

Chapter 1

August-Mobile Alabama

Wonderful, just wonderful..

Okay, so I didn't say it out loud. I sat in a little, warmish puddle of water with my back jammed up against a damp concrete block wall and my knees drawn up against my chest, and didn't say anything. I hardly breathed. My butt was beginning to wrinkle. On my left, a concrete minnow pool, thankfully higher than my head, gurgled and whirred, keeping its tiny, brainless occupants alive. I was working on the same goal for myself—feeling as brainless as the minnows.

I hunkered; scrunched behind a big steel and plastic rack filled with nets, fishing rods and various fishy gear, and actually had one of the nets draped over my head. Between my aching knees, I held a .380 AMT Backup pistol—yes, a “mouse gun”—and when I had slipped it out of the ankle holster and flicked the safety off, I had, cursed the shiny sides.

Now, unless someone turns on the overhead lights in this dump, I probably won't be noticed. Not exactly a prayer, but should have been.

The place stunk to the choking point, and since it *was* a seafood market, filled my nose and the back of my palate with its signature clinging, viscous odor of fish—both fresh and *very* old. The pool against my left shoulder burbled along giving off a chemical-edged scent that flew up my nostrils like an invisible swarm of tiny gnats.

In front of me, past the rack, the heavy wooden door crossed with three iron straps had been pushed back until it banged into my shelter of nets, rods and packaged lures. Right now, the little pistol was pointed outward through the nets at no special target. Two Hispanic-looking men who kept wandering in and out of the place and, if I pulled the trigger, I *might* hit one of them—in a kneecap at best. Then my problems would *really* begin.

One of them, a skinny stoop-shouldered specimen, with dark, pocked skin under several days of stubbly beard wore a maroon and silver striped tee shirt. He walked as if he was stalking helpless prey. Slung from a shoulder strap, he had what appeared to be a Tec-9—one of those 9mm street sweepers. The weapon had what appeared to be a silencer screwed on the end of the barrel. I was guessing that it fired on full auto—a homemade submachine gun.

Hey, if you're gonna be illegal, go all the way.

The other one: lighter skinned and smooth-faced—except for the beginnings of what would one day be a Pancho Villa moustache. He walked with the rolling gait of a bear, and his eyes, even in the meager light: small holes in a large, round face, glowing with the merriment of anticipated cruelty. He wore ballooned white pants, bloused into black cowboy boots and a multi-colored sleeveless tee shirt, designed to show off all his considerable muscle. I had seen him somewhere before, but at the moment, I couldn't relax my focus long enough to sort out the previous occasion.

In a shoulder holster, he carried a big, very recognizable, Glock pistol. I had only the puny little .380 with five shots.

Skinny guy had a shorter ponytail than “muscles,” and had a couple of gray streaks against the black, an indicator of how much longer he had lived in a dangerous world. I had no doubt that neither they, nor the redneck-voiced guy outside in the car that had brought them, would show much of a sense of humor if they discovered me.

The two of them sauntered in and out and through the market with the conscious arrogance of men carrying weapons among the unarmed. Latent violence rose from them like heat waves from a summer highway.

Why were these assholes here at all, and why were they toting what amounted to enough serious hardware to kick ass in a big city street conversation—here in a crummy, smelly little fish market called Harry's—here on the Dog River outside Mobile?

Asking myself about them, I had to examine the whole situation. Asking why I, Mack Brinson, retired Special Forces Major, now an entrepreneurial businessman with a wet butt, sat here? To answer my question: just trying to breathe in silence while a couple of nasty-looking, heavily-armed jerks speaking Spanish walked in and out of the store, helping themselves to beer from the glass-fronted coolers.

I don't speak Spanish. I had always *meant* to learn at least one of the other languages spoken in my native hemisphere, but the Army kept sending me to schools to learn Vietnamese, Chinese or Thai. At one time, I could actually *read* a Vietnamese newspaper.

None of that kept me from wondering *now*, if these two who were now leaning against a display cooler filled with metal pans of shrimp and crab were saying unpleasant things in Spanish. Such as, “You see that dipshit gringo with that little pissant pistol who thinks he's hiding behind those nets? Let's pretend we don't see him until we finish this beer, and then have a contest to see who can put the most slugs in him in fifteen seconds.”

As it happened, the nasal redneck voice from outside called to them. He had been driving the car, and acted as boss on this party.

He'd been sitting in the big blue Lincoln Town Car that belonged to the Ansel Schoomer Ministries, a phony televangelist's organization that had started this entire problem for me to begin with. The license plate read, "PRAISE." In the car with him, I'd seen a big, fat black guy who, from all indications, owned or ran Harry's Fish Market. I called him Harry.

The pair responded, but in a self-consciously desultory way, taking the beer along. Okay, the little redneck was someone they *had* to listen to, but not their *real* boss. Like seasoned Army sergeants temporarily assigned to a different unit, they were required to answer to the local lieutenants, but didn't respond with the snap of attention given to officers in the parent unit.

They walked, dragging, past my little hidey-hole. Close enough: their knees nearly touched the nets that hid me. I could feel the vibration of their cowboy boots through the floor. The scrunch of their steps on the gravel diminished.

The doors on the Lincoln made a thump—pause—thump. I stretched my neck as far upward as I could without risking disaster by knocking over the rack and pushing the door shut from the inside. A dead giveaway. Ouch! *Damned* poor choice of words to have running through my head.

Through smeary, sweating windows, I saw four dark lumps in the Lincoln. That was all the buzzing, blue mercury vapor lamplight gave me.

After a long, deep breath, I could even ease my feet forward a bit to take the strain off my knees and back. Looking down at my deck shoes—worn, for this occasion, without socks—I had a fervent wish I'd worn sneakers—better suited for running. My pale khakis and light blue polo shirt made super targets. Poor planning.

Mack Brinson, how in hell did you let yourself get into shit like this?

In addition to the well-armed ponytail boys, another problem literally loomed: the large man that either owned, or at least ran, the fish market; the one I'd been calling Harry. I didn't want to deal with him, not when trespassing on *his* turf. He carried a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun dangling close to his leg.

Both back doors and the right front door of the Lincoln opened. Stretching upward showed little, but voices broke through again. The words—blurry as the windows over the straining roar of the walk-in reefer and the air conditioners trying keep the place cool when the door was standing open to the August heat.

Suddenly, they walked in front of me.