that’s on special; that just means they’ve got some reason to get rid of it.”

Chris took a close look at her for the first time. She was young, early twenties, with a figure that did a fine job of filling out her tight white uniform. Chris found her face very appealing with its bright, intelligent eyes and those richly inviting lips. Strands of auburn hair impatiently struggled to free themselves from captivity. He was aware of the fact that he had not spoken to a pretty young girl in...well, too long to recall.

She laughed, showing her strong, though slightly crooked teeth, and leaned toward him.

“You see something else you want, just holler,” she said, teasing.

Chris was uncomfortably aware that if he lowered his eyes from hers, she was offering him a pleasing view of the deep valley between her breasts. He couldn’t be sure without looking, but he suspected that the freckles on her nose were matched by an array across her upper chest. She watched his struggle for an amused second and then took pity on him and relented, standing straight again.

“So what’ll it be?” she taunted.

He had the presence of mind to say, “Well, not the special, anyway.”

She laughed. A deep growl of thunder rolled in from the distance. She nodded toward the rain-streaked plate glass.

“You been driving in that?”

Chris turned and looked at the steamed window. The man was still staring at him. Uncomfortable, Chris nodded a greeting, but got no response. Outside, massive raindrops exploded against the pavement. Chris turned back to the waitress. The muscles of his back bunched into knots, and he kept wanting to glance over his shoulder at the man sitting in the booth.

“No,” Chris replied. “I hit it just outside of town.”

“Then you came in from the east.”

Chris started a little, suddenly suspicious. He told himself to calm down, that she was just making small talk. He heard the man behind him move slightly.

“Yes. That is, I drove from Virginia.”

“Are you in the Army or something? You’ve sort of got the look. I had a boyfriend in the Service once.” When she said it, she glanced quickly over Chris’s shoulder, at the man in the T-shirt. Chris caught the look, but resisted the urge to turn around himself. His finger traced tight little patterns on the Formica.

“Yes. Marines. I was, anyway. I just got out.”

Suddenly she leaned forward, excited, another curl of her hair escaping the band holding it back.

“I’ve almost got it,” she blurted. “I know you from somewhere. You’ve been around here before, haven’t you?”

“Well, yes, but...” he started to say.

She waved him silent, thinking hard, her eyebrows furrowed deeply and her lip twisted a little with concentration. Despite the nervous tightness in his stomach, Chris found himself enjoying the way it felt to look at her. She was very young and sexy, very alive and vibrant. It occurred to him that maybe being a hermit wasn’t the only way to handle this sudden retirement he had decided upon.

Her eyes popped open.

“You’re one of the Jordans, aren’t you?” she cried. Behind him, Chris heard the dull thump of the man’s coffee cup on the table.

When Chris nodded, she continued, “Yeah, your cousin Susan was in my class at school. She brought you in one day, as a visitor, right?”

“That’s right,” he replied, surprised by the sudden memory. “That was about ten years ago. I was just a kid.”

“Sure, I recognize you. You really haven’t changed much, have you?”

Chris tried to smile, if only to conceal how hard the question hit him. “Well, maybe in some ways. I’ll bet you’ve changed quite a lot.”

She laughed loudly and held out her hand. “I guess you wouldn’t remember me. I’m Mary Taggart.”

“Chris. Chris Jordan.”

They shook hands. She held on to his longer than she had to.

“Chris. That’s right. You showed the class how to do an algebra problem, or something. Do you remember?”

“Yes, I do. I was scared to death, getting up in front of a whole room of strangers.”

“You did good, if I remember correctly,” she said, smiling into his eyes and letting go of his hand. “You solved it.”

“I used to be good with math. You must be good with faces.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” she said. “What ever happened to Susan? They moved away, gosh, seven or eight years ago?”

“Arizona. I hear she’s in graduate school out there. I haven’t spoken to her in years.”

“Yeah, families move on, don’t they?” Suddenly her smile faded. “Oh, of course. I know why you’re here. Your grandmother just died, didn’t she?”

Chris could only nod.

“I was sorry to hear that,” she said, but somehow Chris knew that she didn’t really mean it. They both heard the insincerity in her voice, and she suddenly blushed, embarrassed.

Chris spoke quickly to cover her discomfort. “Well, she was in a nursing home for several months. And my granddad had died a while before that.”

Mary nodded. The light refracting through the rain on the window lay in mottled patterns on her cheeks.

“So, you’ve come back to look around the old town? Kick up a few memories?” she asked.

“That’s part of it, I guess.” He hesitated, reluctant to go on, but decided that he might as well. In a town this size, it would be common knowledge soon

enough anyway.

“There’s more to it,” he continued. “My grandmother left me her house. I guess I’ve come here to live. For a while, anyway.”

Her surprised smile was genuine. “Well, welcome to Hawthorne, Iowa, population nine hundred. That is, nine hundred and one.” They shook hands again.

Later, after he had eaten a sandwich and a slice of pie, Chris drove into town. The lean man rose out of the booth and took a seat at the counter. Mary, covering her look of apprehension, spoke cheerfully.

“How about that, Charlie? Chris Jordan is moving here to Hawthorne.”

Charlie Morgan looked at her slowly, his blue eyes taking on the color of the storm.

“Chris Jordan, huh? How about that?” He gazed out the window. “You seemed to like him right off.”

“Yes, I did,” Mary replied, trying to sound unconcerned. “Not that it’s any business of yours. He looks very tired.”

“Uh huh,” Charlie said, watching the gray water flow across the concrete. “He did look tired. I’ll be damned. Chris Jordan.”