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Hook, Line

and Sinker



A Vinnie and Mook Story
by M.J. Hyman

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I

The warm, South Florida night was as cloying as a needy lover. Only the croaking of Cuban tree frogs and the occasional amorous calls of “in season” alligators pierced the heavy silence. The new moon lent no light to the scene and the only illumination on the steamy swamp came from a small shack about thirty yards away from the struggling Vinnie Testoroni and Morris “Mook” Chinchinski. Mook was the larger of the two – which was he was the one who was slickening in the 80% humidity. His moist hands almost betrayed him while trying to get a better grip on the burden he was carrying; but he was able to regain control and carry it to the first stop on its final trip.

Heaving a throaty sigh, Mook flopped the six-foot-long, plastic-wrapped corpse to the ground in front of a chain-link fence. He got down on his knees and began to pull at the opening made earlier for them. Finished, he crawled through the enlarged passage, dragged the body after him and then Vinnie followed. Not fifteen yards later, Mook cursed as the back of his shirt caught on the jagged edge of another chain link fence, this one near the alligator pens. Mook, who loved clothes more than a man in his messy line of work should have, dropped his bundle. Vinnie’s first real physical exertion of the evening was scrambling with a speed that would have made Mercury proud to help his partner get the corpse back in place on his shoulder – the hundred-dollar bill he had given the greedy night watchmen here at Gator Gardens would only keep the electricity of this fence shut off for another hour, so they had to move fast. Meanwhile, Mook was too busy looking for a tear on his shirt – Vinnie was not pleased.

“Mook! For fuck’s sake!” grunted Vinnie, as he wrestled with heir latest job, “This sonovawhore is starting to rigor...now quit crying over your torn shirt and give me a hand!” Mook stopped trying to twist his shirt around to get a better look at the damage and bent down to aid his partner. “Dammit, Vinnie!” he whined, “I just bought this shirt yesterday!” Vinnie looked at the cheap knockoff that his partner thought was “designer original” and couldn’t help but stop for a moment and smile in spite of his anger. “So...you thought that, uh, *this* would be a better place to premiere your new blouse rather than that shithole club you go to in South Beach?” he said through gritted teeth. He gestured to the big man to pick up the head while Vinnie hoisted the feet.

Mook grunted, lifted and then dropped his end again at Vinnie’s jab. “This ain’t no blouse! Those are what women wear!” snarled Mook. Exasperated, Vinnie dropped the head into the mud with a resounding splat. Again, more humor found its way into the situation when he remembered his uncle taking him as a kid to his one and only opera – in it, some poor, son of a bitch had to spend the entire show in a bed sheet being dropped and thrown around. It cured Vinnie of any acting aspirations. Back in the moment, he was fishing what was become a soggy, mud-and-water-logged dead weight out of the muck and hissing, “Yeah. You’re not a woman...but you ARE being a fucking bitch! Now pull your panties out of your asscrack, adjust your nutsack and let’s get this job done!”

The big man knew that tone of voice. He grunted (his favored verbal expression when under duress), bent down and with one, mighty tug pulled the entire corpse – and almost Vinnie with it – off of the wet ground and slopped it onto his shoulder. Mook, for as big of a pain in the ass he could be, thought Vinnie, was as strong as two oxen and just as stubborn. He followed along, trying to smear the slime off of his hands, as Mook hauled the carcass of the late Russian shylock Ivan Petrov to his final resting place: the bellies of the now restless alligators that were the main attraction of the aptly named, but inappropriately marketed, “Gator Gardens...A Family Experience”.

He was musing on the poor advertising as Mook called out that he was near the water's edge. "Vinnie," he harshly whispered, "come on! I can't unwrap this dead commie fuck myself!"

Vinnie sighed. "Mook, the Russians aren't 'commies' anymore. Now they're good, democratic folks – you know, just like us." Mook sneered, "Screw you...I ain't no Democrat...I listen to Neil Boortz! I'm an 'independent contractor.'" He then guffawed at his own joke – something Vinnie hated. "One more stupid joke and you'll be 'independent' all the way," growled Vinnie, "Because I'm going to leave you here with this ex-money lending, wife-beating dingus."

Mook couldn't see Vinnie well in the dark, but he could "hear" Vinnie's face darkening. He knew that his partner could go from nice to deadly faster than his Lamborghini could go from 0-60 – and he made no exceptions to friend or foe when he was in his latter stage, having been on the receiving end of more than one "expression" of frustration. For his part, Vinnie had a long fuse for everything but stupidity – you screw up because you forgot something or something got in the way? Ok. Don't do it again (and you only got one more chance, mind you). But if you screwed up because you were just, plain dumb? Inexcusable – and he had "educated" more than one stupid person for their idiocy.

Vinnie was brought out of his reverie by Mook's screams.

While he had been in his thoughts, a bull alligator of about twelve feet had grabbed onto the wrapped-up corpse of the Russian mobster and was playing tug of war with Mook. At first, Vinnie wanted to laugh; but he saw the gator begin to whip its tail. Any true Floridian worth his suntan knew that a gator's jaws were not the real threat: its ugly maws could be kept closed with two fingers and fast wrap of duct tape. The tail – the tail could break a man's legs in one, vicious swipe.

Without thinking, Vinnie dove on the gator – and wished he hadn't. The thing started to roll, with Vinnie on its back and the dead Russian its jaws. This brought Mook down and he rolled off the cluster fuck of man and beast, and landed near the water's edge. A second later, two more gators began to crawl up to answer the call of the splashing midnight snack bell.

Meanwhile, Vinnie was hanging on for dear life.

It was a mess of gator, corpse and hitman. Things got worse when Mook, not watching anything but the wrestling match, found his boot in the jaws of a five-foot specimen. Thankfully it only had the heel of his ostrich-skin customs and that gave him one chance: let the bastard pull it off and free his foot. Mook prayed an ancient survival prayer to a god he was never really sure about and pulled his leg up, almost wrenching his ankle off in the process. Mook's liberated foot sent up its own prayer to the Almighty and Mook made a fervent, silent promise to go to synagogue for the first time since his bar mitzvah.

Now freed, Mook pulled out his Glock and popped one right in the skull of the gator. Kind of. The gator's natural armor deflected the bullet – but not the second one, which was a problem. It didn't come from Mook's gun. It didn't come from the gun of the panting and sweating Vinnie.

It came from the rifle of a redneck night watchman named Clyde Kirkman. The Kirkmans were the park's past owners, losing it to Vinnie's family after too much jai alai gambling in Dana. They might

not have been much of gamblers, but the Kirkmans were good people – and good around a rifle and the local wildlife.

“Son of a biscuit!” yelled Clyde. “That there was the stupidest shit I have *ever* seen! You teased that poor motherfucker with yer damn meat bag and now I lost my best breeder!”

No one but the living gators were listening. Vinnie was trying to count the unbroken bones in his body, while Mook was getting over his shock. And it took a lot to shock him. But after he regained his senses, as Vinnie was still doing damage inventory, Mook hopped over on his one, booted foot and started screaming at Clyde. “Fuck you, you fucking rebel-ass fuck! Fuck your gators! Fuck this fucking swamp of a state!” Clyde wasn’t amused. Actually, Clyde wasn’t anything. He was too busy trying to figure out how to explain to his dad why they would have to go into the Everglades to hunt up another bull, requiring lots of time, pay-off money and stealth – three things the Kirkmans had in extremely short supply

Clyde slowly became aware of Mook’s presence and yelling, and his own anger started to burn. He lifted his rifle and put it squarely under Mook’s chin. Suddenly, a yell pierced them both like a spear: “Shut up and shut down, assholes!” There was Vinnie, dripping with swampy scum, pointing his guns at both men. He used his weapons like an airport runway worker used flashlights to direct a plane to get both men over to the now-exposed and partly eaten corpse. “Do it,” he said emotionlessly. “Do it now, or so help me you’ll be part of a gator ‘value meal.’”

After disposing of Ivan – and listening to Clyde bitch about his lost gator and Mook kvetch about his ruined couture – Vinnie walked back to the “borrowed” Hummer, wiped himself down with some old towels and pulled out a thick Cuban cigar. Mook found him swaddled in blue-gray smoke as he sat on the ground, eyes closed, with his back up against a tire. Mook opened his mouth to speak and a hand with an extended finger shot up from the seated figure – without seeing, Vinnie could sense the impending eruption of idiocy.

Mook dropped to the ground next to his partner, saying nothing. He knew it was dangerous to talk to Vinnie when he was “in a mood.”

The drive back to Miami was equally silent – until the silence was broken when Vinnie said, matter of factly, “This is getting far too old, my friend. I’m going to ask to be ‘let out.’” Mook almost drove the truck into a group of partying college students walking down Collins Avenue. He swerved the hulking vehicle into a side street and threw it into park. “What did you just say?!?” Mook hollered astounded. Before Vinnie could answer, Mook jumped back in. “No fucking chance! *Not a fucking chance!* We’ll get whacked for bein’ cowards!” He threw his hands up in the air and slammed them down on the steering wheel. “Holy crap, Vin! Why don’t you just say we’re goin’ to Rome so you can shoot a cardinal and slap the Pope with your used rubber?”

Vinnie slowly turned his head and looked at Mook with the smoldering devil in his eyes. Quietly, he said, “Man up. We’ve done well and served honorably. At our level, we can walk. No problems. No help, either; but no problems.” Mook was white knuckled on the wheel. The sound of Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song” was spilling out of a nightclub like smooth scotch into the night.

Calming, trying to make sense of everything, Mook said pleadingly, "Vinnie, please... You gotta..." Vinnie reached up and grabbed Mook's cheeks in his hands like an uncle did when making a point to a misbehaving nephew.

"I don't 'gotta' anything!" Vinnie replied. "I 'gotta' get out and get away. I have my eye on this little tackle shop in the Keys and we could do a lot worse than fixing gear and selling high-end fishing rods to tourists trying to tell the tale of the one that got away." Oh no, thought Vinnie. Mook's face started to screw up in Vinnie's hands. His eyes glistened; the corners of his mouth drooped. The big man was tough as nails on the outside, but as mushy as an over-cooked s'more on the inside. And then the tidal wave broke.

Mook burst into tears unbecoming of a lug of a hitman. "But – but," he blubbered. Snot trickled out of his nose and he pushed Vinnie's hands aside to wipe it away; but not before Vinnie felt a few drops of "mookus" on his fingers. Sniffing, Mook continued, "What am I gonna do?" he whined. "I hate fishing! You got all that from your grandpa. He loved that shit and took you – not me – on those trips!"

Here we go again.

Vinnie sighed. He never told Mook that those "trips" involved fishing, yes. But they also were "training missions" on which Grandpa would show his grandson how to truss up a guy and then attach the right amount of weight to make him sink and stay sunk. Mook always felt that even though the Testoroni's loved him like their own, he would never truly be "famiglia."

Vinnie was not without heart. He spoke calmly now to his "brother."

"Mook, you can do what you do best. Drink, find some girl to shack up with and, hopefully, get tired of it and do the right thing and come help at the store." Vinnie knew that this would never happen and added, "Or you could work on your jokes and try being that comedian that you think is in you."

Validation of Mook's secret, lifelong ambition got a look of pure joy. "Vinnie," sobbed Mook, "I'm gonna make you proud! Let's tell Dad tonight and..." Vinnie laughed and said "Don't be a putz! Now THAT would get us whacked. Dad is asleep at 7:00 p.m. Waking him at 4:00 a.m. for anything but a coupon for a bacon, egg and cheese sandwich is a bad idea!" Mook laughed, too. "Yeah, we'll wait till you get back from that fishin' trip you're goin' on this weekend. I hope you catch somethin' big and win a trophy!"

Vinnie hoped the same; but what I wish for and what I get are usually the opposite of one another, he thought. "Okay, then – it's settled," he said. "When you get back from the 'family interests' in Aruba and I get back from Orlando, we'll talk to Poppa. Meanwhile...come on. Start this pig up and let's go get *us* one of them sandwiches – now *I'm* hungry!"

Mook brightened up at this. "Good! And I got a coupon, too!"

Vinnie smiled and shook his head. Why should I have expected anything else? He thought, as Mook gunned the truck and headed off to get a well deserved reward for a trouble-filled night.

II

The Orlando exit came up on the highway so quickly that Vinnie almost missed it. He had thought all chance of missing this weed and scrub oak festooned egress would have been negated. For the last forty miles, this exit, “America’s Vacation Destination,” had been heralded by the most obnoxious billboards he had seen in quite a while. Still, Vinnie deep in thought of tackle and prize-winning fish, had almost screwed up.

The billboards had promised everything from fireworks and pecan logs to “Natural Live Oddities.” The one Vinnie had chosen as “best of the worst” featured a huge, shark-shaped alligator with a gaping mouth and a crew cut similar to Mook’s, riding a puce-colored surfboard. A word balloon announced, “If You Miss THIS Exit, You Will Miss a World Class Surfing and Indoor Shopping Opportunity!” This Florida horror was really grotesque in a lot of weird ways. Vinnie wondered how one could surf and shop at the same time, much less indoors.

But, these days? Why not? He grudgingly admitted to himself. They had those eternal wave things even on cruise ships. But still, thought Vinnie, the designer of this atrocity deserved to be fed to the shark-thing depicted on the billboard.

Vinnie amused himself by picturing the kind of people who patronized the kinds of places advertised on the billboards. Mini-vans loaded with screaming, food-smearred children, who needed to go to the bathroom at every rest stop, and then complained that they needed more to eat to fill the void left by the *previous* rest stop. It was a vicious circle. The parents of these midget banshees must have felt as if they were not on one of Americas’ great interstate highways, but on the low road to Hell.

Vinnie slammed on the brakes; his Jeep screeched to a halt scant inches from the Massachusetts license plate affixed to the van ahead. The trailer and boat Vinnie was towing whipped back and forth, rocking the Jeep. It felt to him as if the boat had torn free of its perch. A quick look in the Jeep’s rearview mirror confirmed the boat was still tied down to the trailer.

Vinnie was just about to get out and double-check his self-contained caravan, when the driver in front of him, a sunburned tourist with a New England drawl, started screaming at Vinnie. “What is the matter with you, you jerk? Don’t you hicks down here learn how the hell to drive? What’d you do, get your license from the AKC like your mother?” the man, leaning half out of his driver’s side window, shouted over a background of shrill, childish voices singing off key about beers on walls.

A pang of sympathy tugged at Vinnie in light of his new-found empathy for people such as the red-faced tourist. Since no harm was done, he decided to let the tourist run his mouth; he figured the guy was already being punished enough. Vinnie just watched as the driver disappeared back inside and the van roared across the exit intersection, through a red light. The tourist was clipped by another vehicle, one definitely driven by a Florida resident. It was a Florida Highway Patrol car.

What a pageant of fun life can be,” Vinnie laughed as he drove away.

It had been three years and two theme parks since Vinnie's last encounter with "America's Vacation Destination." He remembered that, even then, this town was getting congested. Now, it was quite an experience trying to get through traffic. It took over an hour to find the road leading to the tournament's camp. Vinnie found it amazing that all of this crowded paradise was built on what were formerly orange groves. He remembered as a child in the early '70s when his parents would take him up here on trips. In those days, Orlando had a kind of frontier town feel; kind of, in a weird way, like Huxley's *Brave New World*. The exception was that the people populating this version were out to exploit it – and they had done a damn fine job of it. Despite the urbanization, however, it took just fifteen minutes of driving in any direction from the interstate to find yourself on dirt back roads surrounded by huge tracts of scrub forest and swamp. Back in the brave but old world of Florida, Vinnie desperately looked for a clue as to the camp's location. He pulled to a stop on the side of the road when he thought he had spotted something.

"A clue," Vinnie chuckled. There was a sign, nearly obscured by a huge palmetto bush, with lettering announcing the "Red Bug Fish Camp" circling around a faded painting of a large-mouth bass. The sign also promised "live bait," "cold beer," and a few other services that weren't too clear to read because of a copious amount of shotgun and bullet holes. When the backwoods boys got bored and a few beers in them, whatever can be aimed at from the window of their pick-up truck becomes target practice.

"Well, yee-hah," Vinnie said dryly as he turned into the camp's entrance. Vinnie had been to dozens of these tournaments, and the mix of people attending the events never ceased to amaze him. As he drove around the tangle of vehicles and trailered boats, he looked at the owners of some of them. He saw everything from fashionably attired doctors and lawyers, to torn-jean-clad construction workers. Then there were nondescript "good ol' boys" in bib overalls with tobacco tins bulging from their top pockets.

The "crackers" were the ones that bore watching. The rustic morons were almost always the ones who brought in the trophy winners. They all had some "sekrit" method taught to them by their daddies to bring in what they called "lunkers," the really big fish. It irritated Vinnie terribly that, no matter all of the equipment money might buy, one rarely got a stringer of fish the size these rednecks could catch with an old taped up pole and a can of wiggler worms. They guarded their secret ways well, and never attended the real big money tourneys because they wouldn't be allowed to pull half of the tricks they got away with at these local contests.

Pro anglers, impressed by the abilities of the locals, often showed up at these small tourneys. Many of the big names didn't or couldn't compete; they came to learn. So did Vinnie. He had come to understand long ago that a man in his line of work couldn't afford notoriety. It just wasn't good business. He could just picture himself on *Bass Masters* telling all the fine folks at home how he had landed the big one, while someone who had recently seen him with one of his soon-to-be victims would grab the nearest phone and call *America's Most Wanted*. Besides, he fished simply for sheer pleasure and the fun of competing. He loved being the best at whatever he did and was determined that this time he was going to get some of the local secrets.

Vinnie finally found a spot to park his truck. Almost as soon as he stopped and got out, someone walked up to him. The man was dressed in a Florida State Seminoles t-shirt and matching shorts – no shoes. From where Vinnie was standing, thankfully downwind, he could smell a mixture of stale

sweat and beer coming from the guy. Vinnie was just about to ask him what the hell he was staring at, when the smelly, little man started talking.

“Mother o’pearl, that’s a nice ‘un! What’s a boat like that cost? I knew a boy one time had one like that! Man, we used ta pull in th’ lunkers all day from it! Ya here to fish?” prattled the crazy-looking little guy all in one breath.

Vinnie’s eyes rolled back in his head partially from the smell of the weasely-looking man, and mostly from his strange welcoming speech. Vinnie tried to ignore him and walk away to the front door of the camp bar and guest room complex a few yards away. When Vinnie turned to leave, a hand came out of nowhere and landed on his shoulder. It belonged to the weasel. Vinnie’s first impulse was to deck the guy, but he was so startled he turned and found himself looking into pale grey irises floating in a sea of red and yellow. “How the hell did you...” was all Vinnie could get out of his mouth before the man started to laugh. Vinnie found himself being assailed by words floating on sour breath.

“It’s an old Seminole Indian trick. I know you was gonna ask me how I snuck up on ya! You was gonna ask weren’t ya?” Vinnie nodded numbly. Weasel boy positively beamed with pleasure at Vinnie’s response. “I knew it! I knew it! Damn I’m good!” The man then started dancing around like Walter Houston in that old movie about gold mining. For one of the first times in Vinnie’s long and jaded life, he didn’t know what to think. He figured the guy was nuts, drunk or something; he just couldn’t put his finger on what.

Before Vinnie had any more time to think about it, the crazy little man started in again. “I’m Booger Greene,” the man said proudly. Vinnie thought, Yeah, you sure are! Booger continued with the formalities of introduction. “Yep, Booger’s my momma’s name fer me – my daddy called me worthless. Ha, ha, ha, ha!” Booger was highly amused by the joke, and continued laugh as he spoke. “I knows ya’ll come here ta fish. I was just making yakkety with ya. I loves these fishin’ contests. Ya gets to see all kinds o’ folks with their fancy rigs an’ such. But, ol’ Booger knows stuff don’t none of ‘em have any idea ‘bout. ‘nuff said, eh?”

Vinnie agreed and thought, this is getting weird. Just moments before he had been wishing for a “fishing muse.” Could this nutcase be it? Nah...it doesn’t happen that way in real life.” Vinnie’s next move was based on instinct. Never the kind of person to pass up a potential opportunity to win, he found himself asking Booger if he’d like to have a beer with him. This delighted the man so much that Vinnie swore that Booger must have pissed his pants – but with all of the grime that was on Booger’s shorts, Vinnie couldn’t tell. With Booger in tow, Vinnie stepped into the bar.

The place was packed, seemingly to the rafters. Vinnie was accustomed to the crowded Miami lounge scene and was fairly expert at navigating through even a throng such as this. He took stock of the situation: There was a bar with tall stools and a gaggle of tables with chairs. Every chair had a body on it – a few had two. Vinnie turned his attention to the bar. Within minutes, he found two recently vacated stools at the far end of the bar. Vinnie enjoyed the place, despite the reek emanating from Booger. The room was paneled with cypress wood and had nautical lamps illuminating the corners. The tables were the old formica, butcher-block type and Vinnie noticed one of them had been covered with peeled-away labels of various types of beer. He’d seen this done before by drunks at other bars – “redneck decoupage” Vinnie mused.

Vinnie noticed that the walls were covered in places with photos of happy anglers and their prize catches, or the catches themselves. One such fish was a five-foot alligator gar, usually referred to in these parts as a “fresh water barracuda.” It had a long, lithe body and a tapering snout jammed with sharp, saw-like teeth. These fish would never see a frying pan, but they were good for a fight. This was heaven to Vinnie. Booger suddenly shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he watched a large, muscular woman coming from the front of the bar toward him. She paused, looked at Vinnie and then with a sneer at Booger. She proceeded toward them like rolling thunder, bellowing, “Goddammit! Booger, you scumwad! I told you to keep your nasty ass out of my bar until the tourney is over!”

She paused directly across the bar from them and put her nose in the air like an old hunting dog testing the wind. Her face screwed up with revulsion. “Jeezus! Booger you smell worse’n Satan hissself on a Joo-ly Sunday! I’m gonna wring your—” Vinnie cut her off in mid-threat with his best southern-gent’s drawl, “I’m sorry, darlin,’ it’s all my fault. Allow me to introduce myself: the name’s Vincent, Vincent Testor.” He smiled his most charming smile as he used the alias he preferred for trips like this. “I hope my guide and I aren’t taking away from the ambience of your fine establishment. Just allow us a few beers and we won’t trouble you much beyond that. Please.”

“You talk pretty smooth, butch. Lemme ask you what fool told you Booger was a fishing guide; no offense.”

“None taken, ma’am. A good buddy of mine who was here for last year’s tournament recommended him most highly.” The woman reared her head back and snorted like a hippo breaching from a long underwater walk; then she started laughing. “I think your ‘friend’ is yankin’ your chain, butch. Last year, the only person crazy enough to hire ol’ Booger was this wheezy accountant fella from Tampa, whose dirty eyeglasses kept fallin’ off from the humidity. I have to admit he did catch that big ol’ gar on the wall; it like to killed him pullin’ it into his boat. He left it with us ‘cause his wife would never let him bring it in the house, let alone put it in their den.”

Vinnie looked over at Booger, who looked about as comfortable as a pair of 40DDs in a training bra. “Why, yes; Booger told me about that when we met outside. I told him won’t happen with me. If my wife ever told me that I couldn’t keep a prizewinner like that gar, she’d be mounted on the wall next to the fish.” The woman, who Vinnie privately tagged as “Tugboat Annie,” appeared to dearly love hearing that, and laughed uproariously. “Oh yeah! If you’re friends with that guy from last year, there’s as much harm in you as there is in baby formula,” she gasped between chortles, “Well, it’s up to you how you want to waste your money; but if you want to bring Booger in again, throw him in the lake with some pure soap. It won’t hurt the fish and will do his ass a world of good. Now, what’s your pleasure?”

Vinnie, relieved that the conversation concerning the wheezy accountant was ended, smiled graciously. “A couple of longnecks, ma’am.”

“You best not spend any more dough on Booger than you hafta, or he’ll be drinkin’ your wallet dry,” Annie warned. “Let him get shit-faced suckin’ the citronella from out the dock torches. The stupid dummy can’t tell the difference twixt it and good beer anyway.” They all laughed, even Booger. Annie went to fetch the beers and Vinnie turned his attention to Booger. “So, what makes you a guide?” Booger, seizing his beer as if Annie might snatch it back, took a massive gulp of the golden liquid. Between inhalations, he related his life story to Vinnie. Vinnie suspected that he’d be

moving on from beer to Oxycontin by the end of the tale, expecting Booger to begin with Steve Martin's, "I was born a poor, black child..."

"I'm not much differ'nt from any other Florida 'cracker.' My people been here a long time. My dearly departed daddy, he got 'squatters rights' on this bitty island by th' west shore of th' lake. It's a big 'un, that lake, and that's where this here tourney's been held fer years now. My people, they was poorer than dirt. If not fer poachin' an' moonshine, we'd a starved right enough..." Booger looked woefully at Vinnie, and then down at his empty beer bottle. Vinnie caught Annie's attention. She was slightly irritated at the interruption, as she had just beaten a plumber in arm wrestling for double or nothing on his repair bill. A crowd had gathered to witness the event and she was bowing to their applause. Finally arriving to satisfy Booger's bottomless beer belly, she literally slammed two more longnecks down on the bar in front of Vinnie. As she left, Annie glanced over at Booger, who had immediately grabbed his new bottle and downed most of it in one swig. "Damn fine imitation of a water cooler," Annie muttered. "Glad the toilets is fixed... 'course, might have to drown Booger in one of 'em... would be worth the trouble--"

The rest of what she said was lost in the noise of the bar; Vinnie hid his amusement at her remarks by taking a sip of his beer. He looked at Booger, who was still playing water cooler and tapped his bottle on the bar. "...um, thanks, Vinnie... man gets dry tellin' his tales," Booger nodded sagely, "Th' revenooers, well, they was always after us. They busted stills an' spilled right good hootch everywhere. Th' 'possums would be drunk fer days. They was bad enough; but, damnation! Th' Fish an' Game agents was worse! We'd no sooner get a gator skinned an' them bastards was on us.

"My daddy learnt me how ta peel a dead gator so as ta not waste a touch o' skin or a speck o' meat. He swore th' agents waited 'til we was done so they could seize th' fruits of our labors an' sell 'em for th' state. Helped ta pay their salaries an' buy them fast boats. Me, I don't know." The tales of revenue agents and gator skinning finally ended. Vinnie slapped Booger on the back and thanked him for the great story. I have screwed up big time, Vinnie thought while grinning at Booger, I've just become the best buddy in the whole, freaking world to a beer-soaked, poor man's Daniel Boone. Vinnie, still smiling, started to make his excuses to get away from Booger; but the smelly boozer muttered something that stopped him cold. "Yup, outside of me an' 'Miss Millie', don't no one 'round here know more 'bout fishin' this ol'lake."

Sometimes, late at night, just as a person is about to fall asleep, the body involuntarily jerks in a kind of protest to the oncoming visit from Morpheus. It was this type of reflex that hit Vinnie at the mention of 'Miss Millie.' Always a man to go with his instincts, Vinnie asked, "Who is this Millie?" Booger got a look on his leather-like face reminiscent of a kid caught smoking behind the tool shed. His answer was terse and respectful, "Miss Millie is one of th' finest people in her tribe an' is th' best fishin' lure maker that ever drewed a breath."

"Really? No shit?" Despite his cautious nature, Booger's abrupt change in demeanor impressed Vinnie. Booger became as solemn as a teetotaler in church. "If I'm lyin', may I never taste beer again!" Vinnie, having been offered information he had wanted for so long, started to press Booger for details about Miss Millie. "So, who is she? Where does she sell her lures? How do you know her?" Booger maintained his "dry" look. Vinnie, not about to waste a moment in getting this information, handed Booger his barely sipped on beer. He didn't want to waste time waiting for the mean-spirited Annie, who might make some snide remark and cause Booger to hold his tongue.

Booger greedily downed the beer and belched loud enough for the whole bar to hear. Everyone turned and looked; Annie thrust her fist with the middle finger stiffly extended in their direction. Booger leaned in close and began speaking in a hushed tone. "First of all, Miss Millie is what we 'round here call a 'granny lady.' She comes from th' oldest Seminole injun tribe I know of hereabouts. Hell and damnation! I hope I don't get killt fer sayin' this, but Miss Millie is a medicine woman." Booger quickly looked around the room to see if anyone had heard him. Satisfied no one was staring anymore than usual, he continued nervously, "Long as my family's been in these parts, there's been Miss Millie. Some say she's more'n a hunnert years old. But, ya couldn't tell to look at her. No sir, I just saw her a couple days ago puttin' a new roof on her house, an' let me tell ya, she was up'n down th' ladder like a cop on his way to a doughnut shop!"

Vinnie, not terribly concerned with Miss Millie's health, pressed Booger for more details about her lure making abilities. "I was just gettin' ta that, but my throat's kinda dry. Ain't nothin' a couple more beers couldn't help." Vinnie resigned himself to the fact that Booger couldn't blow his nose without another brew. He figured to ease Booger's discomfort with a minimum of interruption. "Annie! Six more longnecks, here." He didn't think there was a limit when it came to "Bottomless Booger" and that "stocking the lake" was the best way for him to get the answers he needed. The bar was even busier than before, so when the woman brought the order she had no time to make any more comments. The ever-thirsting Booger looked at the bottles and began to grin like a kid who got the key to a toy store at Christmas. He drank one down so fast, Vinnie saw him choke on it. That didn't stop Booger – he kept going as if to lose one drop would mean the end of creation itself. After he got halfway through the second bottle he continued his story.

"Now, don't get me wrong, I gots a lot of respect for Miss Millie, so I don't just send any ol' somebody over to her place. No sir! Just folks I know who appreciate what she does...and also can afford it."

Here it comes, Vinnie thought, this freaking, double-damned juicer is going to start trying to shake me down! In the face of what he figured was a scam attempt, Vinnie rolled around the thought of Booger wearing a "Colombian necktie." Booger looked straight into Vinnie's eyes with a clarity the hitman didn't think him capable of after so many beers. "This ain't no shit, bubba. I know I come off like a stupid drunk; but when it comes ta shit like I'm talkin' 'bout, no matter how blasted I get, it's th' Goddamn truth!"

Vinnie felt as if Booger had read his thoughts and made a silent promise to himself to not prematurely judge Booger again. At least until Vinnie had proof, one way or the other, that this strange man sitting next to him was lying. Booger finished his second bottle and then held on to the third longneck as if it might be taken from him at any moment. "Look, Vinnie, I trust ya. I can tell yer a man who loves his fishing. Ya give me th' chance ta guide for ya, an' I'll tell ya how ta get ta Miss Millie's – an' what ta say if ya want her ta get you a lure that'll catch a real trophy fish. All I want in return is that when you or yer friends fish 'round here, ya use ol' Booger ta help ya. Promise?" At this point, Vinnie would have kissed Booger's ass to get both the magical lure and Booger out of his face. "You got it Booger, I promise."

Booger grabbed a cocktail napkin, handed it to Vinnie and told him to write down what he was about to tell him. Booger drained his last beer just as Vinnie finished putting down the information. It was at that moment that they heard a crash outside the bar. Vinnie somehow knew in his heart of

hearts that the crash had something to do with him. He jumped up off his stool with Booger right behind him and tried to get out the front door.

The front area was clogged with people who wanted to see what the uproar was about. Vinnie finally pushed his way through the crowd, thanks in part to the smell of his companion, and got outside.

The sight that greeted him made his stomach drop. Only part of his brand new bass boat was sitting on its trailer. The part not on the trailer lay in pieces. Someone had smashed into the boat while trying to park in a space too small for him. Vinnie saw the man who had caused this destruction standing next to the door of a new Range Rover towing a boat that looked as nice as the one Vinnie, until just a few minutes ago had owned. Vinnie's despair evaporated under the heat of rage. He stalked toward the newcomer with dark purpose and clenched fists; he was almost within striking distance when the Range Rover's owner turned around and saw him. Recognition spread across the man's face as soon as he saw Vinnie.

"I'll be a sonofabitch! Vinnie! How's it hangin' man? I'm glad to see you! Would you believe this shit? Some dickhead parked like a housewife at the mall and I hit his freakin' ten-cent boat. I hope I find the stupid ass so I can ask him what the fuck he was thinking when he pulled it in like thi—"

Before the man could continue, Vinnie grabbed the front of the man's expensive safari shirt. "That was MY fucking boat you bastard, so shut the fuck up or I'll tear your balls off and play bocce with them."

"Hey, hey! Vinnie! For chrissakes, calm down! It's me... Ramon! Come on!"

"Yeah...Ramon Moldanato, asshole at large!"

"You're a cruel guy, Testoroni!"

"Yeah? You have no idea how cruel Moldanato; but I'd be glad to show you!"

Vinnie had a long history with Ramon Moldanato, an enforcer working for the biggest Colombian drug cartel in Miami. Moldanato also fancied himself as a big-time sport fisherman. Moldanato and Vinnie would occasionally run across each other at a nightclub Vinnie used to frequent – until it closed after he and Mook had killed the owner for maiming a girl Vinnie with whom the latter was friendly. Word about the hit circulated among the other local wiseguys, Ramon being one of them.

The Colombian was impressed and thought Vinnie was like himself, a cold-blooded killer. Moldanato knew Vinnie was from the "old school," and saw him as a way to get in with the larger, and soon to be more prosperous, mobs. With this end in mind, Moldanato offered Vinnie an invitation to go shark fishing aboard Moldanato's cabin cruiser *Corazon de Oro*.

The Heart of Gold, mused Vinnie at the time, how funny. Vinnie accepted the invitation, knowing that Ramon had his own motives. In the "old school," the most important lesson is to learn – and separate – your friends from your enemies. If you are a friend, fine, Vinnie thought wryly as Ramon had painted a glorious picture of what a day at sea would be like. But he concluded that thought with if you're not, I will remember to keep my enemies close...you closest of all."

The day they went out, Vinnie caught two good-sized Hammerheads. Ramon caught nothing and his failure irritated his sense of pride. Ramon tried to drown his ire at being bested in drink, but only succeeded in getting drunk. He had brought a number of attractive young women aboard to cut bait.

One had worn a bright yellow bikini. He ordered her to take the suit off and let him put it on his line because he believed that the color would attract sharks. When she protested, Ramon told her she could either give it to him, or he would take her, suit and all, and use them both. The rest of that day, Vinnie fished and tried not to pay attention to how the others laughed when the poor girl tried to cover her nakedness with an old life vest.

Eventually, the embarrassed woman just went below decks and hid until they got back into port. As Vinnie was leaving, he saw Moldanato hitting the hapless girl, blaming her because the suit had failed as a lure. Vinnie hated anyone who preyed on the innocent. Even though he killed for a living, Vinnie only took jobs where there was no doubt as to the guilt of his intended victim. Both Vinnie and Mook had a particular hatred for pushers who preyed on children, pimps and men who beat women. They knew their attitudes were considered antiquated, but few dared argue any of the points with them. Those who did seldom argued about anything ever again.

Vinnie glared at the man now standing in front of him decked out in the latest catalogue wear; a man Vinnie despised more than the nuns who used to beat him in school. Vinnie wanted to smash Ramon out of existence, but he was stymied by his desire to avoid inordinate attention. Vinnie gathered his self control with considerable effort. “Ramon, what the hell are you doing here? Tired of selling school kids used condoms?”

“Funny, Testoroni, funny. We should get you one of them daytime talk shows. You’d be a hit! Get it? A hit!” Ramon laughed loudly, but mirthlessly. “Quit amusing yourself and tell me why I shouldn’t kick your ass back to the stone age!”

“Simple. I ran into Mook in Aruba. He was losing at blackjack; and since I had some influence in this particular casino, I sort of helped him out. You know how it is”

“No I don’t; that’s what you’re going to tell me.”

“Mook started winning and he and I got to drinking and talking. Well, one thing led to another and he told me you were here at this tournament. I hopped the first plane back, bought a couple of things I needed and here I am!”

“Yeah I see that. Nice boat and truck combo. Paid cash I suppose?”

“What else? You shoulda seen the salesmen when I flipped that wad of cash on them. I know one of ‘em won’t stop grinnin’ for at least a year!” Vinnie loathed displays of that kind; he particularly loathed boastful reminiscences of them. “People in our line of work should keep their finances simple,” Vinnie lectured through gritted teeth. “It’s better to look like a stand-up citizen and make payments on big ticket items like cars and boats. It’s not like you’ll miss a payment – unless you get whacked, of course.” Vinnie did not add that his financial profile looked good to any authorities hoping to nail people like Vinnie and Ramon. The Colombian did not address the lesson when he next replied; what he said set Vinnie’s teeth on edge.

“Testoroni, you owe me a fishing trip!”

“I owe you the shit from the bottom of my shoe, Ramon!”

“Not true. I took you out and you’ve never repaid the favor. I thought you guineas were big on respect. Guess it isn’t true.” Ramon knew he had Vinnie on the defensive. Vinnie, despite his anger, figured a way out of the problem quickly. “Ramon, I’d love to take your ass out into the middle of a lake; but as you can see, my boat’s wrecked – as you might have noticed! Guess that’s it for pay back, eh?”

“Not necessarily. I know you’re blaming me for the fact you didn’t park your boat and truck correctly, but I got a solution to this little social problem.”

“Yeah? You decided to give up fishing and try a new hobby like sky diving without a parachute? Sounds seriously fun to me!”

“You want serious, you wop prick? Here’s your fucking serious! I admit that I fucked up your boat, Testoroni! And because I’m a sweetheart of a guy, I’ll give you my boat in exchange for you being my partner. What d’ya say?” Bile crept up Vinnie’s throat and would have served as an answer had not Booger intervened. “Well Hell’s bells, that’s as nice an offer as I ever heard! Ya’ll must be tight as ticks on a poodle ta have such a good ol’ friendship. Come on now, Vinnie. You boys shake on it ana I’ll guide ya both for th’ same price as one! Howzzat strike ya?”

“It strikes me like being in the middle of a screwed up deal at a garage sale,” Vinnie all but snarled. “Of course, at this moment, my choices are few to none; thanks to you, ‘friend.’ Against my better judgment, I accept.” He continued venomously, “This is probably going to cost me a lot more than a ruined weekend, I’m sure – but Ramon. Know this: I want no shit out of you!”

“Sure, Vinnie, sure. Hey, just to show you my heart’s in the right place, I’ll pay to have your boat towed outta here and fixed.”

“All right, Moldanato. But no insurance company bullshit! I don’t want my rates going up!”

“Vinnie, would I draw attention to us like that? I’m insulted!”

“Better you should be dead, you bastard,” Vinnie hissed, glaring, as he watched Ramon walk away to call for assistance. The Colombian was too far away to hear him. Ramon arranged to have the wrecked boat towed away. After the trucks came, Vinnie excused himself to get away from both Booger and Ramon so he could think in private.

III

Vinnie Testoroni lay on the hard bed of the camp’s hotel room and reviewed day’s events. More and more it seemed as if he had been a losing contestant on a crazy television game show. Now, I’m not only saddled with a crazed and wasted river rat, but with one of the deadliest fucks on this planet! As my fishing buddy no less! Fuck it all! I only wanted to relax and maybe come back with a good story or two for Mook. Well, I sure will have one hell of a story, if I live long enough to tell it!” Vinnie reached over to the night stand and turned off the light.

He lay in the dark a long time, just thinking. Finally, he pictured himself getting so frustrated with his two ‘companions,’ he cut their heads off, tied the disengaged craniums to either end of a length of string and hit them together like a pair of “clacker balls.” Vinnie chortled to himself at the

thought and started to try to figure out if this was possible. It might come in handy later. After a short bit, he began reviewing less gruesome details he would need to attend to in just a few hours. Between registration, captains' meetings and required boat inspections, he would have little time to get his gear in order. Thinking of his tackle reminded him of the directions to the home of Miss Millie. He wondered if, during the confusion surrounding the accident, he had held onto the paper napkin on which he had written the instructions. He got up quickly and turned the light back on. His pants were draped over the back of an old, rickety chair.

"Oh, please, let it be there," he whispered, eyes closed, as he pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. To the relief of his rattled mind, there, between his driver's license and a "free drink" card from the lounge he had "helped" close down, was the precious napkin. He had instinctively placed it there when all of the craziness started. Vinnie could still see the intensity on Booger's face, swearing the information he now held was the "real stuff." Vinnie carefully replaced the paper, closed the wallet and put it back in his pants. He turned off the lamp and went back to bed. "Tomorrow," he sighed to the darkness, "is going to be a bitch of a day."

"What a beautiful night," Booger sighed as he paddled his johnny boat back to his island shack. As is often the case with habitually solitary people, he had gotten into the odd habit of talking to himself. "Hell, th' whole damn day was nice. I met me a good, new friend, and got me a real nice buzz goin' from all them beers he bought me. Would ya believe he gave me twenty bucks in advance for my help?" he shouted to the tops of the pine trees surrounding the water way. As he pulled the boat onto his island's shore, the skinny lake dweller shouted again. "Booger Greene's a man of means! Ha,ha!" He got out of the boat and flipped it upside down. "That'll keeps th' 'coons from crapping in ya'," Booger assured the small vessel. He continued speaking as he walked away. "Yep, tomorrow ol'Booger and his buddy Vinnie are gonna make out fine. I only hopes that he an' that Ramon feller keep up th' truce that they begun with my help. I don't like that Spanish boy much, an' I know Vinnie finds him as welcome as a turd in a punch bowl. I could tell that right off. Ol' Booger may be crazy, but he ain't stupid."

Booger walked up the rough path leading to his beloved shack. "My Island mansion," he muttered happily as he unknotted and pulled the rope he had tied as a handle to the rough-hewn door. There used to be a real lock and knob; but when Booger lost the key, he ripped the hardware off. The rope worked just as well against those he wished to keep out: the always-foraging raccoons. A stray thought ricocheted off the top of his brain, "Lord o' God, I hope that Vinnie feller ain't planin' to bring that Ramon boy over to Miss Millie's. That would never do. If Miss Millie found out that I'm th' one who sent his butt to see her..."

Booger shivered despite the balmy, eighty-degree weather outside. He was haunted by the speech his Daddy had given him before he died, "Don't go messin' with that injun witch an' don't forget, ya little idiot, the Seminole injun's were at one time cannibals! If you piss them off, you'll be dinner for a howlin' group of savages!" Booger still felt his father's presence here on the family's homesteaded land, even though the man had died years before in a prison far away. Booger believed in spirits, including guardians, so before he fell asleep on the pile of thrown out mattresses that made up his bed, he prayed he and his new benefactor, Vinnie, would be safe. "...an' I'd be most obliged if'n you'd see t'it that Spanish boy don't cause me and Vinnie no trouble," Booger said. Then, after a moment's thought decided he should add, "Thank you."

“One down and one to go,” Ramon Moldanato said as he laid down to sleep. He smiled with pleasure at the memory of killing Mook. Now, all that stood in the way of his becoming the greatest hitman alive – no, the greatest hitman of all time – was Vinnie Testoroni. Ramon was secure in the knowledge that he had always gotten whatever it was he wanted. He considered himself a cut above most of his countrymen, escapees who arrived on the shores of the United States as poor unfortunates.

Ramon Moldanato was a rich man when he left his homeland. It had taken him years of underhanded, even cutthroat, business practices to achieve success; practices he continued in his new home. He liked his station in life and he was determined to keep it, no matter what it took.

Ramon Moldanato slept like a baby; dreamless, unworried. He had no conscience; even the wrath of God was something Ramon figured could be bribed or bargained away.

IV

Ramon was up at first light. He smiled as he remembered the American term, “the crack of dawn.” He showered and, to his discomfort, realized the camp was using well water. The smell of sulphur was going to require a liberal dose of cologne to negate the water’s lingering effects. Satisfied that he had applied enough, he dressed in his new fishing clothes. After he admired his handsome, new, imported boat shoes, he went out in search of his “pal” Testoroni.

Vinnie, up before the crack of dawn, sat at a table in the camp restaurant, a plate of scrambled eggs and grits before him. He had slept fitfully the night before, and although he hadn’t had a drop of alcohol since he left camp bar the day before, he had what felt like a wicked hangover.

He stared at the plate of food in front of him and tried to muster up an appetite. “To eat or not to eat...ever again,” Vinnie moaned softly to himself. As he was preparing to take his first bite, Ramon walked in and plopped himself down next to Vinnie. He stuck his greasy head right into Vinnie’s plate and sniffed, “How the hell can you eat that stuff? Grits are made from corn leftovers, for Christ’s sake! It’s the part you’re supposed to throw away! It’s garbage!” At this close range, Vinnie caught a hefty whiff of the cologne Ramon had so liberally applied. Jeez, he thought with a self-satisfied grin, he’s going to attract mosquitos from dousing himself with that shit!

He noticed his smile was irritating Ramon; so to irritate him further, Vinnie shoveled an extra-big spoonful of grits into his mouth. Ramon just glared and looked disgusted. Vinnie rubbed his stomach to accentuate the wonderfulness of it all and assumed an expression Mook called his “nasty-nice smile.”

“This is garbage, eh? Well, sit down Moldanato – have a big bowl of it. You are what you eat, and for you this would be an improvement. I only hope this place has enough ‘fill’ for a land fill like you.” Vinnie turned back to his breakfast as Ramon stood up, fury smoldering like fire inside him. Ramon was about take revenge when a familiar smell and voice wafted in ahead of the owner of both. The rest of Booger was just barely past the restaurant doorway.

“Mornin’ boys! Ain’t it a peach outside? Th’ radio weather fella said today was going t’be dry in the mornin’ with seasonal rains ‘bout three o’clock. I loves th’ Florida summer – ‘t always makes for good fishin’!” Vinnie and Ramon both turned to note the appearance of their ‘guide.’ The two hitmen glanced at one another; they would finish the debate that they had started much later.

“You eat yet, Booger?” Vinnie asked mildly. “Oh, yeah. Had me a fine meal o’ swamp cabbage an’ a bit of smoked bream,” Booger looked around nervously. “What the hell is swamp cabbage?” Ramon snapped. “Fine stuff! It’s made o’ th’ pulpy inside o’ th’ palm tree... fine, fine food. Ya’ll should try it; it’s tasty with bream – that’s a kinda fish like a ‘sunnie.’” Booger looked at Vinnie’s plate and said, rubbing his belly none too obviously, “I do confess, though, them grits look mighty temptin’.”

A smirk of self-satisfaction spread across Ramon’s face at Booger’s observation, as if Boogers’ love of grits proved his point about them being trash. Vinnie ignored Ramon, “Sit down. I’ll order some for you.”

“I wish I could, Vinnie. I ain’t allowed in here. Th’ owner of th’ camp says I kill folks appetites.” Vinnie felt a pang of sympathy for Booger’s outcast status. “Wait outside. I’ll bring a bowlful to you.”

“Vinnie, yer th’ bestest thing ta happen ta me in quite a while,” Booger said with true feeling

As Booger turned to go, he leaned down close to Vinnie, the smell of him almost causing Vinnie to deliver those grits a little sooner than either man wanted, “Are we gonna make that little side trip we had talked about?” Booger’s sotto voce was a bad stage whisper Vinnie figured could be heard all the way back to Miami. Vinnie looked over at Ramon, who appeared absorbed in trying to find something he considered edible listed on the greasy, plastic menu he was perusing. Vinnie simply nodded at Booger and tapped the seat of his pants.

“Go on and wait outside; I’ll bring you the grits in a minute,” Vinnie told Booger. Once Booger stepped outside, he got that cold shiver again. He waited anxiously for Vinnie to come out. Inside the restaurant, a waitress began taking Ramon’s order. Vinnie noticed the waitress was the same who took his order earlier. He hadn’t paid much attention to her because he had been feeling so sick. Now he realized she was a slightly smaller version of the bartender, Annie. Vinnie mused, this is either coincidence or I’ve uncovered a band of well fed, inbred mutants!

“That be all, sir?” the waitress asked when Ramon finished. He nodded in the affirmative. Vinnie tapped her on the arm as she turned, “I want an order of grits; make it ‘to go’, if you don’t mind,”

“Sure, sir. I like a man with a healthy appetite!” she smiled broadly as she flipped through her ticket book looking for Vinnie’s check. She scribbled the additional charges and made her way back to the kitchen. Before Vinnie had finished his toast, she was back with a steaming Styrofoam bowl on her tray. Vinnie looked away from her for just an instant – and somehow the bowl of hot corn cereal slid off of her tray and landed upside in his lap.

He stood up howling as the grits burned him through his jeans. Ramon laughed at the sight of the man he hated most in the world suffering. The waitress became hysterical. “Oh, good Lord! I’m so sorry! I don’t know how this happened! The tray just flew outta my hands! Darlin’...I’m so sorry, please don’t be mad...” she sputtered as she wiped at the hot mess with a table rag, “I’m just a poor workin’ girl with two kids to feed and—”

Ramon leaped to his feet, his napkin in his hand, “Here, honey, I got a lotta sympathy for ‘working-girls’ – I know quite a few of them back home.” To Vinnie’s absolute amazement, Ramon began

wiping the grits from Vinnie's lap with the gentleness of a bear fishing for salmon. Vinnie regained his composure quickly, "It's all right kiddo. Just tell me where the bathrooms are. This stuff is so hot, it's eating through my pants – I don't want to live the rest of my life with a high voice!"

Wordlessly, she pointed the direction to him, and Vinnie hurried on her lead. "A man cut of a different cloth would have me fired for this," the waitress sniffled as she showed him the gentlemen's rest room. "Oh well, shit happens...though I have to admit lately it seems to be happening to me with surprising regularity," Vinnie shrugged. The pun was lost on the waitress. Vinnie nodded his thanks and pushed open the men's room door. He was hit in the face by a hot, odor-laden breeze. "Phew!" he swore as he entered, "What a stench! Booger's like a lavender sachet compared to this open sewer!"

When Vinnie returned to the dining room, he noticed Ramon, his breakfast untouched, was gone. At first he felt relieved, then he thought, that rat bastard's trying to pull a fast one. He's going to split with his boat, leaving me stranded without a proper competition craft! Vinnie reached for his wallet so he could pay the still-mortified waitress. To Vinnie's dismay, he found his back pocket was empty. The shock was slowly pushed out by the realization that settled in like a dull pain. "Ramon, that sneaky bastard!" he growled under his breath.

Now Vinnie understood: Moldanato *had* been paying attention earlier and had realized that there must be something important in Vinnie's wallet when he saw him tap his back pocket. "Son of a bitch took my damned wallet! He's probably out there throwing my credit cards to the gators," Vinnie fumed, his voice getting louder until he erupted with, "What a shitty way to cheat me out of this fishing tourney!" The waitress, who had been standing by and getting more and more nervous nearly created a hole in the ceiling when Vinnie finally blew.

"Sir? Is, uh, something wrong?" the waitress asked, feeling helpless and wanting to say something.

"I forgot my wallet," Vinnie told her woodenly, cooling down to freezing at the sound of her voice. "I'll have to sign for it on my room."

"I was going to take care of your bill, sir," she said sheepishly, "for dropping the grits on you; your friend insisted on paying – he even took your to-go order with him – and he gave me a real nice tip."

Vinnie said shaking his head and as sweetly as possible, "That was mighty big of him darlin'. Did he say where his generous self was going after he left here?"

"Uh-huh. He said he was going to check on his boat."

"Thanks, y'all have a good day."

"I will, hon. Things are looking good today!"

"Maybe for you," Vinnie shot over his shoulder as the door closed behind him.

Booger was standing outside waiting for Vinnie looking like a proud father watching his kid take its first steps. "Hey, Vinnie! I gots it! Fooled ya! I gots it! I was waitin' on them grits ya'll promised me

an' while I was yer friend came runnin' out an' told me you two always played jokes on each other, so he asked me ta hold onto yer wallet, while ya went nuts lookin' fer it. Some fun, huh?"

"Yeah, Booger," Vinnie said with no amusement, "as much fun as a fucking three ring circus!"

"Ya got that right! I was wrong 'bout yer friend. Why, just last night I was thinkin' how bad he was an' now I'm gonna have a good time showin' y'all th' best fishing ya ever seen!" Much to Booger's surprise, Vinnie grabbed the wallet and quickly opened it. Booger looked insulted and whined, "I didn't take nothin'! Honest!" Waves of relief washed over Vinnie when he found his cards and money where he had put them. That's when his famous instincts came back from vacation. He looked in the wallet's side compartment and saw his license and the drink card, but not the encoded napkin.

Trying to stay calm, Vinnie said evenly, "Ramon is on his way to Miss Millie's," as he refolded his wallet and put it back where it belonged. Booger might as well have been wearing a wax mask – because the cheery outer face melted to reveal an inner one filled with terror and panic. "Vinnie," he cried, "if he is, we're in deep, dark shit! Him, you – an', most of all, me!" Vinnie didn't need to ask about the face – he just grabbed the little man by the back of his filthy shirt and began running to his Jeep. Booger didn't argue as he was dragged along.

Booger sat quietly as the Jeep bounced down some of the worst dirt roads Vinnie's kidneys had ever encountered. "Where the hell," Vinnie snarled, "do you people get off calling these glorified cow paths 'roads?' I suppose you'd consider Charles Manson an 'angry guy.'" Vinnie gritted his teeth and cursed as the truck jumped over a huge rut. When no answer came from the passenger seat, Vinnie glanced over; Booger seemed to be in a trance.

He stayed in his transfixed state through the trip. The grubby man would occasionally mutter to Vinnie about a turn or a side road coming up; but outside of that, he had nothing to say. He looked over at the troubled Booger Greene and his expression, so out of keeping with what Vinnie had come to expect from him, made the normally unflappable hitman uncomfortable.

Here was a man who lived in a shack located on a speck of land situated on a remote lake. He survived on handouts during the off season and did odd jobs, like being a fishing guide the rest of time. Booger had nothing anyone would want, except his secret about the lure maker, Miss Millie. He permitted few people to share his magnificent secret; and now Ramon had it by underhanded means with Booger's unwitting assistance. Vinnie could tell that Booger also felt an obligation to protect Miss Millie from people like Ramon – and himself. Now, Vinnie thought, Booger was in agony over having let her down and broken what he considered to be a sacred vow. Vinnie respected this and, strangely enough, respected Booger as well. "Look man, I really appreciate your trying to get us to Miss Millie before that dirtbag Moldanato, but you're worrying for nothing. Once we get there, I'll explain what happened and I'm sure she'll understand. She's your friend right?"

Booger gave Vinnie a weak smile, rolled down the truck's window and heaved himself half out and began to vomit.

Vinnie immediately halted the vehicle. His concern was not entirely for Booger, who would have been thrown from the Jeep by one, good jolt and probably land under the truck's rear tires. He was

also afraid that what was coming out of Booger would stick all over the side of his beloved Cherokee. Booger sat bolt upright when the truck stopped and screamed, “Vinnie! What th’ hell did ya stop for? We’re gonna be too late ta stop that boy, Ramon! Ya called Miss Millie my friend! Well, sir, if we don’t get there soon, she’s gonna take it out on me – friend or no! Her anger ain’t somethin’ I wants responsibility o!” With that, Booger opened the door and jumped out for reasons not apparent to Vinnie.

“Jesus, he’s lost it!” Vinnie moaned as he banged his head on the steering wheel. He watched Booger start to circle behind the truck and reached under his seat to pull out the .38 police special he always carried in case of an emergency. This was beginning to look like one.

Vinnie was pulling the gun free of its holster when he was startled by Booger’s sudden appearance next to the driver’s side window. Vinnie remained calm and waited to see what Booger’s next move might be. Booger’s next move was to dive out of sight. Sighing, gun in hand, Vinnie opened his door and stepped out. As he looked down in the direction he had last seen Booger, he put the gun in the back of his waistband – there was no need for the weapon. Booger was crouched down by the back of the truck, digging at the rear tires and talking to himself. “God damn, God damn, God damn!” Booger chanted madly. He noticed Vinnie standing near, “Ya shouldn’t have stopped! Help me! We’re stuck in ‘sugar sand!’”

V

“Crap,” Vinnie muttered as he hurried to the front of the Jeep and put the gun back in its hiding place. He returned to assist Booger’s efforts to free the truck. Vinnie had once before encountered sugar sand, the bane of all off road drivers: pure, white sand that felt like refined cane sugar and gave about as much support to vehicles that drove through it – and Vinnie’s Jeep was in it up to its axels. Vinnie fell to his knees and helped as the two men dug furiously to uncover the tires. While digging, Vinnie disturbed a fire ant nest and was the unfortunate victim of their attack. “Damn tourists!” he spat as he swatted at the tiny, stinging insects. “Stinking six-legged plague on Florida’s cursed ass! I don’t know why God made these damned, useless shits – except to torture animals, kids and me!”

Booger looked up from his task for a moment and cautioned, “Don’t go scratching them welts th’ little red bastards leave – if th’ white heads pop, you’ll get a powerful infection, sure enough.”

“I know,” Vinnie grumbled, getting back to work, “We’ve had ‘em in Miami longer than ya’ll have up here. I hope the son of a bitch who brought them from South America rots in Hell, stung by their poisoned spit forever.” Much to Vinnie’s amazement, Booger leaped to his feet and scooped up the top of the nest with one, easy motion. He then threw the nest on top of another one, just a few feet away. “Them’s insane fighters. They’ve forgot all ‘bout you ‘cause now they’ll wipe each other out. Can’t stand ‘em, they’ll kill a fawn fer nothin’,” Booger said, turning back to the real task at hand. He paused for a moment and said to Vinnie like a parent, “Now, don’t ya try doin’ that, Vinnie – it takes special practice.” Vinnie thought, sure, I was thinking of doing it right after I scrubbed my crotch in the shower with steel wool.

After twenty minutes, Vinnie paused to survey the results of their labors. The truck’s tires were clear of sand, though the constantly shifting particles threatened a cave in. “We’re going to have to take a page from the Yankee book of snow driving to get free.”

“If that means get in th’ truck and rock her ta pack this shit, then I’ll be happy ta,” Booger gasped, nearly spent from his efforts. “An’ when ya stomp on th’ gas pedal, I’ll pray real hard ta the spirit o’ ol’ Henry Ford, hisself. If’n he’s a listenin’, we’ll be free.” Vinnie smiled grimly, “‘IF’ being the operative word. You get behind the steering wheel and wait ‘til I holler.”

“You gonna try an’ push from th’ back, are ya?”

“Yes. Get going,” Vinnie replied. Booger was getting desperate – he knew the result of not getting to Miss Minnie before Ramon. “Come on Vinnie, please, come on! We gotta do it!” Booger pleaded from the driver’s seat. Vinnie merely grunted and put his broad back to the Jeep. He locked his hands under the bumper and called out, “Go for it! Goose the bitch!” Booger turned the key and began pumping the gas pedal. Vinnie screamed, “Booger! Don’t pump it! This sucker’s fuel injected! You’ll flood the engine!” It was too late. Vinnie drew a ragged breath and realized Booger must not have done much driving recently – like for the past fifteen years. Vinnie squeezed his eyes shut and listened to the truck cough to life and then stall. He held his breath for a moment; then to Vinnie’s great relief, the truck’s engine turned over and kept running.

Vinnie braced himself hard against the Jeep’s tailgate, offered up a prayer to Saint Jude, the patron of lost causes, and yelled, “NOW – HIT IT!” Booger gunned the Jeep; Vinnie felt a spray of sand hitting his hurting arms like a wave of tiny needles. He focused on the pain from the ant bites and sand flack – and then with a grunt pushed with all his considerable might. For a second, the Jeep seemed to hang between being stuck and being free, wheels spinning and sand flying. Then Vinnie realized he was falling backwards as the truck lurched onto blessed, solid ground.

Before Vinnie could figure out if he was dead, paralyzed or any of the above, Booger was helping him up off the ground. Vinnie shook the sand from himself and he rushed to the driver’s side door of the Jeep. As the two men hurriedly climbed in, Vinnie smiled over at Booger in thanks. Vinnie was going to have to keep an eye on his new friend; there was definitely more to this little character than met the eye. Minutes later, Booger gave the final directions and Vinnie steered onto the path leading to Miss Millie’s.

Shangri-la, Atlantis, and the finding of real New York pizza in Pigs Knuckle, Arkansas: Should any of them eventually be discovered, it will not cause any greater ecstasy in the locator than Vinnie and Booger felt as they pulled onto the property belonging to the mysterious woman known as Miss Millie. Booger, trying to make up for lost time, had directed Vinnie along a short cut, which took them to the back of Millie’s deep woods home. Vinnie looked around from the vantage of his truck seat. He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed to see the woman’s home was not the decaying swamp-witch’s shack he had envisioned. It was actually a pretty nice place.

The house was a block affair, typical of this region, with a nice, new looking, brown roof. It was painted maize yellow, a color quite common in Florida, and one that always reminded Vinnie of baby excrement. The yard, although surrounded by some of the thickest scrub oak and palmetto brush Vinnie had ever seen, was neatly cleared and contained several well tended garden patches. Vinnie decided he was disappointed that Millie’s dwelling looked like any typical suburban homestead.

What? No skulls on spears, giant cobwebs or stinking sorcerer’s brew bubbling on an outside fire, putrefying the air?

It was then that Vinnie noticed that there *was* a smell in the air, and though he couldn't place it, it was familiar and not unpleasant. As if in answer to Vinnie's unspoken question, Booger pointed at a small out building. "That's th' smokehouse there. Miss Millie makes th' best pork jerky in any part o' this here world I know." Vinnie wasn't anxious for a sample and was about to say so when Booger surprised him by getting out of the truck. He looked nervously toward the house. Booger further surprised Vinnie by walking in a direction away from the domicile. Vinnie got out of the Jeep and caught up with Booger. "Why are you leaving? You sure were in a hurry to get here."

"Just goin' to wander," Booger answered flatly. Vinnie was tired, sore and in pain from the still-burning ant stings. He was in no mood for Booger's new attitude and he intended to let the small man know it. "For Christ's sake! We bust our asses to get here, you're throwing up because of nerves – and now you're simply 'goin to wander?'" Vinnie continued yelling, "Look, buddy. We're here to stop that motherless fuck, Moldanato, and you're not backing out now!"

Vinnie expected Booger to understand and do as he was not-so-gently requested. Booger didn't. Instead, the lake rat slammed his grimy palm across Vinnie's mouth. "Now, just hush!" Booger warned in a harsh whisper. "Ya may be a Florida boy, but ya'll are from Miami. 'round here, you ain't nothin' but from a suburb o' New York! So, ya just keep that piehole closed, 'kay, 'Bubba'? Ya ain't no country boy!"

Amazed by the outburst, Vinnie allowed Booger to finish instead of beating the hell out of him. Booger calmed. "Look. I think yer a nice fella Vinnie; but Miss Millie don't like trouble. If she thinks I'm responsible for any o' this..." Booger got that sickly look again. "Well it ain't gonna be a pretty thing! I'm countin' on ya ta get that Ramon feller outta her house!" Booger's tone grew conspiratorial. "She lives like th' ol' injun's did an' still hates Columbus an' his kind fer fuckin' up their home. A few hunnert years ago, there was a settlement built near here. Th' local tribes tolerated them folks fer a whole year, then one night th' settlers vanished! Not a trace! Those Seminoles were a fickle group – their likin' toward anythin' could change like th' weather. But they wasn't just *any* Seminoles, they was special. They was feared by th' other tribes an' pretty much allowed ta do what they pleased." Booger's voice dropped to a reverent – almost fearful – whisper, "It was said they been touched by th' gods!"

Vinnie, his amazement turning to anger, was about to smack Booger into next year when the little man looked straight into Vinnie's eyes and said, "They was th' same tribe that Miss Millie comes from! That's why I gave ya them words ta say on that piece o' paper that got swiped. Now that Ramon has th' paper, yer gonna go in there an' be calm ta show her yahave no harm in ya. It should work out okay. But if you an' that boy set ta fightin' in front o' her, or cause any kind o' trouble...Well, I think ya got th' idea."

For whatever reason, Vinnie believed enough of Booger's superstitious speech for it to show in his eyes. Booger saw this and took his hand away from Vinnie's mouth. As soon as Vinnie had spit out the taste of Booger's hand, he spoke quietly to his companion, "I don't know what the hell to believe, but I'll do as you say. I'm telling you one thing right now: When we get out of here, I'm going to kick that bastard's ass clear back to South America!"

Booger smiled and replied, "An' I'll help ya – but not 'til we get us some big ol' trophy bass!" Vinnie laughed to himself at the thought of Booger taking on Ramon Moldanato. Booger was all

right, even if he wasn't very bright. "My buddy, Mook, will like you...probably because you're both nuts." Booger studied Vinnie for a second and then started to walk into the woods again. This time, Vinnie didn't stop him. Just before Booger disappeared into the scrub, he called back, "Ya keep smilin', no matter what." Then he vanished from sight.

Vinnie steeled his resolve and headed toward the house. He was a man accustomed to dealing with unusual situations and rarely relied on anyone but himself. Having Booger with him might have made things go smoother, but push had come to shove: he was fine without Booger...he hoped. Vinnie was going to knock on the back door; then he thought better of it. After what Booger had told him, he didn't want his actions to be misconstrued by the woman who lived here. No, he decided, I'm going to do this properly.

That was when he stopped himself. Vinnie – what the fuck are you doing? He was letting all of this supernatural mumbo jumbo get to him – a guy who had cut people open and never once saw a soul go fluttering skyward. Now here he was worrying about using his best table manners on some swamp witch to get a magic lure. Vinnie was ready to turn and leave – but something gnawed at him to push forward. If nothing else, he was going to even the score with Moldanato; and that gave him the extra push to stride up and knock on the door.

Only he never got the chance.

Just as he was about to put knuckles to wood, the door opened – and before that happened, he could have sworn he heard...laughter? What the hell? Before he could do or think anything else, standing in front of him was a woman about forty five years old; she was wearing a loose, summer print dress and had black hair lightly streaked with gray, up in a tight bun that reminded Vinnie of a frozen custard swirl cone. Her face was pretty, not in any certain way – just pretty. She wore no makeup and her skin was tanned. It was as if she was born healthy and simply stayed that way. Her black eyes caught Vinnie's and reflected an inner peace that melted his apprehensions. Vinnie wondered how this woman could put such fear into Booger and started to say hello – again, he was pre-empted.

"There you are!" she said with a mild, playful scold in her tone. "I was beginning to think you and Booger were gonna sit out in my yard and palaver all day! Now, don't say a word; come join us for tea and lemon cookies. I grow the lemons for them myself." She held the door open for Vinnie, as he dumbly stepped with mechanical precision inside the house. "Wipe your feet, please," admonished the woman and Vinnie did as he was asked. He looked down at the floor and saw it was green AstroTurf. Miss Millie noticed and explained, "You can't keep mildew and mess out of carpet, and I like something soft under my feet. I don't like shoes; can't feel the world breathe with the darn things on."

Vinnie nodded as if someone else willed him to do so. He was still speechless. All of Booger's ramblings hadn't half prepared him for the power flowing from her. Miss Milly continued speaking, "Now, go find a comfy place to sit down at and I'll bring the tea." She proceeded down a hallway and turned a corner to disappear from Vinnie's sight. "Hey stud! Come on in. I was wondering where you were. You should have come the way I did," said an annoyingly familiar voice. Vinnie had been in such awe of Miss Millie that he hadn't noticed Ramon sitting in a large, cane-back chair in the living room. His first instinct was to floor the bastard, but he remembered where he was and walked over to an empty chair identical to the one Ramon sat in.

Vinnie gave the smugly grinning Ramon a hard look. “You stole from me, Moldanato. I always figured you for a petty thief.” Ramon laughed, “I’m a man of opportunity, and if you stupidly leave your wallet out, someone is bound to take it. That’s a good lesson to learn. I just never thought someone as smart as you would need me for a teacher. I’ll give you an ‘D’ for effort and a ‘A’ for stupidity.”

“Look, you worthless pile of snot,” Vinnie snarled – but not too loudly, “I’m going to give you something for not being able to play nice with others and it isn’t going to be a grade!” Before the two men could get any further, Miss Millie reappeared carrying a bamboo tray with cups and a pile of golden-colored cookies. “Everything okay with you fellas?” she asked in a measured tone. “I thought I heard voices being raised, I hope I’m wrong. Your mommas reared you properly, I assume?” Both men shook their heads affirmatively like two schoolchildren caught in the act by their teacher.

“Good,” said Miss Millie, “I don’t like company to fight. It...upsets me.”

With that, she gave each man a glance that hit Vinnie, at least, in the head and gut. Hard. Ramon just smiled and glibly told her, “I just came here to tell my good pal Vinnie he dropped something from his wallet he needs. Also, to tell him I have to head back to the fish camp and get our boat inspected for the tournament.” Ramon stood up and handed Vinnie the cocktail napkin. Vinnie took it and said, “Thank you, [COUGHING] you dog’s penis dressed as a man.”

“You are welcome,” Ramon answered heartily, despite the hatred in his eyes.

“Won’t you stay to tea?” Millie, who had taken everything in, asked Ramon.

“I really must leave, dear lady,” Ramon said with an unctuous bow, “but thank you for your hospitality. The small courtesies mean so much to my people.”

As he was about to go, Ramon stopped and went back over to Miss Millie. The self-absorbed hitman gave her a funny look and said, “I don’t want to make you think I don’t appreciate your offer.” He took several cookies, wolfed one down in front of her, then said flatly, “That was the best cookie I’ve ever tasted, ma’am! Thanks again and good-bye.” And out the door he went.

Vinnie sat in stunned amazement. Ok, I can die now because I really have seen everything: Ramon Moldanato calmly eating cookies! Vinnie’s musings were interrupted by the sound of the Range Rover starting up and roaring away from the house. An uneasy silence followed in the wake of the truck’s departure. Miss Millie went over to the front window and looked out into the yard. She had her back to Vinnie as she said, “Good riddance to bad rubbish. I didn’t take well to that boy. He’s trouble.”

As she continued to stare out of the window, Vinnie went to grab a cookie. If Ramon thought they were to die for, he had to have one. The cookies did look delicious – no, as crazy as it seemed to Vinnie, they *wanted* to be delicious and *wanted* him to know how delicious they were. Just before he chomped down on one, a hand slapped the baked good out of his hand. “Don’t you dare!” warned Millie. “That’s not a fit thing for a man like you to eat!”

This was the second time this trip that someone had whacked him – not in the traditional hitman sense; but it was starting to get on Vinnie’s nerves. His eyes flashed up at the “slapper” and Miss Millie smiled at him as if nothing had happened and said, “You’ll learn a lot more before this is over.” She proceeded to sit down and sip her tea. Vinnie numbly, but cautiously, did the same. As if reading his mind, the woman told him, “No, it wasn’t poisoned – if that’s what you’re thinking. Poisoning is for cowards. It’s just a little something I wanted him and him alone to have. A woman can have many secrets and those cookies are one of mine. Besides, he’s the kind who needs to be watched. Don’t you agree?”

Vinnie’s head was spinning. He wondered how a cookie could watch someone. As he chewed on only his thoughts, Miss Millie spoke again, “Now, then. I think I know how he got that paper from you; not that it would have done him any good. Oh, and remind me to give you a lotion for those ant bites before you leave.” Vinnie had forgotten about the painful welts. Millie sipped at her tea and commented, “I like that little stinker, Booger – even though he’s a worthless drunk like his daddy and his daddy before him. The difference is that our Booger is a good soul. I see he was scared to come in...that’s okay. You tell him to come see me when all this is over.”

Vinnie assumed she meant the tournament. At least he hoped that’s what she meant.

“Now,” Miss Millie said as she settled back on the sofa across from Vinnie, “let’s get down to the business at hand. I know who and what you are.” Vinnie waited for the proverbial “other shoe” to drop. “I don’t say that what you do is good or bad. I just agree that the kind of people you get rid of are, for the most part, greatly deserving of the fate they get. The world is not as it was a long time back, and just like hawks keep down the rabbit and rat population, you do the same. It kind of keeps the rest of the herd healthy to weed out the weak and sick.”

Vinnie had never heard anyone talk about his work like this. She made him sound noble.

Realistically, he should have gone out to his truck grabbed the gun and taken her out in the woods for what she knew. But after what she had just said, he couldn’t. It wouldn’t be right. Instead, he quietly asked her what it would cost for her to not tell anyone what she knew about him. Millie laughed. It seemed like the entire forest around her – every tree, rock and grain of sand – laughed with her, too. After her chuckles subsided and she cleared the tears away from her lovely eyes, she spoke again. “Oh, but you are a *fine* warrior for today’s needs, and you still have much to offer the Great Spirit. No, no, don’t look so shocked. I just explained why a minute ago, so let’s forget that for now. Tell me what you want from me instead.”

Vinnie fumbled in his pocket for the napkin. Millie looked him dead in the eye and said with no mirth, “Save those words Booger gave you for later; you’re gonna want them.” Vinnie swallowed his original idea and words – they went painfully down his throat like large chunks of unchewed carrots. When he finally found his voice, he said, “Uh, I don’t understand anything at all about what’s going on – and maybe that’s for the best. I came here for one of your special fishing lures; I promise that’s all.”

Millie looked gravely at Vinnie and responded, “That’s what you want and that’s what you get.”

She got up and left the room. It seemed to Vinnie there should have been more to it than that.

Miss Millie should have wanted him to join her at some secret ceremony, or have at least asked for some of his blood to seal the deal. Millie simply went to go get what he'd asked for. Vinnie was confused because for the first time in his life the things that were simple were becoming complicated and the complicated were becoming, well, simple.

While Vinnie waited for Millie's return, he took time to notice the decor of the room. It reminded him of his grandmother's place in West Palm Beach. There were shelves of knick-knacks and seascape paintings on the walls. No photographs for some reason. Curious. He also noticed a needlepoint on the wall that read, "All eyes belong to the Great One." As he pondered the meaning of the phrase, Millie reappeared. She held something in her left hand. Vinnie didn't know whether to put his hand out or wait. Miss Millie gave him his answer by grabbing his hand and placing what was in hers into his. It was now firmly gripped in Vinnie's left palm. She gazed at him and gave him a wonderful looking smile. "Don't look at the lure until later."

He thanked her and shoved it in his shirt pocket. He expected to be stung by a hook, but wasn't. He wondered if she had...no, not this lady. No way would she rip him off; he just knew it, not knowing why. They spent the remainder of the time he was there talking about how Florida had changed through the years. As they talked, Vinnie took mental note of the ancient and arcane references Miss Millie used. She spoke of the old days as if she had been there to see them herself. He didn't disbelieve she hadn't been, not after what he had witnessed today.

When he finally got up to leave, he glanced at his watch and realized that he had been there for over three hours, Millie went to get the lotion she had promised earlier for his now-throbbing arms. She returned with a white tube of cortisone cream. Vinnie accepted it with a puzzled look and thanked her. Millie laughed and said, "I know what you must have expected! Probably an old mason jar filled with slime made from toad warts and dragonfly guts. Sorry to disappoint you. A doctor friend of mine gives it to me on the sly. There's a lot of folks who come see me for one thing or another, and they pay me as I need."

Her words reminded Vinnie she hadn't asked for payment on the lure. "I almost forgot," Vinnie said, "what do I owe you for the lure?" Millie took his hands in hers and answered, "You pay me when I tell you. Promise me when you come into town again, you come see this poor, old, crazy woman." She kissed him on the cheek and patted him on the butt like a kid late for the school bus. "Now go on! You just catch yourself a big fish and try to keep Booger from harm. Now promise me." Vinnie smiled at her and nodded he would. She wagged a finger at him and tsked, "Uh, uh, uh. Words have power. I want to hear you say them." Vinnie, again feeling like a child, sighed, took a deep breath and said, "I promise I will come back to visit you – and I'll keep Booger from getting into anything 'stinkier' than himself." Then he added, "You know, my grandparents would love you."

"Well," Millie snickered, "I don't know about your grandma; but if your grandpa is half as handsome as you are, send him around. But only after his wife joins the Great One. Now scoot!"

Vinnie went out the open door and just as he was about to get in his truck, Miss Millie leaned out from the door and called, "One last thing, hon: You tear up that paper napkin after you memorize the words on it! You don't want any more fools like that Spaniard finding their way here. It's all part of the price."

“It’s a promise,” Vinnie told her.

She closed the door and Vinnie happily left with his prize. As he drove down the road he had seen Ramon take earlier he thought of the needlepoint on Miss Millie’s wall, the one that concerned itself about the Great One’s eyes watching. Vinnie wondered exactly who the “Great One” was and what its eyes saw. Vinnie had no way of knowing as he bounced down the dirt road that led back to the fish camp that other eyes with a dark purpose behind them were watching.

Ramon Moldanato left the bushes where he had hidden and, after making sure that there would be no further interruptions, went to work. He had concealed his Range Rover in a stand of trees and brush not too far from where he now stood. He went to it and retrieved his gun and one other object necessary to his plans. Ramon boldly walked back up to Millie’s door and without knocking, re-entered the woman’s house. He passed through the living room where he had earlier sat as a guest. Looking around, he saw no sign of Miss Millie. Before he could further inspect the home for his former host, a strong, steady voice came from behind him. “I expected you to come back,” Miss Millie said.

Moldanato turned around and saw her standing by the front door with a look of disdain on her features. Moldanato was unsure of how she had gotten behind him. He really didn’t care about how she entered the room without him seeing her, only that Millie was now here and he could proceed. “That’s a good trick old woman. It’s a shame we don’t have time for you to teach it to me. It would be useful to a man like me,” Ramon retorted sarcastically. Millie stared evenly at Ramon, “You take great liberties when you refer to yourself as a man.” Her taunt angered Moldanato. “I was going to make this easy on you; but now I have no choice but to show you how much of a man I am, bitch!” With the gun held steady on her, Ramon approached Millie. The weapon aroused no real fear in her – it was what Moldanato had in his other hand that worried her (if one could call what she was feeling “worry”): Her main concern was the medical syringe with its long, gleaming needle and the way Moldanto held it.

Moldanato wanted her to plead for her life. That was half the thrill for him when he finally had a victim right where he wanted them. Millie stood her ground and started to hum under her breath. Ramon was incensed at her reaction. How dare this old wretch act so fearlessly?! In a rage he charged and struck her with the butt of the pistol. Millie hit the floor like a sack of potatoes and did not move. Ramon thought he had killed her, but after seeing her chest shallowly rise and fall, he figured she was merely unconscious. Ramon regretted that he was going to be cheated out of seeing the terror in her eyes as he started to go to work. But regrets quickly faded as he dragged her to a chair in the living room, the as the call of wild peacock drifted to his ears.

VI

It was nearly five o’clock in the afternoon by the time Vinnie got back to the Red Bug Fishing Camp. The parking lot was nearly full, as usual; but he was fortunate enough to find a parking space. He had no sooner set foot to pavement when, like a dog who hadn’t seen his owner for a few days, Booger came bouncing up to him. “Did ya get it? Did ya? I bet ya did! Ya got it wrote all over yer face! Hot damn! Is Miss Millie mad? I bet not. I knowed she’d like ya! She’s somethin’ else, she is!” Then his voice changed to a whisper as he leaned in close to Vinnie. “What happened ta th’ Spanish boy? I ain’t seen hide nor hair o’his ass all day. His boat is still on his trailer an’...”

Vinnie's mood did a 180°. "Booger – you mean to tell me Ramon hasn't had the boat put through inspection yet? Shit! Inspection closed an hour ago!" Vinnie took off at a dead run and yelled, "Wait here!" to Booger as he ran past him toward the tourney tent. When Vinnie arrived breathless and panting, he found one official still there. "Excuse me," Vinnie called to the official across the tent, the man looked up at him, "my fishing partner misunderstood that he was supposed to put the boat through inspection..."

"Well, sir, I am truly sorry," the official shuffled papers and cleared his throat. "Rules are rules. If we make an exception for you, we have to make all kinds of exceptions and then we may as well just have a weekend of pointless fishing." Vinnie smiled grimly. He recognized a weekend potentate when he saw one. "I sort of thought the point was having fun," Vinnie commented, "as sportsmen..." The official, rustling more papers and pursing his lips, was obviously annoyed. Vinnie wanted to smack him. He tried again. "We've come all this way just to fish here—"

"All right, I'll do this much for you: You and your partner can fish anyway. Nothing will be official, but you can participate." He waited for Vinnie to respond. When Vinnie remained silent, the official reached under the table he had been sitting at and pulled out a cooler filled with beer and ice. He picked it up and made his way toward the tent's exit. Vinnie watched with narrowed eyes. "I am sorry, but that is the best I can do. At least you can compete...sportsmanship and all that." Then he ducked out the exit and was gone.

Vinnie was crushed. "I have gone through hell to get into this tournament, and once again I go and prove nice guys finish screwed! When I lay my hands on Mr. Ramon Moldanato, I am going to settle this like the true professional I am," Vinnie fumed to the tent, now empty save for him, "I will do things to him a Hollywood creep show writer wouldn't think of. I will show that bastard who has honor and who is second best – which is dead!"

Vinnie was storming out of the tent when a better idea hit him, one that grew in perfection the more he thought about it: physical wounds heal in time – but not psychological ones. What he had in mind was not a kneecapping, but an emotional crippling – and this plan depended on one thing. Vinnie reached into his shirt pocket and finally removed the lure Miss Millie had given him. He carefully unwrapped the paper towel she had placed it in. Then like something out of a dream there it was, the thing he had been insulted, slapped at, been attacked by ants and barfed on for. It was...

...an ordinary piece of wood.

VII

Vinnie walked away from the tent in a daze. He continued to mutely stare at the small stick. Miss Millie had treated him like family. He actually trusted someone he had just met. "So why," he started angrily talking to himself like his fishing guide did to himself, "did she trick me?! Why the hell would she humiliate me? Did she think Ramon and I were working together?" He calmed himself and started replaying the day's events over in his mind, right back to something that Booger had said about Miss Millie: "She's not what she seems." Maybe there was some secret to what she had given to him, just as she, too, had her secrets. Fine, he thought. I have mine; she's entitled to hers.

Booger Green's voice broke his train of thought. "C'mon on, quick! Th' sumbitch is tryin' ta haul ass outta here!" Booger was jumping up and down in a frenzy, frantically pointing in the direction of

the docks. There, down by the boat ramp, was Ramon. The Colombian gangster was in the process of pulling his boat out of the water. Vinnie looked at Booger and asked him, “When the fuck did he get here?”

“Just a couple o’ minutes ago; come in like his ass was on fire.”

“Yeah?” Vinnie snarled, “Maybe it was all of those cookies he took from Miss Millie.” Booger grabbed Vinnie’s arm and forced him to turn and face him; he barked out, “Sweet shit – Miss Millie gave him sumptin’ ta eat?” The little man’s face was ashen and his voice dropped to a moan, “Oh Lord! Vinnie, we gots ta talk!” Vinnie wasn’t in the mood for one of Booger’s stories; not now. Ignoring Booger’s whining, Vinnie reached in his pocket, took out his wallet and handed the grimy man a ten-dollar bill. “Here, Booger. Go get yourself some food, beer or whatever.” The filthy, little man refused the money, and Vinnie became impatient, “Goddamn it, Booger! Just go! I’ll see you later!”

Booger would not be denied. He grabbed Vinnie by the arm and shook him. “Please, Vinnie! It’s goin’ too far! We gotta talk *now!*” No one accosted Vinnie twice and got away with hit. He ripped Booger’s hand from his arm and cocked his fist yelling, “Booger, if you don’t get the hell outta here, I’m going to deck your smelly ass! And I *never* give anyone a warning!” Booger stood his ground with the look of someone who didn’t care if he lived or died. “That’s fine. Go an’ deck me – you always seem ta know what yer doin’. But if yer alone with that Ramon feller – well, just don’t be. Got me?”

Vinnie wasn’t listening anymore. He had to catch Ramon. He dropped the ten on the ground and muttered, “Get a buzz and sleep it off.” Booger stood there like a whipped dog. He muttered, “A man’s word is his bond.” The words hit Vinnie in the back of the head as if Booger had hurled a rock at him. What was it Miss Millie had asked him as payment? To keep an eye on Booger? The swamp man had been pretty much right about everything up until this point – this was uncharted territory for the hitman. Believing the sincerity of others – especially strangers – was a dangerous thing to people in his line of work. That and having faith. But right now, all of those bets would have to be put on hold as he approached Ramon.

“Once a thief, always a thief, eh, Ramon? My grandfather always told me that.” The sound of Vinnie’s voice took Ramon by surprise. He paused securing the boat to watch Vinnie walk toward him. His look of astonishment was soon replaced by a smug expression. “I never listen to advice from senile, old guineas,” Ramon retorted. “Nor do I pal around with smelly, fucking drunks.” Ramon tried to dismiss Vinnie by going back to securing the boat. “That’s why you’ll never be more than what you are, Moldanato, begging at the table for the scraps I leave behind. As for the ‘smelly drunk’ part, you shouldn’t talk that way about your momma.”

“Fuck you, and your whole world along with everything in it!” Ramon snarled. “You’re a dinosaur Testoroni! All you talk about are the ‘old ways’! Well, get ready to be extinct!” Ramon was literally screaming, much to Vinnie’s amusement, “Right now, as you stand there running your face, my people are looking to fuck your whole crew back to Sicily on the garbage scow they came in on!” He continued with his attack, “And where else would people from a garbage scow talk, but out of their asses? At least my ‘guinea’ ancestors aren’t the trash of half breeds.” Vinnie smiled as he watched Ramon’s face turn Florida-sunburn red. “Anyway, all that aside,” Vinnie said, his voice dropping to an even, almost amiable, tone, “you’re still trying to steal my boat. Now stand back and I’ll put it back in the water.”

He went to push Ramon out of the way. Ramon had other ideas. Vinnie saw the 9mm flash into Ramon's hand; in less than a heartbeat, it was pointed straight at Vinnie's chest. "You are such an asshole," Vinnie sighed. Ramon smiled insanely, flashing gritting teeth, "I'm an asshole, am I? Who's got a gun on who?"

"I don't doubt for second that you're stupid enough to shoot, Ramon; but think – if you can. First, it's going to attract attention, a bad thing even here in 'Yee-Haw!' land. Second, that's a clip weapon. They have a nasty habit of jamming and you definitely don't want that to happen. All I need is a second and I'll send your nose to meet the empty space where your brain should be. I'll even tell the cops it was self defense and my lawyers will make it stick!"

Ramon lowered the gun slightly for a moment, then vengefully brought it back up. "Oh, yeah? I'll kill you anyway! I'll tell the cops that you tried to steal my boat and I was protecting my property! So you're fucked no matter what!"

Vinnie sighed and, with a shake of his head, gave Ramon a "you're such an idiot" look and said, "Oh, that's a great idea." Ramon looked as if he had been slapped, "What's 'great?'"

"Your plan." Vinnie answered sarcastically. "I'm sure as the cops investigate, they'll question the places where you bought the boat and your Range Rover – in cash, isn't that what you told me? I guess you people still can't tell the difference between the IRS and the INS – you launder money for the first and your illegal grandma for the second." Before Ramon could interject, Vinnie continued, "I remember about a year ago how the IRS put that buddy of yours who owned the strip club on the rack. Stuck his butt in federal prison for – how many years was it? – for tax evasion? I hope you aren't claustrophobic and enjoy getting your ass grabbed – oh, and like being known as a welsher."

That was the "bait" coup de gras – as a true gambler, Ramon would, above all things, not want to be known as someone who went back on his bets. Vinnie hoped he would bite. He did.

Ramon put the gun down and looked around. Vinnie figured his brain was overheating by now. After a few, uncomfortably silent seconds the Colombian said, "What are you talking about? We don't have a bet going. How the hell am I welshing?"

Hooked. Now Vinnie needed some skill to reel him in and land him.

"Simple. You told me I could have your boat since you wrecked mine. No payoff? A definite welsh!" Vinnie knew it was a stretch to call it a "bet", but he was banking on Ramon's temper to wash over that fact. Sure enough, Ramon slammed his hand down on the boat and, with a catch in his voice, retorted, "Look, Testoroni – I said you could have the boat if you took me as your partner; but since we're disqualified, that leaves no reason to continue. I don't play for laughs!" Ramon had never intended to fish; Vinnie knew that for sure now. More than likely, the Colombian checked with the officials today and purposely stayed away until it was too late for inspection. Stealing Vinnie's wallet had been just a lucky break for him. Ramon had big ideas for a small man – and small men usually have huge egos. Vinnie felt the time was right for a big finish.

"Moldanato, I hate you worse than I do my ex-wife. You're a fucking wannabe mafioso! I don't blame you for it and, if you want, I've got a way for you to make the jump from that pack of jungle

monkeys you work for to the big time. All you have to do is make a small bet with me. You win and I'll personally introduce you to my people. Then I'll retire and turn it all over to you." When it looked as if Ramon was truly considering all this, Vinnie cinched the deal, "Mook included as your new partner. Now, you can't turn me down!"

Vinnie smiled confidently as he thought, Mook would shit if he knew what was going on. Ramon tapped his fingers against his teeth, pondering Vinnie's offer. He narrowed his eyes and stared at Vinnie for a long moment before speaking. "You must really think you can win this so-called 'bet,' Testoroni. First, tell me what the bet is on. You owe me that at least."

"I bet you I can catch a bigger fish than you," Vinnie said. Ramon said nothing. A smile crept along his lips, building to a grin, then a smile then an open-mouthed guffaw that led to him laughing until he choked. Vinnie thought he would vomit. "That - that's it?" Ramon said, wiping tears and still laughing, "You wanna fish against me for your life? Don't you ever call me 'stupid' again, Testoroni! Madre de dios! Sure! Why the fuck not? You got any thing special you want? Like maybe we fish blindfolded?" Ramon kept going, completely amused with himself, "No - no, wait - how about we cut up your pal Booger and use him for bait!"

A shadow passed over Vinnie's face. "Booger is not to know about any of this, Moldanato. We leave tomorrow morning for the far side of the lake, away from the tourney area. We go at 4:00 a.m. - no guns, knives or bullshit. If you screw up, the deal is off and I will fuck you up so bad..." Ramon chuckled and held up his hands in a calming motion. "Okay - relax, relax. If you stay this intense, it'll scare the fish! We'll do it! Shake, so the deal is set," Ramon said, extending his hand.

Vinnie laughed, "I've got something better." He kissed Ramon on the cheek. "That's how we do it in the big time." Vinnie strode away with a swagger in his step. Behind him, he could hear Ramon swearing in Spanish to the stars that had just started to appear that he'd win. Vinnie smiled wolfishly as Ramon's voice faded away. Unfortunately, Vinnie was too far away and his grasp of the language insufficient to know that what Ramon was actually saying was how he'd sealed Vinnie's fate at the swamp witch's house.

"Bye, bye, Vinnie!" Ramon yelled after him. Tomorrow, like your people love to say, you'll be sleeping with the fishes.

VIII

Vinnie slept soundly. Ramon's sleep was disturbed by a dream about getting a bellyache from eating a truckload of cake and candy. He shook himself awake and realized that he had just had a dream that he used to have as a kid. Between the dream and his real stomach discomfort, he couldn't get back to sleep - and it was only around 2:00 a.m. But he comforted himself with thoughts of the day and how, after tomorrow, he could take it easy forever. He got up and began his special preparations for the coming fishing contest.

Vinnie got up before his travel alarm could sound. He turned off the alarm and gathered his gear, making sure that Miss Millie's gift was securely tucked away. Once finished with his preparations, he looked around the small room to make sure he had everything. His bags outside of his room, he reminded himself to grab his gun from the truck. As he grabbed the doorknob, he was hit by a feeling like a slug of bad whiskey burning his throat. For whatever reason, his conscience was saying

to him, “You’re doing a bad thing.” Again, Vinnie thought to himself that he needed to fix this newfound faith thing – it was going to get him killed.

On the other hand, Ramon Moldanato had no feelings, save for the fire burning in his stomach. He had consumed an entire roll of antacid tablets to no avail. Screw it, he thought and concentrated on how good he would feel after he beat Vinnie. Ramon loaded his tackle box on the boat as he remembered how good he felt about doing the old lady yesterday. It didn’t feel as good as when he had done Mook down in Aruba; but was a good feeling nonetheless. Moldanato loved the way he had killed them, using a compound his drug lord friends had developed.

“This is why you are going to lose, Vinnie,” Ramon chuckled to the dark morning. Testoroni was, in Ramon’s opinion, too old fashioned; a hitman with honor and morals. He shook his head and said, again aloud, “Typical old-school wop ethic.”

“It’s enough to beat a new-school maricon. Let’s get this show going, Ramon.”

Ramon flipped around to see Vinnie standing on the dock, not more than two feet away. “Motherfucker! You surprised the shit out of me! How did you do that?” asked Ramon, genuinely intrigued. Vinnie knew he had either been lucky to sneak up on Ramon, or that Ramon had been so deep in thought he hadn’t been paying attention. Vinnie hoped it was the former, but settled on the answer Booger had given him, “It’s an old Indian trick. Now let’s get going. The best fishing is done before the sun comes up.”

Ramon started the engine.

IX

The lake looked peaceful in the moonlight. This must have been how it appeared to the first Native Americans to ever see it, thought Vinnie. Ramon, uncharacteristically silent, steered the boat across the lake. Vinnie figured his thoughts must be somewhere else; he doubted Ramon had any interest in the pristine beauty surrounding them.

The last of the waning moon’s light played on ripples created by the boat’s passage through quiet, spring-fed water. Ramon had the throttle barely above idle as they ventured across the lake. Neither man wanted to alert anyone of their presence. Any human, that is. The copious number of orange, glowing eyes peering up from the water marked their passage. Vinnie knew the watching eyes belonged to cruising alligators. The population here was exceptionally large, even for this area. He always researched any place he planned to fish. During his perusal of the Florida Freshwater Fish and Game Commission’s brochures, which he had made a habit of collecting over the years, Vinnie learned this was a gator preserve. That meant no poaching, or “gigging,” for the ancient reptiles.

For decades, the alligator had faced extinction in Florida. Only through the efforts of various societies manned by people dedicated to saving what was left of Old Florida, its animals and their habitats had the alligators been saved. The alligators’ population had increased to such an extent they were no longer listed as endangered, only protected; and there were people who disputed the need for protecting the dangerous beasts. Vinnie recalled the distraught owner of a recently deceased poodle. He admitted to having felt sorry for the elderly, blue-haired woman with the markedly northern accent; though not half as sorry for her as he did for the dog. She was tearfully telling the

tale of poor Bellini's death to the news, asking why the "damnable, useless gators were allowed access to Florida's waters." The problem wasn't the gators, though: it was the people. It was people who insisted on treating alligators as if they were tourist attractions and built their homes on lakes and canals, which provided the only habitat the creatures could live in. Gators didn't care if a cat or a dog was a pet – to the gators, they were lunch. The same went for imbeciles who tried to feed a gator like they were giving a herring to a porpoise at SeaWorld.

Vinnie glanced at Ramon out of the corner of his eye, "They must all be related to you, asshole."

"You say something?" Ramon answered.

"Yeah, we're here."

"About time, it's been half an hour."

"Patience, Ramon, patience. This is a good spot for our contest."

Ramon pulled out another roll of antacids and took three tablets. Vinnie watched with secret glee. He had been closely watching his opponent and his growing abdominal discomfort. Silently, he chanted, "Fuck you, hard," every time Ramon had whined from his belly pains. "Stop the engine and we'll get started," Vinnie directed pleasantly. Ramon complied and tossed out the small anchor to keep them from drifting too close to shore.

The two uneasy companions readied their poles, lines and other tackle. Vinnie, though busy with his own tackle, couldn't help overhearing Ramon swearing in Spanish about some difficulties he was having with his gear. "Why you won't stay tied on, you bastard?" Ramon muttered, or something along those lines from what Vinnie could tell. He understood a great deal of Spanish, it wasn't that different from Italian; and Ramon peppered his with a good amount of English. With the sound of Ramon's bitching in the background, Vinnie reached into his tackle box and pulled out the special lure. He didn't want Ramon to see it; he worked as quickly as he could to get it in the water.

The problem was that Vinnie didn't know if he should split the thing and try to insert a proper hook into it, if he should put a bobber on his line – a thousand questions about how to deal with a stick of wood. Vinnie still didn't understand how a lure with no hook would catch a fish, but he decided to trust in what he had been given.

Vinnie followed his instincts. He put the lure on his line and nothing else. As he was tying the little piece of wood on, Vinnie was astonished to see the lure close over the line wrapped around it, like skin healing over a wound. Vinnie thought he was seeing things in the pale light, then figured it was all part of the magic. Deep inside of him he was actually glad to see that the lure presented unusual properties from the start – it made his faith stronger. He wished he could be here with anyone except Ramon. At least with someone else, he could indulge in the age-old fisherman's game of showing off his great fishing secret. Vinnie mused about what one of the local, good ol' boys would say if they saw a Miami city slicker owning something better than all their granddaddies' fishing wisdom combined. Such a scene would have been great, silly fun for all. With that, Vinnie made his first cast out into the lake.

Ramon finally finished fussing and cast his line over on the opposite side of the boat. Now came the rough part of all this. The part where the tension and anxiety that had been building between them escalated to almost unbearable heights. Now it was time to wait.

Vinnie listened to a “tree frog concerto” that had begun when he and Ramon cast their lines. After a very short time, Vinnie was startled by a sharp cry from Ramon. It was too soon for Ramon to get a strike – not when Vinnie had his special lure! “All right!” Ramon yelled with childish glee, “Come to poppa, you scaly bastard!” Even in the pale, half light of dawn, Vinnie could see Ramon’s graphite pole bending in an alarming arc. Forgetting the rivalry between them, Vinnie got caught up in the excitement and called out words of encouragement. “Play it out Ramon! Don’t give it too much line!”

“Mind your own fucking business!” Ramon grunted. “You don’t know shit from spit about what you’re doing.” Vinnie cursed at him in Italian and went back to tending his own line. It wasn’t easy: the boat was rocking with Ramon’s efforts. Just when Vinnie thought he had a nibble, Ramon suddenly called out for help. Vinnie was above all else a sportsman. He secured his pole and went to help Moldanato even though it may have cost him his possible strike. Honor among thieves was nothing compared to honor among fisherman. Working his way across the small, unstable boat took some effort. When he got to the other man, Vinnie knew Ramon had a big one on the line. Vinnie cursed under his breath, and looked around for the net. It was lying near the live well. He grabbed it and got ready to help haul Ramon’s catch into the boat. All at once, the fish broke the water. Vinnie could see the sparkle of a massive amount of scales.

“Damn! It’s a whale!” shouted Vinnie. Just as he lowered the net to scoop the fish up, a pair of orange eyes surfaced next to it. Vinnie heard Ramon yell, “Gator!!” Resident of Miami or not, Vinnie was a Floridian and he had lots of experience with the living prehistoric reptiles. Alligators could usually be deterred; but should one become insistent things could rapidly become dangerous. Vinnie quickly turned the net in his hands and rammed the pole toward the creature’s eye. The alligator hissed, bellowed and sank beneath the surface of the water. It might be retreating, it might be readying another bid for the fish. The animals were not as stupid as most humans thought they were.

Not wasting a motion, Vinnie flipped the net around and placed it under the fish. After some effort by both men, they got it into one of the boat’s live wells. Ramon’s eyes danced as he and Vinnie watched the fish flop, futilely trying to escape the strange place in which it found itself. Vinnie had to admire the aquatic animal’s preservation instincts. He kind of wished he had listened to his own instincts as he realized that if he didn’t come up with a superior catch, that he, too, might be fighting for his life.

The line still in its mouth, Vinnie was about to reach down to pull the hook from the fish’s mouth when he heard Ramon gloating. “Now *that’s* a fish!” Ramon chortled with an electric charge to his voice. “No, fuck that! It’s a *monster!* A freakin’ *monster!*” Vinnie agreed. It was a beautiful large-mouth bass: at least ten pounds and big like all of outdoors. As Vinnie put his hands down towards the fish to finish what he had begun to do earlier, Ramon grabbed his hand and stopped him. “What the hell are you up to, Testoroni?! Get the fuck outta here! This bitch is mine! I don’t want your greasy paws on it!” If Vinnie was ever going to rap Ramon in the mouth, this was it!

“Moldanato,” Vinnie said through tight lips, “I’ve taken a lot of shit the last couple of days, but this beats it all by a fucking mile!” Even though Vinnie was in a pique of anger, something in the back of his head told him to turn around. When he looked back at his pole, he saw it trying get free of the tie down. Then the whole boat tipped toward that area. Vinnie rushed over just before the pole slipped out of its bonds. He no longer cared care about Ramon’s smart mouth. He wanted the bass that he was sure had just tugged on his line.

Vinnie grabbed onto the pole as if his life depended on it. In a way, it did.

He played out a little line, just enough to keep things going. Vinnie then started reeling his line in spurts to tire the fish out. If he didn’t do it this way, Vinnie would need Ramon’s help getting into the boat, and that was the last thing he wanted.

And so it went for five good minutes. Reel then release, reel then release. Finally, the thing on Vinnie’s line got close enough to see. It was what he’d hoped for, a huge large mouth bass! He would have hated to waste all this on a gar – and the best part was that it looked to be bigger than Ramon’s fish. “Good fuckin’ deal!” Vinnie grinned. Screw the net, he decided. Vinnie would grab it under the gills and haul it on board. His plan proved to be a mistake. When Vinnie went to grab the line, the stress on the monofilament was too much and, quick as a flash of summer lightning, the fish was gone!

Vinnie had no moment of disbelief, because what had happened hit him like a ton of bricks. He lost it, in both ways. He lost the fish *and* he lost the lure! And now he lost the last of his control along with them. “Son of a fucking motherless cockbiting bitch bastard!!” Was all he could say. Vinnie turned to look at Ramon. The man was laughing. Seeing the ambitious hitman holding his belly, guffawing and grimacing at the same time, made Vinnie’s anger rise like water to a boil.

“Oh, man, if it didn’t hurt so much to laugh, I think I’d kill myself,” giggled Ramon.

“Let me help you,” Vinnie growled.

“Vinnie, Vinnie, Vinnie! I told you I was going to win. But, hey, look, I want to show you I’m not a bad sport. I’ll give you another chance. How’s that, boy?” Vinnie was humiliated, he knew that as good as he was at fishing, without Millie’s lure he didn’t stand a chance. Ramon’s luck was too much to beat without help. Ramon picked up on Vinnie’s consternation and said with false sincerity, “I think I know what’s wrong...” Ramon held out his hand to Vinnie.

Vinnie stared at his lost lure!

His mind reeled. Vinnie stammered out the words he wanted to yell. “H-how d-did you get that?” Ramon tossed the little piece of wood to Vinnie and grinned nastily, “Here, cabron. No problem. I’ve got lots more.” Ramon opened his tackle box and showed Vinnie dozens stick-like lures. Vinnie fought back his impulse to strangle Ramon. “Moldanato, I’m going to ask again: How did you get those?” Ramon smiled, “Same place you did: Miss motherfuckin’ Millie!” Moldanato sat back for a second to let Vinnie drink in his words. Seeing how perplexed Vinnie was, Ramon added, nonchalantly, “I had to kill her first, though. She didn’t like me as much as she did you. I could tell.”

Vinnie went into a crouch and prepared to send Ramon straight to hell. Ramon pulled out a gun.

Oh shit! Vinnie thought ruefully, not again!

While Vinnie was silently damning himself for allowing this to happen, a gleeful Moldanato spoke again, “Stay put, dickhead! This one’s a revolver, and it ain’t gonna jam! Just sit there like a nice boy and I’ll tell you about her last minutes on Earth. Then when you hear it, you’ll understand why Ramon Perez Maria Garcia Moldanato, is the best of all!”

“I’ll believe it when I hear it. Maybe,” Vinnie humored him, hoping for a chance to get Ramon. Patience, he had told Ramon earlier, patience.

Ramon was crowing about his victory, “It was so fucking easy, too. My first clue was when you and that drunk buddy of yours got real cozy in the restaurant about some place you had to go and it had something to do with your wallet. The rest was like an old three stooges episode. I trip the waitress, she spills the hot food and – bam! – I got your wallet. I get the weird piece of paper with some fucked up directions and some bathroom wall philosophy, how did it go?”

Ramon assumed an exaggerated expression, a comic’s version of someone deep in thought; it was as if a sarcastic bit of play acting would add to the moment. Vinnie greeted the performance with studied indifference. Ramon shrugged and emoted, “Oh yeah, it went something like, ‘New are all under the sky and to me the Great Spirit does fly.’ Shit! It doesn’t even rhyme decently. I waited for you and the Wicked Witch of the South to stop bullshitting and went back after you left. Then I simply cornered her and beat the shit out of her!” He paused and looked thoughtful for a minute, “You know, for a woman living in the woods and fending for herself, she didn’t put up a fight; nope, not at all.” He laughed, “See! Even *she* knew I am the best! The rest was a piece of cake. I knocked her out and gave her a shot of a little something my boys cooked up for me. It makes the victim appear to have had a heart attack. I propped her up on the sofa. The rest is what you see before you now: the greatest hitman since Judas Iscariot!”

Ramon was obvious in his relish of the situation. Then he got a pained look on his face. His stomach was hurting worse with each passing moment. Ramon knew he’d better get this over with before he got too sick. “Any questions before we blow away the audience?” Ramon asked dryly. Vinnie was determined to try and stall Ramon. “Yeah, ‘oh, great one’: Don’t you think the cops’ll wonder about the bruises on her body? Or didn’t this occur to you, you being god’s gift to death and all?”

“Vinnie, my poor chico, don’t worry. After your suicide, they won’t care that you killed her.”

“Just how the hell are they going to trace it to me?” Vinnie snarled, ignoring Ramon’s plan for his “suicide.” Ramon grinned more broadly than Vinnie ever remembered anyone grinning, “I left the fishing license I found in your wallet near her corpse. Pretty good, eh, amigo?” Vinnie berated himself briefly for not checking his wallet more closely when he got it back. He never got to properly register for the tourney, so he never checked to see if he had it for the final inspection.

He heard Ramon click the hammer on the gun. Vinnie had to think fast. “Ramon, if you whack me, my people will sell your skin to the Japs for sushi!” Ramon spit at Vinnie and said, “Your people ain’t gonna take kindly to your unauthorized killing of a helpless old woman...so shut up!

“Oh, one little detail – to think I almost overlooked telling you! – don’t count on Mook to help avenge you. I did Mook in Aruba before I left. He died of ‘blood poisoning,’ the poor bastard. You gotta be careful when snorkeling on the reefs down there. Even an experienced guide like myself didn’t see that ‘sea snake’...you know, the syringe with stuff the authorities figured for a snake bite.

“He passed out from that and all the rum he drank. Last I saw him, they were airlifting him to Miami – hope he made it – into the pearly gates, I mean!”

“I am flattered, Ramon. All of this trouble you’ve gone to, just for me,” Vinnie smiled coldly. Mook would have said right now, “What a putz.” Mook wasn’t dead; Vinnie knew there was no way such a grand moron, no matter how completely evil and vicious, could kill Mook. Miss Millie, though, was another story. She was such a sweetheart; Ramon would pay for what he did to her, even if Vinnie had to crawl from the grave to wreak vengeance.

Vinnie narrowed his eyes. Everything was in slow motion – it was as if time slowed down to give him a chance. Ramon fancied himself to be Al Pacino’s Scarface: and if Hollywood is what he wanted, that was what he was going to get, thought Vinnie. Suddenly, instinctively, knew what he had to do. Vinnie stood straight up in the boat and held his hands high in the air. Ramon laughed with approval, “Bravo, bravo! You stand tall! Good! You are a real man!” That was when time finally slowed to a stop and Vinnie found himself in the grips of a warm feeling that embraced and controlled him. A feeling that opened his mouth and sing forth with a tune he had never learned, “Call to the old, speak to the new, all are under the sky, to me the Great Spirit does...Fly!”

Ramon was visibly nervous. “What the hell was that about? I hate that poem or whatever the fuck it is!” Ramon grabbed his belly with his free hand. The pain was intensified by Vinnie’s song. Ramon composed himself, and said, “That’s one other good thing about that old bitch dying: She can’t make anymore of those rotten cookies! I’ve had a stomach ache ever since I ate them!” Vinnie was silent now. The strange feeling and the song had left him as flocks of birds take wing when a predator appears. He noticed a movement in the water. A particularly large set of orange eyes surfaced only a few seconds after his song. He noticed they were coming straight at the boat. This was Vinnie’s chance, the break he desperately needed.

Vinnie lunged for Ramon. He was halfway to his adversary when something slammed into the boat. The gun was still aimed at Vinnie: it discharged as Ramon struggled to maintain his balance. The bullet grazed Vinnie’s scalp. Stunned, Vinnie fell overboard.

Florida waters average seventy degrees irrespective of the air temperature. When Vinnie hit the water, he went under; but the cool temperature revived him. He was only underwater for a second; time had returned to normal. When he broke the surface, he was bleeding profusely from the wound; but with all the water streaming off of him he had no idea outside of the throbbing in his head that he’d been hit. He did realize that he must be in some kind of shock and tried to clear his head. He focused on the boat, where he saw Ramon firing his gun into the water.

What the hell is he firing at? Vinnie wondered. Had Ramon also suffered some kind of injury? Vinnie was nowhere near the area into which the Colombian was emptying his gun. Vinnie closed his eyes for a second to clear them and prayed his action would not cause him to slip into unconsciousness. When he opened them again, he almost wished he hadn’t done so. As dawn burst over the lake, Vinnie saw what he could only call a monster – not a fish, but a *real* monster.

Whatever the thing was that was trying to get in the boat with Ramon wasn't even slowed by the rounds erupting with fire. What ever it was, it was not an alligator – or was it?

The sun's light was slicing in beams over the trees lighting up the water, allowing Vinnie to get a good look at the thing that was now in the boat and beginning to swallow whole the soon-to-be former Ramon Perez Maria Garcia Moldanato, Hitman Supreme.

The monster looked to be about eight feet tall and about four feet wide. Vinnie could not get a bead on its appearance because it kept *changing*. First it looked like a giant alligator-like thing with iridescent scales and something slimy oozing from them. Then, it morphed into something grotesquely hairy with a head the size of its body. There were more shapes, but Vinnie's swirling mind could no longer take them in. The one shape it constantly came back to, the one image that was forever burned into Vinnie's mind, was a horrible combination of mammal, insect and reptile. It had a long, scaly body with a mass of matted hair running down its back and ending in a barbed tail; saucer-sized eyes faceted like a bee's; a stinger like a scorpion's at the end of the tail. But no matter what shape it took on, the creature's mouth was always the same: a nasty, gaping construction with rows of razor sharp teeth. The teeth seemed to move in their respective rows giving the impression of an orifice filled with a buzzing chainsaw. It was in this maw that Vinnie watched in terrified disbelief Ramon being inch by inch ground into flying pieces of bloody gristle. His agonized screams would have elicited pity from Satan himself.

Even for someone as hardened as Vinnie it was far too much. He actually thought, with his own strangely placed pity, that Ramon didn't have the sense to pass out to make it easier. Something crept into Vinnie's mind that told him that the creature did not want Ramon to pass out. That Ramon would continue to thrash in the thing's belly while he was slowly digested – in more pain than any man had ever endured.

This was the last thought Vinnie had before everything went white – and he saw and felt nothing at all.

X

Booger's sleep was tormented by a dream that he was a beer bottle filled with golden liquid. Someone was sucking the brew out of him, slowly drinking the very essence of his life. He was just about to have his beer bottle body thrown on the recycling heap, when he was startled awake by the sound of a small explosion near his island home. It sounded like a shot being fired an inch from his ear. He didn't think, he didn't dress; he ran out of his shack as fast as he could. Booger looked around groggily, and then heard more shots and now some shouts along with it. Then a scream. By the time he got to the water's edge of his 'private estate,' the screams had begun in earnest. Booger stopped dead in his tracks at the sound.

"No, no, no, no, no! Not again!" It was just like when he was a small boy – it was happening just as he had suspected it might! He tried to warn Vinnie, but the man hadn't listened. Booger knew she had another victim: First grandpa, then those federal men from the alcohol agency and then a few bad folk here and there. Now Booger was sure it was happening to Vinnie! He wanted to run ran back in his shack and hide for the rest of his days; but he couldn't. He knew that Vinnie was in trouble.

In the light of the rising sun he scanned the lake to see if he could spot the source of the screams. Sure enough, just like the way he had seen it happen to his grandpa, there she was standing in the Spanish fella's boat. It was Miss Millie! Her jaw all unlocked like a rat snake's, a-gulping down...someone. Booger couldn't see who it was; but he *could* see someone floating in the water nearby. Much to his relief, he recognized it as Vinnie.

Booger's vision was excellent, so he could also see that Vinnie was in peril of drowning. He didn't want to disturb Miss Millie while she was feeding, but he had to save Vinnie. He pushed his old boat into the water. The lake rat almost slipped and fell in the lake from his efforts, but managed to scramble aboard and row his small boat to save the drowning man. Without looking in the direction of the Miss Millie thing, he hauled Vinnie aboard.

Against his better judgment, Booger found himself glancing up at what was going on in the larger boat. He didn't want to, but something made him. Miss Millie still had her jaw unslung part way and was now just getting Ramon's knees into her open maw. She winked at Booger and then waved him away, like a mother shooing off a pesky child. Booger didn't have to be told twice. He rowed for all he was worth – and to Vinnie Testoroni, that would mean a lot.

Vinnie didn't want to sleep, but he felt groggy from the sedatives he had been given. After Booger got him to the camp, the manager called an ambulance and Vinnie ended up in the Orange County Regional Medical Center's emergency room. They shaved Vinnie's scalp and put ten stitches in. "How did he get shot?" a police officer on duty at the hospital demanded of Booger. He held a clipboard with report forms on it and a pen poised to write, "And what happened to the other man he was fishing with?"

"Well, sir, they had fish in the boat. A lake monster attacked th' boat and that Spanish boy took a shot at it. He missed an' hit Vinnie. Th' boat went over an' th' Spanish boy went under. I paddled my canoe as fast as I could ta get ta them, but th' monster got th' Spanish Boy. Was all I could do ta pull Vinnie out o' th' water..."

The cop worked hard to suppress a laugh. He had dealt with people like Booger before. "Yeah, some of the gators around here get as big as small trucks," the cop nodded. He made a small checkmark next to a blank line on the report form and handed it to Booger. "Sign here and we're finished."

"Yes, sir," Booger signed his name with great care. "Yes, sir, indeed...some o' them monsters are real big."

Booger went back to Vinnie's room and sat outside like a dog waiting for his master to claim him. He didn't want to disturb Vinnie. A nurse noticed this and decided to help the nervous little man out. She went into Vinnie's room and cleared her throat until Vinnie opened his eyes and looked up. "You have a visitor, Mr. Testor," the nurse smiled. Vinnie smiled back. Seeing he was feeling better she ventured to ask another question. "Do you feel up to having a bit of company?"

"As long as it's not someone who's going to shove something into a place I don't want it to go, yeah, sure." Vinnie said with a joking tone. The nurse nodded and went out into the hall. Booger popped in like a wayward jack-in-the-box, "Boy, are you a sight fer sore eyes! I thought ya was done fer when I heard th' screamin' comin' from th' lake. That was a close shave, buddy." Vinnie received

the overwrought Booger with joy. As usual, Booger stank to high heaven; as far as Vinnie was concerned, this stench was as welcome as fine perfume.

Booger hurried over to Vinnie's bedside and examined Vinnie's scalp, "Jeez Louise! Ya ain't gonna be gettin' no ladies fer a while!" Vinnie smiled even though the action hurt, then he looked at Booger gravely. "Booger, what the hell happened out there?" Booger got a serious look and then went to shut the room's door. He pulled a chair from the corner and sat down at Vinnie's bedside. The smelly man studied Vinnie for a moment and then began to speak in a high-pitched, nervous tone. "Bubba, I could tell ya everything, but ya seen 'xactly what I saw."

"You mean a 'boogey man' eating Ramon like a damn popsicle?" Vinnie's voice was quiet.

"Yeah, well, she always looks like yer worst nightmare 'til ya get ta know her a mite. Then, Millie just looks a little different than normal folk do."

"Miss Millie..." Vinnie started to choke. He brought an IV-tube festooned hand up to his face and rubbed at his forehead and eyes. "Are you saying that...that...*thing* was – *is* – Miss Millie? My God, man! That *thing* ate Ramon...it swallowed him *whole*!" Vinnie gasped. "What the hell is she? A medicine woman? A part-time Creature From the Red Bug Lagoon? How? I—" Booger sighed and struggled to find words to quell Vinnie's impending meltdown.

"Look, Vinnie. There's just some things older than us, th' Indians an' th' gators. Miss Millie's all that an' more. If ya had talked ta me 'fore ya went an' got hurt by gettin' in between that Ramon fella an' Millie, I coulda told ya," Booger admonished. "You are right, Booger, and I apologize. Please tell me the rest of what you were going to say that day."

Booger continued. "When Miss Millie don't like someone, she eats 'em, plain an' simple. My grandpa messed with her when I was a bitty boy. She come an' invited him ta a big feed over ta her place. Next day, Gramps come down with th' 'Tampa Two-Step.' His stomach hurt ta beat all get out. That's why when that Spanish boy ate them cookies, I knew what Millie was preparing him for.

"Ya see, Vinnie, even someone like Millie gets too old ta chew her food proper, an' that's what th' food she feeds her intended is fer. It works kind o' like that meat tenderizer shit does. They starts dissolving inside; an' when th' time is right Miss Millie calls them to her." Booger stopped to collect his thoughts, then went on, "But with you, it was different. I know she didn't like ya at first, but she powerful hated that Ramon-boy. I knew she would come to tell ya was quality folk. That's why she come when you sang the verse.

"I know from a long time with her that if th' poem's sung, it's ta help somebody in need. She puts th' music in yer head so she can tell straight off it's someone under her protection. It's like me. I've sung that song twice; but after watchin' her gulpin' down gramps, I never saw or wanted ta see such goin's on again!"

Vinnie tried to take in all that Booger was saying. Mercifully, he passed out before Booger finished.

"Come on, honey. I really don't need a wheelchair," Vinnie sighed as he settled in the uncomfortable seat. Looking at the implacable gaze from the nurse he finished, "But it's useless arguing with 'hospital policy,' huh?" The nurse smiled as she stepped behind the chair and pushed it toward the

door. "I wish everyone was as reasonable as you are," she sighed as she guided Vinnie's chair down the hall and to the elevator. He wondered where Booger was. The little man had shown up earlier and taken Vinnie's belongings, all neatly packed into an overnight bag.

"Your friend called and said he would be waiting downstairs," the nurse commented as the elevator doors opened. She pushed the chair in and the doors closed. "He is taking care of the paperwork for you." Sure enough, Booger greeted them with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "Vinnie – all ya got ta do is sign here fer yer release," Booger grinned, "I got us a cab waitin'."

"Good man," Vinnie answered. As he signed, he noticed that the cause of hospitalization was entered as "accidental shooting." Booger then handed him something he hadn't seen in days – his cell phone. "I found it under th' seat in yer Jeep. Figured ya might want it." In all of the excitement, Vinnie had forgotten that he had turned it off when he first approached the camp to keep in theme with the "get back to nature" of his trip. He powered it back on and was greeted with the beeps of voicemails and texts. One screamed out at him.

Booger watched him frantically dial and listened to the exchange. "I knew it! I *knew* that little putz couldn't get over on you!" Booger walked away to give him some privacy. When he returned a few minutes later, Vinnie was still on the phone. "Oh, man, that's *great!*...What? No...stop being my mother, would you? I know my phone was off...I'm...no, *Ma!*...I'm okay. It's a long...yeah. No, I have a new friend who's driving me...Yeah, it's the guy I told you...Lay off! Look, I'll explain everything when I see you."

A huge grin lit up Booger's face at the words "new friend." Vinnie saw him and said, putting his hand over the phone's tiny mouthpiece, "Mook says he want to thank you personally for hauling my sorry ass out of the drink." He was glad Vinnie had accepted his offer to ride down to Miami with him. It wasn't entirely out of concern for Vinnie, though that was a major factor. The doctor at the hospital had frightened Booger half to death by listing what he called "remotely possible complications" from a head wound.

Booger was tired of being alone and nearly friendless. Instead of being hailed as a hero for saving Vinnie from drowning, he was looked upon as a "jinx" because Ramon had been killed – or, at least, presumed to have been killed since there was no sign of a corpse. The camp manager had "invited him" not to return to the premises, period. Booger wanted a change of scenery and maybe a fresh start.

"Okay, bye," Vinnie said and hung up the phone.

"Your pal okay?" Booger asked.

"Yeah, he was just released from the hospital, too. The authorities had him airlifted out of Aruba to Miami. The dose of poison Ramon gave Mook wasn't enough to kill him, just made him really sick," Vinnie shook his head, "If Mook hadn't been drinking so much all week, the poison wouldn't have hit him as hard and he probably would have ripped Ramon's head off between trips to barf in the john."

"Drinking man, is he?" Booger wondered.

“He wants to take you out partying,” Vinnie answered, eyeing Booger’s dreamy, alcohol-longing gaze. “I suppose I’ll have to pour both of you into the car when you’re done.”

“Nope, I can handle my drink when I gots to,” Booger objected earnestly.

Vinnie smiled and thought to himself, “Little man, you’re going to get your chance to prove it.”

Epilogue

Vinnie cast an admiring glance at his reflection in a storefront window. His barber had done an admirable job over the last month minimizing the impact of the bald spot shaven into his hair at the hospital. As his hair grew back, it became increasingly difficult to see the scar left by the bullet wound and subsequent stitches. Vinnie pulled his attention away from his own reflection and examined the window display of his planned retirement, a bait and tackle store he’d named the “Too Tough to Tackle Shop.” He had signed the last of the paperwork this morning: as of 10:53 a.m., he was the proud owner, free and clear, of the business and its small building. He had already been running it for two weeks with Booger and Mook’s help. As he predicted, the two of them got along great. Sometimes, felt Vinnie, a little too great.

In the middle of his reverie there was a loud crash that came from inside the shop. Vinnie hurried to investigate. He walked in to the sight of reels of fishing line spilling out of a broken cardboard case, bouncing all over the cash register, the counter and Booger. Booger was beaten to his knees, cursing and trying to fend off the heavy cylinders. Vinnie walked over and helped Booger to his feet, “What are you trying to do, get yourself killed? You know the rule: Nobody dies unless Vinnie says so!” Booger looked sheepishly at Vinnie. “Sorry, boss,” he mumbled, “I was tryin’ ta get that case down from where Mook put it on th’ shelf and it split on me.”

“Next time, use the ladder. I don’t want the stock dented when it hits your bone head,” Vinnie kidded as he helped Booger pick up the fishing reels, “So, anything new, since [looking at his watch], oh, noon?” Booger considerably brightened, “I got a letter from Miss Millie!”

“Really,” said Vinnie with a cocked eyebrow. “What’d she have to say?”

Booger crooned like a woman with a secret, “Oh, ya know Miss Millie. Everythin’ is fine on my island. She goes an’ puts feed out fer th’ creatures; you know, th’ ‘coons, ‘possums, foxes an’ such. She’s a kind soul – I mean, it ain’t like those critters can’t fend fer themselves.” Vinnie knew that Booger was leading him on, not telling him what he wanted to hear. He let him. Finally, Booger said with a sly smile, “...‘an as fer *you*, she says, ‘He better bring that smooth talkin’, good lookin’ butt o’ his up to visit soon – or else!”

Vinnie never argued with his ‘grandmonster.’ He found another box for the reels and packed them in as Booger handed them over. “Listen,” Vinnie said to him over his shoulder as he worked, “write back and tell her to come on down here for little while. Her creatures will be okay for a couple of days. She’s got that friend who will feed them and—” Booger sighed and shook his head. “I thought I told ya – maybe I didn’t. She can’t leave where she’s at. Th’ land is her an’ she’s th’ land. If she ever leaves that place, well, she won’t be th’ same Miss Millie – fact is, there might not *be* a Miss Millie at all.”

Sometimes Vinnie forgot that she was a creature of magic, no matter how much a part of nature. “Okay, then tell her we’ll be up to see her right after the bonefish tournament in Bimini.” As Vinnie spoke, Mook came into the store. He waved at Booger. The two had hit it off the second they met. Besides their mutual fondness for Vinnie, they were both fans of the bottle and were affectionately known around town as the “The Booze Brothers.”

“Okay, here’s my plan,” the big man announced. Booger leaned against the counter, prepared to pay rapt attention. Vinnie rolled his eyes thinking, Jesus Christ. What scam this time? “Fried chicken and huge, boiled potatoes. We’ll sell franchises,” Mook told them proudly, “and we’ll call it – ready? – ‘Choke Your Chicken.’”

Vinnie just sighed at the man who was more than partner, but a brother to him in the truest sense of the word, as he walked back out of the shop into the warm, Keys afternoon. Booger was kind enough not to laugh until Mook was out of earshot. Vinnie took a deep breath of the salty air that blew in as the door opened and closed, and said quietly to Booger, “I hate to admit it. But that may not be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” Booger grinned broadly at his new friend and said, “Well, th’ day ain’t over...just yet.” The two men decided enough was enough for the day, locked up and started walking in Mook’s footsteps.

As they strolled side by side, Vinnie could feel Booger’s admiration for the man who he now called “boss.” Vinnie slapped him on the back, knocking the unsuspecting skinny little guy into the path of a crowd of drunken tourists fresh from a day of booze and beach. One of them shoved Booger back at Vinnie, who responded with nothing more than separating him from his friends in the lead and staring at him with an evil, tooth-filled smile that said, “Do it to me. Please.”

Vinnie watched with satisfaction as the now-chagrined man called to his friends and nervously skip stepped to catch up to them. “It’s all about knowing the right words,” Vinnie said as he made sure that Booger was okay, concluding with, “but if you make something special enough, you could get someone to bite at it.”

Booger clucked in agreement as they walked toward the patiently waiting Mook, who had stopped when he heard the ruckus. After a moment’s thought the swamp man added, “But I gotta tell ya somethin’ that I’ve learned only recent like: It ain’t th’ bait, son...it’s th’ fisherman!”

And like a cliché from an old film, the friends, old and new, walked off into the sunset.