

Chapter 1

Tampa 1975

Tommy was tired of waiting. He had been up since 2:00 a.m. and his body was aching with fatigue. Sandy Carlton was dozing across the room from him, her strong legs tucked under her on the green velour of the chair. Tommy flexed his shoulders, rolling them forward and ruffling his dark brown hair. It hung to his neck in long, natural curls. He flexed his hands against each other, extending the isometric pressure along his arms, up his shoulders, and down into his back. Breathing deeply, he tried to relieve the fatigue of his will, an exercise he practiced at the tae kwon do school he attended three times a week. He didn't like sitting, just sitting. He wanted Harry Burr to arrive. Harry was the connection that would bring him to the big time and closer to a million dollars.

“What time did he say he would get here?” Tommy asked again.

“Six o'clock. He said he didn't want to miss dinner.” Sandy lifted her head from the soft chair. Her black silk dress from the party last night was thrown into a ball on the floor next to the chair, and she only wore black panties. “He's busy. He's an important man in Atlanta,” she said in her own defense.

“How'd you know each other again? Oh yeah, you're his little schoolgirl, aren't ya?” Tommy smiled at his joke. Sandy said she had met Harry when she was in high school.

As Tommy looked at Sandy, he thought her breasts looked too small for her body, just one size, to throw off her otherwise perfect symmetry. Tommy didn't care; he loved the way she moved her hips when she was under him. All karate movement begins at the center of gravity, the pit of the gut, which moves, as does the force of life, from the pelvis up and out through the hands and feet.

Sex came from that center. When he and Sandy gripped bellies, holding tight with their abdomens, swinging with the easy sway of the hips, he was engulfed with joy at her body. His mind was clear of all other life, and the world would shrink into the ten feet surrounding them. Sex was the first pure pleasure he ever understood. He doubted that neither of his parents, Angela and Kevin, ever had any idea of how good it was. Did they repent every time they had sex?

Discovering sex had replaced much of Tommy's pain. There were always available women. Sandy had begun as one of them, but that was four months ago, and now he wasn't seeing the others. They weren't as good as Sandy.

He couldn't figure her out. She had everything she could want. Her father was senior vice president of a Georgia bank, her brother was a lawyer, and her grandfather owned a carpet company in Dalton. She had all the money she needed, a cabin in the Smokey Mountains, a condominium in Daytona, and a sailboat in Savannah. Yet, she wanted to be heavy.

Tommy looked at his diver's watch—ten o'clock. He didn't think this Harry Burr would show.

When Sandy first had bragged about her connections in Atlanta, he laughed. He couldn't tell how much of her talk was bluff and how much was fact. Then she told him about Harry Burr, her connection, and offered to make the introductions.

“He’ll be here. He’s got a lot of things to do. He’s an important man,” she had insisted. “He’ll come because *I* asked him to.”

“You have him by the balls.”

“Oh, Tommy, you’re so crude. He’s a friend of my father’s. That’s how I met him. He’s at least thirty-eight.”

“Doing it with the old-timers too? I guess they go out of their way for the young cunt as sexy as you. I know you didn’t learn to screw by reading a book.”

“Stop it, Tommy. If you can’t talk right...”

“Oh, for a piece of your virginity,” he mocked. She swung at him, but he blocked it easily. “Don’t start something you can’t finish, sweetheart.” He smiled.

The loud knock on the door surprised them. Tommy felt his stomach tighten, and he tucked into his pants pocket the small container of coke he’d been holding. He was ready, ready as he’d ever be.

He felt safe because Tampa was his town. He knew people here, and, at least, Sal, his sometimes partner, would find where he was. Touching the small of his back, he felt for the handle of the Smith & Wesson to be certain it would be a quick draw—just in case. Sandy quickly slipped on her dress. He nodded to her to answer the door while he stepped back by the patio door.

“Harry! Oh, Harry, it’s good to see you.” Tommy could see Sandy’s legs in the air as she was lifted from her feet. He moved closer to the sliding glass doors.

“I told you I’d come.” Harry’s voice boomed in a deep baritone. “Did you think I’d break my word? Just had a little business to finish in Miami.”

When he stepped into the room, Tommy thought he might be hallucinating. The uneasiness of his stomach began to churn, and he

fought it down. He didn't have words; his mind was trying to comprehend what his eyes saw, but that made it more nightmare than reality. Maybe the coke was cut with acid, but it wasn't because he'd cut it himself. A friend of her father's? Friend?

Harry Burr moved into the living room, dwarfing the furniture. He was the biggest, fattest person Tommy had ever seen. His head was the size of a soccer ball, his skin porcelain white, hairy, and fleshy. Each arm was the size of a thigh.

"Is this the kid you were telling me about?" Harry said loudly in Tommy's direction. His dark, bushy black beard and long, oily black hair made Harry seem a man-relic from the age of the dinosaurs. Though Harry was a little taller than Tommy, he weighed over four hundred pounds.

Tommy floated backward into a karate fight stance as the fat man approached. Harry seemed to sense his readiness and stopped in the middle of the room. "Is this punk giving you a hard time, baby?" He again addressed Sandy, who was smiling at Tommy's discomfort. Next to Sandy, and behind Harry, was a tall platinum blonde whose huge breasts were straining to break free from the confines of her thin silk halter.

"Yeah, old man. What are you gonna do about it?" Tommy fell easily into his natural New York accent.

"Oh, he's a sassy one." Harry turned around to Sandy. "But he's good looking." He turned back to Tommy, eyeing him with his silver-dollar-sized eyes.

With the balls of his feet firmly planted on the floor, Tommy squared his shoulders with deliberate nonchalance, meaning it as a demonstration of equality. The fat man loomed in the room. The girls were quiet, almost invisible. The action was between Tommy and Harry. Tommy wanted it that way. All was uncertain, everything blind. It was that way going into any new situation. The feeling mul-

tiplied in the fibers of his muscles: Tommy flexed and unflexed slowly. The muscles must behave.

“Well, Sandy,” Harry spun gracefully on his back leg, breaking the tension, “you have anything in this house for a growing boy to eat?” He tapped his midsection and walked directly into the kitchen. Returning to the dining room, Harry sat at the head of the wooden table and opened a jar of whole kosher dill pickles.

“The dill pickle is good for your sex life. Gives you longer stamina and the sperm a farther trajectory—titillating!” Puckering his lips, he lifted a whole dill from the jar and inhaled it. His eyes bulged with satisfaction as he rolled his cheeks with definite sexuality. “Anyone want one?” He glanced at the three frozen people before eating another in the same way.

He couldn't be real, Tommy thought. *There must be acid in the cut.* Harry let out a deafening belch. “That’s Japanese for *thank you*.”

“Harry, I thought you were going to teach him a lesson?” Sandy asked.

“You wouldn’t want me to do anything on an empty stomach?” he said patiently like a father.

“Well, I might as well sit down,” Tommy said, casually sitting at the opposite end of the table from Harry. “It’s gonna take a while, I can tell.” Everyone laughed.

“I like you, kid. You got some spunk.” The blonde quietly walked over to Harry and began nuzzling at his cheek like a child. “Not now, Elsie. Sit down.” Her flat face dropped, and she sulked around the table to sit at his right. “Here. Eat one of these; good for your sex life.”

“You’re good for my sex life.” It sounded like Harry had pulled the magic ring behind her neck.

“I know I am. Now get me something to drink. Fruit juice would be fine.” Elsie disappeared into the kitchen.

This was heavy. He was heavy, and he wasn’t from the country club.

With a flourish, Harry raised his right hand and pulled back his sleeve. “Nothing up my sleeve.” He wore two large gold rings on each of his hands, set with several clusters of diamonds. One on his index finger had four stones in it, all equal in size. From his neck hung a large teardrop-shaped pendant embedded with numerous diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. “Would you care to smoke?” He looked at Tommy, then Sandy, before turning the back of his hand to them and instantly producing a plastic bag, which he laid on the table, and then a pipe.

Unfolding the baggie, his thick fingers retrieved a flat, golden piece of hashish. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” he said reverently. His voice was mellow and cultivated. “It’s the finest Lebanese blond, not too light, not too wet. The finest blend of the best pollen those Arab hands could produce. Do you have a knife?”

“There’s a razor on the table.” Tommy motioned to the living room. He didn’t like the pot high, so he would be careful with the hash.

“Sandy...” Harry said, and she got it.

The flat, hand-carved hash pipe was passed around the table. The thick, sweet odor scented the room like incense. The hash was very good. Tommy knew quality; the fat man had it. Tommy was proud of his knowledge and ability to judge pot.

“The olfactory sense is the least developed sense,” Harry continued, “though people use it more than they realize. You don’t taste food. You smell it. Animals, for instance, can tell people apart by their smell. People have the same senses, but we don’t use them. I have this huge apparatus here,” he pointed to his wedge-shaped nose, “and unlike ordinary people, I have taken the time to develop it. I can distinguish Lebanese hash from Moroccan or Afghani hash just by the smell. I don’t even need to see it.”

“Right,” Tommy said.

“An unbeliever. You’re going to have to learn the hard way, aren’t you, kid?”

“There isn’t an easy way to learn.”

“A skeptic. I’ll demonstrate for you.” Extending his arms over his head, he brought them to his chest like a priest consecrating a host. Raising his right hand to a point in space, he produced a plastic bag. He repeated the action at another point in space. Laying the two bags on the table, he motioned Sandy to open them. In the first was a black, gooey substance like the resin from a pipe, and in the second was a firm, dry brick with a delicate odor.

“Do you know the difference between the two, *kid*?”

Tommy bridled. He didn’t like the tone or the context. He didn’t need or want a father; he was equal to Harry. He wasn’t a kid. He had learned from the street and his own life how to stay alive. “Yeah, the first one is from Lebanon, and the other is from Morocco.”

“Wrong. The first one is from Afghanistan. You know where that is?”

“Yeah. On the other side of the ocean.”

“You’re a sassy one.”

“Just being accurate.” He smiled at the business, all a bunch of bullshit but necessary. If Harry was going to give him shit, he was going to shove it right back. “It doesn’t matter where it’s from—maybe Morocco, maybe Micanopy. It only matters how it smokes. If it’s good, I don’t care where it came from. I can tell people it’s very rare, handmade by Tibetan monks in secret laboratories in Hoboken and jack the price one hundred percent.”

Harry was fondling the soft piece.

“You gonna play with it or smoke it?”

“I’m about to demonstrate, for your skeptical mind, the excellent sense of smell I have.”

“Don’t bother. Anything that big has *got* to smell,” Tommy quipped as Sandy and Elsie laughed.

Harry smiled and shrugged. “Oh well.”

Tommy had made his point. One for the kid. He tried to figure out where Harry was coming from. Not a cop. That was evident by his size and his connection with Sandy. But who? Tommy’s scene in Tampa had taken two years to get together, but it wasn’t sacred or unchanging. Dealing in reefer and a little coke was working well -- though he had to do too much volume and take too many chances—but what wasn’t risky?

The pipe kept coming around, but Tommy passed it without inhaling. Hash made him lazy, relaxed, and spacey; he didn’t want that feeling now. Getting up to stretch his body as well as break the spell of the table, Tommy went into Sandy’s bedroom for her makeup mirror. Her bed wasn’t made: jeans, halters, and panties were carelessly thrown around the room. She was a slob for a girl. She didn’t really care about things. She had so many of them.

He didn’t either; it mattered, but it didn’t. Sandy had lived in her little girl’s fantasyland supported by Daddy for most of her life. Tommy never had that and didn’t want it. He was fortunate, he thought, that the world had become real when he was young. His father had prayed himself to death, the only one of his prayers God ever answered. It was all in the mind—just the mind. The bullshit of religion, the bullshit of government, the bullshit of Harry Burr, the bullshit of Tommy Logan. He wondered what bullshit actually looked like.

This was a game, movie, episode—whatever the name was—it was a segment that promised to be interesting. Harry was a trip, and he had good jewelry. Tommy figured Harry would be looking to gain the advantage. They’d see who was smarter, the man or the kid. Tommy

took the mirror and returned to the dining room, where everyone was still smoking. Placing the mirror in front of him, Tommy smoothly took the brown bottle from his pants, opened it, and poured some coke into a pile in the corner. Harry stopped smoking; Tommy saw he had his attention. The coke was personal stash—guaranteed to knock his lights out.

Almost carelessly, Tommy chopped the rocks into powder. His hand was practiced. Drawing eight lines, Tommy took a hundred-dollar bill, re-rolled it, and snorted the first row. He passed the mirror and the bill to Sandy. She did two, then Harry, and finally Elsie. Tommy drew eight more, and the mirror went around again.

“Not bad,” Harry said. His snorts were loud and rumbled like a storm.

Tommy smiled confidently. “It’s not too bad.”

Sandy and Elsie exchanged private glances from which the men were excluded. Tommy felt relieved, reconstituted, not only because he had received the appropriate response—*not bad* in drug parlance easily meant *wow*—but it confirmed his opinion and what he had learned. He was not stupid. Ignorant at times, but not stupid. If Harry wanted to think of him as a chump that was fine — as long as it went his way.

“Can you get this stuff regularly?” Harry asked distantly.

“Sure.”

“How much an ounce?”

“Small time?”

“Just tasting.”

“Fourteen.” Tommy took a chance and went two hundred high. It was that good.

“Can I get some?”

“When can I see the money?”

Harry reached into his front pocket and brought out a roll of hundred-dollar bills. He counted off fourteen. “Satisfied?”

It was time to put on a show for Harry. Tommy dialed the phone. “Sal, yeah. I’m at Sandy’s. Bring me my briefcase from my apartment. Get dressed before you come. Yeah, it’s important. Do it right now. I don’t care if you’re eating dinner. Tell Terry it’s an emergency. Anyway, pasta is better warmed over. Not on the phone. Ten minutes. *Ciao.*”

If Sal could keep himself together, Tommy wanted to be partners again, but the dumb Lombardi kept fucking up. Human nature.

Tommy sat back at the table. Elsie relit the pipe. Slowly, the insane world was holding together, pieces at a time—no large picture, but pieces that he could see as fragments. It was better than he had ever imagined it would be. The street teaches by necessity and example.

“Have any luck, kid?” Harry smiled a broad, toothy grin. His teeth were flat and even from years of eating.

“What’s luck? Luck’s when your best friend gets hit by the bullet meant for you.”

Harry nodded. “You have some smarts, but you don’t have any class. Got to have style, kid. Without style, you’re just like the other million hustlers. Think you’re good?”

“I know.”

“Maybe you know, but I haven’t seen anything.”

“Neither have I.” That’s where it was. What’s upfront counts. Always—until it comes to call the bluff. Most of the time, people can just get by on a bluff. Isn’t it always the same? If I say and you believe, then I know, and you don’t. Who knows anything for sure? Tommy didn’t, but knowing he didn’t was the first major lesson he had learned. Dealing with it wasn’t as easy. For some people, in some

worlds maybe but on the street, your life is on each roll. He was frightened much of the time, but he didn't mind it as much.

Harry rolled back both his sleeves and held his hands in front of him again. "The hand is quicker than the eye. A skeptic like you might not believe that, but you aren't the first." Slowly lowering his left hand, he turned it over quickly, producing a twenty-dollar gold piece—an old double eagle.

"Ever see one this shiny?" he asked, holding the coin between his thumb and forefinger. With a quick motion of his wrist, the coin disappeared.

Tommy was impressed, letting the side of his mouth turn up in a smile. It was a good act, but there was more to this than parlor room magic.

The fat man held his finger up to his nose and trumpeted like an elephant. The gold piece fell from his nose. Elsie clapped—Sandy started to but looked at Tommy.

"Let me see that thing, Houdini," Tommy said insolently. He no longer felt threatened, and the Smith & Wesson was still in the small of his back. Harry threw the gold piece across the table. Tommy made a one-handed grab. Turning it over in his hand, Tommy tossed it back. "If I know you a year from now, it'll be mine."

"You're welcome to try."

There was a loud knock on the door. Tommy sprang instantly to the front window. A long black Cadillac Brougham was illegally parked in front of the building. Sandy stood beside him.

"Open it," Tommy said. "It's Sal."

Dressed in a black suit, black shirt, white tie, dark sunglasses, and a wide-brimmed black hat, Sal Lombardi and Mike Broski entered the room. Sal was Italian; there was no room for doubt.

Tommy had retreated to the dining room table. Sal silently walked up to him with a black briefcase in his hand. Harry's eyes followed the newcomer. Sal didn't take off his sunglasses. Broski stood by the door, hands clasped like a Secret Service agent.

Sal had a bowl of black hair cut to his collar. His droopy black mustache, round baby face, and stocky build gave him the menacing appearance of a movie heavy. Sal was playing his part for effect tonight. Tommy took the briefcase and nodded to Sal. "I'll call you later."

Sal still said nothing but eyed Harry and Elsie without changing his facial expression. Then he sauntered back to the door, gave a parting nod to Tommy, and he and Broski exited.

"Let's see that money," Tommy said again. Whenever he sold, he ran the show. Always, no exceptions. He had trusted other people when he was starting, but not now. It wasn't worth the risk.

Harry counted out the fourteen bills again, while Tommy unlocked the combination. Inside were a kitchen strainer and aluminum foil, and in the top snap pocket were two bags of white powder. The one closed with masking tape was 28 grams, one ounce. Tommy had measured it earlier. This was his personal stash; he hadn't intended on selling it, but... If he had had time, he'd have stepped on this bag a little because it was too good to sell. But he didn't know how much Harry really knew. Tommy stood and exchanged the bag for the cash. Pulling out his money clip, he added the fourteen hundreds to the twenties he had. Tommy saw Harry glance from the coke to the money—that was the idea.

Laying the bag on the table, Harry opened it slowly, allowing all the powder to fall to the bottom. He dipped his finger into the bag and tasted before rubbing some on his gums. His nose wrinkled from the acid—it was good.

"Pretty clean."

“I only deal in quality.”

“Why don’t you come to Atlanta this weekend? Bring Sandy; she knows where I live. I can show you a thing or two.”

“Like what?”

“You’re young—whether you admit it or not. And you’re going too fast. But don’t let that fool you; you’re still a boy in the real world. Ever been busted?”

“What’s it to ya?”

“If you haven’t, then you have no idea how the justice system works. And if you haven’t done the whole trip in coke from start to finish, then you’re a virgin. Controlled, not the controller. You have to rely on someone else, not yourself. Placing your fate in the hands of another man can be fatal. I can tell you want to be your own man. You understand, kid?”

“I’m listening.” Tommy bridled again but wanted to hear. There was the street, and there was the office. Both profitable. One safer, the other way more fun.

With an actor’s sweeping hand gesture, Harry brushed the conversation aside. “You know that I know what I’m talking about. I didn’t get these,” he held up the rings, “by being stupid. I want to see where you’re coming from. Come to Atlanta. I’ll show you what a big-time is about.”

Tommy smiled in mocking sweetness at Sandy. “Want to take me to meet Daddy this weekend? We might even go shopping.” He was usually good for an outfit or two whenever they went.

“I don’t know if I want you to meet my father yet, but I’ll always go to Atlanta.”

“Settled, nice and simple. Harry, we’ll see you in Atlanta.”

“Great, kid. Sandy remembers where I live.” Harry looked at her and winked.

“Yes,” she said, looking away.

Harry took two large spoons of coke from the bag and inhaled.

“Hey, Harry,” Tommy snapped, “don’t be so stingy with the coke. I gave you a deal at fourteen. I should have charged you eighteen.” Harry nodded a *get fucked* gesture. Tommy drew some lines on the mirror. Sell it first, then snort.

Harry rose with imperial authority, signaling the end of the meeting. He gathered up his toys as Elsie quickly put the drugs in a case. “Okay, kid. I had some really important business in Miami. Major score. Think about it: are you ready for the big time?”

After he closed the door, Tommy could feel how tired he was from the running around. His Tampa business was good, making twenty thousand a week for his crew, and he had just completed a deal for one pound of pot. He was concerned with the logistics: pot was big, smelly, and hard to carry. Coke was small, easier to conceal, and more lucrative. Sal wanted to stick with pot though his nose was becoming fond of the white lady. The quality of coke in Tampa wasn’t very good. The Cubans, who brought it in from Miami, cut it with too much junk. There was a market for quality.

Sandy was lying on the king bed, watching television as he stripped. Her cat finally emerged from its hiding spot and jumped on the bed. The tension of the day and night translated into physical exhaustion. He wanted to curl up with her and sleep for two days.

The television was background noise. “*Today, a jewelry dealer was found dead in his room at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach. Police are treating it as a robbery/homicide because over two million dollars’ worth of diamonds may have been stolen. In other news, Hurricane Betsy is gaining strength in the Atlantic...*”

“Turn that shit off,” Tommy said, collapsing on the pillow as Sandy drew the room into darkness.