

Chapter 9

The no smoking sign is exactly at eye level on the door, and Wooden comes face to face with it at the entrance to the video store. He pauses for a minute, then tosses the cigar butt into the trash. It's best to follow other people's rules when you want to get information from them. He steps inside.

The full height, wall-to-wall windows of the store let in the bright daylight, giving it a softer, friendlier appearance during the day. A few people mill around the aisles. The cashier, a teenager whose long black hair shows its blonde roots, chews her gum, impatient, and stares straight ahead at the wall. Wooden approaches her.

"Hi." He attempts a smile, but his mouth resists, the appropriate muscles long since having atrophied.

"HellowelcometoBoxOfficeVideoforyourbestcollectionofthehot

-newmoviesandyesterday'sclassicshowcanIhelpyou?" She takes a disinterested breath and resumes chewing.

"Well, I'm returning this movie." He hands her the video cassette, wishing his mouth could form a damn smile.

"Didyoulikethemovieyouknowaboutourmoneybacksatisfaction-guarantee?"

"I haven't watched it yet. It was rented to a friend."

She checks the computer. "That will be a dollar thirty five please."

Wooden reaches into his back pocket and takes out his wallet. He opens it, counts out the money and hands it to her.

"Can you tell me who rented it last?"

She looks at him for the first time. "I thought you said it was, like, a friend of yours."

"Yeah, well . . ."

"Is that a gun?" The girl has come to life. She points to where his jacket has fallen open to reveal the gun holster. "Are you, like, a cop, cause if you're not and you're planning to rob this place I don't have any money and there's this lock box with the money in it and I don't have a key."

"I'm a cop."

"Oh," she says with disappointment. She thinks a moment and then perks up again. "So, like, this is some kind of case you're working on?"

"Yeah."

"And the guy who rented the movie last isn't your friend,

right?"

"Right."

"He's like a spy or a killer or something, right?"

"Or something. Can you give me his name?"

"Yeah, sure." She fiddles with the computer, making faces.

"Roger Vermette."

Wooden recognizes the name of the fraternity president.

"Anybody else rent this movie within the last two weeks?" He knows he'll get a full report from Simmons, but figures he should ask anyway.

The girl fiddles with the computer some more. "Stewart Haddington last Monday. That's it. We only got the tape a few weeks ago" She stops for a minute and fingers the metal hoop in her lower lip. "I remember them--him and his wife or girlfriend. They were, like, all over each other. Couldn't wait to get home. Know what I mean? Like, pawing each other in public here." She runs her hands over her face and sides, wriggling and making loud, exaggerated kissing motions for illustration. "Some people."

"Anyone hanging around. Anyone follow them home?"

"I don't know. I didn't see anyone. Yeah, I would've seen someone if someone was there. I'm very observational, you know? I could be a cop, too."

"I'm sure." He didn't mean for it to come out sarcastic, it just did.

The girl looks down and picks at a scab on her finger,

pouting. "Thanks for your help," he says. "You may have helped prevent another crime."

"Yeah?" She looks up again.

"I'd like to rent this." He hands her his membership card. She smiles. "I'll scan it."

She pops open the clear plastic container to run the bar code scanner over it. As her left hand makes contact with the cassette, she pauses and looks directly into Brent Wooden's eyes. Her smile tightens. Her eyes seem to almost glow red for just an instant. "I tink you vill enchoy this moofie," she says, not blinking. She opens her mouth wide and an evil, echoing, guttural laugh emanates. The people in the store stop cold and turn to look at her. The laugh seems to linger in space. The gum falls out of her open mouth and onto the counter.

The girl pauses for a moment, still staring directly at Wooden. Then, she closes the case and hands it and the membership card back to him. She smiles at him, notices the gum on the counter, picks it up, pops it in her mouth and resumes chewing.

Wooden looks at her, unblinking. The people in the store slowly resume what they were doing. He blinks a few times. "I didn't realize before that you have an accent."

"Oh yeah," she replies, disappointed. "I'm originally from Baltimore."

Wooden turns to go.

"Good luck with your case," she calls after him. He turns to see her waving. He nods, turns back, exits the store.