

# The Derelict

## Prologue

Thick, dank darkness, complete with pungent, foul odors of rotten fish and mold met her as she came back to life. Hands and feet were tightly secured with some kind of cord, leaving her hog-tied on a wooden floor. Three or four minutes of struggling proved useless.

*Think, Liz! Think! What happened?*

Her last memory was opening her motel door to a set of hairy knuckles smashing into her jaw. Then stars. But before that? . . . She had emailed Gumshoe and faxed some pictures of the people she supposed held the young Maggorie boy against his will . . . oh! and she had taken pictures of them as they boarded a fishing boat called *The Blue Moon*.

As she lay there she could hear *and feel* the ebb and flow of the sea beneath her, coming through the floor; she surmised she was probably now aboard that old hulk.

**Sunday, Sept. 29. 2 p.m.  
The Crew**

**“I can already taste the money!” Willie laughed. “In a couple of days we just move in and scoop up the kid and his black book!”**

**“That’s what the boss says. Might not be that easy though,” Danny cautioned. “He may have already unloaded the damn thing.”**

**“Or it never left his dad’s office,” Candy chimed in. “Why would a dude steal his dad’s address book? I don’t get it. What’s the big deal, anyway?”**

**“Oh, he took it,” Willie said with conviction. “And he’s still got it. Bet on it. According to the boss it’s still listed as available on the dark web. And if he wants that book and the kid, it’s a big deal.”**

**The three--Danny Grayling, Willie Burch and Candy Mattis were enjoying a burger and fries at an I-95 frontage road burger joint, just north of Vero Beach, Florida. It was September 29. They had been on the kid’s trail since September 26<sup>th</sup> . . . four days. This would be their biggest score.**

**Exciting business, this . . . working for their new boss. A fortuitous meeting in a bar outside Camp Lejeune. He asked if**

they wanted to make some easy money, and ended up promising them \$10,000.00 to follow this “Paul” kid, make sure he ended up in Key West, Florida by October 1, even--he had smiled as he said it--even if they had to kidnap Paul.

The boss was even going to pay all their expenses: gas, motel, food and drink. Just keep all the receipts, he said. He would double that fee to \$20,000.00 if, without attracting the attention of local authorities, they brought Paul with a certain black binder to an old fishing trawler named *The Blue Moon* in Key West by October 1.

Willie had frowned and more or less demanded an “up-front” \$1,000.00 as an expense package, the excess to be returned, or to become part of their overall agreement.

They laughed nervously over their burgers . . . but the boss had smiled at the demand and said, “Young man, you have *cojones*. Maybe we can continue to work together when this job is done.” Then he spread ten crisp \$100.00 bills on the table in front of them.

With that, their new employer gave Willie a GPS tracking device. “Paul’s car is bugged. You can locate him and track him down anytime. Stay close.”

They were staying close. Hopefully, they’ll be able to befriend him either later today or tomorrow and convince him their boss in Key West is anxious to buy his notebook. If that wouldn’t work, they would have to kidnap him.

“Either way,” Danny laughed as he dipped a french fry into a small cup of ketchup, “it’ll be a good payday.”

**Wednesday, October 2. 4 p.m.  
Gumshoe**

The flight from LAX to Miami was pleasant enough and from there it was only a short hop to the small Key West airport next to the Naval Air Station. Picking up a reserved Ford Mustang and a map from Alamo I negotiated my way to *The Chelsea House*. It was 4 p.m. Wednesday, October 2.

“Welcome! How may I help you?” came the voice from behind the counter. Teen, fifteen-sixteen I guessed, white shorts, green and white striped tank top. Didn’t bother getting up from her leather armchair, but smiled broadly up at me.

“Hello, young lady. I’m Alan Garrett from Los Angeles. I’m looking for my assistant, Liz McConnell. She checked in here a few days ago. I haven’t heard from her for a couple of days and I’m a bit concerned.”

“Ahh, you must be that private eye fellow! My name is Jennifer,” she said, standing, stretching out her hand. She was taller than I thought-- maybe 5’6”. “Folks call me Squeaky--I guess because I used to laugh funny. Your friend calls herself Fox, right?”

“Yes, I’m that private eye fellow, and yes, Liz calls herself Fox,” I said, trying to keep pace with her, “but I wonder about that ‘Squeaky’ nickname. Sounds like a preteen name which I suspect you’ve outgrown.”

“Oh! Thank you, kind sir! Yes, as a matter of fact, my preteens ended nine years ago. But I think you have a nickname, too. What is it she calls you, Mr. Garrett?” Jennifer searched through her client files and pulled out Room 23, with Liz’s business card clipped to it. Giggling, she handed me the card.

“*Gumshoe and Fox.* That’s it! *Gumshoe!* Talk about a nickname! Come to think of it, Gumshoe, I haven’t seen Fox for a day or two. We sent some faxes to you yesterday or the day before and I haven’t seen her since. She’s paid up through tomorrow night.”

**“If you don’t mind,” I said, “let’s grab a key and take a look in her room.”**

**“Sure. Give me a second. I’ll call my brother to watch the desk for a couple of minutes.”**

**Little brother was almost as tall as me and weighed as much as the left guard for the Miami Dolphins.**

**“Two bucks a minute,” he frowned to his sister as he walked through the private door behind Jennifer and into the office. “I’m in the middle of a game!” he said emphatically, slamming the door.**

**“Munch, meet Gumshoe. Gumshoe, my brother Munch. Gumshoe is here looking for his sidekick, Fox, the detective from Room 23.”**

**“That’s nice,” Munch tapped his watch. “Two bucks a minute,” he repeated. Turning to me he added, “Hello, Gumshoe.”**

**On the way to Room 23 Jennifer explained. “Munch plays on-line poker, and when he’s hot he hates to be disturbed. Obviously, he’s doing well.”**

**“He’s not old enough to get involved in that on-line crap is he? How old is he?”**

**As she unlocked the door, she laughed and turned to me, “Munch--uh, Marvin--is seventeen, a senior this year.”**

**“Let me guess, got his name from eating everything in sight,” I smiled.**

**“My, you are a private detective, aren’t you?”**

**I nodded and touched the front edge of my fedora. We entered.**

**The room had been ransacked: open, empty suitcase on the bed, clothes strewn over the floor, closet empty, dresser drawers hanging empty. No laptop, purse, wallet or phone. Most disturbing were the few drops of blood on the floor just inside the door.**

**Jennifer kept repeating, “Oh, No!” over and over, but I breathed a sigh of relief . . . Fox was not to be seen. Why had she not used her phone or laptop to communicate with me? Hopefully, she was somewhere safe. But the blood, even though it was minimal, was unsettling.**

**“I’ll stay here, Jennifer. Leave the room as it is. I’ll straighten it up. But you can hustle back to the office to minimize your losses. Two bucks a minute adds up. Oh,” I added, “would you call the police to have a forensics team here to check this room for prints?”**

**Jennifer took one last look around, shaking her head. “Oh! Of course,” she replied and left me to assess the distressed room.**

**I didn’t have long to wait--just minutes later a two-man detail from the Key West Police pulled up. After introductions and a few questions, they went through the unit, found four sets of prints--one of them belonging to Liz from the number of them--the others scattered here and there throughout the room.**

**The prints identified a couple of names: Willie Burch and Candy Mattis, two small-time low-lives from New York. They were a long way from home ... but then, so was I. It was a start. I now had names to go with my pictures. The room’s phone rang. It was Jennifer. “Police Chief wants to see you within the hour.”**