

PART I

“Running with the Bulls”

CHAPTER I.

The night reverberated with thunder. It was after midnight, and the corporate offices that sprawled along Atlanta's edge were mostly empty. Two impeccably dressed men sprinted from a commercial building, gingerly avoiding the puddles in the parking lot. The younger of the bankers was tall, thin, and almost thirty. Holding a briefcase on his head with one hand to protect himself from the rain, he pulled a cigarette from his pocket with the other. He waited for his supervisor to unlock the rental car and exhaled a cloud of smoke. Nico Gressens looked up as a lightning bolt crossed the sky. "A perfect moment," he said to himself.

"Goddamn Dutch son of a bitch," Nico's supervisor said as he approached the car, "how the hell did you come up with that tax shelter in the Caribbean?"

Jacob Moore, in his fifties and well built, clicked the remote control on his keychain and the black car's lights flashed. Jacob sank in the leather seat. Nico threw his cigarette into a puddle and opened the passenger door.

Jacob Moore shook his head. "Did you learn those tricks at Harvard?" he asked.

Nico loosened his tie. "Oh Georgia, it's been a hard day's night."

Jacob turned on the ignition. "Our night is just beginning. Let's go and celebrate downtown, I know a shortcut from here."

"So this is how the American dream really gets done," said Nico as he strapped on his seatbelt.

"Yeah, and you helped underwrite it," replied Jacob. "You turned on the Amsterdam charm with those senior executives. Amazing how they bit on your idea . . . you could see it, all they were thinking about was putting on their Bermuda shorts and heading for the beach!"

“They better not forget their sunscreen. My Caribbean idea may burn them.”

Jacob wound his way onto the highway and pressed the gas. Raindrops gently drummed on the windshield. “Now let’s get this show on the road,” he said. A wry smile crossed Jacob’s face. “We can run with the bulls, Nico. We’ll be spinning for our friends.”

“Spinning for our friends?”

“I’ll teach you. We dish cheap IPOs to influential executives, like the guys we just dealt with, after the stock has already started trading. They cash in their shares for an instant profit, and return the favor by sending lucrative opportunities our way. All we do is go from one deal to the next, spinning stocks to our circle of friends. Bankers Price Investments of New York leaves no money on the table.”

Nico sat up straight and made sure that Jacob could see him nodding attentively.

“Remember this, Nico: you don’t have to spend money to make money – you need a deal to make money. This IPO may be a good deal, but it’s still not as great as when your Dutch forefathers bought Manhattan for twenty-four dollars. Unfortunately, your people then traded it for a worthless nutmeg island.”

Nico remained silent, his glare fixed on the empty road. In spite of the darkness and rain he could make out the pine trees that flanked the highway. “I see,” he eventually replied.

“What is there to see? If you want to see the Chinese wall, go to Chinatown. You Dutch know a thing or two about frenzied speculation and tulip mania. But why the hell would you swap Manhattan for a bunch of spices?”

The vehicle accelerated. Nico turned on the stereo and scanned the airwaves.

“Can’t stand this country shit,” said Jacob. “These guys are always crying about some Southern belle that got away.”

“Play the tune backwards and the girl will return,” smiled Nico. He sang along to a Neil Young song that played on the radio. “*Are you ready for the country, because it’s time to go?*”

“What is this world coming to? A foreigner that’s into country.”

“It’s always been a fantasy of mine to be a DJ and play dance music. And if it’s all night, it’s all right.” Nico smiled, trying to lighten the conversation.

Jacob glanced around the car interior. “Where are my CDs? See if they’re in the glove box.”

As Nico fumbled with the contents of the glove box, Jacob impatiently wedged his fingers under the seat. When he lost control the car spun on the wet asphalt.

Nico grabbed the wheel, trying to stabilize the car as Jacob sat silent and motionless staring at the raindrops on the windshield, his eyes large and white. The car rolled, once, then again, then smashed into a tree, shattering the front end. Oil and parts scattered in all directions. The airbags never inflated.

Jacob flew from the broken window and onto the red clay. He had a gaping wound on his forehead. The pouring rain washed the blood from his face.

Nico Gressens held tightly onto his seatbelt. He was knocked unconscious. Blood drained from Nico’s smashed mouth as his body rocked horribly back and forth. His hands eventually let go of the seatbelt.

The black automobile rolled over furiously on the wet road. A pine tree absorbed the third and final blow, this time from the car’s rear – bending the metal around the tree as if it were a scarf. The wrecked vehicle ground to a halt. What was left of the car hugged the splintered wood and embraced it with its vapors.

The sky over Georgia was split by lightning. The raindrops disintegrated when they hit the ground. The music continued playing from the shattered car's stereo. The sound surrounded the crash site, and blended with the night:

"I was talkin' to the preacher, said God was on my side

Then I ran into the hangman, he said it's time to die

You gotta tell your story, boy, you know the reason why."