

**LEAVING
THE SCENE**

**A PENNS RIVER
CRIME NOVEL**

DANA KING

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PRAISE FOR *LEAVING THE SCENE*

“A small town, a killing, and a cast of characters tough enough to make Elmore Leonard grin. Dana King’s *Leaving the Scene* is a slow burn that will leave you wanting more. A great read!” —Bruce Robert Coffin, bestselling author of the Detective Byron mysteries

“Great read—ensemble cast, police procedural in a tough, blue-collar-town, with good reminders of classic Ed McBain. Gritty and authentic detail, with realistic, interesting characters and crimes.” —Dale T. Phillips, author of *A Memory of Grief* and *A Darkened Room*

“Dana King’s *Leaving the Scene* delivers the goods—a procedural packed with smart dialogue, sharp plotting, and a vivid humanity that brings to mind the best of McBain, Wambaugh, and Connelly.” —James D.F. Hannah, Shamus Award-winning author of the Henry Malone series.

“With interweaving plots and quickfire dialogue, the relentless pace of *Leaving the Scene* is highly addictive.” —Caro Ramsay, Dagger-shortlisted author of the Anderson and Costello mysteries

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[*Leaving the Scene*](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by the Author](#)

[Preview from *Tracking Shot* by Colin Campbell](#)

[Preview from *Sangre Road* by David Tromblay](#)

[Preview from *Roughhouse* by Jeffery Hess](#)

*To Drs. John Grundy and Priya Vakharia, who keep my vision good enough
to continue writing. If you don't like my books, blame them.*

**THURSDAY
JULY 18**

10:47 p.m.

The American Legion function room was about half empty when Ben “Doc” Dougherty pulled a folding chair next to Stan “Stush” Napierkowski and asked what the plan was for tomorrow.

Stush tipped his can of Rolling Rock toward Doc in salute. “Get up around six. Make coffee. Read the paper.”

Doc waited until he was sure Stush had finished. “You do understand you’ll wake up retired, right? Live a little. Sleep till quarter after. Tempt fate and go for six-thirty.”

“It’s not like I’ll set an alarm. I been getting up at six for so long I do it on Sundays and vacations.”

They sat two feet apart, watching the room with cop eyes as the party lost steam. Doc asked if Stush had plans beyond coffee and the paper.

“I might run over to Oak Lake. See can I scare up a foursome.”

“They gave you a lifetime membership at the country club. I hear that’s a hell of a nice course.”

Stush nodded. “Might be the best course in the area except for Oakmont. Played it a couple of times when the big shooters around here still cared about schmoozing me.” A sip of beer. “Look who I’d have to play with. Same jagovs spent the last five years trying to run me out of a job.”

“Won’t they be working?”

“It’ll either be them or some of their asshole buddies.” Stush sipped and looked in the general direction of the country club. “Maybe I’ll sneak over some Monday when they let the caddies and hired help play. My people.”

Doc knew the aluminum mill would reopen and run three shifts before Stush played the country club. “You’re Polish. You should bowl.”

“I will. Joe Rychlinski’s been trying to get me on his team in the Tuesday night Falcon’s league for a couple years. Now I have time.”

Doc watched Stush take in everyone still there the way a father looks at a child leaving for college. Forty years a Penns River cop, twenty-five as chief. Doc turned down half a dozen six-figure private security jobs after nine years in the Army so he could work for his Uncle Stush. Uncle in name only. Stush and Doc’s father friends since they worked together at the A&P right out of high school, Penns River still a township. Spoke so no one might overhear. “You trained us well, Uncle Stoshu. We’ll be okay.” Stush turned when he heard his boyhood name, eyes shining. “Everything I hear about Sullivan says he’s a good man,” Doc said.

“Sully’s aces.” Stush crushed the empty can. Held it up for Doris Renko to see from behind the bar. “Don’t know if I told you, but part of the reason I retired now is because he was available and interested. And the country club membership.” A wink.

“You’ll miss it, though.”

“Goddamn right.” As much emotion in Stush’s voice as if discussing how much a putt might break. Gestured to the room. “This is what I’ll miss. The job’s been a pain in my ass for a long time. Gave me a heart attack a few years ago. Sullivan’s welcome to it.”

Doc sipped his Foster’s. The only guy in town who drank it. Doris always kept a cou-

ple of the big oil cans cold for him. “What would you say changed the most since you came on? Besides getting cars.”

Stush accepted a fresh beer from George Augustine. Asked after Augie’s daughter in the Air Force. Turned back to Doc only after satisfying his curiosity. “I walked a beat, smartass. Knew every family on it. I told a kid to stop or come over here and he didn’t, I ran him down and gave him a couple swipes across the hammies with my baton. Told him if it happened again I’d take him home to his father. Anything I did be like kisses from his mother once his old man got through with him.”

“White kids?”

“Mostly, yeah. Not all. See, I didn’t just know the families. They knew me. I’d tell them I had to smack their kid’s ass and why, everyone was good with it.”

“Can’t do that now.”

“No, and it’s a good thing. A cop in a unit riding around all day can’t have the same kind of rapport. Or judgment. There’s too much distance. Cop in a car doesn’t know the people as well, someone lips off to him could end up in the hospital. Puts everyone in a jackpot having to write around it.”

“You must’ve put your share in there.”

Stush held up a finger. “One.” Saw Doc’s face. “Swear to God. Little half-pint Dago hanging around down by the tracks looking to boost stuff outta the boxcars pulled a knife on me and took a swipe.” Swallowed beer, his eyes smiling at the memory. “I guaran-goddamn-tee you that little cocksucker never pulled on a Polack again.”

The two men watched in companionable silence as the party wound down. Peers now after Doc had proven himself as a cop and a man more times than either could remember. Stush swished a sip of beer around in his mouth before he swallowed. “How’re the troops taking to Snyder as deputy?” Promoting Nancy Snyder from patrol to deputy chief over several men with more rank and seniority was Stush’s final personnel decision.

“My first choice would’ve been Mike Zywiciel, but he made it clear he didn’t want the job. To be honest, he didn’t exactly cover himself in glory during that active shooter business at Rose’s last winter. He’s better off running patrol, though I doubt he’ll last a year with you gone.” Doc shook the last crumbs of pretzel and salt into his mouth. Washed it down. “Nancy’s probably a better choice. She has a good idea of the big picture, doesn’t rattle, and I doubt the mayor or any of the assholes who actually run this town will intimidate her. She’s fine.”

“Just fine?”

“What do you want me to say? She’s going to reinvent police work? My biggest issue with her getting the job is we’ll miss her on patrol.”

“And?”

“Jesus, Stush. And what? I have no problem working for her if that’s what you’re asking. Hell, I *like* working for her. She’s smart and on top of things, and she doesn’t play favorites with the people who were friends before the promotion. If you’re so worried about how she’s working out, why didn’t you let Sullivan pick someone?”

“Because he would’ve picked you, and you would’ve felt like you had to take the job, and I know how much you don’t want it.” Went on while Doc still gathered his thoughts. “Benny, you’re the most respected person on the force. You’d have been the perfect bridge between the old and the new, Sullivan’s obvious choice. Even the assholes who’ve been running me out would’ve recommended you as the best man to lubricate the transi-

tion.” More beer. “I know Sully a little. From conferences and around. He’s a persuasive guy. He’d of used arguments I never would because you and me go back so far. Guilt you into taking a job you’d hate. Not just hate it; *hate* it. I appointed Snyder as my parting gift to you, and because she was the next best qualified once I saw Zywiciel wasn’t up to it. Sullivan doesn’t want her, he can get rid of her.”

Stush seemed surprised to find himself leaning half out of his chair. Sat back and drew in some beer. “I didn’t bring her up to talk about you. How’s everyone else taking it? The people who wouldn’t tell me, I mean.”

“About what you’d expect. Some think she jumped the line. Some don’t like working for a woman. Some just like to bitch. Mostly everyone’s fine with her, and she’ll handle the others. From what you tell me about Sullivan, I doubt he’s going to put up with much bullshit, regardless of the reason.”

“Sully’s going to come down hard for a while, showing everyone else how far up the tree he can piss.” Stush folded his hands across his belly in his standard thinking pose, can of Rolling Rock poised between his fingers on the shelf. “She’ll be fine. Retiring now wasn’t exactly my idea, but my conscience is clear.”

The two men nursed their beers, far enough into the evening to know they didn’t want any more but not yet ready to go home. People came by every few minutes on their way out to congratulate Stush or break his balls or show they wanted to say something even if they had no idea what it was. Stan Napierkowski and Ben Dougherty were the closest things to heroes Penns River had. One was stepping down and the other wasn’t stepping up. Penns River lost something here tonight, and the town had little left to lose.

**FRIDAY
JULY 19**

7:02 a.m.

Doc drank two more beers than he'd planned and one more than he really should have, so he wasn't amused when the phone rang half an hour before the alarm was set to go off. Dead body down the Flats.

Lester Goodfoot had the crime scene under control, wrapping up another night of his permanent graveyard shift. Every year Stush offered to put him in the rotation. Every year Lester turned him down. Said he was more valuable on the nights, what with Indians seeing so much better in the dark than white men. Doc knew the real reason. Lester's idea of a good night's sleep was four hours, tops, and not continuous. Listening to the house settle and his wife snore drove him crazy. At least there were things to do if he couldn't sleep in the daytime.

Lester's patrol unit hid the body from anyone passing by on Greensburg Road. Doc pulled past and parked as far away as he could and still be on the paved lot of what had once been a gas station. Gulf at first. Then Chevron, Sunoco, and some operation Doc didn't remember the name of. Only things left were the building for the office and service bays, the island where the pumps used to be, and an iron bar near the body that once supported the air pump.

Doc twisted his torso as he crossed the lot, trying to get loose. Never much of a coffee drinker, he depended on his morning shower to get the blood circulating. No time for one today. "Morning, Lester. Neuschwander here yet?"

"I thought he was on vacation."

"Tomorrow. What do we got here?"

Lester nodded toward the body. "Couple kids out running their dog before it got hot come across her. Said they ran right past on the way out but the dog got curious coming back."

"They sure she was here on the first pass?" Not a big deal; the autopsy would tell how long she'd been dead. It might help determine whether she was dropped off or killed here.

"I asked about that. They said it was only a couple of minutes after they come by the first time, and they didn't see any cars go past." Lester pointed to Greensburg Road to show the directions the boys had gone. "They run up the other side of the road, facing traffic, then back on this side. That's when the dog noticed her."

"The dog mess with the body? Mark its territory or take anything?"

"The boys say no. Said they were real careful once they seen what it was. They're good kids. They live off-Broadway"—the locals' designation for a cluster of homes set back from Broadway Avenue— "and come running their dog every morning, rain or shine. I know they play football, and I think one of them's a wrestler."

"Where are they now?"

Lester pointed to the abandoned service area. "Back there. Turned out being around a murdered body isn't as cool as it looks on the TV. I told them to stay close, but they keep finding spots where they don't have to look at her."

Doc knew a path ran through the bushes over to Broadway. "You sure they're still back there?"

Lester nodded. "I can hear them talking. Ain't just our night vision that's better'n you white-eyed devils."

Doc recognized Wally Beattie right away from seeing him wrestle. Western Pennsylvania champ last year and a definite contender for States this winter. Pete's name familiar from hearing it on the PA at football games from a dozen tackles a game. Penn State, Pitt, West Virginia, and *The Ohio State University* had been sniffing around, the recruiting magazines listing him as a national top ten linebacker. Both good kids who wanted to be helpful but didn't have any more to say than what they'd told Lester. Doc gave them the usual "If you think of anything else" speech, handed a card to each, and turned them loose as Rick Neuschwander pulled into the lot.

Penns River couldn't afford a full-time crime scene tech, so Neuschwander pulled double duty as both detective and CSI. So good at evidence collection Pittsburgh called every time they had an opening. Funny thing, broke as it was, Penns River paid better than the Burgh, well-known for not paying its cops what they were worth. Besides, going to Pittsburgh would mean commuting and shift work. Neuschwander lived for eating dinner with the family and tucking the four little Nooshes in at night.

The two detectives crossed behind Lester's car to meet at the side of the body. "Jeez," Neuschwander said. "He ran over her face."

He sure had. Tread marks crossed the upper torso and where her face used to be. Tank top pulled up and off the right side of her back. Cutoffs and panties torn to expose one buttock. A sandal, more like a glorified flip-flop, lay next to her right foot. Only visible jewelry a thin gold chain around her neck—somehow intact—and a hoop earring on the ground near her torn earlobe.

Doc crouched near her head. "Blood on this earring." Pointed with a pen. "Looks like it was pulled out."

Neuschwander stood. Looked around the lot. "You didn't see the other shoe did you, Lester?" Lester hadn't. "Be a nice get."

"No telling how long she's been here," Lester said. "Dog or some critter coulda took it."

"Let's hope not," Doc said. "That could be exactly what we need, depending on where it is now and who might've accidentally driven off with it. She have a purse?"

"Everything I saw is right there." Lester got a look Doc had seen before. Too many people thought Stush had buried Lester on the midnights. Doc knew better. "Anything strike you unusual here?"

Lester not given to trick questions, the detectives took their time. "Skid marks," Neuschwander said.

"More like the absence thereof," Doc said.

"Didn't try to stop, no sharp turn," Lester said. "Looks like she was teed up."

Doc about to say something when an Allegheny County Medical Examiner's vehicle pulled into the lot and parked next to the detectives' cars. Penns River couldn't afford a crime scene tech and was the only city in Neshannock County, so there were sure as hell no funds for an ME they might need a couple of times a year. Allegheny County covered them—for a fee, ain't nothing free in government these days—but Allegheny's cases took precedence. Doc was happy not to have to wait in line today, hot as things were shaping up to be.

He recognized the young woman as she walked across the pavement. Couldn't place

her name. She ducked under the crime scene tape and nodded toward the cops. "Morning, Dougherty. Neuschwander?" Rick nodded. She extended a hand toward Lester. "I don't think I know you. Michelle House, Allegheny County coroner's office." That was it. Dr. House.

She knelt to look at the body. "Don't you Penns River people ever have a nice, clean domestic shooting? Dispute that leads to a stabbing? At least there's only one this time."

"It's a small town," Doc said. "We figure if we want to hold the interest of you big-city folks, it needs to be something you don't see every day."

House's expression could have meant anything. "I worked the synagogue shooting. You can call me with a routine body anytime you want if it'll keep me away from another one of those. What do you have so far?"

Doc brought her up to speed. House was unimpressed. "Any ID?"

"No."

"You turn her over?"

"Waited for you."

House smiled. "I knew I liked you, Dougherty. This small consideration almost makes up for your excessively gruesome crime scenes." Held up a finger. "Almost."

"I figure it's the least we can do, and my father always said I do the least I can, Dr. House. And please call me Doc."

"And please don't call me Dr. House."

"You don't like it?"

"Would you?"

"What do you prefer?"

"Mike is fine."

"Okay, Mike. You want us to turn her now?"

"Give me a few minutes. I want to examine her in place a little more in case anything important sticks to the pavement when we move her."

"Sounds good. We're going to look for the missing shoe. Have Lester call us when you're ready."

Doc and Neuschwander grid-searched every inch of the parking lot. Crawled under the vehicles in case someone parked over it. Tried the doors to the office and service bays. Paused in a patch of shade to decide whether to start looking up and down Greensburg Road.

"That sandal has to be close by," Neuschwander said. "It didn't move itself down the road."

"Maybe a dog picked it up."

"I thought the kids said their dog didn't touch anything."

"Some other dog. We have to assume this didn't happen right before they came by. She's been here a while. Doesn't even have to be a dog. Coon, maybe."

"Would a coon do that?"

"Might if it smelled like something it could eat. Carry it down to the creek and wash it off." Doc pointed across the road toward Pucketa Creek. "Might be worth a look over that way a couple hundred yards each direction."

Neuschwander looked where Doc pointed. Shrugged one shoulder and started across the road. They made it to the double yellow before Lester hollered.

"I hate this part," Neuschwander said walking back. "And this one's going to be espe-

cially nasty.”

“Look on the bright side,” Doc said. “She can’t have been here long, and it’s not too hot yet. Think of what it would be like if we didn’t find her until three or four in the afternoon.” Neuschwander’s expression showed he didn’t want to consider that option. “Hey,” Doc said, “it’s not my fault I’m Mr. Silver Lining.”

House had a request when they got back to the body. “I know this is icky, but can you turn her three-quarters over and hold her there for a minute or so while I take a look? The way her face is mangled, I don’t want to get any unaccounted-for debris stuck to it from rolling her all the way over. I promise I’ll be quick.”

“No problem,” Doc said before Neuschwander could object. “Do me a favor and check her back pockets for me. A wallet would be nice.”

Doc took the shoulders, Neuschwander the hips. Lester positioned a boot to support the body’s midsection. House looked at whatever she needed to look at, patted the body a few places, and gave the sign to let her down. “Nothing in her pockets. Sorry.”

“So a stone whodunit and a Jane Doe to boot,” Doc said. “Happy fucking Friday.” Stopped himself from spitting, the area still a crime scene until House and Neuschwander finished with it. “Got anything for us?”

Every profession has a phrase it can’t live without, taught the first day of school. For cops, it’s “Move along. Nothing to see here.” Doctors who service the living say “Uh-huh” like it means something. House had been well-trained as an ME. “I’ll know more after the autopsy, but it looks like she was already on the ground when the car went over her. There are no bruises or visible injuries on the legs or hips to indicate being struck. No skid marks on her back or the backs of her legs, either, like there would be if she was struck and slid or dragged a little. I can’t say for sure, but it appears the car went over her twice—forward and then again backing out.”

“He’d have to, close as the old air pump is.”

House shook her head. “You’re missing my point. If she’d been struck while standing, her body would have been thrown a bit, even at a low speed. She’s hardly been moved. To me, she wasn’t run over so much as rolled over, then he backed over her to get out.”

“If she was hit at a low enough speed there are no tire tracks, *and* the car missed the pump...I mean, she’d of moved out of the way, right?” Neuschwander said.

“You’d think so.”

“So she’s laying on her back here in an abandoned service station looking up at the stars?” Doc said. “Had to be a reason.”

“She could’ve been passed out drunk or on drugs,” House said. “The lab results will give us a good idea there. It’s not impossible she was dead already and all of this is post-mortem.”

“Which implies it’s deliberate,” Doc said. “Kind of like setting a fire to cover up a murder. Will it work?”

“Depends on how she died. Assuming she was dead already. If she was shot or stabbed or poisoned, no problem. If someone beat her to death, then ran her over...there’s a chance we could still figure it out if the fatal injuries weren’t too badly damaged by the car. No guarantee, though.”

“You’d still know if she died first, right?” Neuschwander said. “Even if you couldn’t say why.”

House took her time. “If she was shot or stabbed or poisoned or OD’d, sure. If she was

beaten, say killed by blunt force trauma not too long before she got run over? Could be tricky.”

Doc looked from the body to the road and back, sizing up distances. “Noosh, I think we might could use a traffic investigator. You want to call the Kittanning barracks and see if they can send someone down?”

Neuschwander ducked under the crime scene tape. Scrolling through his contacts, he had to skip out of the way when another patrol unit rolled onto the lot. Kathy Burrows stepped out of the car centering her hat. “Lester, the chief says you can go home.”

“I don’t mind staying,” Lester said.

“Chief says eight in the morning is not when to pay overtime. You know how it works.” Burrows motioned toward the detectives. “These guys will get it all.”

“Not me,” Neuschwander said. “I’m on vacation soon as I sign out today. This will be down before I get back week after next.”

“Where you going?” Burrows said.

“Ocean City.”

“Jersey or Maryland?”

“Maryland. Jeannie’s family’s been going there for years. We pretty much take over the hotel, what with all the grandkids. Big fun.” Doc made a *phone* gesture with his thumb and pinky. Get Neuschwander talking about his kids and he’d miss the vacation. “Right. On it.”

House went back to work, the cops nearby if needed. Still green, Burrows was well on her way toward becoming a good officer. Not watching House but not looking away. Her eyes scanned the lot for anything out of place or anyone who might disturb the scene. Doc listened to the leather of her utility belt creak as she rocked forward and back on her heels as cops have been doing since the invention of the Sam Browne. Easing his way into a standing nap when House spoke.

“Based on body cooling, the time of death looks like it’s somewhere between midnight and three this morning. I can tell better if we find out when she last ate.” Stood and brushed grit from her slacks. “Cause of death looks obvious, but I’m not calling it until we get the autopsy and tox screens back.”

Doc raised a questioning eyebrow as Neuschwander rejoined the group. “About an hour.”

Doc asked House if she was done. “She’s all yours.” Pointed across the lot. “Her ride’s here.”

An ambulance coasted to a stop well clear of the crime scene. Tony Lutz got out and walked over. “Sorry we’re late. Crash on the bypass by the VFW. We came as soon as we could.”

“It’s okay,” Doc said. “She’s in no hurry.”

A car pulled in closer than Doc liked, swerved to park on the other side of the ambulance. Ford Escort with some wear on it. A young woman got out. Doc lowered his head. Murmured, “Get rid of her” to Neuschwander.

“Who is she?”

“Press.”

The young woman accelerated to a trot. “Detective Dougherty!”

“Shit,” Doc said. “Too late. Now I have to get rid of her.”

“Detective Dougherty! Katy Jackson with the *Tribune-Gazette*. I—”

“I remember you, so you should know the drill—whoa. Did you say *Tribune-Gazette*? You get a promotion?”

“I got hired.”

“Full-time?”

A brief delay. “Almost.”

“A tiny bit shy of qualifying for benefits, I’ll bet.”

Almost a blush. “Yeah.”

“They at least letting you do outside work?”

“I do some feature pieces when I can. Interviews. Stuff like that. I make almost as much as I would full-time.”

“For the *Tribune-Gazette* or other outlets?”

“*Tribune-Gazette* mostly. They’re who I know, and I have the best contacts there. A couple of editors feed me stories.”

“So they’re basically working you full-time and not paying you any benefits.”

“No, it’s not like...” Her voice faded as she realized it was *exactly* like that. “Hey. I’m supposed to be asking *you* questions.”

“Then get to it. So long as you aren’t disappointed when I tell you I can’t answer them.” She pulled a face. “You know the drill. It’s an ongoing investigation.”

“What about the victim’s name?”

“Family hasn’t been notified.”

“Gender? Race?”

Doc pondered. The morgue would fingerprint the victim first thing, though it might take a while to run the prints. Assuming the victim was in the system. He’d endured a few episodes of *NCIS* visiting his parents. Wondered if the goofy chick who could type for ten seconds and give full histories of unidentified decedents based on height, weight, eye and hair color made house calls. The quicker they IDed today’s victim, the quicker they could start working on a timeline and acquaintances. “Female Caucasian.”

“Age?”

Doc tried not to think about the victim’s face. “Indeterminate.”

Katy Jackson paused before making a note. “Cause of death?”

“Pending.”

“Time of death?”

“Unofficially?” Katy nodded. “Between twelve and three. Pending autopsy results, tox screens, the usual bullshit.”

Katy tried to peer around Doc and Burrows’s unit. “Can I take a look?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.” Doc saw Katy’s expression. “I’m doing you a favor.”

“Bad, huh?”

“Off the record?” She nodded. “Gruesome.”

Doc had a decision coming and having a new boss didn’t make it any easier. Stush would have backed him either way. He had no reading on Sullivan. Figured what the fuck, it’s a union job. “How about I give you a chance to redeem yourself after you screwed me on that mass shooter last winter?”

“I did *not* screw you.”

“Not deliberately.” Let it sink in. “I know you didn’t mean to. I’m willing to see if you learned anything.”

“What do you want?”

“Help us identify the body.”

“I’d love to. It’ll be a lot easier if I can put her picture in the paper.”

“No, it won’t.” She looked confused. “No one is going to recognize her. Even on the off chance they did, this is not how anyone’s family wants to see her in the paper.”

“Then what do you want me to do?”

“We’ll call a presser when we have more to tell, but I’d like you to get it out on the website sooner. Maybe TV or radio will pick up on it. Do this for me and I promise to call you with anything about to become public knowledge before everyone else gets it. Not much before—a few minutes, maybe—but you’ll still be first. Maybe they’ll break down and hire you full-time.”

Doc told her as much as he could. General height, weight. Clothing. A reasonable guess at hair color, considering the blood and gore on the victim’s head and shoulders. Katy Jackson took it all down. Thanked Doc and started for her car.

He called her back. “Forgetting something, aren’t you?” Confused again. “How am I supposed to give you advance notice if I don’t have your contact information?”

“It’s not in your phone from last time?”

Doc showed exaggerated patience. “You realize it’s not my job to hang onto your contact information, right? I’ll already know what you want to find out. It’s up to you to make it as easy as possible for me to share it.”

She might have reddened a little. Gave him a card with the paper’s logo on it. Doc filed it in his wallet. Took out one of his own to give her. She declined. “*I have your number. I’m not a complete dunce.*”

The media dealt with for the time being, Neuschwander and Burrows working the crime scene, Doc decided to canvass the few houses along this stretch of Greensburg Road until the traffic investigator showed. Mostly businesses right along the road—mechanics and a refrigeration company and a small appliance repair operation—all closed during the time frame he cared about. Some houses set back off the road on the little hill rising up the opposite side from Pucketa Creek.

The Flats was where Penns River’s location at the extreme northeast edge of the Appalachians stood proud. A lot of people busting their asses to scrape by, and some willing just to scrape. Families like the Beatties sharing blocks with oxy dealers, evangelical Christians, meth labs, and hillbillies. The diaspora of twenty-first-century life among the lowest quintile of whites. All they agreed on were the Steelers.

The canvass went about as expected. The people who’d talk to him had jobs that sent them to bed early or had them asleep in front of the television four beers into the evening. The problem was the kinds of sounds of interest to him—squealing tires, yelling—were too common to be noteworthy. He got as many statements of “I didn’t see anything,” “I didn’t hear anything,” “If I think of something I’ll let you know” as he needed to satisfy his conscience and went back to the scene. He’d send a couple of uniforms back later after people came home from work.

Stepping onto the parking lot, Doc saw a man he took to be the traffic examiner ducking under the crime scene tape, two hours after Neuschwander’s call. Tony Lutz looked antsy, his passenger growing riper by the minute. Doc knew how much the living loved riding in an ambo that smelled like the dead.

The state cop wore plainclothes, carried himself as if still in uniform with his baton stored up his ass. Sidewalls cut short with not much more on top. Aviator sunglasses.

Didn't look up as Doc approached.

Neuschwander did what passed for an introduction. "This is Sergeant Mansfield from Troop D in Kittanning." Mansfield still didn't look up. Took measurements with a small tape he kept in a pocket and photographs with his cell phone. Jotted notes on a spiral-bound pad. Doc chose to interpret his disinterest in interacting with him and Neuschwander as professional intensity bordering on mania. The other choice was asshole.

No one spoke during the twenty minutes Mansfield worked. He took meticulous care in putting his tape, phone, notebook, and pen into their respective pockets. Stepped back and looked down at the body until it occurred to Doc the state cop might be waiting for one of the locals to ask him a question. Turned to Neuschwander and placed a finger to his lips, moved his head side to side one time.

Getting late in the morning of a day forecast to be in the nineties and humid. Doc and Neuschwander had the foresight to stand in the shade of a few trees in the neighboring lot. Mansfield and the body in the sun on concrete already beginning to shimmer in the heat. Nothing happened for at least another minute until Tony Lutz cleared his throat.

"It okay to take her now? Before I have to scrape her off the fucking pavement?"

Mansfield looked to Doc and Neuschwander as if to say *What's he asking me for?* "Go ahead, Tony," Doc said. "The ME already pronounced her. You can take her straight to the morgue."

More silence until Tony and the other EMT had the victim on the gurney and Mansfield took his turn. "Some kind of sports car. Mustang, Camaro, Challenger. Something close to the ground."

"Because..." Doc knew it was the tires. Wanted Mansfield to get on with it.

"The tread marks." Mansfield went on for a few minutes that seemed like hours about tread patterns and characteristics of high-performance tires.

Doc let him get it out of his system. Jumped in when he came up for air. "Can you be any more specific?"

"Such as?"

"The make and model would be nice." No way Mansfield could reach that definite a conclusion. Asked the question to get him to admit it.

"Can't tell from what's here."

Having established Mansfield's lack of omniscience, Doc got straight to business. "How do you think it went down?"

"She was already on the ground. He literally ran her over."

"We know." Mansfield looked at Doc for the first time. "No contusions or fractures on the lower extremities consistent with being struck by a vehicle. We hoped you might have some information the ME hadn't already told us." Not the way to foster interdepartmental cooperation, but the combination of the heat and missing his shower had Doc smelling himself, and he hated that.

Mansfield pointed to the ground. "Body's here." Spread his hands apart shoulder-width at an angle. "Car comes in like this. Can't be going too fast or he'd of hit the pole here or left skid marks, which he didn't. Didn't make too hard a turn, either, or there'd be rubber to show that too."

"You think it was deliberate?"

Mansfield considered. "I'm not willing to go that far. He could've pulled in here for...anything. Take a leak. Do a line. Maybe he was over the limit and saw a patrol unit

coming and wanted to get off the road.”

“And her lying here on the ground doing what? Taking a nap?”

Mansfield’s expression showed no matter how low his opinion of the locals had been, now it was worse. “I have no idea what she was doing there. I’m here about the vehicle.”

“Fair enough. Let me ask you this: Given what you see and your considerable experience as a traffic investigator, what would you say the odds were whoever drove the car accidentally ran this woman over?”

“I’m not here to speculate.”

“Off the record. One cop to another.”

Mansfield sighed to show the burden placed on his patience. “Far as we are from the road, close as this pipe is? I’d say it’s unlikely this was an accident. Especially taking into consideration the driver didn’t call it in. Most citizens run someone over and it’s an accident, they call it in.”

“Is that what you’d tell a jury?”

“I want to finish my report and read the autopsy first. I don’t expect it to change too much.”

“You are willing to go so far as to say whoever did this definitely left the scene of an accident? No way he didn’t know he hit *something*, given the kind of car he had to be driving.”

Ice formed on the lenses of Mansfield’s aviators. “Yeah. All else fails, you got a dead bang case on leaving the scene.” Shouldered his way between the two Penns River cops and walked to his car.

“What do you think?” Neuschwander said as Mansfield drove away.

“The way Sally likes to plead cases out? I think we’ll be lucky to get leaving the scene. Too bad whatever happened here didn’t wake any of the neighbors. We might’ve had a shot at disturbing the peace.”

11:52 a.m.

Nancy Snyder didn't think assigning Chris Trettle to work traffic at St. Margaret Mary's annual summer festival was too much of an ask. Not hard work so much as a pain in the ass. On your feet all evening with nothing to do but make sure cars turning onto and off of Leechburg Road killed as few kids as possible while keeping Friday evening traffic from becoming gridlocked, the casino half a mile up the road. Dave Wohleber on vacation. Skip Speer worked a double yesterday. George Augustine on light duty after he cut his forearm eleven stitches' worth breaking up a domestic. Sean Sisler worked it Thursday, Trevor Boston had it Saturday afternoon, and Kathy Burrows Saturday evening. Trettle was off on Saturday. He was the best of her limited options.

Trettle had other plans; he didn't say what. Nancy suspected they involved going to the fair with his and his brother's kids instead of wearing the bag. Police work was the life he'd chosen, so Nancy insisted. Trettle said something as he left. Hard to make out. "Families" was in there. Maybe something about dykes.

No one else around. Not an example of open defiance. Not Trettle's first offense, either. Nancy decided she could draw the line without anyone losing too much face. "Officer Trettle. In my office."

Nancy led him in. Sat behind her desk. Waited until Trettle's ass was half an inch from the seat of one of her visitor's chairs. "Officer Trettle. You did not request, nor did you receive, permission to be seated."

Trettle gave Nancy a good look at the expression that cemented his reputation of not being someone to mess with on the street. She held his gaze without upping the ante until he rose.

"At ease," she said before he could assume a posture. "You and I never had any trouble when I worked patrol, but this is not the first time you have been openly disrespectful to me as deputy. You can have what feelings you want about me, but you will respect the rank." Took a counseling form from a drawer. "We're going to see if the loss of a day's vacation clarifies it for you."

Trettle went from pissed off to amazed in one second flat. "You can't take a day for that."

"For what? For the record, describe what you said." Held a pen ready to write.

"You're docking me for something you didn't even hear?"

"I'm giving you a chance to clarify."

"I was muttering to myself because I had plans. Nothing directed at you."

"Explain how the word 'dyke' figured into your monolog."

The glare lessened a notch. "That's not what I said."

"What did you say?"

"I don't remember exactly. Something about how I had plans with my family."

"And dykes don't have families?" That left a mark. "Be grateful I'm only docking you the day and not writing a reprimand for uttering a homophobic slur."

"It's only a slur if you are one."

"Not true. You don't believe me, check the regs." Nancy wasn't a lesbian. Debating her sexual orientation could only make her appear defensive and imply she had a problem

with gays herself, which she did not. “Do you have anything else to say?”

Trettle made it clear he had plenty more to say but had found the good sense not to. Nancy finished the paperwork and slid the form across her desk. Trettle scrawled something in the signature block and turned on his heel.

“*Office Trettle.*” Trettle not the only person in the room who’d learned a few things on patrol. Nancy’s command voice could stop a train. “You are not dismissed.”

Trettle turned to face her. Stood at attention with a glare that made his previous effort look like a mother welcoming a child home from Afghanistan. Nancy signed her name. Separated the carbons. “Pick up your copy, and you are dismissed.” He closed the door with half an ounce less force than a slam.

Nancy let out a breath. Tilted back her chair and checked out the ceiling while the adrenaline seeped away. Wondered what she could have done to keep things from going this far. Came to recognize this was on Trettle. If anything, she’d let things go too long in the hope he’d figure it out for himself.

She had an agreement with Sullivan: she could patrol a few hours a week so long as she only provided backup and supervision. Sullivan reserved the same right for himself. The ability to get out of the office and be real police once in a while a not inconsiderable perk of being the brass in a small town.

Hat in hand when two light knocks sounded. The door opened and Brendan Sullivan stuck his head in. “You have a minute?”

“Sure. Your office?”

“Here’s fine. Have a seat.” Waited for her to get back around the desk. His impish smile showed what he must have looked like as a kid. Nodded toward her visitor’s chair, still warm from Trettle’s red ass. “You mind?”

“No. Please.”

Sullivan sat. “I just encountered Chris Trettle in the hall. He’s not happy about pulling traffic duty at the fair tomorrow night. What happened?”

Nancy’s stomach sank an inch. Took a deep breath and described her order, Trettle’s insubordination, and the confrontation. No editorializing. No embellishment. The smile grew in Sullivan’s eyes as she went, though not on his lips.

He waited until she finished. “Okay, then. Looks like I did the right thing.” Let her suffer a few seconds longer. “Officer Trettle complained about how you took an innocent comment and blew it into a disciplinary issue because, he suspects, it might be your time of the month. We exchanged thoughts as I tried to clarify what he believed had so unjustly provoked your hormones. I found his answers to be unsatisfactory. I encouraged further clarification. He proceeded to clarify his way into two more lost vacation days and well on his way to a full week before his better angels took control of the situation.”

This was not at all what Nancy expected after the way Sullivan began his spiel. He must have seen the look on her face. “I know how new you are in that chair. This was as good a time as any for me to show you and I are on the same page. Also a chance for me to see how you’d handle it.”

He left it there so long Nancy couldn’t help herself. “And?”

“Not exactly how I would’ve done it, but I have no complaints. Trettle earned the day you gave him even more than the two I added on.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how would you have handled it?”

Sullivan shook his head. “There is no right or wrong. You did fine. Better yet, the way

you did it shows you're developing a command style. Everything I know about you says you were a hell of a patrol officer. Command is different. Everyone adapts to it in their own way. You're finding yours." Pointed to her hat on the desk. "Going somewhere?"

"I was thinking of patrolling for an hour or so."

Sullivan nodded. "Sometimes you need some street time. We'll walk out together. I want Trettle and maybe a couple of his buddies to see the command structure here stands together."

2:51 p.m.

Ten messages on Doc's voicemail by the time he got back to the shop. Two were for other cases. One promised Medicare would pay for a revolutionary new brace to ease the chronic back pain he didn't have. Seven were tips on the hit-and-run in the Flats even though the only news available was whatever Katy Jackson had put on the Internet. Doc took a minute to check her story. She'd done a nice job. Then he called all seven to verify their information against things he'd held back. He knew going in it would be a waste of time.

He typed up his preliminary report while Neuschwander flew through getting his forensic ducks in a row so he could get home and pack the van for tomorrow's 5:00 a.m. departure. Teresa Shimp came back from taking a witness statement for another case. Doc got her attention before she had a chance to sit. "How busy are you?"

"I'm working on those burglaries in Coxcomb Estates and that liquor store robbery downtown. Leads are still turning up on a couple of other things, plus the usual. Why?"

"How many Coxcomb burglaries now?"

"Five."

"Over how long?"

"A little over a month." Then, before Doc could say it, "I'm starting to think the guy lives there."

Doc checked his comment. He held no rank on Shimp. She deferred to him more often than not based on his experience. He sensed a teaching moment. "What makes you think so?"

"This close together in both time and location? Plus they're nighttime jobs? He knows the area and feels comfortable there. Maybe he's a family friend who knows who won't be home and how late they'll be out."

"I was starting to wonder about that myself. What's your plan?"

"I'm thinking of going back to the victims and chatting them up about their friends. See if I can find someone they all have in common who hasn't been hit."

"I don't want to put you behind on Coxcomb, but do you think you can spare a few cycles to help me with this hit-and-run? Ricky's abandoning me in the morning, and it looks like it might be a homicide."

"It *is* a homicide," Neuschwander said without looking up.

"You don't know?" Shimp said.

"The ME is pending it, and the traffic investigator from Troop D is noncommittal," Doc said.

"Extremely noncommittal." Neuschwander still not looking up. "Excessively noncommittal. Superlatively noncommittal."

Shimp turned to Doc for an explanation. "The guy was kind of a dick. Made us pull information out of him while we had better things to do. Anyway, I may need a little help running down leads while Mr. Baywatch there goes to the beach." Neuschwander typed with one hand, flipped Doc off with the other.

"Sure. Whatever you need."

Doc's phone rang. He said, "Assuming we get any leads," as he reached for it.

“Dougherty.” Listened. “What makes you think so?” More listening. “I’ll be right there.” Turned to Shimp. “Val has a woman in the lobby might be a relative of our victim. Says the woman is distraught. That’s the word she used: ‘distraught.’ Not to get all Mars and Venus about it, but you’re way better handling emotional people than I am, especially emotional women. I’d consider it a favor if you sat in on this one.”

“Distraught” wasn’t the first word Doc thought of when he saw the woman in the lobby. “Distressed” was right up there; “frazzled” also a contender. Mid-twenties, five-five or -six with light brown hair grown out of any recognizable style. A tattoo of a butterfly high on her left breast, a rose with a barbed-wire stem on her right arm. She talked ten words a second all the way from the public lobby to the interview room. Doc stopped paying attention when he realized no three consecutive sentences related to each other. Maybe this was what distraught looked like. Or cranked.

The woman’s name was Melody Rushnock. Doc seated her; Shimp gave her a bottle of cold water. Doc said, “Ms. Rushnock, you told Ms. Peters you’re here about the body found in the Flats this morning. What do you know about that?”

“That body yinz found down the Flats? Up from the Dairy Queen, right? In that old gas station an’ ’at.” Doc nodded. “What’s she look like?”

Doc still looking for a way around describing the victim’s face when Shimp spoke up. “Ms. Rushnock, who do you think it might be? We can’t say much right now except to confirm or deny what people tell us.”

“I’m scared it’s my aunt. Patty Polcyn. She dint come home last night and everyone’s worried sick about her.”

“What does your aunt look like?”

“About my size ’cept her tits is bigger. She got a chipped tooth in front and a hump in her nose where she got it broke a few years ago. Blue eyes and blonde hair.”

Shimp hadn’t seen the file or the body. Knew only what Doc had time to tell her before Melody Rushnock showed up. Looked to Doc, who opened his hands, palms up.

Shimp gave half a nod. “Does your aunt have any distinguishing characteristics? Birthmark? A tattoo, maybe?”

“She hates tats. Gave me a ton a shit when I got this one.” Pointed to her left breast. “Asked why I’d want to draw attention to something I ain’t got. Not bein’ snotty or nothing, just teasing. Aunt Patty’s a sweetheart.”

Doc had a go. “Any broken bones? Besides her nose?”

“Her nose ain’t enough? That guy messed it up pretty good.”

She has no idea. “Most people break their noses at one time or another and don’t know it. She ever break an arm or a leg? Foot? Ribs? Fingers or toes?”

Melody took her time. “Naw. I can’t think of nothing.”

Shimp’s turn. “Any scars?”

“She put her arm through a window once. Cut it up pretty good. A dozen stitches, I think.”

“Which one?”

“Up her brother’s cabin the other side of Brady’s Bend.”

“Which arm?”

Melody held out her arms and lifted her eyes toward the ceiling. “Left.” Doc’s cell phone already in hand. “She had her appendix took out once. That leave a scar?”

Shimp continued the conversation while Doc stepped into the corridor and called Mike

House. Got what he wanted and rang off. Stood where Melody Rushnock couldn't see and gave Shimp a quick thumbs-up.

Shimp said, "Ms. Rushnock, I'm afraid there's a good chance the woman in the parking lot was your Aunt Patty."

"Aw, jeez. Can I see her?"

"She's not here. Homicides are taken to Pittsburgh for autopsy."

Took a few seconds for the penny to drop. "Homicide. That's like murder, right? I thought she got hit by a car. You're saying someone *murdered* her?"

Shimp laid three fingers on Melody's arm. "She was hit by a car. The driver left the scene and didn't report it. That's a crime. Any death resulting from a crime is treated as a homicide unless we find a reason not to."

"They gonna cut her open down there?"

"I'm afraid they have to."

Melody looked to Doc, who tried to keep his face expressionless. It worked. Melody spoke to Shimp. "You mean like on TV and the movies where they make them—what do they call it?" Slashed a Y across her own torso to demonstrate. "Then they scoop out all her guts? Can they do that without asking the family first?"

"Distraught" didn't begin to describe Melody Rushnock now. She planted her head in her arms on the table and shook with sobs. Shimp laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. Melody turned to bury her face in Shimp's chest. Teresa put her arms around her and rocked gently in place. Used the backs of three fingers to dismiss Doc, who left the room to start finding out what he could about Patty Polcyn's final day.

4:19 p.m.

Jake Mroczka wasn't distraught. Upset? Some. Pissed off? Goddamn right.

"Was two of them. Come in together and went back where I keep the craft beers. I didn't pay them no mind until I seen them coming back with those cheap-ass masks and carrying those cheap-ass guns. I thought about going for the .38 I keep under the counter here but they had the drop on me and a cheap-ass gun will kill you just as dead as something expensive, so I had to give it up. Son of a bitches. White guys, too." Looked at light-skinned but no doubt African American Officer Trevor Boston. "No offense."

Boston wrote in his notebook. Never looked up. Three months into the job and he understood people under duress say things they might not mean. Of course, sometimes they said exactly what they meant but hadn't meant *to*. Early in the shift and his balls still intact, Boston let it pass. "What did they look like, sir?"

"They looked like two guys wearing masks so I couldn't see what they looked like is what they looked like. How the hell am I supposed to know? You think I got some kind of mask-seeing-through X-ray technology back here for the one time in my goddamn life two assholes wearing them come in to rip me off?"

"No, sir. I understand you couldn't see their faces. What kinds of masks? Devils? Ghosts? Donald Trump? Whatever you can tell me."

It didn't appear to have occurred to Mroczka Boston would care about the masks themselves. "Uhhh...had a face like a retarded dinosaur. Eyes up on little posts, like antennas. Sticking up above his head."

"Both of them?"

"You mean both eyes?"

"No, sir. Both masks."

"Oh. Yeah. The both of them was wearing the same masks."

The germ of a seed of an idea formed in Boston's head. "Was it a *Star Wars* character?"

"Coulda been, I guess. I don't follow *Star Wars*. Saw the first three when I was a kid, but the newer ones all look stupid to me, being a grown man an' 'at."

"What color was the face?"

Mroczka applied real concentration now that Boston had shown genuine interest. "Hard to say. Sorta brownish greenish. Mostly brownish. One of them dinosaur colors."

"Smooth or lumpy?"

"Snout was pretty smooth. Had teeth like a person, now that I think about it."

"Was it Jar Jar Binks?"

Mroczka shrugged. "If he wasn't in the first three, I got no idea. Chewbacca I know. Them robots, you know, R2-3PO and the one looks like a garbage can? Them I know."

Boston pulled his cell. Googled Jar Jar Binks. Showed the result to Mroczka. "This the face?"

Mroczka's eyes snapped open. "That's the one. Who'd come up with a goofy-looking cocksucker like that?"

Boston thought of mentioning George Lucas. Saw no upside. "Can you tell me anything else about them? Tall? Short? Thin? Fat? Anything distinctive about either of

them?"

"One was over six foot tall. The other was six, eight inches shorter. Average builds. The tall one has one of those speech ingredients."

"A what?"

"You know. Couldn't say esses. They all come out like T-H."

"Ah." Boston crossed out "ingredient." "What were they wearing?"

"T-shirts and jeans. Dirty T-shirts and jeans."

"Dirty how? Grease stains? Paint? Yard dirt?"

Mrocza shook his head. "No no no. Not stained. Dirty. One said he was an orgasm donor and the other advertised free mustache rides. Dirty like that."

Boston crossed out "dirty," wrote "obscene." Looked around the store. "They touch anything with their hands?"

"Not so's I noticed. The big one pushed the door open with his ass on the way out."

Boston looked at the entry doors. Curved metal handles about a foot high to pull on. "Were they wearing gloves?"

Mrocza pulled a face. "Ninety degrees outside and two guys come in wearing gloves? I'd a known something was up right away."

Boston called the shop for a detective. Neuschwander head down on the hit-and-run. Dougherty and Shimp in with a witness. Positioned himself inside the door to open it so anybody who wanted in wouldn't touch the outside handle, not expecting they'd get anything of use off it. Forty-five minutes later, his radio squawked with more pressing business. Told Jake Mrocza not to let anyone touch the outer handle until a detective dusted for prints. Knew he wouldn't. Left to answer the next call.

5:58 p.m.

Helping out with the hit-and-run that might or might not be a homicide turned into way more than Teresa Shimp bargained for. Opening her notebook and giving Melody Rushnock the standard “Anything you can think of. You never know what might turn out to be important later” speech inspired the recitation of Patty Polcyn’s life story. More to the point, the parts of Melody Rushnock’s life story that intersected with her Aunt Patty’s. By the time Teresa disengaged, Dougherty had left for and come back from dusting the door handles at Mroczka’s. He walked in as Teresa was signing out. Hung his jacket on the hook in their office, sat down, opened a Coke from the mini-fridge, and said, “What’d you get?”

Teresa was grateful not to have had to put up with Dougherty trying to be patient while listening to tales of the trip to Kennywood Melody’s junior year—or senior—with all the cousins and who did what and who Angie ended up sleeping with years after and what happened when Aunt Patty caught Greg and Rina making out behind the Exterminator. Took over an hour, but Teresa was able—through patience, deft questioning, and stifled exasperation—to piece together a decent timeline for Patty Polcyn on the night she died.

“Melody’s been living with Patty for a couple of months now, ever since she—Melody—dumped Ricky and moved out.”

“Who’s Ricky?”

“He doesn’t matter except for if he hadn’t been such a jerk Melody would never have moved out and we’d have nothing on Patty’s last day.”

“Patty married?”

“Not recently. Her kids are grown and gone so she apparently didn’t see the need for a husband anymore.”

“An emancipated woman. Good for her. Sorry to interrupt.”

“The reason I brought it up is Melody got worried and started calling around when Patty didn’t come home. From what Melody told me, Patty got around, but she was always good about letting someone know where she went and when she’d be home.”

“So where’d she go?”

“Here.”

“Here? In the station?”

“On the county side, actually. The jail. Patty had a friend we booked for D and D. She came over to see if she could bail him out.”

“Could she?”

“No. The guy’s still here. Might not have had enough credit on her card. Anyway, that’s what makes this interesting. Melody had plans to go out with friends, and Patty let her use her—Patty’s—car since Melody’s needs a battery.”

“How’d Patty get here?”

“Don’t know. She appears to have been hitchhiking home, so maybe that’s how she got here.”

“She hitchhiked? Honest to God?” Teresa nodded. “How old was she?”

“Forty-eight. Why?”

“No reason. She seemed younger lying there.” Doc swallowed Coke. “How do we know she was hitching back home?”

“We don’t, not for sure. Based on what Melody found out from calling around, that’s the most likely thing. She says if Patty wanted to get somewhere, she’d find a way and wasn’t afraid to thumb.”

“Okay, so for now she’s hitching home.”

“Someone had to have picked her up because after she left here she went to see an unnamed family friend to buy some grass.”

“She called him an ‘unnamed family friend’? Honest to God?”

“Not in those words. Melody wouldn’t give me the name. Said she didn’t want to get the guy in trouble.”

“She want to help us find out who killed her aunt?” Teresa shrugged. “How does Melody know Patty was there?”

“She called everyone she knew who might’ve seen her.”

“Did she call Patty?”

“Several times. All the calls went straight to voice mail. Melody says Patty sometimes forgot to charge her cell for a few days at a time, so she didn’t worry at first.”

Dougherty looked inattentive again. Spoke as if no one else was in the room. “Patty didn’t have a cell or a purse or a wallet on her when we found her. Makes me wonder if she had them taken from her or if she left them in the car.”

“You think she’d been in the car that killed her?”

“Neuschwander sure does. She had only one shoe on and we can’t find the other one. Noosh’s theory is she was in the car that killed her and getting out might not’ve been her idea. Or maybe it was and the opinion lacked unanimity. Either way, there’s a struggle. A hasty departure. Things get left behind. Anyone Melody talked to see the car Patty was in?”

“The unnamed family friend pot dealer said whoever drove Patty to his place sat in the car and idled it while he waited.”

“He sure it’s a he?”

“Not a hundred percent but that was the assumption.”

“He get a look at the car?”

“Something dark. Blue or black.”

“He say anything about a make or model? Any kind of description better than ‘dark’?”

“If he did, Melody didn’t tell me.”

“And Melody’s not giving up the name.” Teresa shook her head. “You give her the ‘This is a homicide investigation; we don’t care about some misdemeanor grass’ speech?” Teresa had. “And she still didn’t go for it?”

“She said that’s what we’d say today. She’s afraid next month or the month after we’d be looking for an easy bust and use what she said as probable cause.”

Dougherty stared at the wall he faced—not the one behind Teresa—and said, “Just once I’d like to be able to look at a witness in the box like Bunk used to do on *The Wire* and say, ‘I’m murder police. That don’t interest me.’ One time.” Looked wistful. “Anyone else see her?”

“Melody says another friend saw Patty at Fat Jimmy’s bar around midnight.”

Dougherty perked right up. “She there alone?”

“Melody’s source says no, but he didn’t recognize who she was with.”

“Does *this* source have a name?”

Teresa checked her notes. “Paul Halicki. He lives off of Freeport Road, up on the hill.”

“He’s handy to Coxcomb Estates. Maybe you can kill two birds with one stone.”

Checked his watch. “No point going to Fat Jimmy’s now.” Teresa breathed a sigh of relief. Fat Jimmy’s the most notorious bar in Penns River. The ladies’ room her worst nightmare: no lock on the stall door, a stained sink, cracked mirror, and bad lighting. Only the crud held the floor tiles together. “Go home. Get something to eat. Take a nap maybe. I’ll meet you there at 10:30.”

“Do you really think the same people will be there?”

Dougherty looked surprised. “This is Fat Jimmy’s we’re talking about. They’ll probably be on the same stools.”

10:34 p.m.

Getting your first legal drink at Fat Jimmy's was as much a rite of passage in Penns River as killing a lion with a spear in some African countries or your first "mistaken" foreclosure at Wells Fargo. Cinder block construction with the bar on the right as you entered and two pool tables at the left rear. The regulars were borderline unemployed, borderline broke, borderline criminals, or some combination of the three. Jimmy's joint also served as a temp agency for the local underworld, a good place to pick up day—more often night—laborers.

Doc stopped by off-duty once a month or so to shoot the shit with his old high school buddy Jimmy, who always complained about how having a cop there cut his business in half but still comped most of Doc's drinks. Doc knew Jimmy liked having a "source on the force" if he ever needed one and was not above the random phone call when he became aware of activity that crossed the line of even his broad interpretation of legality.

"Jimmy!" Doc's voice cut through the gloom. Space materialized as anyone near the stool he aimed for either turned their backs or departed. Shimp followed with the enthusiasm of a child going to the dentist.

Jimmy pointed to Shimp. "She can stay. You, Dougherty...ah, fuck it. Don't matter what I'd say. You're harder to get rid of than head lice. What're you drinking?"

Doc held his hands chest high, palms out. "Thanks, but no. We're on the clock." Took a copy of Patty Polcyn's driver's license photo from a pocket. "Know her?"

"Sure. Patty Polcyn."

"She a regular?"

Jimmy made a seesaw motion with one hand. "Semi. What'd she do?"

"She died."

"Patty? Died?" Jimmy took a few seconds to get his head around it. "She was just in here last night."

"That's why we stopped by." Doc gestured to include the whole room. "Anyone here who might've seen her?"

Jimmy took inventory. "Harley Hagenmeyer over there. Scooter Morris and Big Steve and Fat Steve for sure. Bunch a people. Patty Polcyn is dead? What happened to her?"

"Hit-and-run. Two kids found her this morning in the lot of the old Gulf station down there by DQ."

"Fuck me. Yeah, she was here. You want someplace where you can talk to people?" Jimmy must have thought a lot of Patty. The random surreptitious phone call was one thing. Overt cooperation with the law was something else altogether.

"Thanks, Jimmy. Really. I have another small favor to ask." Jimmy raised an eyebrow. "You know who we're going to want to talk to. Make sure none of them leaves until we do."

Jimmy let them use his "office"—a ten-by-ten storeroom with cases of beer and whiskey stacked along the walls. A filing cabinet, card table, and two straight-backed chairs were the furnishings. Doc and Shimp put the witnesses in a chair and stood to take the state-

ments. Showing who was in charge, not so close they'd seem menacing.

Doc and Harley Hagenmeyer had history—Harley had “history” with every Penns River cop—so Doc scooped him up right away lest he decide to skip the festivities and place Jimmy in an awkward position. “I seen Patty when she come in. Guy was younger than her but that’s only because I know how old she was and it was older than she looked. Not that I would’ve minded a piece even if she was older than me.”

“What did he look like?”

“Average.”

“Average how?”

“Not as tall as you but taller than her.” Jerked his head in Shimp’s direction. “Blond hair kinda long and stringy, and a mustache he really shoulda give up on.”

“You catch a name?”

“Ron something. Said he worked at a body shop out Greensburg Road, but I know most the guys around here and I never seen him before.”

“Anything else you can tell us about him?”

“He loved his car. Nice ride, too.”

“You saw it?”

“I took a quick look when someone opened the door. Guy had it parked right out front.”

“You get the make or model?”

Harley shook his head. “I didn’t get a good look. Something sporty.”

“Color?”

“Black, I think. Dark for sure.”

Big Steve was too cool to sit in the chair. He turned it around and straddled it, elbows resting on the back. “I talked to him a little. His uncle owns a bar over Plum Borough. Said he worked tool and die across the river.”

“What’d he look like?”

“About my size but thinner.” Big Steve six-two, two-fifty. “Dirty blond hair and one of those droopy mustaches down past the corner of his mouth.”

“You see his car?”

“Not really. Kept talking about what a sweet ride he had, but him and Patty left before I did. I couldn’t see going outside just to look at a fucking car like I never seen one before.”

“You catch a name?”

“John something.”

Scouter Morris said they should have talked to him first. Saved themselves some time. “I knew he was trouble soon as he walked in. Little bantam rooster-looking cocksucker—sorry, miss, excuse me—come in like he owned the joint.”

The cops exchanged glances. “How big?”

Scouter turned toward Shimp. “No taller than you. Maybe even thinner, not saying you have any excess on you. Between us, I thought he might’ve been a tweaker. You know the look? Bad hair, shitty teeth?”

“What color was his hair?”

“Light brown, I guess. Hard to say between it looking like it hadn’t been washed in a while and the light in this shithole.”

“Anything else strike you? Something he said? Where he lives? Where he works?”

“Nah. I only about half listened while I watched the ball game. He might’ve said something about working on cars, but I didn’t catch where. No idea where he lives.”

“What about his car? You get a look at it?”

“Nah, but that’s probably why I can’t tell you much else. All he did was talk about what a great job he did restoring it. I tuned him out after the Pirates got a couple men on base.”

“You see it?”

“Nah. He sure did talk it up, though. Practically begged people to ask him about it. Fuck him. Anyone wants to show off that bad can kiss my ass.”

“Did he say what it was?”

“Not so’s I heard.”

“You catch a name for him?”

“Not like we were introduced or nothing, but I think I heard someone call him Don.”

Fat Steve not as tall as Big Steve and not as fat as Fat Jimmy. He also wasn’t any smarter than the average household appliance. “See, the thing about this kind of guy is he’s always looking to charm you. You know, like the guy killed all them college girls in Florida? Al Bundy? Guy in *NCIS* played him in a movie, *The Deliberative Stranger* or something. They said he could charm the pants right off a girl, then he’d kill them.”

Shimp was not a virgin but had yet to meet a man who could get her to take off as much as a glove on charm alone. “How was he charming?” she said so she’d know what to be on the lookout for.

“Come on. Nice-looking girl like you must know all about how men are charming.” Teresa knew all about how men *thought* they were charming, let Fat Steve talk. “Lets her know he has a little cash to spend. Figures out what it is about her she likes best and compliments it. Gives her the idea he’s a guy who can keep his mouth shut, you know, in case she’s married. All the little tricks women fall for.”

Dougherty spoke up before any more male secrets got out. “What did this charmer look like?”

“He was sort of...I don’t know...what’s the word I want? Nondescript.”

Teresa fought not to roll her eyes. Dougherty stared lasers through Fat Steve. “Nondescript in what way? Was he a shape-shifter and you couldn’t get a handle on how he looked most often?”

Fat Steve didn’t appear to enjoy Dougherty ragging on him. “No, he wasn’t a shape-shifter. Only certain Southwestern Indians can do that, and they have to be on peyote first. This was a white guy. He just didn’t have nothing memorial about him.”

“What about his hair? What color?”

“Brown.”

“How long?”

Thought, then, “Not too long. Over his ears.”

“You must’ve heard him talk quite a bit to know he was a charmer. He say where he

worked?"

"Uh-uh."

"Where he lived?"

"No."

"He talk about his car at all?"

"He liked it. Said he liked it a lot."

Dougherty paused. Said, "What did Patty have on?"

"A tank top thing. Hung kind of loose on her. Cut-off jeans."

Dougherty held up a finger to tell Teresa something was coming, roll with it. "How short were the jeans cut off?"

"They just about covered her ass. She bent over to pick something up and they didn't cover that much."

"What color was the top?"

"Blue."

"You said it hung loose. How loose? You catch any side boobage?"

Fat Steve might have smiled. "Sometimes. Patty had a nice pair on her, so yeah."

"Any birthmarks or moles on them?"

"Huh? What?"

"Get your fat ass out of here and stop wasting our time."

Fat Steve almost to the door when Teresa called after him. "Did you get his name?"

Fat Steve turned around and smiled for real. "Yeah, that I got for sure. It was Lon. I remembered it because it's the same as the guy who played the werewolf in those old movies. Lon Chaney, Junior. Can't be too careful around werewolves. They're sneaky bastards."

Fat Jimmy came in carrying three longnecks. Shimp passed. Doc reached a hand for one, stopped halfway, then told his partner he was going off the clock and took it. Jimmy sat the other two on the card table and tested the sturdiness of one of the chairs with his ass. Doc leaned against a stack of beer cases. Shimp stood as far away from touching anything in the room as possible.

Jimmy went first. "You get anything good?"

Doc flipped open his notebook. "We did okay. His name's either Ron or John or Don or Lon. He's somewhere between—how tall are you, Teresa?"

"Five-eight."

"Somewhere between five-eight and six-two and weighs—how much do you weigh, Teresa? Wait. Never mind. Sorry. Weighs less than two-twenty. Has brown, light brown, dirty blond, or blond hair just over his ears or to his shoulders and could be an athlete. Or a twaker. We talked to eleven people and got six different answers to where he worked or lived, the most popular being, 'I don't know.' He does appear to be a gear head. Not sure how good. He may have an uncle owns a bar in Plum. Or Penn Hills. Or Churchill. Somewhere over there."

Jimmy drank half a bottle in what looked like one long swallow. "You been back here all this time and that's all you got?"

Doc snorted half a laugh. "I've done worse. We would've liked to get more on the car, but knowing it's sparty ties in with what we know from the crime scene and the tread

marks. The rest is about what we expected. Better in some ways. Ron or Don or Lon could be Sean or Juan, but he's probably not Reginald or Archie or Aloysius. We grab a suspect with an uncle owns a bar or liquor store or restaurant or any kind of business over Penn Hills way, we take a closer look. Teresa? Sound about right?"

Shimp nodded. "If this were a battery or a robbery, we'd have the victim as a witness. Burglary victims can tell us about the security system or who has keys or knows the door code. In homicides you either have a suspect right at hand or you have to work around the edges."

"And for this one you have to work around the edges, right?" Shimp and Doc nodded. Jimmy finished the beer with one enormous swallow. "Then what are you still fucking around here for?"

SATURDAY
JULY 20

2:28 p.m.

“PR-Six, PR-Six, come in.”

“PR-Six. Go ahead, Janine.”

“See the woman at 2565 Reed Street. Possible domestic disturbance.”

Sean Sisler hoped for an indoor disturbance. A front pushing through advertised thunderstorms; the sky suggested sooner rather than later. Took him two minutes to get to the address. Not out of the car yet when a woman burst out the front door of the house carrying a toddler on her right arm and dragging a kid about six years old with her left. Halfway to Sisler when the clouds let loose like a spigot had opened.

“You gotta do something about him!” The woman tried to point toward the house with the hand dragging the child. “He’s out of his mind in there and I’m pretty sure he’s on something.”

“Is anyone hurt?”

“We’re okay, but Lily and her little ones is still in the house. Can we get in your car where it’s dry?”

Sisler decided what the hell; it wasn’t like he needed it right now. Opened the back door and let them in. About to turn toward the house when he heard a hoarse yell and a woman’s scream. Asked his new ward if the man inside had a gun or a knife.

“We don’t have no guns but there’s knives in the kitchen.”

Sisler nodded. Keyed the mike on his shoulder. “This is PR-Six requesting backup at 2565 Reed Street. They’ll see my car in the driveway. The people in it are not suspects at this time.”

Halfway to the house when a baseball shattered a front window and landed in the yard. First time Sisler had ever seen a baseball break a window from the inside, but that’s what makes the game great: you’re always seeing something you’ve never seen before. Drew his baton as another woman came out with two children in a mirror image of the first, this one carrying the smaller child on her left arm, dragging the other with her right.

“Thank God yinz is here. He’s fucking crazy. Oh!”

“You all right?”

“That rain’s freezing.” Looked toward Sisler’s car.

“Get in back. Wait.” Put a hand on her dragging arm. “Where is he?”

“Somewheres in there. All I care about is me and the kids ain’t in there with the crazy bastard. Oh, Jesus Christ, here he comes!”

Sisler turned toward the house to see a man standing under the awning above the stoop. Close to six foot, about a buck-eighty, pretty well put together. Mid-twenties, longish dark hair. Wore a white athletic sock on his right foot. Nothing else. “Why’s he all shiny?” Sisler said.

“Mazola.” Sisler stared. “You know? Cooking oil. Can I please get these kids out of the rain?”

Sisler waved her away and stepped up to the man. Not a confrontational distance, still a presence impossible to ignore. “Hey there, sir? What’s your name?”

The naked man stared at a spot behind and to Sisler’s left. “Slithering blades of grass.” Sisler still making up his mind whether to call the guy “Slithering” or “Mr. Grass” when

the speech continued. "Tiny little green snakes with their tails in the ground. Look at them! They're beautiful! And the sky." The guy wasn't doing anything threatening and his penis wasn't erect so Sisler let him talk. Maybe he'd learn something. "Look at it changing colors. Blue to green to yellow to aqua to...I don't even know what to call that shade. It's beautiful. A liquid sky shifting colors. A kaleidoscope of natural beauty."

Sisler couldn't help himself. Chanced a look up where the only liquid he encountered stung his face when it landed. "What's your name, buddy? Let's see can we get out of this rain and talk. With some clothes on, maybe."

"It's not rain. It's the sky. All of it. Dropping down just to get to know us. Maybe it'll take us back up when it goes home." The naked man spread his legs and opened his arms skyward.

"His name is Elliott Coffman." From the second woman in the police car.

"Okay, Mr. Coffman. Let's both get in out of this rain and see what's what."

Coffman dressed left and the cold rain was taking a toll. "No! No! I want to go with the sky when it returns home."

Sisler about to answer when three things happened almost simultaneously:

Lightning struck across the street.

Hail started to fall.

Coffman ran.

The lightning didn't bother Sisler until he smelled it and remembered all the equipment he carried made him a human lightning rod stumbling around in the open. The hail the size of pea gravel, but it still left a mark when striking at terminal velocity.

Coffman leaving the scene crossed the line. Sisler ran after him, slipping in the carnival of casual water the yard had become. Caught Coffman twenty feet from the street with a textbook flying tackle. Learned why football players aren't allowed to grease themselves when Coffman slipped away to leave Sisler face down in the muck.

Got up on the third try, shirtfront covered in mud, hail the size of dimes pummeling him. "Hey!" Held the rest of his thought until a thunderclap passed. "Stay right where you are! You're under arrest!"

Coffman stood facing Sisler. Mud dripped from the tip of his penis like something Sisler knew he'd never unsee. "Look what you did." Coffman pointed upward. "You made the sky angry. Now it's throwing shit at us, you asshole."

Sisler launched himself to plant a shoulder into Coffman's midsection to take both of them both to the ground. Tried for a pin but holding him down was like trying to put gloves on a carp. Coffman slipped free. Sisler grabbed an ankle to pull him down. Coffman fell facedown and started swimming across the mud. Sisler, tired of the whole situation and soaked to his undershorts, reached for his baton. Not there. Thought of the sap he kept for emergencies. Decided it wasn't worth having to explain the unauthorized weapon. Coffman rose to his knees. Started throwing gobs of mud and water with both hands in what appeared to be an effort to shield himself from the hail, now the size of nickels and starting to accumulate damage as they hit Sisler's head. He drew his pepper spray and aimed for the best target he had: Coffman's genitals.

Coffman screamed and started slapping at his privates like yellow jackets swarmed in his pubes. Sisler stepped up and put a cuff around one wrist. Pulled the arm behind Coffman's back and almost fell when the cuff slipped off. Coffman started walking away on his knees, screaming how the sky didn't like what this big blue spider had done to Little

Elliott. Sisler rammed a forearm into Coffman's shoulders to plant him face down in the mud. Thought about drowning the bastard, repositioned Coffman's face to allow some air. Got the cuff open and tried again, closing the ratchet tighter than the book recommended. Coffman hollered something about fucking the earth and what a wild sensation it was. Sisler snapped shut the second cuff and took a deep breath. Wiped hair and mud from his forehead. Noticed the hail had stopped and saw Kathy Burrows walking toward him, carrying an expression of more amusement than concern.

"Call the wagon," Sisler said. "No way is this greasy piece of shit getting in my car."

Burrows managed not to laugh until after she turned away, though Sisler noticed her shoulders shaking. She brought a blanket from her unit to wrap around Coffman, who wanted none of it. Hands cuffed behind him, he squirmed and twisted and screamed for the sky to take him. Broke into tears when the sun made an appearance. Took Sisler, Burrows, and wagon driver Dave Wohleber to get the blanket more or less situated and Coffman in the police van.

Sisler sliding his baton into its ring when he saw Ben Dougherty talking to the two women. Heard bits and pieces as he approached. "LSD, huh? Where'd he get that?... You mind if we take a look around the house? See if there are any more potentially dangerous substances lying around?... No, you don't have to let us. The arrest took place outside the house. We can get a search warrant, though... A word of advice: don't flush too much down the toilet at once. Backs up your system and makes a hell of a mess. And don't *even* think about throwing any of it in the river. I know it's only a hundred yards or so through the woods and down the hill. Don't do it unless you want fish crawling up here acting like he did."

Dougherty made a show of noticing Sisler. "Look at you. And from Saxonburg, no less. Didn't your father ever teach you not to wrestle with a pig? You both get dirty"—jerked his head toward the wagon where Coffman extolled the extravagant beauty of its interior— "and the pig likes it."

SUNDAY
JULY 21

1:28 p.m.

Trevor Boston took advantage of a slow patrol day to do some police work. He'd already been to Dollar Saver, The Dollar Store, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar. He walked into Dollar General—the one across from the school, not the one next to Pizza Hut a mile and a half down the road—and nodded to the cashier and the clerk stocking shelves. Wandered the store with one eye on the clerk's contortions to keep him in sight at all times. Used to people in stores keeping an eye on the young black man, but he was a cop in uniform for Christ's sake. Some things ran deeper than common sense.

He found what he wanted inside of five minutes, took it to the cashier. Rose. She gave a confused look when he laid the rubber Jar Jar Binks mask on the counter. "Will that be all?"

"It won't even be that, ma'am. Do you sell many of these?"

Rose looked closer. "Not this time of year. Halloween mostly, though this one's pretty much past his sell-by date, if you know what I mean."

"Sold any recently?"

"How recent?"

"The last few days, maybe a week."

Rose shook her head. "Not so's I remember." Raised her voice. "Hey, Lois?" Held up the mask. "You sell any a these the last week or so?"

"What? Those masks?"

"That's what I'm holding up, ain't it?"

"You mean that particular mask or any mask?"

Rose turned to Boston for a ruling. "Like that one," he said.

"Like this one," Rose yelled back to Lois.

"Not me. I sold a Hillary Clinton and a, what's his name? With the dirty mouth? Deadpool."

Rose looked to Boston with hope in her eyes. He shook his head. "He says it has to be this one."

"I told you what two I sold. Him not liking it don't change nothing." Boston already sorry he asked.

"I didn't say it did," Rose said. "You think Charlie sold any?"

"Who's Charlie?" Boston said.

"Manager."

Lois, from the back: "Might have. He likes to stay out front when kids is in the store. Keeps them from cleaning us out. That's when something like your mask there would sell, when the kids are around."

Rose about to answer when Boston cut her off. "Is Charlie here now?"

"Less he went to lunch."

"Could you check for me, please?"

Rose took a phone handset from a pole attached to her register. "Charlie? You here? There's a cop wants to talk to you."

Charlie a forty-something guy with thinning hair and a wispy, droopy mustache that appeared to know managing a Dollar Store was as good as it would get for either of them.

He sauntered to the front of the store and looked at Boston with an expression already halfway down the road to defeat.

Boston thanked him for his time, I'll make this quick, have you sold any of these masks in the past few days or a week. Threw in "Especially if you sold two at once" mostly for the hell of it.

Of such inspiration are police careers made. Charlie looked at Boston like he'd guessed which card Charlie drew to fill his inside straight at last week's game. "How'd you know?"

Took considerable effort for Boston not to smile. "Do you remember anything about who bought it? One guy or two?"

"Two guys."

"Remember what they looked like? These two guys bought the masks."

"Two guys. Nothing special about them except they bought a couple of kids' masks. That's the only reason I remember them. How glad they were to get them, two grown men."

"Glad how?"

"You know, like these were exactly what they'd been looking for. The tall one—rangy guy, taller than you, even—kept going on about how these would be perfect." Charlie paused. Considered. "Funny thing about the tall guy. Couldn't say S to save his life."

Boston losing his fight with a smile now. "How do you mean? Couldn't say it?"

"Come out all T-H every time he tried. I remember because he paid with exact change and counted out the pennies on the counter. 'Thenevty-thikth, theventy-theven.' Hard not to laugh."

"Can you tell me anything about the other guy?"

"Little guy, about my size. Well, little compared to the big guy. He didn't say much."

"Would you recognize them if you saw them again?"

"I...might." Drawing the word out. "What'd they do?"

"Maybe nothing. Assuming they're the ones I'm looking for"—Boston had no doubt they were—"it's not like it's murder or rape or anything." Armed robbery not *exactly* like murder or rape. "I mean, you said they were excited about finding these masks. How badass can they be?"

That appeared to fortify Charlie's resolve. And memory. "Come to think of it, I figured them for assholes when I first saw them."

"Why's that?"

"How they were dressed."

"How were they dressed?"

"I'm thinking." Boston waited while Charlie drew a picture in his head. "The tall one had on a T-shirt said 'I'm a virgin but this is an old shirt.' The other one..."—snapped his fingers—"had a picture of a cat with like waves coming toward it." Looked at Boston like he expected something. Boston let him take it. "You know? Pussy magnet?"

Not the same shirts they wore at Mroczka's but how many of these assholes could there be in a town this size?

6:58 p.m.

Ben Dougherty, Eve Stepler, and Veronica “Call Me Ronnie or Else” Cavanaugh had an interesting relationship.

- Eve was Doc’s best friend since elementary school and the only non-blood relative he stayed in touch with during nine years in the Army.
- Eve and Ronnie were lovers.
- Ronnie was bisexual and sometimes, as she put it, “just wanted some dick.”
- Eve thought a perfect solution would be to hook Doc and Ronnie up for the occasions Ronnie needed complementary plumbing.
- Hot as Ronnie was, getting serious with her brought Eve to Doc’s mind and they had become so much like brother and sister he was unable to rise to the occasion with Ronnie.
- It was complicated.

Not so much the three of them couldn’t get together for dinner once a month. Still complicated enough Eve and Ronnie couldn’t help themselves fucking with him. In a wholly figurative and platonic manner.

This month they crossed the river to Tarentum Station. Eve ran a contracting business and opened the conversation with a story about working on a house she swore Norm Abrams would have torched. Ronnie worked as a gastroenterologist and told an entertaining and somewhat disturbing tale about a colleague and amateur magician who wanted to open a practice called “PediaTricks,” where he could produce unexpected objects such as small replicas of human organs at opportune times during examinations.

Eve waited for the server to arrive with the entrees before turning to Doc. “Get any lately, Dougherty?”

Doc took his time cutting into and chewing his pork chop. “That’s a little direct even for you. What happened to asking about my love life?”

“You always get mad and change the subject.”

“Because you keep trying to fix me up.”

“I gave up trying to get you married. I’ll settle for getting you laid.”

Ronnie leaned in. “Given your impossibly high standards.”

Doc wagged a finger in Ronnie’s direction. “Meeting standards had nothing to do with what happened—”

“Didn’t happen.”

“Okay, didn’t happen with us. There were other things involved.”

“Like your VIR,” Eve said.

“VIR?”

“Virtual Incest Rule.”

Doc let his head droop. “I’m so old I remember when we were friends.”

“Poor baby,” Eve said. She and Ronnie reached across the table to place a hand on each of Doc’s. “Do you have anything entertaining to say or do we have to carry the whole conversation?”

“As a matter of fact, I do have a story worth telling because it reminded me of you.”

“How so?”

“It makes no sense at all.”

Eve released his hand. Sat back. “Then at least it will be entertaining.”

Ronnie left her hand on Doc’s. The look she gave Doc pulled his heart—among other organs—into his throat. “Go ahead, Dougherty. I’m all ears. Almost.”

Took Doc a few words to get his voice as resonant as he wanted it. “I’ve told you about Sean Sisler before, right?”

“Patrol officer,” Eve said. “Lives in Saxonburg. Used to be a sniper in the Marines.”

“Maybe you should introduce me to him,” Ronnie said.

“Trust me, he’s not what you’re looking for,” Doc said. “Anyways, he’s driving down the road the other day on patrol, minding his own business, when he gets a call. Possible shots fired, vehicle description, respond Code Three.”

“I love when he gets all policey and starts leaving out parts of speech like conjunctions,” Eve said. “I bet articles are next.”

“Shhhh, Evie. I like a man who doesn’t beat around the bush.” Ronnie brushed her thumb over the back of Doc’s hand. “What’s Code Three?” she said in a voice with warm butter in it and promises of more elsewhere.

“Sirens and lights.” Doc cleared his throat. “Right. So. Sisler’s on his way to the call when he comes across the exact vehicle described. Pulls it over. Calls in the plate. No problem there so he walks up and asks for license and registration.

“The driver knows the drill. Tells Sis the license is in his wallet, which is in his left hip pocket. Says he’s pretty sure the registration is in the glove compartment but by this time Sisler’s lost interest because there’s a loaded crossbow lying on the passenger seat.”

“A what?” Eve said.

“A crossbow. You know, where you hold the frame parallel to the ground and a trigger releases the arrow?”

“I know what a crossbow is, dumbass. I said ‘What?’ as a sort of ‘What’s a crossbow doing in this guy’s car?’ kind of question.”

“I’ll tell you if you’ll let me talk.”

Ronnie looked at Doc as if he were George Clooney in a room full of Danny DeVitos. “Let him tell it, Evie.”

Knowing she was messing with him didn’t inhibit Doc’s body’s production of natural Viagra. Left his hand there for her. Didn’t want to seem impolite. “Right. Yeah. So that’s what Sisler asks the guy: ‘What’s a loaded crossbow doing in your car?’ Guy asks if it’s illegal and Sisler tells him it’s a loaded firearm. They go back and forth until Sisler informs this genius they can debate the merits all day but the law is still the law and that’s a loaded firearm and you can’t carry a loaded firearm in a vehicle and while we’re at it what’s it doing on your passenger seat?”

Ronnie withdrew her hand, sliding her fingers across Doc’s palm. He took the opportunity to cut another piece of pork chop. Chewed and swallowed. Hard. “Guy said he hit a deer once and didn’t quite kill it. Always been sorry the poor thing suffered and him unable to do anything about it.”

“So he carries a loaded crossbow with him all the time?” Eve said. “Just in case?”

Doc pointed his fork at her as he chewed. “Exactly what Sisler asked. Guy backed off a little, said not all the time—not at night, too dangerous—only when there’s good enough visibility to use it safely if he had to.” Saw the women’s faces. “Uh-huh. Exactly the conditions when you’d be least likely to hit a deer. Sisler tells him to uncock the

weapon—”

“It was *cocked*?” from both women in unison.

“Well, yeah. Crossbow’s not truly loaded unless it’s cocked.” Chewed a bit to make them wait. “The guy complies and gets the vehicle registration from the glove compartment.” Let it hang there.

Eve broke first. “And?”

Doc chewed. Swallowed. Wiped his lips with a napkin. He’d drunk free on his story-telling skills for years. “Sean Sisler is a trained and sworn officer of the law. It was obvious to someone of his keen eye and experience that the name on the registration did not match the name on the license.”

“Oops,” Ronnie said.

“‘Oops’ is the legal term. Sisler points this out to the guy—who will henceforth be referred to as ‘Suspect’—and Suspect tells him this is his friend’s car and he’s borrowing it.”

“Ever heard that before?” Eve said.

“Not since I worked patrol. Sisler asks Suspect to prove it by producing his friend’s phone number, which he does. Sisler calls and learns the friend has, in fact, loaned his car to Suspect. Sisler then informs the owner of the misdemeanor crossbow violation his car is now involved in. The owner is not amused.”

“I feel like I’m at an official press conference,” Eve said. “Almost makes me wet.” Ronnie and Doc shot her looks. “Almost.”

“Sisler asks the owner if he minds if Sisler searches the car. The owner has no objection. Sisler makes Suspect get out, frisks him, and places him in a non-threatening position. About to search the car when he asks Suspect if there’s anything in there that might hurt him—you know, knives, needles, concealed firearms—and Suspect says not as far as he knows but it’s not his car and, oh yeah, since you’re probably going to find them anyway, there’s drugs in the car and will those be held against him, it not being his car and all and no Miranda warning being given.”

“That’s not really how it works, is it?” Ronnie said.

Eve and Doc replied in unison. “No.”

Doc reclaimed the thread. “Sisler tells Suspect since he’s been so forthcoming he won’t use the statement against him. Waits for the guy to relax before he says he *will* use the drugs he’s about to find in a legally authorized search and they can go through Miranda later when a detective actually has questions for him.”

“What did he find?” Ronnie said.

“A little of this, a little of that. About ten grams each of crystal methamphetamine, oxycodone hydrochloride, and methylenedioxymethamphetamine...”

“Whoa,” Eve said. “Methylene what?”

“Molly,” Ronnie said. “How much trouble is this guy—Suspect—in?”

“For starters, we have hunting out of season, hunting without a license, using a vehicle to attempt to hunt game or wildlife, and having a loaded firearm in a vehicle. Those are summary offenses and Sisler wrote the tickets on the spot.”

“*What about the drugs?*” Eve had a tendency to wrap herself a little tight listening to a cop story.

“Depends on whether he’s just under or just over ten grams on any of them, how the DA chooses to bundle the charges, and whether he’s a repeat offender. Could be any-

where from six to fifteen years. In practical terms, Sally Gwynn will almost certainly let him plead to misdemeanor possession and he could walk with probation or a suspended sentence if he's a first offender."

"The prosecutor has that much discretion?"

"All cops do is present evidence. The prosecutor has the option to go to the grand jury or not bring charges, but going to trial depends on what they can prove in court, which means only the cases they're about certain they'll win. Sally goes the extra yard for justice and not clogging up the system by only trying cases she knows for a moral certainty she'll win, which is close to zero. If she folds everything into a single misdemeanor possession charge and offers probation...well, there's a deal no one can refuse. That's why she has a 98 percent conviction rate."

"The DA doesn't mind?" Ronnie sounded already half afraid of the answer.

Doc took a bite of pork chop. Chewed. Shrugged. Swallowed. "He has a prosecutor with a 98 percent conviction rate, which means his office must kick ass. Besides, the defense will argue the drugs belonged to the vehicle owner and it's not a crime in Pennsylvania to be caught with drugs that don't belong to you or drugs you didn't know were there."

"I thought he told Sisler about them," Eve said.

"True, and that's what Sisler will testify to. Suspect will say otherwise. Defense lawyer will work the gray area to try to create reasonable doubt in at least one juror. Sally knows this—she's overcautious, not stupid—and she won't want to take the chance there'll be one juror who hates cops or had a relative jammed up ten years ago and wants to strike a blow against the police state and its jackbooted thugs and decides to hang the jury. That's what her boss likes best. Hung juries are expensive and whatever her faults, Sally Gwynn does not hang juries."

"How do you feel when you catch them and they don't even get jail time?" Ronnie said.

"Used to bother me a lot."

"Not now?"

Doc finished his pork chop. "I work for the clearances now. Sometimes it's nice to have a partial suspect list ready to go. Check the evidence, think of who else does that kind of crime with the same MO, and start looking for Artie Baxter. Or Jimmy the Ferret. Pain in the ass to start from scratch every time."

MONDAY
JULY 22

8:07 a.m.

“Find this prick. I don’t care how you do it, but the first suspicious death on my watch is *not* going to be an open file. Go into every garage in town and eyeball the cars personally if you have to. So long as the ACLU doesn’t make Penns River their summer home because of how you do it.”

Brendan Sullivan’s office was the same room with the same furniture as Stush’s, nowhere near as homey. Gone were the candy dishes—one for jellybeans, the other for Halloween-sized bars—as well as the framed photos and awards that used to cover the walls. Sullivan had a photo of his family—wife, two daughters, a son, and what appeared to be a son-in-law, a daughter-in-law, and a couple of grandkids—on his desk. A framed Certificate of Appreciation from the Massachusetts Association of Women in Law Enforcement hung on the wall behind him. Nothing else.

Doc knew Sullivan to be a well-respected and much-decorated Boston police officer who retired as a captain after twenty-five years, in part due to an injury he suffered as a patrolman that left him with two fused vertebrae and a hip capable of setting off metal detectors from ten feet away. Doc knew all this because he was a good detective, which meant he was naturally nosey—what his mother called a “neb shit”—and had the skills and resources to indulge himself. Stush filled in a few blanks. As far as anyone had heard from Sullivan himself, his history began the first time he sat behind Stush’s old desk.

“I hear you, Chief. Really. I do. The thing is, this ain’t *L.A. Confidential* where we can delegate 48 teams of two to toss three cribs apiece.” One of only about fifty lines from the movie Doc could cite word-for-word and in context. “It’s Shimp and me against whatever else comes up until Neuschwander’s back.” Saw Sullivan’s expression. “I’m not saying we won’t or can’t do it. I’m letting you know it’s not going to be done in the next few days.”

Sullivan wanted to argue, plain as the star on each collar point. “I know. I also don’t want anyone going alone to get it done faster. When’s your court date?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“The DA’s sure she only needs you the one day?”

“This trial shouldn’t take more than a day unless the jury decides to milk it.”

None of the options Sullivan considered brought a smile. “She’s prepping you tomorrow?” Doc nodded. “The medical examiner is still pending this?”

“That’s why I didn’t come as soon as you called me, on the phone with Pittsburgh. He told me no tests have come back yet so they have no reason to change the status.”

“How much does Shimp have going on?”

“Same as the other day. Nothing new.”

“Anything pressing?” Doc shook his head. “All right. No offense, but Shimp is now the primary on the Polcyn file. You’re out a chunk of tomorrow, all day Wednesday, and maybe part of Thursday for the verdict and ceremonial eye-fuck. The case needs someone to give it their full attention. This is all I want her to work on. Cover the rest as well as you can until Neuschwander comes back. Snyder and I are available to assist.”

Doc nodded. Didn’t like having a case taken away from him but he understood why and had no counterargument.

“Give her the list of potential vehicles you got from PennDOT so she can get right on it. I’ll get Mike...Zy-wuh-keel...how does he pronounce his name again?”

“Suh-wiss-ee-ul. Call him ‘Eye Chart.’ Everyone does.”

“Eye Chart?”

“A collection of random letters?”

Sullivan smiled for the first time. “I’ll talk to Eye Chart,” *Eye-chaht*, “and get a uniform detailed for a couple of hours at a time. No one goes alone, and I don’t mean just Shimp. The person we’re looking for meant Patty Polcyn harm, no matter what the ME says. No telling what they’ll do if they feel cornered.”

8:33 a.m.

“I don’t know how they got them anywhere.”

If Sean Sisler walked into a bar and saw Mike Hrivnak, his first thought would be “construction.” Not fat. Stocky. Hair curled from under the sides of his “Hrivnak Construction” ball cap though his hairline resided well above the bill. Two inches of unlit cigar were jammed into a corner of his mouth.

The people Hrivnak wondered about had liberated the plate tamper and excavator bucket from the work site along Silvermoon Drive. Hrivnak didn’t know how much each weighed, estimated together they were close to a ton. “Sure, they’d fit into a good-sized pickup bed, but it’s not like just anyone can get them in there.”

No sidewalks on Silvermoon. Sisler noted the terrain fell away from the street into a front yard. “Could the two pieces they stole been at the edge of the hill? Like this?” Demonstrated dragging something. “Back up the truck and drag in the targets of opportunity?”

Hrivnak calculated. “Could, I guess. Still be some work. Be taking a chance either one of them snapping off the gate if it landed wrong. If that’s even where they were. I don’t remember for sure.”

Sisler looked for tire tracks in the yard. What grass there was showed evidence of frequent acquaintance with parked vehicles. “Could two guys do it?”

“They’d still have to be better men than me. Be no big deal if they had the right equipment. Lift them—hell, drag them—with your bare hands? I guess it’s not impossible, but let’s say you’d really have to want to do it.”

“How much are they worth?”

“The tamper run me a couple grand. I’d have to look up the bucket. What gets me is what anyone would possibly want them for.”

“Could a competitor have taken them?”

“I doubt it. Me and Willie Nasser and Curt Hilsen play golf together a couple times a year, for Chrissakes. Refer people to each other when we’re overbooked. I’m thinking anyone else in the business comes across either of these and I’ll get a phone call.”

Sisler made a note to ask Dougherty which fences might handle such equipment. No doubt in his mind someone did—there are fences for *everything*—but these aren’t the kind of things you could unload a truckload of at 7-11. “Might be our best bet to find them. Put the word out, but give me a list of anyone who might have use of them. Whoever took these needs to sell them, and your competitors might be the first people who come to mind. We’ll send a cop by, friendly-like, but it’ll also impress them with the seriousness of the situation in case anybody has a crisis of honesty.”

“I hope this don’t take long. It’ll strain my cash flow to have to buy or rent replacements while the insurance makes up their minds I ain’t trying to cheat them. It’s also not like I can walk into Rent-A-Center this afternoon and pick up a couple replacements. So it’s gonna put me behind. Could cost me a contract down the road. Sooner you can find them, I’d sure appreciate it. Do me one favor, though.”

Sisler waited for the standard request for some kind of extra-judicial vengeance. “What’s that, sir?”

“Ask them what the fuck they took these for, out of everything in the world they coulda stole. I mean, Jesus Christ, an excavator bucket?”

9:17 a.m.

Cedric Faison spent twenty minutes sitting in his car making up his mind while the City-County Building parking lot heated up. Cedric's first trip back to Penns River in seven years. The first he worked in a Nissan plant in Smyrna, Tennessee. The next six he spent in the Morgan County Correctional Complex after cutting up a man in a bar fight over a woman who wouldn't have gone home with either of them if they'd been LeBron James's business manager. Cedric talked his parole office into giving him thirty days to find a job in Pennsylvania so he could properly take care of his sons, the reason he'd gone to Tennessee in the first place.

He found Wilver and David better off than he'd expected, not as well as he'd hoped. Wilver had recovered from a gunshot wound received when actual drug dealers tired of him and his buddies playing at it. He and David lived under the radar with a retired Army Master Sergeant named Jefferson West, who made sure they were fed and clothed and had safe places to sleep.

Cedric couldn't say as much about their mother, Imelda. Eye, as Cedric used to call her, so far gone into her heroin habit she never fussed about the extra-legal living arrangement with West. Didn't visit Wilver in the hospital. The spending money dried up and the gifts sold after Wilver went out of business, Imelda had no choice but to peddle ass to feed the monkey. Given her age and wasted state, Cedric estimated Imelda's jones required about a mile-and-a-half of dick a day. Give or take, depending on where someone would pay to put it.

Cedric held the door for a young African American patrol officer on his way out. Asked where he could find Detective Dougherty. "You here about the hit-and-run in the Flats?" Cedric was not. "Go in there to the right and ring the bell. Tell whoever answers you want to talk to Detective Dougherty and they'll send him out."

Cedric thanked the cop, went in and rang the bell. A middle-aged woman in civilian clothes took his name and asked him to have a seat. Ten minutes later a tall, solid, white man stepped through the swinging half-door. Smiling by the time he got to Cedric. "I heard the name 'Faison' and figured you were some kind of relation, but seeing you like this it's obvious you're David's dad." The cop extended a hand. "Ben Dougherty. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Faison."

This was *not* the reception Cedric expected. Paroled felons didn't rate warm greetings from any cops he ever heard of no matter how close the cop might be to the felon's children. Cedric hadn't expected Dougherty to rag on him, but something more guarded than this.

Dougherty escorted Cedric through the station. Passed by a small office to get a couple of Cokes. Asked Cedric to call him "Doc." Apologized for settling in an interview room with nothing more than a table bolted to the floor, three chairs, two-way glass in one wall, and a camera and microphone in a high corner. "We're working a homicide and the file is spread all over the office. Besides, we'll have some privacy here. What can I do for you?"

"I guess you know I been away." Dougherty nodded. "You know why?" Another nod. "I guess they had to account for me somehow."

“The boys didn’t tell me. I looked you up.” Dougherty waited for Cedric to meet his eyes. “I’m a cop. It’s what we do.”

“You seem okay with it. What I done, I mean.”

“I’m happy to see you back, and I’m hoping it’s for the right reasons. Cut someone up here and I’ll drive your ass back to Wartburg myself.”

“Why are you hoping I’m here?”

“To do right by your boys.”

Cedric’s face warmed on “boys.” “I’s trying to do right by them when I went to Tennessee.”

“Let’s hope you got better at it.”

That didn’t cool Cedric’s face any. “I came today to thank you for looking out for Wilver and David. I heard a little about how you met, and I know you done way more than you had to. I appreciate it, and I know they do too.”

Dougherty waved it away. “Jefferson West is the man to look for if you’re feeling grateful. He’s been there for your boys”—that word again— “every day. I should’ve done more. Maybe I could’ve prevented Wilver getting shot.”

“What could you do about it?”

“Get him out of the drug business.” Laying it right out there, not caring if Cedric knew already.

“Hard to talk them out of all that money.”

“I was done talking.” Dougherty must have caught Cedric’s look. “I wanted to bust him for something minor. Give him a whiff of what he could look forward to if he kept it up. Reynard Mendenhall got to him first.”

“That your idea of helping a young man? Locking him up?”

“My preference is to talk with the parents. I imagine you’ve been to see Imelda by now. You were out of town.”

Cedric chose not to pick up the perceived challenge. “This Mendenhall the one who shot him? Sure?”

“His crew. Reynard’s above all that now.”

“He’s still walking around free?”

Dougherty smiled like Cedric needed to have the simplest things explained to him. “There’s a substantial difference between what we know and what we can prove. We asked Wilver to testify—him the sole survivor and all—but there’s this code about snitching, even if the guy killed your two besties and damn near got you, so...you know how it works.”

Cedric had heard how it works. Had no firsthand experience. Half a dozen people lined up to testify against his ass. “I don’t remember murder being so acceptable when I lived here.”

“Must’ve been you held the social fabric together back in the day. When you left...” Dougherty opened his hands.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

Dougherty showed neither anger nor sadness. “Sure I do. Same as you know better than to think I’m okay with what happened to Wilver and his friends. Two young men—kids, really—died that night. We worked the case hard for weeks. I still open the file and take a look once in a while to see if I missed anything. The sad truth is we have no witnesses—none willing to testify, anyway—no weapons, and the prime suspects have half a

dozen people lined up to perjure themselves by saying these upstanding citizens were nowhere near Penns River when it happened.” Pointed in the general direction of Allegheny Estates. “You know someone around the way who’ll talk to me, send him over. I take my help where I find it.”

“So saying you’re not okay with it don’t mean you won’t get over it.”

“No offense, Cedric, but it’s not like three toddlers were shot down in a drive-by while they were riding their Big Wheels in the playground. Drug dealers killed drug dealers in a turf dispute. One of the dealers being a friend of mine or your son doesn’t change anything. It’s a dangerous business. Wilver knew how dangerous it was, but I don’t think he understood.”

“Understood what?”

“How dangerous it was.” A beat. “He does now.”

Cedric had heard his fill. “Thank you for your time, Detective. I’m truly grateful for all you’ve done for Wilver and David. I have things to do myself now, so I’d best be on my way.”

“Hold on a minute. What’s the plan?”

“The plan?”

“Why are you here? In Penns River. Are you here on a visit or do you have bigger things in mind?”

Dougherty’s voice flat as ever, Cedric not sure how to take it. “Tennessee give me thirty days to find a job. I can do that, get a decent place to live, I can bring Wilver and David under my roof again. No disrespect to Mr. West, but they belong with me.”

“No argument here. How can I help?”

This cop was full of surprises. “Help? Way you been talking, I don’t know why you bothered to see me. Now you’re asking can you help?”

Dougherty’s face softened. “Work with me here. The only thing I know for sure is you carved a man up in a bar fight over a woman not your wife. Everything else is hearsay. The other thing I know is the boys deserve a break. They got a big one when Jeff West took them in. He makes sure they have what they need, and he loves David like a grandson. Thing is, he’s getting old and I wonder about his health. He gets sick or dies...there’s no safety net, especially for David. I’m willing to help you prove yourself so the boys can have decent lives.”

That was one too many. “You sure say ‘boy’ a lot for man says he so interested in helping. This your way to a promotion, showing compassion for the black community while calling us boys to our faces, probably worse in private?”

Dougherty’s expression didn’t change much. He might have smiled. “How old are Wilver and David, Mr. Faison?”

“Wilver eighteen and David be twelve next month.”

“School-age.”

“So?”

“You ever hear of school men? The term is ‘school boys.’ That’s all I meant by it. They’re still kids. No disrespect intended. Now how can I help you find a job?”

11:17 a.m.

Wilver Faison's belly itched. He didn't worry anymore about ripping open the scar where they'd sewn his intestines back together—sixteen inches shorter—though he still had times where all he wanted to do was scratch. A little harder. Then a little softer. His idea of a well-rounded day.

“Wilver.” Jefferson West never demanded attention; he requested it. Neither Wilver nor David ever denied him. Must have been all West's time in the Army. “I'm going to Shop 'n' Save for groceries. You want anything special? Maybe some of the good pepperoni? Put it on Ritz crackers with Colby cheese while we watch the ball game later.”

“Naw. I'm good.”

“Can we put it on Club crackers?” David said.

“I don't see why not.” West jotted a note in the pad he carried in his shirt pocket. “Want some Coke with it?”

“Cherry?”

“Cherry it is. Wilver? You sure I can't get something for you?”

“Naw. I ain't need nothing.” Saw the trace of disappointment on West's face. “I don't need anything. Thanks.”

West nodded. “You want to come with me? See if anything catches your eye?”

“I will.” David already on his feet. Kid had a sweet tooth, and West liked to take care of it for him.

“Put your shoes on. Wilver?”

“Naw. I'm a'ight here. All right here.”

“Your belly itch?”

“Some.”

“Get up and move around a little. It'll heal faster with exercise.”

“Doctor said I'm healed now. Been almost six months.”

West smoothed out his voice like he did when he wanted to talk you into something. “Your body may have healed, but it's not recovered yet. That takes longer and it needs blood pumping to do it.”

Wilver wanted to go. Hot outside the way he liked it, the shorties wearing what showed them off best, and some of those girls round the Estates were *fine*. Talking West into buying a bag of pistachio nuts would be no challenge, glad as the old man would be to see Wilver out the house. Cooped up in the house going on six months had gotten old. He was eighteen and about as recovered as he could be in the physical sense. Things out there called for him to get back in the mix.

Reynard Mendenhall was out there, too. Reynard's boys Sweet and Gillum about to put one in Wilver's head when Five-O rolled up looking for where the shots came from. His besties Pookie and Eddie already dead, Wilver watched steam rise from their bullet holes while he waited for the ambulance on a bitter cold night. Now the idea of leaving the house never crossed Wilver's mind without thinking of Reynard Mendenhall and Sweet and Gillum coming back to finish the job.

They would, too. Wilver and Pookie and Eddie thought they were slick, switching up drug houses and never selling on the street. No one except his boys knew where he lived,

and he knew they'd never give him up. And they didn't. Wilver forgot a stone fiend would give up his friends, his mama, his baby mama, and the baby for some good dope at the right price, especially if somebody—Reynard Mendenhall, for example—let the fiend know the other option was no dope and a beatdown in the bargain.

That's how they got him. Someone—Wilver suspected Pop-Pop Patterson because of a blow-up he'd had with the baggy-assed motherfucker, Mr. West's no-foul-language rule be damned—told Reynard or one of his boys to wait outside in the alley between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, knowing Wilver, Eddie, or Pookie be along sooner or later. Reynard's good luck to catch all three. Reynard would have to assume Wilver—the only survivor—would testify even though he had less interest in snitching than he had in getting back into the drug game, which he wanted to do less than putting broken glass in his morning cereal, which he'd do in a heartbeat if it meant Reynard would leave him be.

But Reynard had no reputation for forgiveness. He might enjoy watching Wilver eat the broken glass, but he'd still cap his ass after because anyone stupid enough to eat glass in the hope of getting out of *anything* was stupid enough for someone to talk him into giving Reynard up. Like Wilver heard on the TV one night, there was no upside for him.

Seeing his Pops again gave him hope for about ten seconds. He remembered Cedric as almost like a superhero, traveling to a different planet to find a better life for all of them, leaving destruction in his wake if need be. Now Wilver had seen things Cedric couldn't imagine. He talked a good game, but Wilver needed more than a feeling he'd seen this movie before and hadn't liked how it came out.

So Wilver didn't go to Shop 'n' Save. Jefferson West didn't bring home any pistachio nuts. Wilver's gut still itched, and his muscles felt tetchy from no exercise or fresh air. He didn't talk to any school friends and he didn't see any pretty girls and he didn't feel the ninety-degree heat he liked so much on his face.

He also didn't get his ass shot off. All things considered, a good day.

1:44 p.m.

Doc would have traded places with Wilver Faison faster than a squirrel can distract a dog. Today was his mother's ophthalmologist appointment.

The horizon of Tom Dougherty's willingness to take himself and Ellen places had shrunk. Tom turned an obstacle into a virtue by overcoming her pathological fear of flying into an excuse for car trips west to the Pacific Ocean, south to Ensenada, north to Banff, and east to Cape Cod. Today the bimonthly trip to Monroeville for Ellen's appointment was too much for him.

"Your dad could've brought me, Benny." Only family and Stush got away with calling Doc "Benny." He didn't like it much when they did it, but he couldn't very well tell the people who gave him the name not to use it.

"He's not feeling well. I'm happy to do it so he can get some rest."

"I don't want you to get in trouble for taking too much time off work."

"Don't worry about it. They owe me so much time I could probably take the rest of the year off and still be in the hole."

Ellen had no familiarity with the concept of comp time. Paid vacations had been a rarity during her working life. She slid the palm of one hand over the back of the other, alternating hands. The one overt sign she knew what was coming.

Ophthalmologist appointments weren't the only time Doc accompanied one or the other of his parents to a doctor. By far the worst. Half-day affairs where the best news they could hope for was Ellen's macular degeneration wasn't any worse; it would never get better. Sign in and wait. Into an examination room to begin what Doc thought of as the Stations of the Cross. A quick vision test where they'd ask if things were any worse or if her eyes watered. Ellen would lie—"About the same" and "Not really"—leaving Tom or Doc to give the straight scoop. Drops to numb her eyes. More drops to dilate them. Move to a darker room and wait. Photograph the inside of each eye. Back to the dark room. Some other test Doc had no idea what it did. More waiting. Then the actual examination where the doctor would tell them whether Ellen needed injections in either or both eyes. If not, silent rejoicing. If so, more waiting. More drops. Then a needle into the eyeball. Rinse and repeat if both eyes needed shots. Whoever drove then took Ellen to Bob Evans to eat, Ellen's idea of a big treat, her reward for allowing a relative stranger to stick needles into her eyeballs. Sliding her hands over each other the closest she ever came to complaining.

Waiting for the first shot of the day, Doc's mind elsewhere when Ellen grabbed his attention so hard he almost sprained his neck. "He fell off the lawnmower the other day."

"Who? Dad?"

"Yeah."

Doc was a cop. "Yeah" was not an adequate answer. "How'd he fall off the lawnmower?" A Toro, top of the line when Tom bought it new fifteen years ago. Cared for like he wanted to make the Buick jealous.

"A branch fell in the yard after that storm a couple week ago. He didn't see it until he was out cutting the grass."

"And... what? He ran over it? How big a branch are we talking about?"

Ellen turned her head to look at Doc. "I'm the one going blind. He saw it. He veered off to the side and lost his balance when he leaned over to pick it up."

Doc took a few seconds to control his frustration. "Let me get this straight. A man well into his seventies with knees he should have replaced years ago, and congestive heart failure, leaned off a moving lawnmower on uneven ground to pick up a branch? Sound about right?"

Ellen returned her gaze to the opposite wall. "There's nothing wrong with your father's heart."

"He has a pacemaker with a built-in defibrillator, Mom. They don't hand those out just to pad the bill."

"No one ever said anything to him about it."

"Not even when they cut him open to put it in?" No answer. Doc hadn't expected one.

A minute passed. "You're making too much of it, Benny. Whatever might've been wrong with his heart, that gadget fixed it. He's good as new now."

Doc's mind flashed to the image of his father in the recliner, his voice saying he'd take her while his face showed gratitude he didn't have to. "What makes you think so?"

"I asked him."

Doc didn't like giving either of his parents the third degree. No other way to get health-related information out of either of them. "What made you ask? I mean, if you're not worried about it, why bring it up?"

Ellen recovered a memory. More of a chore for her of late. "I saw him put the mower away and come in." The mower lived in a fabric garage at the head of the driveway fifty feet from the house. "I took a basket of laundry down the cellar and he wasn't there, so I looked in the garage. He was sitting on one of those folding chairs he keeps by the door so we can sit outside on nice days. He looked like hell, so I asked if he was all right. He said yeah, he just got a little short of breath and felt light-headed, so he figured he better sit down."

"You ask him anything else?"

Ellen's face sank as the conversation went on. "I asked if his chest hurt."

"Did it?"

"Did it what?"

"Did his chest hurt?" Harder all the time to keep his voice down.

"He said not too bad."

Tom's chest didn't hurt too bad after a fifty-foot downhill walk. No heart trouble here, folks. Move along. Doc thinking of another way into the discussion when the nurse came in to anesthetize Ellen's right eye. As if to remind Doc to feel even guiltier than he did already about grilling his mother with this on her mind.

2:32 p.m.

“Is this the Thomas Ziegenfuss residence?”

“Yeah?” The lady of the house on guard as soon as she realized this attractive woman was looking for her husband. Not the first time this had happened to Teresa Shimp.

The badge resolved any hasty first impression. “Penns River police. I’m Detective Shimp. This is Officer Burrows. Is Mr. Ziegenfuss home?”

“He’s at work.” The woman’s guard back to half-staff upon learning these women were cops. Also not the first time Teresa had seen such a thing.

“Does he own a 2011 Dodge Challenger?”

“He drove it to work.”

“Where does he work?”

“Subway over in Penn Hills. He’s the manager.” Half an hour away. Ziegenfuss only on the list because of the car. He’d have to wait.

No one home at the address listed for Michael Adamchik.

**TUESDAY
JULY 23**

9:18 a.m.

“Joseph Herps?”

“Yeah?”

“Penns River police. I’m Detective Shimp and this is Officer Sisler. Do you mind if we come in?”

“What’s this about?”

“We have a few questions for you. About your car.”

“My car?”

“Do you own a 2016 Mustang?”

Herps’s face fell. “I did. Had to sell it last week.”

Shimp felt Sisler perk up behind her. “Had to?”

“Yeah. I got this...doctor bill I had to pay. Still paying. Operation over a year ago. Between the payments and insurance for the car and this hospital thing, something had to give. You ever owe money to a hospital? Mafia’s got nothing on those guys.”

“I’ve been lucky. My brother-in-law had a problem, though. Are you all right now?”

Herps held out his hands as if for inspection. “I’m fine. They took good care of me. The problem is with my shitty insurance I’ll be paying for it like a goddamn mortgage.”

“I’m sorry to drag this out, but I’ll need to see the bill of sale.” Herps bunched his eyebrows. “We have to account for the car. It’s for an investigation.”

The receipt showed Herps had sold the car to Edward Steinkrauss of Apollo the day before Patty Polcyn’s death. Herps was clear, but now they’d have to add Steinkrauss to the list. None of the statements said anything about the suspect living out there, so he’d keep.

Walking back to their cars, Sisler asked if it was true about Shimp’s brother-in-law. “Former brother-in-law now. My sister’s ex. He didn’t really have a billing problem like this guy, but close.”

“What happened to him?”

“They gave him the wrong anesthesia and he had an allergic reaction. They brought him out of it and he’s fine, but the hospital not only charged him for the drug they used, they billed him for everything they had to do to keep him from dying from anaphylactic shock. He was fine and willing to let bygones be bygones until he saw the explanation of benefits from his insurance company. Then he and the company got together and threatened to sue for malpractice until the hospital rolled over. Still took them a year.”

Sisler stood with his hand on his unit’s door latch. “If I ever get shot in the line? I hope the asshole has the courtesy to finish me off.”

12:28 p.m.

Trevor Boston halfway through his Number 4—ham, bologna, Genoa and cooled salami, not too drippy with the dressing—when two men walked through the back door of Bob’s Sub on Tarentum Bridge Road who almost made him set the sandwich aside. Boston not much of a cook, Bob’s Sub had become the bulwark of his idea of a balanced diet. He didn’t want to waste the sandwich any more than he wanted to spook the men.

One stood six-three with a build some might call rangy. The other a head shorter. They goofed on each other in ways appropriate for people ten years younger. The tall one’s shirt read, “I taught your girlfriend that thing you like.” The other’s shirt purported to be property of the University of Pittsburgh Athletic Department. Close enough to the description of the Star Wars bandits to hold Boston’s attention.

He timed his eating to finish as they placed their orders. Couldn’t hear them speak. Caught a break when he noticed a car with its lights on in the parking lot. Rolled his debris into a ball. Stood and sauntered over to the trash can, nodding to Evelyn behind the counter as he passed. Mr. Casual. Dropped the ball of trash in the can and chose a route to take him past where the two men sat nibbling from bags of chips. “Sorry to interrupt you, but is that your car out there with the lights on?”

The short one turned away and grunted what sounded like “no.” The taller one had a cooler head. “No, Offither. We’re parked around the thide there. Thankth.”

Boston nodded. Strolled to his unit and got in so nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Keyed the mike as if reporting himself back in service. “Base, this is PR-Nine.”

“Go ahead, PR-Nine.”

“I’m requesting backup at Bob’s Sub, 87 Tarentum Bridge Road. I have two white males under surveillance who are suspects in the robbery at Mroczka’s last week. Tell them to meet me in the Busy Beaver parking lot. I can see from there.”

“Roger, Nine. Units are on the way.”

“Send them code one. Suspects are just now sitting down to eat. I’m going to make sure they see me leave.”

Boston signed off and drove past Bob’s so Penn and Teller inside couldn’t miss him. Took his time turning left on Tarentum Bridge Road then left again at the light on Caldwell. Came around back and parked in the Busy Beaver lot.

Sean Sisler pulled in driver door to driver door six minutes later. “The guys knocked over Mroczka’s beer distributor are in there eating lunch. Tall guy and a short guy sitting across from the soda dispenser.”

“How do you want to do it?”

“Let’s take them as they come out.”

Sisler surveyed the area. Bob’s had converted an old auto care facility into a restaurant. The service bay design made it a virtual fishbowl. “They’ll see us if we get close enough to grab them before they can run.”

Kathy Burrows rolled up. “What do we got?”

“Two robbery suspects in Bob’s,” Boston said. “We’re deciding how to take them.”

“We’re not going in?”

“Can’t,” Boston said. “There are people in there. Last thing we need is a hostage situa-

tion or for one of them to throw down with civilians standing around.” The idea formed as he spoke. “I’m pretty sure that blue piece of shit in the Advance lot is theirs. Let’s find spots where we can see the car and at least one of us can see each door in case I’m wrong about which car. Or they make us.” No arguments. “We wait until they open the car door and then roll in with sirens and lights and shock and awe and shit.”

General agreement. Boston got the position of honor across the paved path connecting the Bob’s and Advance Auto Parts parking lot to Busy Beaver’s. He could see Bob’s main exit door and the suspect car from there; just about impossible for anyone in Bob’s to see him. Sisler pulled around the other side of Advance to wait for a call. Burrows parked at the bank across Tarentum Bridge Road where she wouldn’t stick out and could see Bob’s other door. She’d be late to the party but also in perfect position to nab a runner.

Boston sat tapping his college class ring on the steering wheel. AC running full blast, sweat still dripped down his face. Sat forward when he saw the door to Bob’s open. Grabbed the mike when his suspects came out. Pressed the transmit key and said what he hoped sounded like, “There they are! Take them! Take them!” Dropped the mike, hit the siren and light switches, and pushed the gas pedal through the floor for the seventy-yard trip to the suspects’ car.

Sisler almost beat him there, burning rubber as he came around Advance. Boston saw Burrows’s car jerk as she drove straight across Tarentum Bridge Road. All the shock and awe and shit he could have expected and just as cool as he’d hoped.

Penn knew the drill. One twitch, then he stood and placed both hands on the roof, feet back and spread apart.

Teller ran.

First to the edge of the lot, then down the embankment onto Tarentum Bridge Road as Burrows came screaming up the driveway. Sisler began foot pursuit as Burrows burned rubber packing into the road to the amazement of two cars and a Transit van.

Boston looked at what he had wrought and sighed. He had the bird in hand but would have traded him to be in on the chase. Kicked Penn’s feet apart and pressed his head to the car’s roof. “Base, PR-Nine requests assistance. Suspect is a white male, five-eight or -nine, 140 pounds, dark hair and eyes. Burrows and Sisler are in pursuit. Sisler is on foot. Suspect has crossed Tarentum Bridge Road and is running east on—shit. It’s the street next to the AutoZone.”

Penn raised up to take a peek. “That’th Carl Avenue.”

Boston pushed his head down. “Keep your head on the roof like I told you.”

“Say again, PR-Nine.”

“I have one in custody. The runner is a suspect in the Mroczka robbery and should be considered armed and dangerous.”

Penn snorted. “Theriously?”

Boston released the mike’s transmit button. “I’m going to pat you down. Anything in your pockets going to stick me?”

“No.”

“You sure? I get poked, I’m shoving it up your ass.”

“No, man, for real. You caught me fair and thquare. Show thome profethionalithm.”

Penn was clean. Boston started cuffing his hands behind his back. “I’m cuffing you for your own protection. Do not resist.”

“How uth it for *my* protection?”

Boston spoke as he steered Penn toward the patrol unit. “It’ll keep you from getting any ideas about running and making me plant your face in this parking lot. Get in the car. Watch your head.”

Sisler lost sight of Teller when he went over the embankment, picked him up again crossing Tarentum Bridge Road like a demented 21st Century Frogger. Went down as quick as his balance and equipment allowed. Heard Burrows’s tires squeal under the sound of her siren, caught motion in his peripheral vision as she got back in the game.

Teller angled for the AutoZone parking lot. Sisler went straight across the street to get out of traffic and lost ground. Heard Burrows zip behind him as he crossed the double yellow. Pulled up short to dance with a Toyota that couldn’t decide whether to let him go or pass. Resolved the situation by going full traffic cop. Stopped, pointed, and gestured to get the fuck out of the way.

Carl Avenue was empty by the time he got there, Burrows at the other end two hundred yards away to seal off Craigdell Road. Sisler drew his weapon and took a second to steady his breathing. Nothing like the night at Resurrection Mall last year. Cold as a penguin’s feet, running around the Allegheny Estates in the dark looking for a guy with at least five bodies on his tab, the biggest fire in Penns River history a few blocks away. This was a perfect summer day, blue sky, fair weather clouds, and a warm breeze. Today’s suspect struck Sisler as more of a knucklehead than a life taker, but knuckleheads killed cops, too. Even when they didn’t mean to.

Walked up Carl dead center. No cover within fifty feet of the street, and Sisler and his vest were willing to bet he wasn’t chasing a marksman. A handful of trees behind a house two-thirds of the way to Craigdell, but Burrows had a line of sight to the back side of them. On the left, the runner had the option to cross the lot where K-Mart used to be, open ground for a couple of hundred yards and visible to Boston across the street. Leechburg Road a block to the right, the police station damn near opposite where he stood. How cool would that be? Chase him right to the house, let him turn himself in.

Keyed the microphone. “You see anything, Kathy?”

“Negative. Street was clear when I got here.”

“You think he had time to get behind the houses on the Leechburg Road side before you posted?”

“Possible. Not likely.”

“Boston should see him if he went the other way and tried the parking lot.” A quick scan up the left side of the street. “There’s some trees behind the house with the sign in front. My guess is he’s in there hugging a trunk.”

“Wait till I get some backup and I’ll go in with you.”

“I’m gonna poke around outside, see if I can flush him. Pull up a little so if he does run for the lot you’ll see him and can book for the back entrance. I’ll try to drive him into the open, and we’ll press him between us.”

“Sounds good. Augie just pulled up to cover this end of Carl. I’m rolling.”

Brian Kastelic knew the cop was trouble the instant he saw him eating in Bob’s. Almost

pulled Seth out, but the cop had seen them and it would be too obvious. Knew they were in the shit when the cop asked if they'd left their lights on. No cop ever lived who gave a fuck if some poor bastard's battery died.

He tried to become one with the bark of an oak in the small cluster of trees standing between the back of a house and a parking lot. He'd seen the police car flying up the street behind him and assumed there was at least one more, though he hadn't seen any. Considered breaking a window to get into the house until he thought of alarms. Worst case, someone might be home. Then they'd hang a kidnapping charge on him, sure as shit.

Couldn't decide if it was good or bad Seth talked him into leaving the gun at home. Seeing it on him might give the cops an excuse to shoot, not that those sons of bitches needed one. Fucking Seth. Brian couldn't pin down what exactly Seth had done to put them in this jackpot, but it had to be him. The more Brian thought about it, the madder he got, and the madder he got, the more he thought about it until...

A sound near the edge of the trees on the street side. Not loud but not like someone sneaking up, either. Brian risked a peek around the tree—not looking right at the sound, cagey-like—saw black shoes and dark blue uniform pants. Now Brian wished he did have the gun. A cop who wasn't sure would have to assume a gun and might feel the need to shoot first. Fucking Seth.

Brian froze. Not even breathing. After a few seconds he decided this had to be the carefulest cop in the world. Still moving around on the outer edge of the trees like he didn't want any more of Brian than Brian wanted of him. What were his options? To the right, the parking where K-Mart used to be. The cop would see him sure if he ran that way, and what would it buy him? Two hundred yards of being visible to every swinging dick driving by to get to another parking lot bigger and busier than this one. Only half as far to Donut Connection, where he could...what? Get something to eat while he killed time before his arrest? Probably ten cops in there already.

Craigdell Road a lot closer and the trees should shield him from this cop, but Brian only got off the street in the first place because he saw the car flying up Carl. Not even cops were dumb enough to leave that large a back door uncovered.

What Brian really wanted to do was work his way over to Leechburg Road and stroll on home. No one would think twice about a somewhat sweaty guy walking toward downtown on such a nice day. Couldn't go home, though. Had to assume fucking Seth had already given him up. Fucking S—

“You! By the tree!” Behind him. Woman's voice. “Extend your hands away from your sides, palms facing me. Spread your fingers. Do *not* move.”

TV or movie cops would compare notes at a bar after work. A comedy would show them with doughnuts, powdered sugar on their chins and shirts. Boston, Sisler, and Burrows spent the rest of their day writing reports, verifying details so no one wrote anyone else into a corner so some pain-in-the-ass lawyer looking for a technicality could tear them apart.

Burrows frowned at her screen. “Is Craigdell one word or two?”

“One.” Sisler looked up from his workstation. “I tried everything to flush that jagov out. He must've been so scared he froze. About ready to go in when I heard you put the

collar on him. How'd you get around behind like you did?"

Burrows finished typing a sentence. "Once Augie had Craigdell sealed off, I figured I could sneak in and grab him if you pushed that way. I came around the corner of the house and there he was."

"Thanks. Rate he was going, we'd of been there till dawn waiting for him to make a move, and we're the early game tonight." Sisler the best and most enthusiastic member of the PRPD softball team. "Hey, Trevor. How'd you spot those two?" Boston told the story of his lunch. "Nice. They get any usable prints off Mroczka's door?"

"Dougherty says maybe. Didn't think what he took off the door would throw a match, but now they have someone to compare them to. Can't hurt." Nodded in the direction of the interview room where Ben Dougherty hadn't got the time of day from Seth Stevenson—hell of a name for a man with a lisp—but Brian Kastelic had given up crimes the cops weren't aware of. Teresa Shimp on the phone now with Tarentum and Plum Borough clearing cases for them.

"Prints or not, that was nice work. They should give you an assist on Kathy's pinch, too, teeing him up like you did."

"Don't you want any credit at all?" Burrows said.

Sisler shook his head. "Not my style. I'm the guy who gives himself up to move the runner from second to third. The guy who wins the face-off in the defensive zone. The guard who throws the trap block to spring the runner."

"Hurry up and finish, K-Bar," Boston said. "I couldn't bear to hear any soccer or lacrosse metaphors. Besides, I left my bat and spikes at home. I don't want to be late for the firemen."

3:47 p.m.

Walter Goodlett wasn't home. Knowing the condition of the overtime budget, Shimp saw shift work in her immediate future.

8:47 p.m.

Dougherty and Sisler stood in the Edgecliff Grill's parking lot enjoying a surprising lack of humidity for so late in July. Seventy-five-cent wing night. Not 75 for the drum and another 75 for the flat. Seventy-five cents for an entire breaded chicken wing not dipped in anything except boiling oil. A half dozen of those with three beers and even a six-footer like Doc was ready to fall asleep watching the Pirates game. Never mind it was only a quarter to nine.

Sisler stood near his driver's side door dangling keys from his finger. "I hate losing to the firemen. Bunch of guys who basically work two jobs kicked our asses." Final score as close as 13-8 only because Sisler crashed the fence to snag a ball with the bases loaded.

"They use ringers."

"I know those guys. They're all firemen."

"There's firemen and there's firemen. The volunteers don't do anything but fill out the squad. Their best players are the half dozen full-time guys. All the more fires we have, those full-timers don't have much to do besides wash the trucks, work out, and jack off."

"I don't think they need to jack off much. What I hear, firemen see more pussy than a Chinese butcher."

"Where did *you* hear that?"

"I'm gay, not deaf. Women talk freely around me."

"No one but me knows you're their direct competition."

"Women don't feel threatened by me. It's the queer vibe. Besides, I overheard a few talking in the bleachers behind us."

"While I focused on the game. No wonder we lost." Doc looked across Leechburg Road to Glen's Frozen Custard. "What the hell. People like firemen more than cops. It's a fact of life. We show up and it's either to arrest someone or break up a fight or settle a domestic where at least one of them doesn't want us spoiling the fun. Witnesses don't talk to us even when they're the victim."

"Especially when they're the victim."

"Most of them are pissed because we didn't prevent the crime. No one blames firemen for fires. They're just glad to see them. Pull the occasional cat out of a tree and post it to Facebook and they eat free casseroles and Christ knows what else for at least a week. That's why cops work fires. Keep the women off the firefighters or the whole block would burn."

"Can't say I blame them, though."

"Why? You got your eye on one?"

Sisler flipped Doc off. "I wouldn't fuck a firefighter if he wore a Bradley Cooper mask. I know too many cops too well. I'm driving around somewhere, here in town where I know everybody, and I see a patrol unit behind me, my first thought is 'What's this asshole want?'" Pointed to Glen's. "Ice cream?"

"I better not."

"Worried about your figure?"

Doc shook his head. "Full as I am, I might get to find out if it tastes as good coming up as it did going down."

“Eat it later.”

Doc glared at Sisler while pondering witty rejoinders. Settled on “Okay.”

They jogged across Leechburg Road between heavier-than-usual traffic, which meant they had to pause halfway. Doc got his usual large chocolate cone, Sisler a medium Dreamsicle. They ate near the trailer selling fresh corn on the honor system near the edge of the lot.

“I thought you were saving yours for later,” Sisler said. Doc didn’t answer, his eyes cast westward along Leechburg Road. “Something wrong?”

“See that car?” Doc pointed along his line of sight.

“I see quite a few. You asking about any one in particular?”

“Black Town Car. The Raylan Givens Special.”

“By the dentist?”

Doc shifted his eyes to the dentist’s lot, then back to glare at Sisler. “That’s not a Town Car. Further back. By the consignment shop.”

“I see it now. What about it?”

“Fourth time I’ve seen it today.”

“It’s a small town.”

Doc kept looking. “Out-of-state plates.”

Sisler made closer inspection. Former Marine sniper, he could still shoot a hole through a dime at three hundred yards. “You’re right. Those aren’t PA plates.”

“Tennessee.”

Sisler’s turn to give Doc a look. “You can tell at this distance in this light?”

“I told you, I’ve been tripping over the bastard all day. First thing I noticed about it. Can’t remember the last time I saw a Tennessee plate around here. We’re not overcome with new Town Cars, either.”

“That’s because they don’t make them anymore.”

Doc broke off his surveillance to give Sisler his full attention. “Say what?”

“They stopped making them years ago. Twenty-eleven, twenty-twelve. Somewhere in there. Ford uses the nameplate to fool the suckers”—smirked at Doc— “but those are MKTs for chauffeurs.”

“I had a good look at that car. It’s not an MKT. It’s a Town Car. Not just the nameplate, the whole thing.”

“Then it’s a refurb.”

“Why the hell’d they stop making Town Cars? They’re classics. Timeless, even. That look will never go out of style.”

“You wanna buy it?”

“No, I don’t want to buy it. Still...aren’t you curious?”

“About what?”

“What they’re doing here.”

Sisler licked a drip from his cone. “They?”

“Two guys in it when I saw them.”

“No one in it now.” Doc knew better than to ask if Sisler could tell from this distance.

They looked down Leechburg Road a while longer. Doc said, “Let’s find out who they are.”

Sisler stared over his cone at Doc. Both of them full to bursting with beer, chicken wings, and ice cream. “Now?”

Doc finished his cone. Crumpled the empty paper shield into a ball. "Why not?"

"You mean besides the fact we're five hours off duty, stuffed like sausages, and probably still over the legal limit?"

"We're big boys. Can't be too far over. Let's go."

"What with this Popeye Doyle shit? You looking to work all day and all night following these guys, see if they go to some shitty convenience store they're using as a front for a multimillion-dollar drug operation?"

"Maybe." Doc tossed the paper in a trash can. "Never mind. It'll keep till morning."

They walked back toward their cars. Sisler said, "It's sad when I'm the voice of reason."

"Voice of reason, my ass. I'm working on a shit the size of a small dog. Priorities, son. Priorities."

WEDNESDAY
JULY 24

8:21 a.m.

Doc waved Sisler into the detectives' office right after roll call. Leaned back in his chair, held up a small sheaf of paper. "The Town Car's registered to Kirksey McCord of Bartlett, Tennessee."

"Where's that?"

"Memphis suburbs." Doc saw Sisler's expression. "I looked it up. Mr. McCord has charges for burglary, armed robbery, mayhem, possession with intent, usury, and multiple firearms violations, which takes some doing in Tennessee. Receiving stolen goods. Threw in an uttering for good measure. Did four years for the armed robbery in Angola and twelve months in Riverbend on the mayhem charge. That's in Nashville. I looked it up, knowing your geographic deficiencies."

Sisler flipped through the pages. "I wonder what he's doing up here. With an escort, if you're right about the other guy."

"McCord has a KA name of Darryl Nix. Big sonofabitch from his description. Could be the guy I saw him with. They're Dixie Mafia."

"The Dixie Mafia's a real thing?"

"Not as well organized as the Italians but probably more active nowadays."

Sisler handed back the papers. "What the hell does Dixie Mafia want around here?"

Doc folded the papers. Put them in an inside pocket. "Beats me. I got a pretty good idea how to find out, though."

He didn't get to find out right away. Nancy Snyder intercepted Doc in the hallway with a man who had the look of the Flats about him: open shirt over an almost-clean tee, neither tucked into not-quite-dirty jeans. Hair the color of old lint. "Detective Dougherty, this is Leonard Radaker. Mr. Radaker may have information on your hit-and-run."

Doc made room so Radaker could pass into the detectives' office. Asked Snyder if she'd seen Teresa Shimp. "She was in the break room a few minutes ago."

Doc leaned through the open door to ask if Radaker wanted a cold drink or anything. He did not. Doc said he'd be right back and started down the hall. Snyder cut him off. "Where are you going?"

"I'd like Teresa to sit in on this."

"I'll get her."

"It's okay, Deputy. I'll go."

"Why? Because I'm the deputy chief now and shouldn't have to do such a menial task?"

"Well...yeah, you want to put it that way."

"You have a potential witness in what might be a homicide in there. Make him comfortable. I'll get Teresa. I don't do much real police work since I put these on." Flipped her hands at the eagles on each collar point. "This is at least useful."

"You sure?" Snyder nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

Snyder took hold of Doc's arm when he turned to go. "A minute ago you called me 'Deputy.'"

“Yeah?”

“Why?”

“This a trick question?” Snyder shook her head. “You’re the deputy chief. It’s protocol.”

“You never called Jack Harriger Deputy.”

“Jack Harriger was an ignorant prick who didn’t know his ass from a dog’s elbow about being a cop or he’d be here breaking my balls today. I’d of stayed in the Army rather than call that little jagov ‘Deputy.’”

“You didn’t call Mike Zywiiciel Deputy, either.”

Doc admired Nancy Snyder’s doggedness in the field. Not so much now. “I’ve known Eye Chart Zywiiciel most of my life. He coached one of my Little League teams.”

“Then what makes me Deputy?”

Doc didn’t know Snyder well enough to be too honest with her. “It’s so you know—everyone knows—I respect the position and the person filling it. Harriger and Mike were special cases, each in his own way.”

“And I’m not special?” The smile in her eyes only, but there.

Doc smiled for real. “Not the way they were. Be grateful.”

Snyder held his look. Might have nodded. “I’ll get Teresa.”

Radaker still standing when Doc entered the office. “Please, have a seat.” Went behind his desk, took out his notepad. “Detective Shimp will be here in a minute.”

“You got a woman boss, huh?”

“XO.”

“How do you feel about working for a woman?”

“About how I feel working for a man. I try to come to an understanding and then I do what they tell me. Now, what brings you in to see us today?”

“You the one taking care of what happened down the old Gulf station? With Patty Polcyn?”

Doc’s first thought was Radaker must be older than he looked. Thirty years since a Gulf station had been there. Maybe forty. Then Doc remembered the old-timers still called it that so often people born several owners later said it as if “The Old Gulf Station” was the official name. Doc did it himself and he had no recollection of the original sign. “Yessir. Detective Shimp and me.”

“I know who she’s with. Patty. The night it happened.”

The news didn’t sit Doc upright in his chair. Phone reports had come in every day since Patty Polcyn’s death. Radaker the first to make a personal appearance. “Who was it?”

“Guy named John Crummie.” Doc’s attention ticked up another notch. Didn’t remember off the top of his head if John was one of the names he got from Fat Jimmy’s, but it was in the Sean/Don/Lon family. “They used to run together when she was between her last two husbands. Kind of what you’d call a stormy romance.”

Shimp tapped on the door and came in. Doc motioned for her to sit and pay attention. “What would *you* call a stormy romance, Mr. Radaker?”

“You know. A lot of fighting and…” Looked at Shimp spooning yogurt from a plastic cup. “Uh, fornicating, I guess you’d call it.” Teresa Shimp could clean up a longshoreman’s language by doing nothing more than sitting in the same room.

“How do you know they were together the night she died?”

"I seen them."

"Where did you see them? What time?"

"They come around my house. Must've been ten-thirty, eleven o'clock."

Doc and Shimp exchanged glances. "Kind of late for a casual drop-by, wasn't it?"

"Me and Patty go way back. She knowed I'm always up late."

"They both come in?"

"Just her."

"How do you know it was Crummie with her?"

"Looked like his car."

That news deserved a note. "You know Crummie, right? Well enough to identify him?"

"I see him around."

"You ask why he didn't come in?"

Radaker shook his head. "I already knew." Doc gestured for him to share. "We had what you might call a falling out a while back."

"What did you fall out over?"

"He, uh...he owed me money."

"Has he paid you yet?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Has he paid you?"

A pause. Then, "No."

Doc nodded. Made another note. "What did Patty want?"

"What do you mean, 'What did Patty want?'"

"Pretty late to drop by to shoot the shit. I mean, you said she'd know you stayed up late, but she had a ride waiting outside. She had to have more reason than just to say hello."

"She wanted to know...she had a question she wanted to ask me. Figured it wouldn't take more than a minute."

"Did it?"

"Did it what?"

"Take more than a minute. The question she wanted to ask you."

"You mean like exactly a minute or more like—"

"Did Patty Polcyn stop by your house to buy marijuana, Mr. Radaker?"

"Hey! I don't know what you're thinking, but I ain't no drug dealer."

"I don't think you are." Not for the purposes of this conversation, anyway. "I don't care if you sell a little grass on the side to make ends meet. Today I care about what happened to Patty Polcyn." Doc wanted to say he was murder police in the worst way. Couldn't bring himself to do it with Shimp in the room.

"Okay, I guess. If I say something I shouldn't, you not going to care later, are you? Like some day you're short on your quota or something and need an easy bust?" Guy must have been talking to Melody Rushnock.

"I don't know what I could say to convince you except to point out you've already said too much along those lines. You might as well go all the way. Build up some good will for when I need the easy bust."

Radaker looked at the floor. "Shit," dribbled from between his lips. Doc gave him time to make peace with the situation. Said, "Where did Patty and this guy who might be John

Crummie go when they left you?"

"Not saying what we talked about because it don't matter one way or the other, right?"

"Right."

Radaker looked at Shimp scraping the last bit of yogurt from the cup. She felt the silence and looked up. "Right."

"All right, then. I don't know where they went after. She didn't say."

Doc let his eyes roll up. "About what time did she leave for parts unknown?"

"Eleven o'clock. Little before maybe."

Doc handed off to Shimp. She asked how Patty looked when Radaker saw her last. "You mean like was she high? If she was, she didn't get that way because of me."

"Not like that. Did she seem worried? Afraid? Happy?"

"She looked like she wanted to ask me...that question we talked about before. The one I didn't answer."

"The one I suspect you didn't even have an answer *for*, right?" Doc said. Radaker nodded. "What kind of car does John Crummie drive?"

"I don't know. It was dark and like I said I don't know him so good to know what he drives. Something sporty, though, from how it sounded when he fired it up."

"Anything else you can think of?"

Radaker appeared to make an effort. "That's about it. Did I help?" He didn't sound hopeful.

"Yes, sir. It did. It might not seem like much to you, but it confirmed a few things we're looking into. If nothing else, you saved us a lot of time."

"So long as it helped. Patty was okay, you know? We wasn't close or nothing and she sure wasn't perfect, but she was good people. What happened to her shouldn't happen to nobody."

"Thanks, Mr. Radaker," Doc said, "Here's a card. Please call me if you think of anything else." Radaker stood to leave. "Oh, and Mr. Radaker." Radaker stopped moving. "I've already forgotten what Patty came to ask you about. I should've written it down..." Tore a page from his notebook. Rolled it into a ball and dropped it in the trash. "But I didn't think to. Do you remember, Detective Shimp?"

"I thought you were taking notes. I was eating."

Radaker left in a better mood. Shimp asked what Doc thought about his story. "He confirms some of what Melody Rushnock told you and doesn't conflict with anything we heard at Fat Jimmy's. We do have to take into consideration the issue he has with Crummie."

"What do you think about this case in general?"

"I think it's time we tapped our sources. You crossed paths with the Hatfield brothers yet?" She had not. "You're gonna love this."

10:03 a.m.

Shimp's love for the Hatfield brothers had to remain undiscovered a while longer. Brendan Sullivan wanted to see both detectives in his office.

Sullivan still an unknown quantity. The cops knew his friends called him Sully and did so among themselves. No stories of him being unfair to any of the cops. Those would come sooner or later if Christ Himself were Chief. He'd shown a sense of humor but maintained a distance. Doc had seen this behavior before and done it himself when moving to a new outfit in a position of authority. It's a lot easier to come on strong and back off than to try to crack the whip after everyone has decided you're their buddy. "Where are we on this hit-and-run?"

"We're running down the list of possible vehicles we got from PennDOT," Shimp said. "Uniforms are about finished canvassing the area. I'm looking at social media accounts for Mary and anyone who tagged her in posts in the couple of weeks leading up to the murder."

Sullivan looked at Doc. "Aren't you supposed to be in court today? Or prepping with the DA?"

"Her case took a plea."

"This late?"

"Sally lowered the charges again. It's what she does."

"We'll have to talk about that some day when we have time." Turned back to Shimp. "Coroner say if it's murder yet?"

Shimp shook her head. "Still pending."

"How busy are you?"

Shimp looked to Doc, who passed it back "The usual. It's never like we have nothing to do, especially with Neuschwander still on vacation."

"This is the end of my first full week here," Sullivan said. "Give me an idea of what you mean by 'the usual.'"

Shimp deferred again. This time Doc stepped up. "All the open files are knucklehead stuff. Trevor Boston took care of the other big thing when he closed the robbery at Mroczka's beer distributor."

"I wanted to ask about that. All Mroczka sells is beer?"

"Pop and snacks. Beer's the only alcohol."

"And the Fine Wine and Good Spirits stores only sell wine and hard liquor? No beer?"

"Right. They used to call them State Stores, but I guess some marketing genius figured out this sounded friendlier."

"They're state-owned, then."

"Right."

"Good to know. When's Neuschwander back?"

"Monday."

"You can carry everything if we call it a homicide?"

Doc looked to Shimp before answering. "We got it."

"Good. I don't like uncleared bodies on my balance sheet. Someone dies and anyone else is involved, I want to be damn sure it's an accident before I drop the investigation."

Let me know as soon as the coroner comes back with something definite. And let me know if you think he's jerking you around. They're not as likely to screw around with someone who can call their boss directly and get away with it."

"Will do." Doc put his hands on the arms of the chair to stand.

"Hold on. You had a double about six months ago in what I hear is the old downtown. What happened there?"

"Some kids were half-assing at being drug dealers and doing pretty well for themselves until a real crew came in. The kids didn't take the hint."

"Where are we on it?"

"What we know or what we can prove?"

"What you know first."

"Reynard Mendenhall had it done. The actual shooters were almost certainly Dontell 'Sweet' Dalton and Calvin Gillum. Mendenhall's too big now, and too careful, to be anywhere near it."

"What can you prove?"

"Nothing." Doc left it there until Sullivan's expression made it clear he expected more. "We have no witnesses, no weapons, and the three main suspects have airtight alibis."

"You're sure it's them?"

"Sure as we can be without a video."

"What's the survivor's story?"

"His story is he didn't see shit. The way things laid out, there's no way anyone except Batman gets up on them close as it was done and they don't see, especially since Sweet and Gillum are known to the kid."

"He's scared?"

"Hasn't left the house since he came out of the hospital. I know him and the guy he lives with. We tried everything. Wilver Faison sees Reynard Mendenhall in his closet at night. He sleeps under the kid's bed."

Sullivan leaned forward to rest his weight on his elbows, nodding all the while. A contrast to Stush's thinking pose, tilted back in the chair with fingers interlaced across his belly. It would have been a bad look for Sullivan and his swimmer's build. One more thing to get used to. "Are we doing anything down there?"

Doc didn't like the *meh* that climbed out of him. "You know how drug investigations work. They take a long time and a lot of commitment. We don't have the time or the bodies to do it right. We sure as hell don't have the budget."

"What about street rips?"

"We do. Sometimes. It's like rounding up hookers. They're out in twenty-four hours. We're no more than a nuisance."

The intensity in Sullivan's voice surprised Doc. "Then we'll be a nuisance. At least until something better comes along." No change in volume, but the new chief wasn't fucking around. "If that's all we can do for now, that's what we'll do."

"It's a time sink. The arresting officers spend all day writing reports when they could be on the street."

"Don't arrest them. Patrol unit sees anything looks like drug activity, move them. Same thing if you're on the way to interview a witness or to a controlled crime scene. Make their customers have to find them, or at least wait until they come back. Break their

balls.”

Doc felt his head move in the half shaking, half nodding mode he fell into when unsure how to express disagreement. “I understand what you’re going for, Chief, but—”

“No one kills people in my town and walks the streets like they’re citizens. No one.” Sullivan caught himself. “I talked with Stan Napierkowski. I know how he handled things and I don’t disagree. Really. I don’t. We’re just going to do it differently. There’s an implied contract that says the lion’s share of crime is what you called knucklehead stuff. This crew went way over the line and they have to pay. If breaking their balls is the best we can do, we’ll break them. The one thing we’re *not* going to do is nothing.”

10:54 a.m.

Orville and Norval Hatfield claimed lineage to the notorious Hatfields of feud fame. The boys came north from West Virginia after their daddy decided it was time for them to join him and their uncles in the mine. Orville and Norval figured if they knew enough not to have to go to school, then they sure as hell knew enough to get the fuck out of the mines. Moved north to Penns River for jobs in a mill that closed the next year. Kept ends together with combinations of small enterprises including odd jobs, handyman work, and running the gray market between Penns River and the hills. Their current legitimate enterprise sold legal moonshine for a small distillery the other side of Black Lick.

The “showroom” had been a storage facility attached to the consignment shop the brothers rented the space from. It contained a counter three feet long opposite a cooler with soft drinks and the brothers’ lunches. The other two “walls” of the customer area were the entry door and shelves with miscellaneous items: shine, snacks, leather straps, boot laces, knife sheaths, and other handcrafted items from the hills. Customers had full and unimpeded use of at least thirty square feet of floor. The entire operation, back room and all, would fit into a one-car garage.

Orville sat behind the counter. Norval fussed with a Red Man chalkboard. “Hey, Doc. I’m glad you’re here. How’s your printing?”

“My printing?”

“I’m having a hell of a time getting what I want on this sign here.”

Doc wagged a hand. “So-so. What do you need?”

Norval handed him the sign and a piece of yellow chalk four inches long and thicker than Doc’s thumb. “Make this say, ‘Just in. Blackberry shine. Special this week.’ Right there.” Pointed to the blackboard area of the sign, no more than four inches by eight.

Doc took the chalk and sign. Looked from them to Norval and back, then back again. “This the only piece of chalk you got?”

“What do you mean?”

Doc tapped the chalk on the board. “I don’t see any way to fit what you want in that space with this piece of chalk.”

“What could fit?”

“I don’t know. ‘Open,’ maybe?”

Norval acted madder than he was. Orville reached across the counter to shake Doc’s hand and accept an introduction to Shimp. “It’s a little early, but can I interest you in a taste of the private stock?” Selling legitimate shine didn’t prevent the brothers making at least as much money selling their own creations out the back of the store. No secret in Penns River. They didn’t even pay off the cops.

“You’re open,” Doc said. “Can’t be *too* early.”

Shimp passed. Orville poured three drinks into little dentist-sized plastic cups used for customer samples. Handed one to Doc, one to Norval, and lifted his own for a toast. “Here’s to staying positive and testing negative.” They drank.

“What brings you around, Doc?” Norval said. “You off today?”

Doc pointed to Shimp while his speaking mechanism regained consciousness. “Teresa’s my partner. Goddamn, Orville, that’s potent. What did you put in there?”

Orville smiled as much as he ever did. "Made a secret adjustment to the process."

Doc was still sweating. "Jesus. What did you do?"

"Wouldn't be much of a secret adjustment if we told every swinging dick come in here and ask about it." Orville's voice part gravel, part liquid—a mix of Tom Waits and phone sex operator.

Doc took a deep breath to complete his recovery. "You boys hear about the hit-and-run down the Flats the other day?"

Both Hatfields lowered their heads. "That was a goddamn shame," Orville said. "Patty Polcyn was a hoot. Didn't have a mean bone in her body."

"You know her well?"

"Norval knowed her better'n me."

Norval didn't get to be the center of attention very often. Didn't enjoy it much, given the topic. "Me and Patty helped with the Halloween thing the fire hall down there runs. 'Member the kid almost got killed when a car hit him trick or treating? Ain't no street-lights worth a shit anywhere down there. Sorry, miss." The Shimp Magic™ at work again. "We get a bunch of candy and pop and games and folks drop their little ones off knowing they'll be safe. Patty loved those parties. I think she had more fun than the kids."

Doc tried for a second to picture Norval Hatfield catering to a bunch of runny noses and *I have to go to the bathrooms*. "Ever know her to be much of a hitchhiker?"

"Not that I know of. Course, if Patty wanted to get somewhere, she'd get there. How wouldn't enter into it much."

"That what happened to her?" Orville said.

"Could be," Doc said. "Looks like she ended up with someone she didn't know and it went bad for her."

Orville said it low, like he didn't want Shimp to hear. "She raped?"

"No. What injuries she had probably came from getting run over."

"Patty'd be a bastard to take it from if she didn't want to give it up," Norval said. "I seen her fight a chick oncet half again her size. Punched, scratched, kicked, bit. Real hel-lion. You'd had to knock Patty out to take it from her."

"Orville said she didn't have a mean bone in her body."

"Hers or no one else's, she didn't make the offer."

"We're looking for a guy named Ron or Don or something who drives a sporty car and likes to talk about it," Doc said. "He lives around here but probably not right in the Flats and might have an uncle or some other relative owns a bar over Penn Hills way. Patty was last seen with him in Fat Jimmy's."

The Hatfields looked at each other. "Don't John D'Argenzio drive a Camaro he fixed up himself?" Orville said.

"He sold it last year when he got married. Drives a fucking Toyota now." Norval's distaste for Japanese cars outweighed Shimp's formidable deterrence.

"This some guy Patty knowed?" Orville said.

"Probably not," Doc said.

"What makes you say so?"

"Can't tell you much, ongoing investigation and all. Let say other things we know indicate this was not someone Patty already knew."

"Be easier if she did. Know him, I mean. Give us something to consider."

No shit, Doc thought. “I’d tell you more if I could. You’ll call me if anything comes to mind, right?”

“You know we will.” Living in the gray area as much as they did, the Hatfields understood the value of good relations with law enforcement. There were lines not to be crossed and times where exceptions could be made and both sides knew where and when they were. Someone had done a friend the ultimate wrong. Their antennae would be out.

Doc’s hand on the doorknob when he remembered. “You boys still in touch with anyone back in the hills?”

“Time to time,” Orville said.

“The name Kirksey McCord come up in any of these time-to-time conversations? Darryl Nix?”

“Don’t ring a bell,” Norval said.

Doc gave Orville a look of disappointment. “Orville, you’re the older brother. Why haven’t you taught him to lie any better than that? You’re pretty good at it.”

Norval made a face. Orville, whose expression hadn’t changed since he left the hills, said, “I try. He don’t listen for shit.”

Thirty seconds passed with the three men looking like a high school reenactment of *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* until Doc said, “Kirksey McCord? You know him?”

“Know of him,” Orville said. “Dixie Mafia asshole.”

“That’s the guy.”

“What about him?”

“He’s in town. Him and a guy I’m pretty sure is Darryl Nix. You know him?”

“Here?” Norval said. “In *this* town?”

Doc pointed toward Leechburg Road. “Saw his car parked in the lot right outside last night. Didn’t see him, though.”

“Fuck,” Norval said, shattering the Shimp mystique forever.

Orville looked at him. No change in expression but Norval got the hint. Stepped back and took a Coke from the cooler. Offered one to each cop. Shimp demurred. “You’ll hurt their feelings you keep refusing their hospitality,” Doc said.

Orville read her mind. “Sorry, Miss. No diet.”

Shimp took the sweating can. Asked if Doc would drink part of it. “Almost certainly.” He took a long pull from his can. Waited for the bubbles to clear his sinuses. “Come on, boys. McCord is trouble on a stick, and I don’t have time to grab-ass around. What’s the deal? If you’ve already settled business with him, then I can let it go.”

“McCord’s a peckerwood. Works for a guy named Boots Yarbrough out of Memphis. Likes to show the boss he can get blood from a stone, running up and down the hollers squeezing folks.”

“What’s he doing here?”

Doc knew he wouldn’t like the answer when Orville poured more drinks. Arched his eyebrows and pointed the bottle toward Shimp. She smiled and took a sip of Coke. Orville swallowed his shine smooth as water. “Could be he’s squeezing some of our people and they run dry so he’s looking to make his nut off us.”

Doc couldn’t afford to look weak. Tossed back his drink and said, “Could be?” in a transparent voice, eyes still watering. Orville shrugged. Doc squeezed out, “When you say ‘our people’—God *damn* it, Orville—do you mean family or business associates? And if they’re business associates, I do *not* need to know which business.”

“Our Uncle Hillard. Daddy’s youngest brother, which means he can’t be less’n eighty. Ain’t got a pot to piss in nor a roof to put it under if he did. McCord must figure Uncle Hillard’s wrung out and come looking for us.”

“You seen him?”

“Not recent. What you’re telling me here—him being in town—that’s news to me.”

“Is he violent? I read his sheet, but what’s there could just be the cost of doing business.”

“McCord we can handle,” Orville said.

“Kind you can run off by tying him to your trailer hitch and dragging no more’n half a mile,” Norval said.

“Don’t tell me that,” Doc said. “What about Nix?”

“Nix likes hurting people,” Orville said. “Gets creative.”

Norval said, “I heard one time he—”

Doc raised a hand. “I don’t want to hear that, either.” Searched for a window to look out of, clear his head. Only one in the room about a foot square made of glass block with bottles and miscellaneous debris in front of it. “I suspect you boys can handle these two if it comes to a fair fight. Thing is, I doubt it will. Even if it does, we have too much going on right now to have to worry about some Dixie mafia revenge bullshit. Do me a favor. Call me if you see them, but stay in the shade for a few days while we figure something out. Do this for me and I’ll owe you one. Get me something on what happened to Patty Polcyn and I’ll owe you at least three.”

12:21 p.m.

Doc and his brother Drew ate chipped ham barbecues for lunch at Crowe's Diner. Drew had Wednesday off this week, the Postal Service's days off walking back one at a time so every sixth weekend was a three-day break.

Doc wiped sauce from his chin. Added the napkin to the pile at the left of his plate. "I probably should've brought this up before, but I guess I've been hoping I was wrong. Dr. Raghuvier called me the other day. Says it's time to get Mom and Dad out of the house."

The mention of their parents' physician got Drew's full attention. Swallowed what he had in his mouth and said, "He called you directly?"

Doc stared at his sandwich, halfway to his mouth. "He says it's only a matter of time before the house kills at least one of them. Either Mom falls down the cellar stairs doing laundry, or Dad has the big one cutting the grass." Ellen did laundry every day to "keep up with" what she and Tom generated: a shirt and pants each, plus underwear and socks. Towels. The yard almost two semi-wooded acres most towns would kill to have as a park.

"You think it's that bad?" Drew said.

"Before I say, have you noticed anything?"

"I'm more worried about Mom's memory than the physical stuff. It's a challenge for Dad to get out of his chair some days, even with the gadget we bought him. Thing is, I see them at least once a week. Hard to notice changes."

"Same here. I started worrying for real when Mom told me he fell off the mower reaching over to pick up a branch."

"While it was moving?" Drew leaned off his stool to mimic reaching for something on the ground.

"Yep."

"He'd wear our asses out for doing something like that, grown-ass men or not."

"She also told me he needed a break to walk from the driveway garage to the house garage."

"What is that? Fifty feet? Sixty? Downhill all the way?"

"If that."

Drew took a bite. Chewed. Phyllis Greer came by and Doc bought his brother some time. "Hey, Phyl. How's Dickie doing? I forgot to ask about him last time I came in."

"He's good. Working at the junior high as an after-school janitor."

"No callback from the fabricating plant yet?"

"They're never calling none of them guys back. Company didn't want the bad publicity of laying all of them off at once, so they waited about three months and sent registered letters saying it's been nice and don't come back."

Drew's head drooped. "Jesus Christ. Is that what those were? I hoped they might be benefits updates or something."

"Nope. Kiss-off letters is what they was."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Doc said. "You two still getting married?"

"He says yeah but I don't see no point to it. It won't matter until we're ready to retire and maybe one of us collects survivor's benefits. I want us to move in together and save

one rent. Money'll be tight if we get this place, and if we don't and I get canned it'll be worse."

"Why would a new owner can you? You're the one knows how everything works."

"Tommy Gioia wants it."

"Ohhh." Tommy Gioia had a history of buying up family restaurants and homogenizing them to cut every corner he could squeeze a dollar out of. Rumor had it he saw himself as the next Ray Kroc.

"'Ohhh' is right. He'll outbid me if it comes to it, but Joe and Sal said they'll honor the price we agreed on but they can't wait forever, not with Joe's heart the way it is. I'm working lunch today so Sal can take him down Picksburgh for the doctor."

"I'm sorry to hear that all around. Good luck."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll take all the good luck I can get. I just hope I don't need a fucking miracle."

Phyllis went back to work. Drew pushed away his empty plate. Wiped his mouth. "When do you want to get together to talk to them? After work? Or Sunday? I'm off Tuesday next week."

Doc shook his head. "I'll do it. Probably Sunday."

"I'll go with you. Safety in numbers."

"You need to lay back on this. Hear me out." Doc had no family of his own and tended to take the lead when Tom or Ellen needed help. He had the added benefit of being able to sign himself out of work when he needed to, given the amount of comp time he'd accrued in lieu of overtime the city couldn't pay. "Whoever pitches this to them is stepping into the shithouse. One of us needs to stay clean in their eyes or they'll shut us out altogether."

"Then you lay back. You've eaten the last couple of these."

Doc shook his head as he swallowed. "It has to be me. It's just the way things worked out, but I'm the one they're used to hearing bad news from. You do it now and it'll seem like we're tag-teaming them. They need to have one of us they trust so they have someone they can vent to. There's no other way for us to know what they're thinking."

"You sure?"

Doc swallowed the last of his Coke. "Don't worry. There'll be plenty of edible shit to go around. For now, you're the mole." Took his weight off the stool and put it right back. "There is one thing you can do for me if you're feeling guilty."

"What?"

Doc slid his check toward Drew's plate. "Pay for my lunch."

12:40 p.m.

Nancy Snyder and Teresa Shimp met for lunch at Tommy Gioia's restaurant in Plum Borough because no other cops ate there. Took separate cars and arrived a few minutes apart. Almost like having an affair.

"How's your hit-and-run coming?" Nancy said as they waited for their salads.

Teresa sipped iced tea. Shook her head. "Nowhere. We're more than halfway through checking the list of likely cars. Nothing looks promising. We don't know for sure the driver's from Penns River. We don't have the manpower to expand the data request much."

"Any useful tips?"

"We have a decent timeline for her up until she leaves Fat Jimmy's. Lots of people there saw her come in with a guy no one knew, but no one saw her leave with him for sure. The way she introduced him gave a few of the witnesses the idea she didn't know him well."

"So the guy who picked her up hitchhiking?"

"Probably."

The salads arrived. Neither woman showed any enthusiasm for what they saw. Nancy asked Teresa's plan for moving forward. Teresa took a bite. Her original disinterest proved justified. "I want to finish with the cars this week. Then I'll reassemble the file. Do some follow-up canvassing. Sullivan's got me on it full time."

"You said 'you.' Are you working this alone?"

"For the time being. I can get Dougherty if something breaks, but right now we can't spare more than one detective with Neuschwander at the beach. Sullivan doesn't want the first homicide on his watch to end up an open file or I'd be back in the rotation myself."

"I have to give him points for that," Nancy said. "The ME calling it 'death by misadventure' gave him the perfect excuse to write it off as an accident." She took a bite and didn't look any more satisfied than Teresa. "You look at social media?"

"Some, but Patty was almost certainly killed by someone she just met. How can we winnow down the accounts to check?" Teresa dipped another forkful of salad into her dressing. A minute's aging had not improved the taste. "No offense, Nancy, but you didn't ask me out to lunch someplace no one would see us to talk about something we could've discussed in your office."

Nancy did the same salad routine as Teresa with the same result. "Why do you think Stush promoted me?"

"Because he recognized you were the best person for the job."

"Thanks, but we both know he had other people with better arguments."

"Your qualifications go beyond time in service and experience."

"That's what I'm getting at," Nancy said. "Politics."

"Stan Napierkowski would still be chief if he cared about playing politics."

"Then why not let Sullivan pick his own deputy instead of promoting me on his way out the door?"

"I wondered myself." Teresa's turn to take a delaying bite. At the rate they were eating, they risked paying the dinnertime price. "I really don't know and I'm not close

enough with Stush to guess. Did you ask Dougherty?"

"He made sure I knew he did not speak for Stush and they had not discussed it. His guess was I was the best cop not too closely associated with what he called 'the old regime' in the mayor's and council's eyes."

"Do you think he's bullshitting you?"

"No. We get along much better now and he goes out of his way to show respect and deference, especially around others who might take cues from him. It's just...there are cops who seem to feel like they got passed over. Or I did...something to get Mike Zywiciel pushed aside."

"Something?"

A muscle clenched in Nancy's jaw. "You know."

"With Stush?"

"A person who'd do something like that to get ahead isn't going to be too fussy who they have to do it with."

"No offense, but I'm thinking more from the other side. Men who worked with him think he'd sink to that level? 'Hey, Nancy, how bad do you want to be deputy?' Really?"

"I don't think rational thought enters into that kind of reasoning."

Both salads sat forgotten now. "Who's giving you a hard time? Zywiciel?"

"Not Mike. He's a sweet man. I'm pretty sure he didn't want the job, anyway."

"Who, then?"

"I don't want to say. Ignorant opinions really don't bother me." Saw Teresa's expression. "Honest to God. I can live with the gossip. It's the lack of respect that...breaks my balls."

Both laughed. "You've been working with Dougherty."

"He is pretty funny. Sully has me sit in on all the detective briefings. Dougherty doesn't seem to care who he's talking to. He just lays it out. I thought he only did it because he and Stush went back so far, but apparently not."

"He can be a pain, but he's fun to work with most of the time. Now, back on topic. About the lack of respect. Who's giving you trouble?"

"I still don't want to say. Mostly it's little things. Some of the older males moving slower than they should or making borderline comments. Not openly insubordinate or disrespectful but also not something you should say to a superior."

"Like Chris Trettle?"

"You heard about that?"

"*Everyone* heard. A lot of people are sick of it already."

"What's the general opinion of the people you talk to? If you don't mind me asking."

"It's hard to gauge. All anyone knows is what Trettle tells them."

"And they're not going to hear anything else."

Teresa nodded. "Trettle has a reputation of being a hothead. You don't. The consensus seems to be what happened to him sucks but you probably had your reasons."

"What's the general consensus about Sully's reasons?"

"Sully's reasons? His name hasn't come up."

Nancy whispered something under her breath. Could have been *son of a bitch*. "Let's say Officer Trettle's dispute with command was not strictly a one-on-one matter."

"So Sullivan has your back."

"I never thought he didn't. He came down on Trettle harder than I expected. Harder

than I would have, to tell the truth.”

“Is that bad?”

Nancy pushed her salad bowl aside. “I don’t want to be treated as the deputy should because people are afraid of Sullivan. I want them to at least respect the rank, no matter who’s wearing the birds.”

“You’ll have to win them over.”

“What if I don’t?”

“You will.”

“But what if I can’t?”

“What are you worried about? Everyone who ever answered a call with you knows you’re a good cop. You’re a good deputy. It’s only a matter of time before the same qualities everyone respected you for on the street bring them around. After all, we’re only talking about a handful of people.”

“A handful is all it takes, especially in a department this small.”

“What’s wrong, Nancy? This isn’t like you.”

“It’s not just me this time.”

“I don’t follow.”

Nancy picked at her napkin. “We both know women are underrepresented in supervisory positions compared to how many of us work the job.”

“*That’s* what you’re worried about?”

“Don’t laugh. You would be, too.”

“Not like this. Look, Nancy, you can’t carry the burden of all female police on your shoulders.”

“I know. I’ve just never been challenged like this.”

“Sure you have.” Teresa saw Nancy’s expression. “What about the first domestic you answered alone? The time you went into Dale’s with Dougherty and Sisler to look for the active shooter. What you’re facing here is not a potential life-and-death situation.”

“This is different.”

“I said it was different.”

“Not different like that. Those were in real time. This takes longer to play out and involves more people. I can *not* afford to fail here.”

“Or what? You’ll be dead? The worst that can happen here—and it’s not going to—is a demotion back to patrol. Do you think you’d be the first person that ever happened to?”

“It’s different for a woman.”

Teresa had the words to shoot down Nancy’s comment already forming in her mouth when she realized Nancy was right. At least accurate. There was nothing “right” about an environment where a woman’s risk-to-reward ratio differed from a man’s. Teresa thinking Nancy was making too much of it didn’t mean it wasn’t Teresa who was wrong. “Did you talk to Bonnie Lewis about this?”

“Who’s Bonnie Lewis?”

“She’s like the coordinator for the IAWP in Pittsburgh. I’ll bet she knows people you can talk to. You’re not the first woman cop to be in this position, you know.”

Nancy didn’t have much napkin left to pick at. Scanned the room as if looking for the server. Teresa said, “You don’t have to carry this all by yourself. You *shouldn’t* carry this all by yourself. All you’ll do is make mistakes others have made before and would be willing to warn you about.” Hurried on when Nancy breathed to speak. “The same as

you'd tell someone else struggling with a situation you'd already come through."

Nancy said, "All right," and Teresa knew she didn't mean it. "You don't want to talk to a stranger? I think Dougherty used to be a first sergeant. Talk to him."

"I can't talk to Dougherty about this."

"Why not? You know he'd take it seriously and keep it to himself. He has his faults but talking out of school isn't one of them."

"It's not like I don't trust him. He's a subordinate. Bitching can never roll downhill."

"Don't make it a bitch. He's the most respected cop on the force. His history with the town, with Stush, some of the things he's done, he's practically a legend. Take him aside and ask how he'd handle it."

"That's the thing. He'd never have to handle it. He'd have as much insight into my situation as he would about menstrual cramps."

Teresa almost spit a mouthful of iced tea across the table. Made sure Nancy knew the amusement was over the comment and not the situation. "Then I think Bonnie Lewis is definitely the way to go."

Nancy nodded as the server came by. Saw the almost untouched salads. "Everything okay?"

Teresa looked to Nancy, who said, "Everything's fine. Those are big salads, and we weren't as hungry as we thought." The server asked if they wanted boxes and the two cops competed to see who could be more effusive in declining.

In the parking lot Teresa let out a question she'd held back before. "You asked me and you asked Dougherty, but why do *you* think Stush made you deputy on his way out the door?"

Nancy adjusted her hat. Took keys from her purse. "He never told me this, but I think it was his way of giving the finger to the mayor and the council. They always said Stush was too set in his ways and too wedded to how things had always been in the past, so he promoted a younger woman who hadn't come up through the ranks."

"Do you think he used you?"

Nancy said, "I thought about that," before thinking about it some more. "Stush is a good man. A little old-fashioned, but he has a good heart. I'm going with what he said in the paper, about how he thought I was the best equipped to handle the evolving responsibilities of police work in Penns River. Sticking it to the big shots might have been a side benefit, but I don't think it was the primary intent. I just don't want to make it look like he made a mistake, or to disappoint him."

"You don't want to disappoint anyone."

"That's right," Nancy said. "Most of all me."

2:11 p.m.

Tracey Rittenour was a woman. Shimp and Boston still checked the car. It looked fine, and Tracey said she had it with her at work that night. An ER nurse at Allegheny Valley Hospital. There were better alibis, but not many.

4:11 p.m.

Trevor Boston smoothed the crease on his uniform pants and placed them on a wooden hanger. Hung it on a hook in his locker and asked Sean Sisler if he ever got goofy-assed calls like Boston did.

Sisler already dressed in his softball uniform pants and old-school stirrup socks. “That’s a hard question to answer, Trevor. Do you mean in quantity, as in ‘How many goofy-assed calls do I get?’ Or quality, as in ‘How goofy-assed are my calls?’ And if we’re going with quantity, there needs to be a standard so we know what qualifies as just plain goofy as opposed to full-blown goofy-assed.”

“How about people stealing stuff they couldn’t possibly need?”

“I arrested a guy last year for stealing an old man’s diapers.”

“Why would he do that?”

“In fairness, he didn’t know what they were when he took them.”

“Why would anyone steal something if they didn’t know what it was?”

“Porch pirate. Guy follows Amazon drivers around, picks up what they leave at people’s houses. This box had adult diapers.”

“Takes a low-rent motherfucker to steal unknown packages off a porch.”

“These guys are the plankton of the criminal food chain. Is that goofy-assed enough for you?”

“It’s not bad, but remember I had those assholes robbed the beer distributor wearing Jar Jar Binks masks.”

“Yeah, but they stole money. *Everyone* steals money. It’s the number one thing to steal, the world over.”

“It’s how they did it makes it goofy. Using those stupid masks.”

“If you want to get into goofy-assed *behavior*, well, take a seat. Remember, you’re talking to the guy who just last week arrested a man with a loaded crossbow in his car.”

“Yeah, the crossbow beats the masks.”

“I’m also the jerk who had to wrestle with a naked man smeared with cooking oil in a thunderstorm.”

“That definitely qualifies.”

Sisler wasn’t finished. “These were before your time, but I’m the one shot the rabid raccoon *and* answered the call where the guy shot his son through both butt cheeks to end an argument that started across town over who ate the last of the chocolate chip cookies.”

“I call bullshit.”

“Which? The rabid coon or the cookie shooting?”

“The cookie thing. I can see you shooting a rabid coon.”

“The cookie thing is the straight shit. Ask Tony Lutz. He was there. Or look it up in the paper for the sanitized version. It was six months or so ago.”

Boston wavered. Sisler’s sense of humor almost as dry as Dougherty’s, but he never fabricated. At least not anything provable. “Both cheeks? One shot or two?”

“One,” Sisler said. “A work of art.”

Boston finished dressing in silence. Sisler couldn’t resist. “Don’t pout, Trevor. You’re still a rookie. You can’t expect the goofy-assedness of your stories to stack up with those

of an established veteran of the streets such as myself.”

“I know for a fact you’ve only been here three years.”

“See what you have to look forward to? Don’t get me started on goofy-assed Afghanistan stories. Or Corps stories in general. It’ll break your spirit.”

Boston checked himself out in the locker room mirror. Sport shirt, pleated slacks, loafers. Sisler asked if he planned to skip softball. “We need you to have a chance against the Legion. Half their team is twenty-somethings or younger who played on the Legion baseball team in the past ten years. They’re passing them off as ‘social members.’” Made air quotes. “Ringers is what they are. We need our sweet-swinging first baseman.”

“I have time to go home and catch a quick shower and change before the game.”

“You shower *before* the game?” Boston smiled. “After, too?”

Boston shook his head. “After I screw that sister works in the bank downtown. The one with the nice natural.”

“Don’t know her,” said Sisler, who had no reason to pay any attention to her, a customer of neither the bank nor the gender.

“You’ll see her at the game. She likes me sweaty.”

Sisler held up a hand. “This is already too much information.” Boston turned to pass in the tight quarters. Sisler filled the space. “What about this goofy-assed story you were going to tell me? I mean, I understand going in it’s not going to be of the ‘greased naked man’ caliber, but you should at least let me evaluate it.”

Boston stopped and considered. “You know that little soft-serve ice cream place behind the VFW?”

“Hang a right at the Vets’ coming off the bypass. They’re maybe a quarter mile up the road.”

“Someone stole their flags.”

“American flags?”

“No, man, regular flags. Had one with their name and logo on it. Steelers flag. Penguins and Pirates, too.”

“When was this?”

“They noticed it when they came in this morning.”

Sisler took off his sunglasses. Hung them in the collar of his shirt. “I answered a call at the VFW for stolen flags today.”

“When? I was in that sector all day.”

“Quarter after twelve? Twelve-thirty? I think you were ten-seven.”

“I went to lunch about then.”

“Where’d you go?”

“Happy’s.” Sisler’s faced clouded. “On Leechburg Road? Across from the church?”

“Shares the parking lot with a little professional services strip?”

“That’s it.”

“How was it?”

“Okay burger but the fries and gravy were outstanding. The flags?”

Took Sisler a second to regroup. “Right. Flags. The Vets had their flags disappear overnight, too.”

“Not the big American flag, I hope.”

Sisler shook his head. “They take the big one down at night like you’re supposed to. They noticed what was missing when someone went out to raise it in the morning.”

“What’d they lose?”

“They had a nice MIA/POW flag and a ‘These colors don’t run.’ Who the hell would steal those?”

“Is that any goofier than stealing adult diapers?” Boston said.

“The diaper guy was a potluck thief. Whoever took these knew exactly what he was getting. I mean, some disgruntled Browns fan might steal a Steelers flag, and maybe a Flyers fan fucks with the Penguins, but who takes the store flag? What are they going to do with it? Hang it outside their house like they’re inviting us to arrest them?”

They stood in thought a minute before Boston asked if it struck Sisler funny, flags stolen so close together on the same night. “A little. Okay, more than a little.”

Boston smiled. Humid summer days patrolling the more rural parts of town could be boring with nobody wanting to get too sweaty. This would be something to do. “I should have that sector again tomorrow.”

Sisler put his sunglasses back on. “I’ll be right next door.”

8:28 p.m.

Monday nights during football season were the traditional times for Doc and Jefferson West to get together at Earl's in Creighton for chicken wings and beer. West called for a special meeting—not football season, not even a Monday—to talk about the Faison situation.

Doc hauled ass after the softball game—VFW 11, PRPD 9—and got there before Cedric. Engaged in the usual small talk with West. The Pirates suck. Worries about the Steelers' defense, which those of a certain age still held to the standards of a season over forty years ago when the Steel Curtain allowed nine points over a six-game stretch. Too hot to think much about hockey.

West broached the topic of the day while gnawing meat from between the bones of a flat. "What do you make of Cedric?"

"You've spent more time with him than I have," Doc said. "What do *you* think of him?"

"You evadin'?"

Doc set his beer down before drinking so West wouldn't think too much creativity went into the answer. "You want my cop opinion or me personally?"

"Cop first."

"He's clean and I don't see any willingness to become a repeat offender, though I'd feel better about it if he'd calm down a little. I can understand why he might be wound a little tight and I'm willing to let it pass."

West tossed the bones onto his pile. Picked up a drummie. "What about personally?"

This time Doc took a drink. "I don't *dislike* him. Not someone I'd seek out for company, but he seems all right." Broke a wing apart. "Your turn."

"I'd like to say what you just said. Wound a little tight. Not someone I'd pick to hang with but seems okay."

"You'd like to?"

West held the small drumstick in both hands. Stared into the mirror back of the bar. He hadn't seemed well to Doc in months. Tonight his shoulders sagged and he looked worn out. "He doesn't meet the standard I had in mind for Wilver and David."

"You understand neither of us has a vote here, right? Cedric wants the boys, he gets them. Won't be like dealing with their dope-fiend mother who'll walk away if we so much as threaten to raise a fuss."

"I know."

Doc wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "You ever spend much time around ex-cons, Mr. West?"

"A little."

"Parolees fresh out of the joint?"

"Not so much."

"They have a way of making straight people uncomfortable. Doesn't matter if the straight knows they did time. Something about walking around free but knowing they're one cop who didn't get laid last night away from getting violated. Gives them a weird vibe. I'm concerned about the boys, too, but Cedric strikes me as someone who has no

interest in going back inside.”

West gestured for another round. “I got a friend around St. Marys runs a small construction business. Jim Mulvihill. Always looking for help and doesn’t mind working with cons.” Doc arched an eyebrow. “His brother did a little time and Jim knows about all the chances they don’t get. I mentioned Cedric to him, nothing serious. He said get him up there for an interview and Cedric shows any interest he’ll have himself a job. Most of Jim’s crew is getting ready to go back to school and he needs people for the cold months, too.”

“St. Marys is way the hell up in the woods.”

West finished the drumstick. “Not a lot of temptation up there. Good place for everyone to get their minds right.”

“You talk to Cedric about it yet?”

“I’m about to.” West pointed his fresh wing toward the door. “Here he comes.”

Cedric Faison did a quick shiver when the air conditioning hit him. Still in the eighties with humidity to match out in the world, almost nine o’clock. Sweat stains under Cedric’s arms and on his back and a ring of salt on his baseball cap. Walked over wiping his brow with a bandanna that wouldn’t recognize a laundry.

West and Doc made room so Cedric could sit between them. Got him a plate for his wings and a cold beer. Spent the next half hour talking about everything and nothing. Not small talk so much as easing into an awkward topic, Cedric on alert from the moment he sat down. Fresh parolees don’t relax much around other people, especially cops.

Doc sensed West wanted him to start. “How’s the job search going?” Cedric gave him a *What do you mean by that crack?* look. “I’m gonna vouch for you with your parole officer. Put my reputation out there. I need something to tell her if she asks how things are going.”

“I get it.” Cedric drank half a glass of beer in one swallow. “God damn it’s hot today. Don’t remember it being this hot here.”

“Global warming.” Doc in cop mode easy as throwing a switch. “The job hunt.”

“I’m looking. Ain’t many hiring. Couple said I should come by again when the kids go back to school. When’s that? Another month?”

“About.”

“One looked promising. Had something and we was getting along, you know? Ran my ass out when I told him I had a record.”

“Who was it?” Cedric gave that look again. “I’ve lived here all my life, Cedric. There are people who’ll do me a favor. Not everyone, but maybe you’ll get lucky. You’re due.”

“Guy’s name was Ed something. Runs a paint and body operation out in the Flats.”

“Ed Tobin? Place called Tobin Auto off of Greensburg Road?”

Cedric might have sat up a little straighter. “That’s him.”

Doc chuckled without humor. “I know him but I can’t help you. Ex-con ripped him off pretty bad a couple of years ago. He’s still a little gun shy.”

“You averse to relocating?” West said.

“Averse” didn’t seem to be a word Cedric heard much in his role as a ward of the state. Or maybe he was confused because he’d already shown a willingness to pull up stakes when he went to Tennessee in the first place, the inciting incident that brought the three men together. “Has to be someplace the parole people say is all right.”

“Up around St. Marys.”

“Where the fuck is St. Marys?”

“Elk County.” No sign of recognition from Cedric. “North of 80.”

“What’s up there?”

“Friend of mine runs a small construction business. He’s always looking for people who aren’t afraid to work and he likes to give second chances.” West saw Cedric’s expression. “I’d rather he told you his reasons himself. If you’re willing to make the trip to talk to him.”

Cedric sloshed beer around his glass. “Pretty far from here.”

“Couple hours.”

Doc saw a chance to assist on the close. “My dad used to hunt up around there. St. Marys. Emporium. Beautiful country.”

“I was thinking I could stay closer to Wilver and David.”

“I was thinking you’d take them with you,” West said.

The idea of relocating the boys seemed new to Cedric. “I don’t know how much they’d like that.”

West took a deep breath. “How long’s it been since you spent a lot of time with them? Until recently, I mean.”

Cedric did the calculation. “Seven years? Six, at least.”

“You know what happened with Wilver.”

“Course I do.”

“Do you know he hasn’t left my house except to go to the doctor since he got out of the hospital?”

Cedric didn’t have to say he did not. Doc said, “He sees Reynard Mendenhall everywhere he looks, twenty-four by seven. He might be able to leave that behind up in the woods.”

“David still in school, though.”

“David might surprise you.” West waited for Cedric’s full attention. “Boy’s got talent in his hands. Likes to take things apart and put them back together and is good at it. He might enjoy living someplace where people value it more.”

Cedric looked uncertain. Thought he’d come in for a friendly beer to find people had plans and expectations for him. “I’ll definitely look into it.”

“You want me to call Jim? Or do you want to do it?”

Indecision covered Cedric’s face. “I—if you don’t mind making the introduction, I guess I can find my way up there, see if he wants me.”

“Don’t let your enthusiasm run away with you,” Doc said.

“I ain’t. It’s just—where the men’s room in here? I got to piss like a racehorse.”

West pointed the way. Waited until Cedric turned the corner. “Not exactly overcome with gratitude.”

Doc signaled for three more. “I wasn’t delighted with his reaction myself. Then again, he didn’t come in here expecting to move a hundred miles away.”

“It’s not like we suggested he go to Alaska. He’s already been to Tennessee. And without the boys.”

Doc nodded. “Reynard Mendenhall’s not Wilver’s only problem here, either. I’m not saying St. Marys has no drug temptations, but up there it’ll be mostly white operations. Meth and oxy.”

Motion and a raised voice tugged at Doc’s attention. Another cross word, then “moth-

erfucker.” Out of his jurisdiction, the cop in him couldn’t resist a look. Found Cedric Faison facing off against a tatted-up black man in his mid-twenties who spent more time in the gym than anyone needed to. A circle had half-formed around them.

West started to get up. Doc laid a hand on his forearm. “I want to see how Cedric handles it.”

Cedric handled it by telling the younger man he had no call to disrespect him like this. The twenty-something told the old man to mind his business.

“You treat a woman like that in my hearing make it my business,” Cedric said. “Leave that shit at home.”

“Who the fuck’re you to tell me a got-damn thing?” Mr. Tats’s reedy voice sounded out of place, like an eighteen-wheel diesel with a Toyota horn. “You best step the fuck off right the fuck now ’fore I fix it so you don’t never stick your nose where it ain’t belong.”

Cedric squared up. Dropped his right foot a little to balance his weight. “Bring it on, boy. You got no idea what you’re asking.”

“I got no idea? Here’s my idea, motherfucker.” Drew a knife. “What’s yours?”

Cedric’s idea was to pull a knife of his own. Doc told Jefferson West to watch the other guy and elbowed his way through the circle showing his badge. “Police officer! Everyone calm down.”

Cedric kept his attention on Mr. Tats, who turned toward Doc. “Who the fuck’re you? I knows all the cops in this town.”

“I’ll bet you do. I’m from across the river, which is why you’re not both already wearing cuffs. Before you get ideas, just because I don’t work here doesn’t mean I can’t call in an ass-kicking in a hurry.” Left a second for the implications to clarify. “Now back off.”

Cedric’s attention still on the knife in Tats’s hand. Doc kept his voice low but authoritative. “Cedric. Give me the knife. Handle first.”

“He pulled on me.”

“I saw. So did Jeff West. You’re covered for now. Give me the knife and we’ll shut this whole thing down right here.”

Cedric still locked on target. “You taking his, too?”

Doc’s voice stayed calm. “Listen to me, Cedric. You don’t hand over that blade in the next three seconds I’m going to stick it up your ass and take you back for some Tennessee prison doctor to take it out. Now give me the goddamn knife.”

Cedric looked at Doc for the first time. Took a beat to regain his bearings. Turned the knife around in his hand so Doc could take it by the handle. Doc led him through the crowd. “Make a hole, folks. Nothing to see here.” The first words they teach in cop school.

Back at the bar, the commotion dying. Doc and Cedric took sips of beer. “No offense, Cedric, but what the fuck happened there?”

“You didn’t see what he done and said to that girl.”

“You’re right. I saw a paroled felon brandishing a deadly weapon. I could—should—violate you just for carrying it.”

Cedric kept the argument in his eyes out of his voice. “I know. I’m sorry. I guess I’m so used to having to watch my back...now I got something to watch it with again I want it with me.”

“You can leave the knife behind or Wilver and David. There’s no third option.”

Cedric didn’t speak for ten seconds. “I know. You’re right. Will you do me a solid and hang onto that so I won’t feel tempted again?”

“I was going to hold it anyway. You can ask for it on your way out of town, whenever you go and wherever you’re going.” West shot him a look. “I vouch for him here. I’m not his keeper. Besides, it’s not like he can’t get another one.”

“It’s okay, Jeff. He’s right. I have a favor to ask of you, too.” West arched an eyebrow. “You still willing to call your friend in St. Marys? Change of scenery might do us all some good.”

Three attractive young Black women walked past on their way to the door. The prettiest peeled off and came over. Touched Cedric on the arm. “Thank you for what you did back there. I appreciate it.” Cedric nodded. The young woman looked at Doc. Almost said something and Doc realized for the first time in the three years he’d been drinking with Jefferson West at Earl’s that his was the only white face in the room.

Cedric started to speak. Doc cut him off. “I get it. Honest to God, I do. All I’m saying is to pick your spots. Not every battle is worth fighting.”

“I can’t let things like that slide.”

“He’s not saying you should.” West swallowed the last of his beer. Put a coaster over the glass. “Sometimes just speaking up is enough. Here’s something I learned in Vietnam: Always have an exit strategy before you start something.”

THURSDAY
JULY 25

9:28 a.m.

Trevor Boston's sector ran south of the bypass and east of Falcon's Park Road all the way to 780. Not a lot out there and not a lot going on, so Trevor spent as much time as he could on the area of Wildlife Lodge and Milligantown Roads south of the VFW. Whoever took those flags would live close and not likely in the more built-up areas closer to the bypass.

Making a slow glide along Frederick Road when a man of about sixty and showing every minute hustled as well as he could toward the car. Had his face in the open driver's window before Boston shifted into park. "You here about my flags?"

"What about your flags, sir?"

"Come out this morning to do some yard work and they're gone."

"What kind of flags are they?"

"One's Penns River High School like they have at football games on account of my wife teaches chemistry there. I grew up in Vandergrift so I'm still a Kiski fan. Don't get me wrong. I like to see the River kids do well except when they're playing Kiski. You gotta stick with what you're raised on. I grew up with a guy moved to New Jersey and now he's a Yankees fan. I don't understand some people."

"You said 'flags,' sir. More than one?"

"It's kind of embarrassing, tell you the truth. A pink My Little Pony or Strawberry Shortcake or some such my wife brung home for our granddaughter and now it's a goddamn family heirloom. It's not like it used to be around here. Sons of bitches will steal anything anymore. Might as well live in town for all the peace we get."

Boston wondered how much more peaceful it was back in the day, not having seen another moving vehicle in at least ten minutes. "Do you want to file a formal complaint, Mister...I'm sorry. I didn't get your name."

"Robuck. Ed Robuck." The man extended a hand. Boston ignored it. Didn't want to be rude. Also didn't want to give control of his hand to someone who was standing and had leverage on him seated in the car. Robuck seemed harmless, but Boston had no desire to have his name used as a case study for future academy classes. Busied himself writing and hoped Robuck would think he hadn't seen the hand. "Do you want to file a complaint, Mr. Robuck?"

"How much trouble is it going to be?"

"I'll ask you a few questions and get a statement for the record. Might not have to do anything else unless we catch the guy. Maybe not even then, depending on how the DA wants to handle it. I'll be honest with you. This is small stuff. Might not anything happen on it ever."

Robuck didn't seem put out by the spurned handshake. Said he'd already told everything he knew. Heard nothing through the night and only noticed the flags missing when he came outside a few minutes ago.

"Are you sure they were taken last night?" Boston said. "Could it've been the night before?"

"I think so, but I wouldn't want to have to swear to it. We went up Ohiopyle to see the falls and have lunch with friends lives in Wharton Furnace. You know, down there past

Uniontown?" Boston didn't know and didn't understand why he needed to but saw no benefit to interrupting. "We left early and got home late, so no, I couldn't swear they wasn't taken the night before."

Boston verified the spelling of Robuck's name, home and cell numbers, and the proper address. Asked if Robuck had anything to add.

Robuck looked toward the hill across the street. "This doesn't have to do with the flags, but I wonder if I can ask you something."

"You can ask whatever you want. Please understand I might not be able to answer."

"I don't like to tell stories on neighbors, but can you do something about the people who live over there the other side of Bair?" Pointed where he meant. "They run their old truck up and down all hours like their rear ends was on fire. Raise hell half the night sometimes."

"What kind of hell?"

"Hollering. Gunning engines. Firecrackers, I guess, though I couldn't swear they aren't gunshots."

"Ever call them in?"

Robuck looked at his feet. "Like I said, I don't want to cause trouble between neighbors. But you're here and we're already talking, so I figured..."

"You have names for them?"

"Lizzie Signorino might. Ain't like they come around introducing themselves once they moved in."

"How long have they lived there?"

Robuck looked up like the exact date might be on a cloud. "Year and a half? Maybe a little more? Less than two because the Alberts lived there until at least football season two years ago." The standard Penns River calendar: spring, summer, football, wrestling.

Boston finished his circle of Frederick and found himself on Bair Road looking at a driveway disappearing into the trees. No reason to assume Robuck's assholes took the flags. No reason to assume they didn't, either. Boston called in to make sure he was clear and gave his location to Janine Schoepf. Turned into the driveway.

A truck parked near the house had no front bumper nor rear gate. The passenger window was plastic duct-taped to the frame. The house had never been the pride of the neighborhood and wasn't half that nice now. A gutter hung loose. Holes in the concrete steps showed where a railing used to be. What might have been a small garage or a shed now no more than a lean-to that wouldn't bear much leaning on. No curtains or blinds in the windows.

Just flags.

Steelers. Penguins. Pirates. Dolly's Ice Cream. POW/MIA. These Colors Don't Run. Penns River Raiders.

My Little Pony.

Boston took his time getting out of the car. Slid his baton into the ring. Gave himself a chance to size up the house and plenty of opportunity for whoever was inside to notice him and not be startled when he approached. Easy, casual stroll to the door. Officer Friendly making a house call. Knocked with the side of his fist and identified himself. Listened to hurried movement from inside.

Boston wagged his head. *Amateurs*. "I hear you in there, so you might as well open up. You can talk to me like people, or I can call for backup. That conversation won't go

as well.” Half-smile on his face or not, Boston stepped back and to the side of the door. Released the strap on his holster.

The chain slid back. A deadbolt turned. The door opened a foot to present a thirty-ish man wearing jeans and a black tee with a sleeveless, buttonless flannel shirt over it. The man blinked in the morning sunlight. “Yeah?”

“Officer Boston, Penns River police. I’d like to ask you a few questions about the flags in your windows.”

“What flags?”

You know, the stolen ones hanging in every window. “We have reports of flags like these being stolen over the past day or so.”

“And you assumed we did it.”

“Sir?”

“I mean, what made you look here? Don’t you need to find some probably flaws or some shit to come checking on our house?” A penny dropped. “That old jagoff Robuck sent you up here, didn’t he? Son of a bitch.”

“What’s your name, sir?”

“What’s your name?”

Boston already thinking of how he could describe this call to Sisler. “I just told you. I’m Officer Boston. Penns River police.”

“Why are you here, then? I got rights.”

“I’m here about the flags.” The obvious odor of cat urine floated through the door, still open only a foot. “I have reason to believe they’re stolen. That gives me probable cause to search the premises if I want.”

The door slammed and the deadbolt turned. Boston stepped off the stoop to give himself room to maneuver. Keyed his mike to request backup and saw hands ripping flags from the windows.

A minute and a half later Boston had his service weapon along his leg with his finger outside the trigger guard when the door opened and a ball of flags flew out. “There’s your probable cause, asshole. Take the fucking flags and get the fuck off my property! Now! I have a lawyer’s phone number here.”

On speed dial, most likely. About to cancel the call for backup when an unmarked car pulled in and Nancy Snyder got out. Walked over and asked what was up. Boston gave her the digest.

Snyder’s eyes stayed on the house. “Pick those up and take them back to the shop as evidence. Get a detective to write you up a search warrant. Distinctive odor and furtive activity consistent with the production of methamphetamine. The detectives will help you phrase it for the best chance of a judge’s signature.” Made eye contact. “This is good work. I’ll make sure you get to serve it.”

She stopped him as he passed. Took the My Little Pony flag from the ball. “The others are all you need for the warrant. Take this one back where it belongs on your way.”

11:00 a.m.

As close to a perfect day as Penns River ever got. Eighty-eight degrees with half the typical July humidity. Not a cloud in the sky and a breeze from the northwest kept the heat from getting uncomfortable. Kids headed for the pool. Adults ditched work to play golf. Nancy Snyder left her air-conditioned office to drive around Penns River in a patrol unit, looking for trouble.

Backing up Boston as much comic relief as police work. She couldn't spend all day driving around, had no interest in going back to the house sooner than necessary. Stopped by the corn stand in Glen's parking lot and picked up a half-dozen ears of Silver Queen. Thought of the last time she'd had anything from Glen's, considered her weight, and bought a cherry milkshake. Small. She was in a good mood, not delirious.

The call came halfway through her shake. "All units. Requesting backup for a domestic disturbance at two-four-zero Davis Street. Please acknowledge and respond Code One."

Another of Sullivan's subtle changes. Standard Operating Procedure now dictated backup for all domestics ever since a husband and wife tag-teamed George Augustine to the point where he had to use his baton to disengage to call for help. The use of force against both parties in a domestic created a metric shit tonne of paperwork for all involved, Deputy Chief and Civil Rights Officer Nancy Snyder included. Enunciating the street numbers came about after Sean Sisler answered a garbled call to investigate a prowler and drew his weapon on a civilian who'd gone for an evening stroll and locked his keys in the house. The prowler two blocks over and long gone by the time Sisler got there, driven away from the broken-into shed by an irate neighbor with a baseball bat.

Davis Street only half a mile away. Nancy keyed her mike and accepted the call. Rolled out of Glen's still slurping the dregs of her shake. Code One meant "no siren or lights." No need to rush. She'd be there in a minute or two.

Rolled up on 240 to see Officer Chris Trettle standing on the front stoop talking to a man in his late forties. No physical contact or raised voices, but body language showed this was more than casual chatting. She parked blocking the driveway and walked up the path to stand a few feet behind and to Trettle's left.

"I only have to get a warrant to search for evidence. This is what the law calls exigent circumstances."

"Exigent my ass. You made that up. I know my rights."

"Exigent circumstances means I have reason to believe someone might be injured or in danger inside and I need to take a look around."

"What makes you think someone's hurt?"

"We got a call from a woman who identified herself as your wife and said you were beating on her. I need to see her."

"She's a fucking drama queen, is what she is."

"I need to see her."

"She's fine."

"I still need to see her."

"What if I say no?"

“No is not an option.”

“What if I say go fuck yourself?”

Trettle leaned in. Lowered his voice. “Then I’ll shove this baton so far up your ass it’ll smell like toothpaste. Now get the fuck out of my way before I get mad.”

Nancy didn’t know if Trettle realized she was standing there, or showing her he didn’t care. No matter. She didn’t care. The guy asked for it. She was willing to write Trettle spoke “figuratively” if it came to it. He’d threatened no actual violence; what he suggested was not physically possible.

The homeowner lacked Nancy’s immunity to Trettle’s stare. Backed into the house and Trettle followed, not too close. Nancy caught the screen door before it slammed and joined them inside.

The homeowner stopped halfway into the room and didn’t move when Trettle infringed on his space. “Youns is in but you ain’t going through the house. I’ll get her.” Turned his head halfway. “*Lisa! Get your ass out here before these cops wreck the place!*”

Hard to tell where the answer came from. “Fuck you, Roger, you piece of fly shit! I want alla yinz to get the fuck outta my house right now.”

“You happy, asshole?” Roger said.

Trettle radiated disgust like a smell. “I have to see her. What’s her name?”

“You just heard me call her, you dumb SOB.”

Nancy took a step forward. Only so much of this she could expect Trettle to take, senior officer on scene or not. He still held it together. “Her last name.”

“It’s the same as mine, dickhead.”

Trettle moved to within an inch, face-to-face. “Tell me your last name before I put cuffs on you and haul your ignorant ass to jail.”

Roger said, “On what charge?” and Nancy smelled the alcohol in his sweat.

“I have until the ambulance gets here to think of something.”

Roger not as hungover as he smelled. “Tomaselli.”

Trettle wasted no time. “Mrs. Tomaselli! I need to see you’re all right before I can leave. Come on out and let me take a look. Then I can be on my way if that’s what you still want.”

Nothing.

“Mrs. Tomaselli?”

Still nothing.

Nancy said, “Go take a look. I got this one.”

Roger reached for Trettle as he moved toward the back of the house. Nancy grabbed Roger and spun him around as Lisa Tomaselli—bigger than Nancy expected—flew through the entryway from the kitchen and hit Trettle square between the shoulder blades with the edge of a cast iron skillet.

Trettle staggered, didn’t go down. Nancy tripped Roger over her outstretched leg. Lisa raised the skillet for another go. Nancy was quicker, hooked an elbow inside Lisa’s to pin the arm to her side. Roger got up for a run at Nancy. Trettle had recovered enough to knock him over the couch with the heel of one hand.

Lisa tried to switch the skillet to her other hand. Dropped it on her head, where it bounced into Nancy’s face. Seeing nothing but stars, she raised her hands to her face to find her nose no longer dead center. Roger came back from around the couch to bull-rush

Trettle, ramming him backward and denting the drywall. Trettle boxed Roger's ears. Followed up with a head butt and a right cross to put Roger to sleep in the recliner as if he'd been there all along. Nancy pushed aside the pain to take advantage of Lisa's possible concussion by grabbing a knee and flipping her onto her back. Total elapsed time: seventeen seconds.

Both cops stood over the fallen Tomasellis. Trettle stretched to get kinks from his back. Nancy tried to staunch the flow of blood from her nose without touching her face. Asked Trettle if he was all right. He nodded.

Neither cop spoke as they cuffed the dazed combatants and loaded them one to a squad car. Trettle could book them both while Nancy went to the hospital. Her nose broken for sure and she had growing doubts about her left cheek. Any movement sent waves of pain through her face.

Lowering herself into the car when Trettle called to her. "Hey! Deputy!" Said her title like it had mucus on it. "Next time send someone who actually *has* my back, okay?"

12:04 p.m.

Doc on his way to lunch when Cedric Faison's parole officer returned his call. A woman with the unfortunate name of Lindsay Gramm.

"Ms. Gramm, thanks for calling me back." At last. "I know how busy you must be, and I promise not to take up too much of your time."

"Your message said you're a police officer?" Her generic southern accent sounded manufactured. The voice and tone put Doc in mind of a one-night stand between Bull and Sarah Connor.

"Detective in Penns River, Pennsylvania."

"And y'all're calling me about a Cedric Faison? Is he one of mine?"

Good to know she stayed on top of things. "Yes, ma'am. Got out a few months ago. Went inside for ending a bar fight with a knife."

"Black fella about five-feet-eleven? Average build?" Papers rustled across the phone line "Thirty-seven years old?"

"That's him."

"What's he doing up there? Conditions of his parole say he's not to leave Tennessee. You asking me to violate him?"

"You gave him a thirty-day pass to find a job. His kids are up here."

More paper rustling. "I see his next appointment isn't till next week and I don't have a note saying he missed any, so I guess I must've set something up. What's he done in—where'd you say you're from? Pennsver?"

"Penns River. Far as I know he spent time with his kids and looked for a job."

"He find one?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then he better get a move on. 'Cording to my records, he needs to see me in five days."

"That's why I called. I'm wondering if he can get an extension. I'll take responsibility for him."

"And you're who again?"

"Ben Dougherty. Detective with the Penns River Police Department. Badge number 395."

"Where's Penns River? I never heard of it."

"Western Pennsylvania. About twenty miles up the Allegheny River from Pittsburgh. You ever see a football game from Heinz Field? That fountain at the famous confluence? Up the river on the left."

"What's this Faison to you?"

Doc took a deep breath. Not the day he would have picked for this—Cedric pulling a knife last night—but he'd promised to make the call and didn't want it to slide till the last minute and maybe fall through the cracks. Not in the best mood to go a few rounds with this bureaucrat who thought she was either Cagney or Lacey, whichever was bitchier. Come to think of it, they were both kind of bitchy. Lindsay Gramm's voice brought him back to the topic at hand. "You still there?"

"Sorry. You know what it's like in a police station." Doc doubted she did but playing

to a bureaucrat's vanity never hurt. "I've developed a relationship with his sons, and I can tell how close they all are. From what I've seen since he's been here, Cedric's making a good faith effort to keep the family together." Saw no reason to mention Imelda. "Jobs aren't exactly falling off of trees here, especially for ex-cons. He needs a little more time."

The silence crossing the line sounded more like inattention than thought. "I didn't have to give him the thirty days, you know. Probably shouldn't have, going strictly by the book. Another thirty..." Let it taper off as if to imply granting an extension would be a favor on a par with asking Doc to paint her house or build her a deck.

Doc understood people who were conscientious to a fault. Didn't like them much when they impeded progress but understood the impulse. Lindsay Gramm struck him more as someone who liked to boss people around and wasn't going to pass up an opportunity just because he was a cop. Maybe her chance to in some small way get back at all the cops who'd shit on her over the years, which Doc would be happy to do, given the chance. "How often is Faison scheduled to report, Ms. Gramm?"

More paper rustling. "Every week."

"He ever miss?"

More rustling. This broad moved more paper than a printing press. "Not so I recall."

"Ever give you any trouble?"

"Not so I recall."

"No offense, but the fact is he could've come up here and not said a word about it. You never would've known so long as he didn't miss an appointment."

"He'd be taking a chance. Maybe things are different where you are but he's subject to recall here at any time."

"What's he get? Twenty-four hours to appear?"

"That sounds about right." Now Doc hated her for real. Raising this big a stink and she didn't know off the top of her head?

"I don't know exactly where you are in Tennessee, but I've been to Nashville for a football game. It's an eight-and-a-half-hour drive from here. Even if you're way over by Memphis, it can't be more than a few extra hours. He'd have time for a good night's sleep and still make it."

This silence was not inattentive. "Detective whatever your name is, I don't truly know if you *are* police. Why I should inconvenience myself on your say-so alone isn't clear to me."

"I'm trying to do you a favor."

"How are you doing me a favor by asking for one?"

"Seems to me if he found a job in Pennsylvania he'd request a transfer through ICOTS. Then he could stay here with his family instead of running back to Tennessee every week to report in. I can't imagine your caseload is so light you'd mind having a file off your desk."

"You have that much confidence in him?"

"Enough to ask for another month. I accept full responsibility. You want something in writing, I'll send it today."

"It takes forty-five days to process a transfer request. Nothing you'd send me would be binding."

"He's not requesting transfer yet. If he doesn't find a job in the next month, he can go

back to what he was doing in Tennessee. Custodial work, isn't it?"

"That's right." This she knew.

"All I'm talking about sending you is something you can show your boss to cover yourself. I'll FedEx it on Department letterhead. Get my chief to put something in there to vouch for me if you like."

Lindsay Gramm would like, thank you very much, though she didn't know why a police officer would go to this much trouble for a violent offender he claimed not to know very well. Doc not so sure himself by the time he finished thinking about it. Decided he didn't do it for Cedric; it was the boys. That made him feel better.

12:28 p.m.

Doc made it as far as the swinging half-door to the public area of the station when Val Peters grabbed him. “This lady’s looking for a detective. She says she has some information on the hit-and-run in the Flats last week.”

The woman’s name was Janet Berlinski. She’d talked to Patty Polcyn on the phone Thursday evening before Patty left the house. “She was complaining because her boss cut her hours back and she didn’t know how she was gonna pay for that vacation she already had money down for at Conneaut over Labor Day. She said she didn’t have a vacation—not a real one—in like three or four years and was really looking forward to this one until that jagov cut her hours so he wouldn’t have to pay benefits.”

Doc sympathized, unsure how this had anything to do with Patty ending up dead in an empty lot early Friday morning.

“I think that might be why she got killed.”

“I don’t follow you.”

Janet leaned in like she didn’t want anyone else to hear, them the only two in the office. “I think her boss killed her because of that.”

“Her boss killed her because he cut her hours?” Janet nodded. “Sounds a lot more like a reason for her to kill him.”

“Welllll...” Janet reconsidered her position. “Patty had a temper. Maybe that’s how it started out and it went bad for her.”

Doc got Janet’s contact information. Gave her a card. Said if she thought of anything else to give him a call. She didn’t need to come in.

1:42 p.m.

Trevor Boston rolled up on Overlook Park to find a woman who appeared to be making a video of people having a picnic. Nice-looking woman, though as he got closer he saw she was a little far along to pull off those jeans. Expert at knowing where and how to tie off her blouse below her breasts and still had the rack and flat belly to make it work. She looked toward Boston when he got close and seemed a little surprised.

He asked if she'd called the police. She had. "I want to file a complaint."

"Yes, ma'am. About what?"

She pointed as though it should be obvious. "The disturbance over there. By the grill."

Boston looked to see a family of four cooking something on one of the small grills near the picnic tables overlooking the river. Quite a view on a day as bright and clear as today. Not Yellowstone or the Pacific Coast Highway but still quite a panorama, small towns spread across the opposite bank, part of the bridge at Freeport peeking around the hill on the right. Two little girls chased each other around and between the tables, making the kinds of noises pre-school children make. The parents half watched the kids and half watched Boston and the woman. Black family.

Boston felt his ass crawl up his shoulders. "What were they doing, ma'am?"

"What *were* they doing? What about now? My house is right there." Pointed to a pile worth half a million even in the Penns River market about fifty yards from the picnic area. "My son is inside sick. How is he supposed to rest with this going on?" Jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

An air-conditioning compressor kicked on as Boston gave the house a once-over. "They're little kids, ma'am. I doubt they can be heard with the windows closed and the AC running."

"I heard them." Cords stood out in the woman's neck to give a less flattering idea of her age. "Why do you think I came out here to call for help? They've been there over an hour and they don't live in the neighborhood."

Boston was inexperienced, not stupid. He excused himself and stepped away from the crazy lady to call for backup. A white cop, if possible. Maybe Nancy Snyder was patrolling today. Might be fun to see the deputy take this bitch on.

Ben Dougherty had dropped some fresh corn at his parents' on the way to help Teresa Shimp check car registrations when the call came in. Told Janine Schoepf he was three minutes away and turned right instead of left, happy for an opportunity to catch the breeze at the top of Garver's Ferry Hill and see almost all the way to Armstrong County.

Only half paying attention to the address, he recognized the house as soon as he crested the hill. Spent quite a bit of time there a few years ago when he came to arrest the owner for a brutal murder. The husband went down for natural life, but the co-conspirator—and worse—wife still breathed free air. Small town, so she and Doc crossed paths once in a while. This would be the first time they met in a professional capacity since then.

He parked with Boston's unit between him and the house. Took his time walking over.

Caught Boston's eye and gave a short nod. Nothing lost by easing into a situation almost sure to become more volatile.

Marian Widmer recognized him before he spoke. "*You!*" Doc stood next to Boston while waiting for her to say something he could respond to. "I thought this one called for help to get these...these..."

"Don't say it, Mrs. Widmer." Marian's presence killed Doc's buzz faster than a hurricane can blow out a candle. "I might be tempted to give Officer Boston a free one." Ignored Boston's amazed expression.

Marian stared, mouth open. "This is harassment. You've been told to stay away from me and I intend to report this."

Doc made a point of turning away from her. "What's the situation here, Officer Boston?"

Boston looked more than happy to hand this one off. "Received a call from Mrs. Uh..."

"Widmer. This is Marian Widmer," Doc said as if it told Boston all he needed to know.

"Mrs. Widmer here is upset these folks at the grill are making too much noise. She says her son is upstairs sick—"

"My son *is* upstairs sick. I suppose I'll have to prove that, too."

"I'll take your word for it," Doc said. "I'll bet he's sick a lot. I would be."

Marian glared. Boston went on before she could engage. "She says she has a video of the kids creating a disturbance."

Doc looked toward the family at the grill. Both parents had their attention on the two cops and the crazy lady and had positioned themselves between the girls and the house. Doc made a minute calming gesture and turned toward Marian to find her iPhone pointed at him. "I saw what you did and I got it on video."

"Saw what?"

"What you did there. Waving. Taking their side."

"Is what they're doing now about the level of disturbance that led you to call the police?"

Marian still making her home movie. "It was worse. They settled down as soon as this officer arrived."

"Did you record any of that?"

"As much as I could without getting too close."

"Can I see it? The video?"

"So I stop filming you? Not a chance."

Doc pulled out his phone. "It's not an iPhone but it takes video. You can keep recording while I look at the level of mayhem you were subjected to by what looks like a three-year-old and a five-year-old." Offered his phone to Marian.

"You're not getting my phone. I know how that chain of custody thing works." *Through first-hand experience*, Doc thought. "I'll never get it back."

Doc replaced his phone. "Don't worry, Mrs. Widmer. I'd never deny anything that went on between us." Turned to Boston. "She show you?"

"She was about to when you rolled up."

Doc faced Marian again. "Did you ask these folks to quiet down before you called us?"

The phone might have wavered for a second. "I didn't want to get too close."

"Why not?"

"I, uh, I didn't feel, uh..."

"Safe?"

"I am alone here."

"With your sick kid."

"Yes."

"And God knows what might happen if these people and their two small children turned on you with their grilling utensils and did...what? You don't think they're cannibals, do you?"

"You bastard! I'll have you fired for this!"

Doc had never seen Marian Widmer so overwrought. A vein showed blue in her forehead and her throat receded behind the tendons in her neck. Maybe the years of submerging her conscience were catching up with her. More likely she'd come to realize she had potential to be social media's crazy racist white bitch of the week.

"You already tried to have me fired." Doc spread his arms and looked down along his body. "I'm still here."

"You don't have your uncle the chief to protect you anymore."

"He's not really my uncle, but I see your point. Here's the thing: Do your best. I wouldn't want any job you could take from me." Turned away before she could pick up the comment. "Officer Boston, you already have it started, so if you'll please take the rest of Mrs. Widmer's statement I'll tell those folks I'm sorry if we disturbed their picnic. I will let them know there's a sick child in the house."

Brought his attention back to Marian. "I'll also let them know this is a public park and they don't need to put up with harassment from anyone. They won't have to, though. Will they?"

Marian called Doc a filthy name as she turned back into the house and slammed the door. Boston wore as confused an expression as Doc had ever seen. "You still want me to get her statement?"

"Let it go. She might've decided those kids weren't as noisy as she thought."

2:34 p.m.

Shimp and Sisler caught Randall Szul on his way out. “Can this wait? I’m running late for work.”

Notebook already in Shimp’s hand. “Where do you work, Mr. Szul?”

“Brackenridge Fabricating Works across the river.” Looked at his watch. “I’m on three-to-eleven this week and I really gotta go. There’ll be traffic on the bridge.”

“We’ll just be a minute.” Shimp pointed to a Camaro with its better days in the rear-view. “Is this your car?”

“It’s paid for,” Szul said as if it were not a foregone conclusion.

“We don’t care about that.” Shimp smiled to herself for using a variation of the line Dougherty lived for. “Where were you on the night of July 18th?”

“What day was it?” Szul showed more interest in Sisler checking out his car than in Shimp’s question.

“Last Thursday.”

Szul gave it thought. Or at least pretended to. “Thursdays I like to go out after work. Get a few beers and some wings at the Inn.”

“What time were you there?”

“I’m not saying I was there—when? Thursday? I’m just saying what I like to do most Thursdays.”

Sisler leaned in to look through a window. “You mind if I take a look inside?”

Szul said, “What for?” and Shimp didn’t like the way he said it.

“I’m curious to see if the primer and Bondo look you’re going for on the outside works as well on the interior.”

Szul’s toe took an edge. “Don’t you need a warrant to look inside?”

Sisler still peering through the window. “Not if you say it’s all right. No big deal. I can always come back.” Looked over the roof of the car to Szul. “With a warrant. Your call.”

“I guess it’s okay.” Szul showed the enthusiasm of a high school kid who had to cut the grass when his friends just scored some.

Sisler tried the driver’s door. Stood and made a key-turning motion. Opened his hands to receive a throw. Szul tossed the keys and Sisler unlocked the door while Shimp kept Szul occupied. “You’re sure you don’t remember what you did last Thursday?”

“What did you do that night?”

Shimp pondered no more than a second. “I did laundry while I watched the ballgame. Pirates lost to San Diego. Five to three, I think. It was the night they used four pitchers to get out of the fifth inning.” Szul volunteered no information. “So, what did you do Thursday the 18th?”

“What difference does it make?”

“Probably none.”

“Then why do I have to tell you?”

“You don’t.” Shimp looked over to where Sisler rummaged through the Camaro’s back seat. “It would look better if we didn’t think you stonewalled us and made up a story in the meantime. If it does become important later.”

“That look any worse than me changing my story?”

“It’s hard to say.” Szul’s expression called bullshit. “If we come back, we’ll know a lot more than we do now. We also understand people make honest mistakes like thinking they were someplace on Thursday when it was really Friday. Let’s make it easier for you: Were you out late that night?”

“How late?”

“Midnight? One o’clock?”

Szul took his time. Snapped his fingers. “Come to think of it, yeah. I worked three-to-eleven then, too. Me and a few guys stopped at Crowe’s after work and drank a six-pack in the parking lot after they closed. You can check my timecard. I’ll give my buddies’ names, you want them.”

On the way back to their cars Sisler told her the Camaro had a lot of junk under the seats. None of it a woman’s flip-flop or anything like it.

3:49 p.m.

Sean Sisler a little surprised to answer a domestic call, not yet four in the afternoon. Fist-fight alleged to have moved from the house to the driveway and into the yard before returning home. No signs of an altercation as Sisler pulled up. No obvious signs of any activity. Domestic calls often blew over as fast as they blew up. Sisler still would have felt better if things weren't so peaceful.

Knocked and announced himself three times before the door opened. Male, late teens or early twenties, red-faced as if from recent exertion. "What it is." Not a question. A declaration of cool.

"Officer Sisler, Penns River Police. We have reports of a disturbance here." Sisler had learned implying more than one person raised the alarm often stifled argument and any urge to retaliate.

"Yeah, well, me and my brother got a little overenthusiastic. No harm done. You can go now." Started to close the door.

Sisler stuck a foot in the gap. "It's not that easy. We have reports of a violent disturbance. Not just hollering. Punches thrown and blows landed. I have to verify everyone is all right."

"It was my brother and me. He's fine."

"No offense, but you telling me isn't good enough. I need to see."

The man looked down at Sisler's foot. Turned his head back into the house. "Dickie! Get your ass out here so this cop can see you ain't dead."

Sisler drew his notebook. "While Dickie's bringing proof of life, what's your name?"

"What do you need my name for?"

"I answer a call, I have to file a report. Nothing to do with you legally, but I have to account for who I talked to, what I saw, what I did. So what's your name?"

"If it's nothing to do with me legally, why do I have to tell you?"

It took a lot to anger Sisler. This kid didn't even register yet. "It's not like I won't find out. You can tell me now—in which case I'll be inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt once I see what's what—or you can break my balls, in which case I won't. Either way, it ends up with me knowing."

"His name's Tyler." Dickie about sixteen with a mouse under his left eye, split lip, and a bruise emerging along his jaw.

Tyler backhanded him across the face. "Shut up, you little faggot."

Sisler replaced his notebook. "Do you *want* me to arrest you?"

"For what?"

"Battery comes to mind. Here's the deal: Observers saying they saw punches thrown is one thing. A cop sees you punch someone and you're going to jail ninety-nine percent of the time. I'm willing to let you be part of the one percent for once in your life, but you'd better start cooperating before I change my mind." Turned to Dickie. "You all right?"

"I'm fine. You know. Brothers an' 'at."

"Anyone else here?"

"Just us." Tyler the alpha again. "Mom and Dad's at work."

“I still need to look around to be sure.”

“Man, I told you it’s just us.”

Sisler wondered if people realized he had no desire to go through their shitty houses. They placed him in situations where he couldn’t afford to have to explain why he answered the call and somehow ignored six mutilated corpses hanging over the basement floor drain so they could finish bleeding out.

No dead bodies here, just a heavy scent of marijuana in the basement. He left Tyler and Dickie with a warning to consider what time Mom and Dad got home when deciding how to air out the basement.

About to get into his car when he noticed the pickup truck across the street. He grew up in Saxonburg and had a more than passing knowledge of farm equipment. Spent time as a Marine sniper so he knew the hell out of weapons. Didn’t know for a fact what was in the pickup’s bed, but it sure looked like what someone might call an excavator bucket.

He stood next to his open driver side door, tapping his hand against his holster as he called in the pickup’s plate. It belonged to Charles Aftanas, who through the most bizarre coincidence lived at the very address where Hrivnak Construction last saw their excavator bucket and plate tamper.

This door opened on the first knock. Tall, reedy fellow wearing an open shirt over a wife beater, more hair on his chest than his head. “Officer Sisler, Penns River Police. Are you Charles Aftanas?”

“Chuck’s in the kitchen eating a sandwich. Can I help you?”

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Alex Potts. What’s this about?”

“Please call Mr. Aftanas to the door.”

Potts went into the kitchen. Sisler listened to Mark Madden’s sports talk show “discuss” why the Pirates weren’t getting any better. Cheap ownership the consensus, big surprise. Chuck Aftanas came to the door looking as if he hadn’t slept for a while. The aura he conveyed implied it would be a while longer. Past the point where a dentist could help him unless there was a new procedure called “Starting Over” Sisler didn’t know about. “Yeah? I’m eating a sandwich,” Aftanas said.

“Is that your truck?” Sisler pointed to the Silverado at the curb.

“Yeah.”

“What’s that in the bed?”

“Where?”

Sisler stared. The bucket rested as inconspicuous as feathers on a turtle. “In the back? That big more-or-less yellow thing?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Took Sisler a few seconds to realize the answer was complete. “Where’d you get it?”

“Found it.”

“Where’d you find it?”

This answer required thought. “In my yard.”

“In your yard.”

“Yeah. Out by the street. It was laying there like a fucking eyesore.”

“So you loaded it up and brought it here.”

Potts jumped in. “Whoa whoa whoa. He stopped by for a sandwich. I don’t know nothing about that thing in his truck.”

Sisler gave a brief nod. "So noted. Mr. Aftanas, were there any other random pieces of heavy equipment lying around near this one?"

Aftanas racked his memory. "Maybe a couple."

"Did you take any of them?"

"No. Well, one maybe."

"Could it have been a plate tamper by any chance?"

"What's a plate tamper?"

"Looks a little like a jackhammer but with a flat plate on the business end instead of a chisel."

Aftanas brightened. "Oh, yeah. I took that to my old boss. He used to work construction and I figured he might know who it belonged to."

"So you assumed whoever left half a dozen large pieces of construction equipment along Silvermoon Drive...what? Forgot where he put them? They fell off his truck and he didn't notice?"

"Who said they were on Silvermoon Drive?"

"You did."

"Bullshit. Alex, when did I say I found these on Silvermoon Drive?"

Sisler held up a hand before Potts could answer. "You live on Silvermoon, right?"

"Yeah. So?"

"And you told me you picked this up because it was in your yard by the street, right? Remember? It was a fucking eyesore?"

"Yeah. So? Oh."

"Yeah. Oh. What's your boss's name?"

"What's my boss have to do with this?"

"You said you took the tamper to him in case he'd know who it belonged to."

"Oh. Yeah." Memory banks scanned again. "His name's Nutting. Bob Nutting."

Sisler needed all his experience and training to suppress a smile. "You used to work for the Pirates?"

"See, Alex? This cop's putting words in my mouth. I never said dick about the Pirates. Where'd you get that idea?"

"Bob Nutting owns the Pirates. His name's been all over talk radio because of all the money he's not spending on the team." Sisler pointed into Potts's kitchen. "Like on the show you've been listening to while you ate your sandwich."

Aftanas looked over his shoulder. His face sagged, then recovered. "Not *that* Bob Nutting. This is a different Bob Nutting."

Sisler pulled out his cell. "What's this other Bob Nutting's number?"

"I don't remember. I forgot my phone at home in case you want me to check."

"Where's he live?"

"Uhhh..."

Potts found an urgent need to participate. "Way the hell across town. Nowhere near here. I don't know nothing about no tampon or whatever else it is you're looking for. Chuck stopped by here for a sandwich. That's all."

Sisler homed in on Aftanas. "Where's he live? Nutting Number Two."

"I'm not sure."

"You were there yesterday. With the tamper, remember?"

"Oh. Yeah. Well, it's not like I know the address. I just, like, know where it is. You

know, to see it.”

Sisler basked in the atmosphere of Aftanas’s cluelessness. “Here’s what happens next. We’re going back to your house to get that bucket to its rightful owner so maybe they can get some work done on your street. Then we’re going to Mr. Nutting’s house to see about the tamper.”

“I don’t think he’s home. That’s...uh...why I didn’t go there today and come here instead.”

“He only come here for a sandwich so we could talk about what to do with it,” Potts broke in. “You know, who else might know besides his boss. Old boss, I mean. That Hutting guy.”

“It’s okay,” Sisler said. “Once I see the address I can always call the owner—”

“He rents,” Aftanas said.

“—so I can find out whose name is on the lease. If it’s not Bob Nutting, then you and me are going to have a talk in private with a detective. We on the same page now?”

Aftanas went into a sulk. “Can I at least finish my sandwich?”

“No. Let’s go.” Aftanas shuffled toward his truck. Sisler shifted his attention to Potts. “Make sure nothing leaves your property. It’s only a matter of time before your pal Chuckie gives you up, whether he means to or not. Things will go easier if you can make restitution on the tamper if it’s not gone already.” Potts pretended to look indignant, went back inside.

Sisler called the station from his car. Updated his status and asked for a detective to begin work on two search warrants. He’d fill in the blanks when he got back to the house with his prisoner.

3:52 p.m.

No one home at the Milliron residence. Shimp and Burrows called it a day.

4:03 p.m.

Doc ready to pack it in himself when Dino Susini made an appearance. Susini heard from some guy over the Vets about Patty owing someone serious money and they'd been looking for her. Under more extensive scrutiny, Dino couldn't name who she owed the money to, how much, or why. Or who told him about it with more clarity than "some guy over the Vets."

Doc took his contact information. Gave Susini a card. Said to give him a call if he thought of anything else. No need to come all the way to the station. Really.

10:42 p.m.

Doc sat at the counter of Crowe's Diner on Leechburg Road. Phyllis Greer came over with the usual greeting. "Jeet yet?" Doc nodded. "The usual?" Another nod.

She settled the check for a departing customer and brought back a slice of two-layer chocolate cake with chocolate icing and a glass of white milk. "Two percent to protect your girlish figure."

Doc bowed his head in gratitude. He and Phyllis had run this routine for going on ten years, ever since he came back to Penns River. He'd stop by once a week or so. She'd ask if he'd eaten. If not, she brought a menu. If he had, she cut to the chase and brought the cake. Either way, cake was non-negotiable.

Crowe's stayed open until one on weeknights. Business often picked up after eleven when it became the only game in town and second shift let out at the fabricating plant across the river. The late traffic hadn't arrived, so Phyllis had time to bullshit. "This is wee hours for you. Working a case?"

Doc swallowed a mouthful of cake. Washed it down. "Yeah, but that's not why I'm here late."

"Sugar high's not going to help if you can't sleep."

"Getting to sleep will not be a problem."

Phyllis took drink orders from two newcomers down the way. Came back to ask, "You all right?" Fiddled with the diamond solitaire on her finger. Beautiful stone. Her mother's. Or grandmother's. Some kind of heirloom. "You seem...weird."

"Been a weird night." More cake. "How long we know each other?"

"Has to be twenty years or more. You was still in high school when I worked with your mum."

Doc forked in a good-sized mouthful. Took his time chewing while he decided what to say. "You still thinking of buying this place?"

"Working on it."

"Joe and Sal make any money here?"

"They're not getting rich, but they do okay. Not as young as they used to be, though. They're about ready to cash in and move someplace warm."

"How's your financing?"

"We're still short on the down payment. I'm working extra here and part-time over at Aldi; see what I can come up with. The bank'll take us now, but we'll need a second mortgage. That means loan insurance, and we ain't gonna make enough money to cover two mortgages, insurance, and live besides."

Doc almost asked how short she was, cash in the bank looking for a useful purpose. Surest way to lose a friend was to go into business with them. "Good luck. I know you'll do right by the place."

"Thanks." Phyllis wiped an already clean section of counter. "It's none of my business and I won't take it personal if you tell me to go pound salt, but are you sure you're all right? Something's off about you."

Phyllis Greer not on the list of people Doc would seek out to bare his soul. Night he'd had, a beer or six might be more in order. Yet here he was, asking for cake. Must be some

deep psychological significance. Motioned for Phyllis to lean in. “This goes no farther than here.” Held his hands to designate the space between them. She nodded and Doc felt better. She hadn’t done some bullshit school kid thing like crossing her heart or locking her lips or offering to pinkie swear. “I stopped for beers after work. The usual cop thing, but this time there was someone else there.”

“You only drink with other cops?”

Doc made a dismissive gesture. “No, but civilians limit our options for conversation. We can’t discuss open cases and they always want to hear entertaining stories while we’re there to blow off steam. Anyways, this young woman’s a friend of one of our female cops. They got their signals crossed about going out and she ended up tagging along with us.” More cake. More milk. “So the group breaks up around seven and they get crossed up again and Burrows—the cop—leaves without this girl. There’s the two of us standing there in the parking lot so I give her a ride home.”

“Your cop friend a woman, too?”

“I said she was.”

“You call all the women you know by their last name?”

Doc showed more disgust than he felt. “Just the cops.”

“Making sure is all. Go ahead.”

“So I take this girl home and she invites me in for a beer and to watch a couple innings of the Pirate game.”

“You go in?”

Doc shrugged. “She’s smart and funny and lives in those apartments down Ridge Avenue ten minutes from my house, so I figured what the hell.”

“Nice-looking, too, I’ll bet.”

Doc didn’t answer right away. “Let’s say she’s not someone who’d make you avert your eyes.”

“And I’ll bet you’re finally now on your way home. Aren’t you?” Doc gave her a look. Thought about not telling her the rest of this story he hadn’t planned to tell her in the first place. “Come on, Dougherty. Your dirty little secret about how you deflowered this maiden is safe with me.”

Doc dropped his head and laughed. “What gave it away?”

“For being a cop and having a take-charge personality, you have to be the most bashful grown-ass man I ever met. I knew you got laid when you said this girl’s friend left without her.”

“They set me up?”

“You understand this is why you’re single, right? You pick up on signals like they were sticks of dynamite. What’s the story? Bad break-up? Needs to get back on the horse again? No offense.”

“Might not be that complicated.”

“Not saying any of what I brought up is all *that* complicated, but how do you mean?”

“I think she might be a badge bunny.”

“What the hell’s a badge bunny? Oh. You mean a cop fucker.”

“I thought women were supposed to be delicate.”

“Delicacy is lost on you. What’s her name?”

“Stacey.”

“Did Stacey say anything to make you think she only cared about what’s under your

badge?"

"Not in so many words. It doesn't work that way."

"Now *you're* going to tell *me* how *it* works?"

"You know what I mean. They don't come right out and say they want to sleep with you because you're a cop."

"What *do* they say?"

An uncomfortable silence. "I never paid much attention."

"So even if Stacey is a badge bunny, she wouldn't be the first water you drew from that well."

"Well...no. I may be clueless but I'm not stupid."

"The jury's still out. Did you bother to pay attention to anything Stacey told you?"

"Well, yeah."

"What did she tell you?"

"She said she broke up with a real shitheel who was great in bed."

"And..."

"She doesn't miss the guy, but she misses the sex."

"And..."

"Jesus Christ, Phyl. You ever think of being a cop?"

"I'm a mother. Where do you think cops learned to question suspects? Let me guess. She knows her next relationship will be transitional while she gets the shitheel out of her system. She figures she might as well have her fun but she doesn't want to sleep around because that would be slutty."

"Sort of."

"How close am I?"

"Eighty percent." Phyllis glared. "Okay. Ninety."

"So, what? You figured out you're a placeholder. Keeping the seat warm. So to speak."

"So to speak."

"And your widdle feewings are hurt? Is that what drove you to late-night cake? Or is it because you got picked up and you think it's your male right to be the picker and not the pickee?"

"Do women do that a lot? Set guys up?"

"You make it sound like she ripped you off. She didn't steal your virginity, did she?"

"This month's."

Phyllis slapped him with the damp cloth. Cocked her wrist to do it again but held back. "Was this a one-time thing?"

"Don't know."

"Are you supposed to call her?"

"I kind of have to, don't I? Unless I want to be a real jerk."

"Do you want to?"

"I don't not want to. I just...I don't know what to make of this."

Phyllis took notice of two men walking in. Glanced at her watch. "How old's this girl?"

"I dunno. Twenty-five. Twenty-six."

"How old are you?"

"Forty...one."

“Are you afraid she’s too young for you? Or you’re too old for her?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Think about it.” Doc’s eyes cocked to the side. “Not now. Second shift’s coming in. I got work to do. Be prepared to discuss next time you’re here.”

Doc finished his cake while Phyllis got the rush situated. Took his ticket to the register. “Thanks, Phyl.”

“You have the answer already?”

“No, but ten minutes ago I didn’t know the question.”

Phyllis winked, handed him his change. He smiled and slid it back across the counter. She spoke as he turned to leave. “Answer me something. All the times you come in here just for cake and you never once asked where we get it. Everyone else does. Why not you?”

“I discovered the cake here. Never had a chance to try it if not for Crowe’s. Wouldn’t be right to go direct and cut you out of the deal.”

Phyllis gestured for Doc to lean in. Gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

“Whatever happens with this Stacey girl, be happy, Dougherty. You’re a piece of work.”

**FRIDAY
JULY 26**

12:37 a.m.

Burrows caught the call. Doc's turn on the wheel. He walked into Crowe's blinking sleep from his eyes. "Seems like I just left. What's the deal?"

"At approximately 11:50 a man wearing a stocking over his head and carrying a handgun walked in and told Phyllis Greer, over there"—pointed with her pen to Phyllis, who wore an expression equal parts fear and disgust—"he wanted everything in the safe and register."

"Jesus. He missed me by half an hour. He knew there was a safe?"

"She said the register *and* the safe. She resisted verbally until he cocked the weapon, at which time she gave him the money in the drawer and the safe."

"How much did he get?"

"She says she can't be sure until they go through all the receipts. Maybe as much as three thousand dollars."

"Three grand? I can't believe they'd do three grand in cash here all day."

"A tour bus stopped on its way out of the casino because—well, because the food's way better here than at the casino. And bus drivers eat free. The swing shift at the fabricating plant let out at eleven. The guy's timing was perfect."

"Still. Three grand? In cash? Here?" Doc gestured to take in the limited expanse of Crowe's.

"Apparently one of the owners"—Burrows flipped through her notes—"Joseph Crowe, took ill and didn't make the bank run. There seems to be some confusion about if it got made yesterday, either."

"Anyone hurt? Shots fired?"

"No one was touched as far as I know. Lester's still taking statements. One thing struck me funny, though."

Burrows still a puppy but Doc liked her instincts. "What?"

"Place had a dozen customers when it went down, but the robber only asked for what was in the cash drawer and safe. Didn't ask the customers for wallets or watches or anything."

Doc loved working with young officers. Considered taking a part-time job teaching at a local college so he could be around that level of enthusiasm. "Good point, but there could be reasons for it. The gun makes it armed robbery, but if he takes from everyone it's a separate charge for each." Looked to the front door and walked his eyes to the counter. "It's also possible he has a hard-on for this place, though who'd have it in for Joe and Sal—or Phyllis, for that matter—I can't imagine." His eyes lingered on the dessert case and two slices of chocolate cake. "He might also have been more interested in how fast he could get in and out than he was in grabbing every possible dollar. The longer he's here, the more likely something will go wrong. Good observation, though. Him not robbing anyone else. Emphasize it in your report so it doesn't get overlooked." Nodded toward Phyllis. "Go help Lester. I'll talk to her."

Phyllis sat on a counter stool and stared at a fixed spot on the floor. Alternated drying her hands and wiping sweat from her brow with a counter towel. Doc startled her when he spoke. "You okay, Phyl?"

“Jesus Christ, Doc. I never had nothing like that happen to me before. I always thought them stocking masks was stupid when I seen them in the movies, but look up and there’s a guy with a gun standing right there? I about shit.”

“I can imagine. What can you tell me about this guy? White? Black?”

“Hard to tell under that mask. You know, how it flattens out their nose and lips.”

“Did you see his hands?”

Phyllis glanced toward the register. “He had gloves on.”

“What kind of gloves?”

Phyllis looked at Doc as if he was jaggging her and she didn’t appreciate it. “What do you mean, ‘What kind of gloves?’ On his hands.”

Doc bit back the urge to smile. “Were they work gloves? Rubber gloves? Winter gloves? Latex gloves like doctors wear? Batting gloves? Golf gloves?”

“Like the trainers wears at ball games.”

Doc made a note. “What kind of shirt?”

“A golf shirt like you got on now. What do they call them? Polos?”

“So you saw his arms.”

“Sure I saw them. What’re you getting at?”

“What color were his arms?”

Phyllis covered her eyes with a hand. “Jesus, Doc. I’m sorry. White guy.”

“Any tattoos.”

Thought. “Yeah. On his...left arm. Some kind of bird.”

“An eagle?”

“Coulda been. I’ll tell you the truth, it was the gun had my attention.”

“I’ll bet. How big was he?”

“Your size. A little smaller maybe.”

“Think about his arms again. Were they muscular? Skinny? Fat?”

She tried for a few seconds. “Jesus, Doc. I gotta tell ya. We was busy when he come in so I didn’t pay him no mind until he stepped up with the mask and put that gun in my face. Alls I seen after was the gun and the big hole at the end.”

Fair enough. Doc was a war veteran and experienced police officer. He’d had guns pointed at him looked like they could shoot basketballs from where he’d stood. He’d talk to her again. A little time and distance often improved memory. “Officer Burrows says the safe had about three grand in it.” Phyllis resumed staring at her spot on the floor and wiping her hand. “Isn’t that quite a bit for a place like this?”

“Joe took sick yesterday and didn’t go to the bank. I was supposed to go today and things got busy when the bus from the casino come in...I forgot.”

“What time did the bus get here?”

“Nine o’clock, quarter after. They left twenty minutes or so before you come in.”

“Kind of an early night for the casino, wasn’t it?”

“It was one of them senior tour buses. I’d a been the youngest person on it by ten years. They don’t stay out late. Half the time they’re here by six.”

Doc put a hand on her shoulder. “Anything else you can think of? Maybe one of the uniforms will get something to go with it and we’ll get a lead.”

“What are Joe and Sal gonna think? Christ, they trusted me with this place while they’re away. I promised Joe I’d go to the bank. What am I gonna tell them?”

“You didn’t call them yet?”

“Uh-uh.” A rueful wag of the head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I’ll do it. You have their phone and address handy?” She did. “They have insurance, right?”

“Yeah. I know because we went over it when we was discussing my offer to buy the place, which I guess is in the shitter now.”

“Don’t be too quick to give up. You know if they’ve ever been robbed before?”

“The old place downtown a couple times. That’s why they moved out here.”

“Then they know what it’s like. How long you worked for Joe and Sal?”

“Fifteen years, anyway.”

“Then you know they’re not the kind of people to hold it against an employee for not risking her life to protect someone else’s insured money.” Doc looked around the restaurant. “We’ll be a while here. Want me to lock up for you?”

“I better stay. I already fell down on the job once tonight.”

Doc took her by both arms until she made eye contact. “Did anyone get hurt? Anyone in the hospital or dead?”

“No.”

“Any damage that prevents business as usual tomorrow?”

“No.”

Doc gave her a few seconds to think about it. “It’s money, Phyllis. I won’t say ‘just money’ because it is important, but it’s also not death. I’ve had to wake people up in the middle of the night to tell them their kid or husband or wife is never coming home. Worst part of the job, and I’ve been shot at. I’m not looking forward to telling Joe and Sal, but I know the first thing they’re going to ask will be, ‘Is everyone all right?’ I imagine it’ll be a relief when I tell them you kept the situation under control.”

Phyllis didn’t look as sure. Doc stood. Shook each knee to get out the stiffness from squatting. “Come down to the station in the morning so I can get a formal statement. Things’ll look clearer after a good night’s sleep and some coffee.”

“Jesus, Doc. I don’t see no way I’ll sleep tonight. Not after this.”

Doc smiled. “Wait till the adrenaline wears off. You’ll sleep like you climbed a mountain. And look at the bright side.”

“There’s a bright side?”

Doc pointed to her hand. “He didn’t get your ring.”

Phyllis seemed startled to notice it. “Yeah. Good thing I was washing glasses when he come in, huh? Had rubber gloves on. My lucky day.”

10:11 a.m.

Doc elbow-deep in paperwork from the robbery at Crowe's when his brother called. Said he might have a situation on his hands.

Doc set the paperwork aside. Drew was not an alarmist. Thoughts of their parents leapt to mind. "What's wrong?"

"Guy on my route, gotta be eighty-five if he's a day. Name's Ed Vesolicky. Always picks up his mail, says hello more often than not, tells me when he's going away. His last two deliveries are still in the box and newspapers are on the porch. I'm worried about him."

"You sure he didn't go somewhere and forget to say anything?"

"Not for certain. It would be way out of character, though."

"You try the knob? Stick your head in and give a holler?"

"It's locked."

"Spell the last name." Drew did. "He on Hastings Avenue?" He was. "Hold on." Doc called the house number.

"I hear it ringing," Drew said.

"Hear any movement?"

"No."

The obvious thing to do was send a unit, which might end up kicking in the door only to find the man visiting his children. Or cleaning the garage and wondering why the hell the cops ruined his thousand-dollar door. Doc considered who the best lockpicker was in the department and told Drew to sit tight. He'd be there in ten minutes.

Drew Dougherty bore more than a passing resemblance to a taller, more athletic Mitt Romney. Best-dressed letter carrier in Penns River with his pressed shirt tucked into his pressed shorts. "I tried the bell and knocked while you were on the way over. No answer."

Doc used the time-honored police knock. Waited. Knocked again. Waited. Took the picks from the pouch in his pocket. Learned to open locks as an MP and developed the skill until he could win two contests out of three. Picking locks a valuable skill for a cop, and not for the reasons the ACLU would assume. Today was a prime example. Turned to Drew and said, "If I get shot at, you owe me lunch. Dinner if he hits me."

A little out of practice, so it took him over a minute to pick the knob lock only to find the deadbolt had been thrown. Another minute only to discover the chain was set. Doc's pulse quickened. Turned to Drew, said, "What the hell. Chains are cheap," and kicked in the door.

The kitchen was clean, not immaculate. Towel hung over the handle of the oven. Coffee cup, saucer, small plate in the rack. All dry.

Standard Penns River retiree living room. Recliner faced the television. Antimacassars on the backs of the wing chairs and what Ed Vesolicky might call a davenport. The TV was dark. The windows closed and the room air conditioner off, giving the room a stuffy, humid feel an old man might think was comfortable. The dining room table had junk mail and a three-day-old newspaper. Car in the attached garage where everything had a place either on the floor, in a cabinet, or hanging from pegboards. The entire main floor had the

aura of abandonment.

But not of being abandoned.

“How old’s this guy again?” Doc said.

“My guess is older than Dad. Eighties, anyway.”

“How well’s he get around?”

“Okay from when he comes to the door. Not like I seen him rock climbing lately.”

They found him in the bathroom upstairs, next to the tub. Pants around his ankles, excrement and urine on him and the floor. Doc dialed the direct emergency number to order the ambulance as he took a knee to check the old man’s vitals. “He’s breathing. Pulse is ragged and weak but it seems regular. Grab a blanket or bedspread so we can put it over him.”

Drew out the door before Doc finished. Came back with a flowered comforter. “Anything we should do for him?”

“Keep him warm. The ambo’s on the way and he’s breathing and has a pulse so it’s better we hold off on CPR until the experts get here. I wonder how long he’s been lying on this floor.”

Seven minutes later, Tony Lutz and an EMT Doc didn’t know dragged a stretcher up the stairs. Tony got right to it, talked while he worked. “How long’s he been here?”

“All I know is he hasn’t picked up his mail or paper the last two days,” Drew said.

“What happened?”

“No idea,” Doc said. “This is how we found him. Except for the blanket. We did that. Unless it was the wrong thing to do. Then Drew did it and I tried to stop him.”

Tony quiet for a minute while he and his partner took vitals and got Ed Vesolicky situated. “His heart’s beating and he’s breathing. Blood pressure’s low but not dangerous. Could be a stroke, could be a heart attack. He might’ve tripped pulling his pants up. Could just be a GTO.”

“What’s GTO?” Drew said.

“Grand-dad tipped over.”

“You think he hit his head?” Doc said.

“I don’t see any bruises or bleeding but that doesn’t mean much. We’ll get him over to Allegheny Valley and they can take a look. You notify the family?”

“We’ve been kind of busy. I’ll take care of it and lock up once you get him on his way.”

Toughest part of the whole operation was getting Vesolicky and the stretcher around the bend at the base of the stairs and out the door. Doc waited until the ambulance rolled before asking Drew to help him find an address book.

“He just had a birthday,” Drew said. “Maybe he kept the cards and envelopes.” Doc stared at him. “I should know. I delivered them.” More staring. “He’s a member of AARP and the VFW and graduated from IUP. Gets two or three Netflix movies a week and subscribes to *Popular Mechanics* and *Time*.”

“You remember all this off the top of your head?”

“I delivered this guy’s mail probably two thousand times. Stays with you after a while.”

“Eye for detail and memory like that, you should’ve been a cop.”

Drew shook his head. “People *like* seeing the mailman walk up to their house.”

10:49 a.m.

Teresa Shimp spent twenty minutes on Friday morning chatting with Denise Walker, who saw Patty Polcyn with a guy named Dylan Donovan at Dairy Queen around closing time the night Patty died. When Teresa noted DQ seemed an odd place for Patty to be, given what the police already knew, Denise allowed as how it could have been the night before. And Dylan might have been there with his kids and just talking to Patty. If it even was Dylan, now that Denise thought about it. Could have been someone else's kids. Patty loved kids. Always found time to talk to them.

11:00 a.m.

Reynard Mendenhall liked to chill with each of his crews once a day or so. Believed he got more work out of them with honey than with vinegar, though he'd never tell them. Tried to confine ass-kickings to rivals as much as possible, though everyone knew one could appear in a heartbeat for slackers. Thieving brought a more serious beatdown. No one wondered what snitches could expect.

Passing out ice-cold Pepsis to his boys stationed on the corner of the parking lot farthest away from the library when two police cars pulled in at speed. Sirens, lights, squealing tires. Cops jumping out hollering the usual "NobodymovekeepyourhandswhereIcanseethem."

The standard script. Reynard and his boys up against the wall in the classic position. Cops patting them down, asking if there was anything in anyone's pockets might stick them. Reynard smiled to himself. He wasn't in the passing-out-free-needles business. He sold drugs, not accessories.

One cop—light-skinned brother, looked new to the job—found the roll of bills in Mike-Mike's jeans. "Where'd you get this?"

"Ain't mine."

"It's in your pants."

"Someone musta put it there when I ain't wearing them."

"You let a lot of people wear your pants?"

"Hey, yo, what happens to 'em when I ain't in 'em none of my business."

The other cop—young white bitch, didn't look too sure of herself—patted down Two-Bit. "I'd ax you to come up a little higher there, shorty, but you ain't my type with those little bitty titties." Might could've made her blush some.

The brother stepped in and took his nightstick to the back of Bit's thigh so hard Bit groaned, and he was no pussy. Cop said, "I got this one," and ran his hand up the inside of Bit's leg and into his balls so hard the whole crew winced. "He's clean."

Reynard still making up his mind should he say something when the third car pulled up. Unmarked but no doubt another cop. Older guy got out—white, of course—wearing a white shirt and shit on his shoulders and collars said he was a boss. He watched his crew search Reynard's. Didn't say a word. The brother took him over Mike-Mike's roll. Boss man thumbed through it while they talked. Then the shot-caller nodded, and the two worker cops spread out to either side of Reynard's boys.

"I'm Chief Sullivan. I'm new, so I thought I should introduce myself to some of our more regular customers. If any of you come across me at any time—in the street, at the movies, Giant Eagle, anywhere—you will address me as Mr. Sullivan. Always." Gave time for it to sink in. "Have any of you seen *The Wire*?" Least that's what Reynard thought he said. Come out *why-uh* like the guy was English or a faggot or some shit. "No? No one? That's a shame. It should be part," *paht*, "of Drug Dealer 101, like an orientation course."

The new chief paused again like he thought it meant something. "Anyway, there's a concept on the show called indicting a corner. If we indict a corner and see you selling drugs there again, we arrest you. Period. We understand you'll probably be out the next

day. It's part of the game. But we keep the corner. It's ours." Another one of those pauses like giving them time to see the seriousness of the situation, get Reynard's boys picking up trash or helping geezers across the street or join the fucking Peace Corps and shit. "We know we can't get rid of you. We are going to move you. Move you here. Move you there. Keep moving you so it's hard for your customers to find you even on the days you're not waiting to get bailed out."

Reynard snorted and drew a stare. Cop talked like fiends didn't have dope radar, smell it in the air like dogs and shit.

"You're smart guys. You see where this leads. We're going to break your balls until you decide it's not worth the trouble. Don't even think about outlasting us. You'll decide to move on to easier pickings or bigger and better things like prison and cemeteries. Any of you ever see *The Shield*?"

The eye-fucking Reynard's crew gave this melanin-deficient motherfucker went on like them NFL penalties. Unabated.

And he *still* weren't done. Turned to the Junior Mint cop. Said, "I sense an alarming lack of cultural awareness, Officer Boston. You feel it?" Boston nodded like he might lick the master's hand, he axed for it. "You think you're gangbangers. Badasses. Gentlemen, *we* are the baddest gang in this town. There's so many of us we work in shifts. You think we can't handle a pissant operation like yours?" Spit on the sidewalk. "We have badges and guns and work in a town where the people don't really care how we keep your shit off the streets."

Took a few seconds giving back the eye-fuck. Reynard had to admit, he was pretty good at it. For a Mayflower. Asked Boston if he found any drugs. Oreo shook his head. "Who had the money?" Boston pointed to Mike-Mike. The chief took a twenty from the roll. Said, "Here you go, Bank," and tossed the rest back to Mike-Mike. "A suspicious person might wonder where all this money came from. I don't see any drugs, so I'm going to assume you hit a number or did odd jobs or something else more or less legitimate. This is the last time you'll get the benefit of the doubt. That said, I don't want you to think we're shaking you down here today."

Took a lighter from his shirt pocket. Set fire to a corner of the twenty. Held it up till it burned close to his fingers then let it float away. "Next time we'll either arrest you or the whole roll goes up. Now get the fuck out of here."

12:12 p.m.

Tom Dignan said he had information on the hit-and-run at the old Gulf station last week, the one that killed Patty Polcyn. Told Doc and Shimp it was probably one of the twenty or more guys Patty slept with over the past year. Twenty, easy. Twenty-five, maybe. When pressed, Tom admitted he wasn't one of them and didn't seem too pleased about it.

Enough. Doc threw Dignan out of the office and told Shimp no yogurt today. He was taking her out to lunch.

Every afternoon The Hot Dog Guys parked their truck at a different convenient location and sold the best hot dogs this side of wherever better hot dogs were. No one knew for sure where that was, but it had to be pretty goddamn far because no one could remember eating better dogs. Those Costco numbers were good, too, but you had to go all the way to Homestead to get one, and The Hot Dog Guys dressed theirs way better. Doc made a point to find them once a week.

Today they set up in the parking lot where Resurrection Mall used to be before it went up in the most spectacular fire in Penns River history. No place to sit there, so Doc and Shimp walked across the street to a bench outside the old Pittsburgh National Bank, now divided into a tax preparer/dress shop/drapery store/deli. They ignored the filthy looks from Hassan Hamouti in the deli, who might as well take the afternoon off with the Hot Dog Guys across the street.

Doc put his can of Coke on the sidewalk between his feet, opened the little bag of Wise potato chips, and leaned it against the bench back. Laid his two chili dogs with onion beside him in a position to support the chips and where they wouldn't feel inclined to fall when he reached for his Coke.

Shimp lacked Doc's natural aplomb with the sausage family. She put her Diet Coke between her feet as Doc had but lost the fight with her natural tendency to cross her ankles. Captured the drink before it spilled and brought it up on the bench next to her. This limited the space to locate the hot dog, so she moved the can back between her feet only to almost knock it over again a few seconds later.

Picked it up and gave the situation more thought before setting it along the side of the bench where she couldn't kick it over, but reaching it for a drink was no foregone conclusion. Started to unwrap the hot dog until she saw how the mustard and relish had smeared the inside of the wrapping. Cleaned her hand and removed the worst of the drippage, exhausting the three napkins she'd been given. Rewrapped the hot dog and walked across the street for more. Came back and began eating with the lower half still sheathed in the tissue. Looked across the street again, shifted position on the bench to hold the hot dog away from her body as she ate.

Doc volunteered two of his three napkins. "This be enough?"

Shimp tried to look pissed. Couldn't pull it off. "Thanks. These hot dogs really are as good as you said."

"You've never eaten these before? Honest to God?"

Shimp shook her head while she chewed. Swallowed before speaking. "I'm not a huge hot dog person and I don't remember ever eating anything out of a truck that I liked. This is so good I might have another."

And not eat again the rest of the week, Doc thought. “Slow down there, young’un. I don’t want to be the inciting incident in creating a dogoholic. Break my heart to see you lying in a gutter, eating one of these out of a brown paper bag.”

Shimp gave her mock-disgusted look. Tried to extend a middle finger, saw it placed the hot dog in jeopardy. Doc shook his head at her amateurish effort. “I see it. Let me finish mine and I promise to go fuck myself later.” He’d spent enough time around her to develop immunity from her anti-cursing force field.

A breeze off the river kept their attention on their meals while they ate. Conversation resumed after Shimp finished her dog, rolled her wrappers into a ball, and placed them into the paper bag, which she also rolled into a ball so it wouldn’t blow away. Doc had dealt with wind before, took his time.

Shimp sipped her Diet Coke. “Did we accomplish anything this week? With all those alleged witnesses and running around, I mean.”

Doc hated to dismiss anyone who might be trying to help. “It’s like you told Jimmy when we were there. Witnesses are iffy.” Thought of Phyllis Greer last night. This morning. Whatever. He was so tired the days ran together. “Your classic innocent bystander is not a trained observer. Even if they did see anything, they’re terrified when they find out it’s nothing like television. By then they’re too busy praying they’re not next to pay attention to what the killer looked like or what he wore or which direction he left in.”

“But they go out of their way to come in and tell us...what? I’ve never seen that before. Not in a homicide.”

Doc held up a finger while he pulled a bit of onion off his bottom lip with his upper teeth. “This is the first homicide you’ve worked in the Flats. They’re different than working one in the Estates. Eighty percent black down there and we have, what? Three black cops? Four? Federal court said we have a proper ratio for the town, but all the folks down the Estates see is white people in cars driving around like an occupying force.”

Took a sip of Coke. Wiped the sweat from the can on his 5.11 tactical pants. “I used to spend at least an hour of every patrol shift walking a beat. Learned to do tricks with my nightstick like it was a yo-yo. Said hello to everyone. After a while, most people—especially those raising families—would take me aside and point me in the right direction. Hell, I solved some crimes we weren’t even aware of.” Looked to his right, the Estates only a few blocks away. Remembered a few of those tips. “It’s not like that anymore.”

“I’ve seen you work around there. They still love you.”

“Sure. Some remember. It’s been a while, though. I used to be able to hear an undertone of, ‘Look, kids. Officer Doc’s coming.’ Now it’s ‘What’s this motherfucker want?’”

“They actually called you Officer Doc?”

“Damn right. They knew I kept an eye on their kids best I could and I’d protect them from a beatdown or worse if they gave me any information. First thing I’d do when someone had something for me was ask if I could use their name. They said no, fine, I got an anonymous tip. I’m the only cop I know used to get Christmas cards from his unnamed sources. Used to be a little store up there on Fourth Avenue, by the tracks. You know where the Sallies are now?” Shimp nodded. “Across the street. Woody Cheatham. He was my Huggy Bear.” Saw her confusion. “*Starsky and Hutch*? Never saw it? Catch a rerun on YouTube or Hulu or someplace. It’s hilarious. Two cool seventies guys in a souped-up car chasing their own asses all over town until they got to the last commercial

break. Then they'd go see Huggy Bear, who was a pimp or some gray-area player, and he'd give them names, aliases, descriptions, addresses, what kind of car, girlfriends' names and addresses, whatever they needed. That computer chick on *NCIS* has nothing on Huggy Bear.

"Anyway, I'd stick my head in to see Woody once a shift. 'Hey, how's business.' Buy a Coke or a candy bar or ask could I use the john. Once or twice a month I'd be at the counter paying for my stuff and he'd ask, nice and quiet, if I was interested in some robbery or assault or mugging or vandalism over the way there. I'd say I might be, not making a big deal out of it, and he'd tell me what someone else told him. See, people used him as a cut-out so they could say they didn't snitch. I'd use him, too, to put the word out about things. No one ever talked too obviously to The Man."

"You can't do that now?"

"Woody's not there anymore."

"There are still small businesses."

"True, but I'm not around every day anymore. People don't know me like they did. They can't. My role is different now."

Shimp took a few seconds to consider. "I guess I see what you mean, but it still doesn't explain why all these people are calling us up and coming in?"

"Ah, Grasshopper...wait. You know about *Kung Fu*, don't you? It's not another hole in your cultural awareness?"

"I know what Grasshopper means."

"Good. I don't have time to explain every worthwhile thing in life to you. Anyway, Flats people are about as different from Estates people as you can get and not because they're almost all white. Lot of them are no more than a generation or two removed from the hills or the mines themselves. They go to visit Grandma on Sunday and they're driving to Carpentertown or Bitner or over to Spangler. There used to be little mines all up and down 28 and north to Butler. Flats people are semi-hillbillies, and they don't like people screwing with them." Paused to admire Sue from the drapery store walking toward the Hot Dog Guys, the breeze pressing her yellow sundress against her in a distracting but not unwelcome manner. "We respond to more calls per capita in the Flats than in any other part of town. Domestic, drunken brawls, sober brawls, garden-variety theft, vandalism, all kinds of knucklehead stuff. People don't mind pointing fingers because they figure the guy's a jagov anyways, and we're talking misdemeanors where they'll be out no later than in the morning, and when it's all over they'll get probation or suspended."

"But Melody Rushnock protected that pot dealer even after we told her it might make it harder to find out who killed her aunt."

"She would've been putting him in for a potential felony. They'll close ranks around that. Radaker coming in on his own broke the seal. Now every redneck, pinkneck, and stiffneck in the Flats figures if the local weed dealer can walk into and out of the police station when he feels like it, they might as well too. The word's out now how no one can identify this guy, so they know an outsider killed one of their own. We catch this guy and the judge will take everyone from the Flats off the jury because he knows they'll vote to take this guy out back so they can kick his ass and hang what's left."

"Don't they know they're not helping?"

"Maybe. Probably. The thing is, they *want* to help. Don't we always ask potential wit-

nesses to tell us anything even if they don't think it's important? Maybe we have another piece where it'll fit? In their minds, that's what they're doing." Doc ducked as if to apologize for what he said next. "Of course a lot of them are full of shit. The guy we talked to just now, for instance. Mr. Public Service Radaker didn't mind throwing shade on some guy owed him money. The sad truth is we don't know what we need to know to make use of most of what they tell us even if they aren't full of shit."

The strain showed on Shimp's face. "I know, but it *has* to be there. What are we missing?"

Took Doc a few seconds to reply, his attention still at least half on Sue, now on her way back. "You're the primary. You tell me." Saw Shimp's expression. "No, seriously. You *are* the primary. I work for you on this case. What do you want to do?"

"We have more cars to look at, but we also can't be sure whoever did this isn't from out of town." The sun peeked from behind a cloud and Doc turned his face skyward. "There's nothing we should've done that we haven't." The hint of a question in her voice. Doc watched a pigeon pick at a bit of French fry. "I guess we start over. New canvass, take second looks at stories, background checks on anyone we haven't eliminated yet."

Doc picked up his bag of debris. Stood and stretched until vertebrae popped. "That's what I'd do. Not that you asked."

3:13 p.m.

Getting pulled over didn't surprise Kirk McCord. He and Darryl Nix had been to see the Hatfields the day before to discuss what it would cost to keep from poisoning their Uncle Hillard's well and maybe burning the old man out altogether as a message to his inbred friends down in the holler. All the angles those hillbillies worked, it made perfect sense they'd have a cop or two on the pad.

The patrol officer took his sweet-assed time running the tags. Four minutes passed before he got out of the car and sauntered alongside Kirk's window to ask for his license and registration, please. Big guy, six foot or an inch more. Blond and blue, looked like a military recruiting poster in his pressed uniform, though a little old for the gig now. Name tag read *Sisler*. "What did I do, Officer?"

"License and registration."

Kirk knew better than to hassle a local who might already have it in for him. Handed over his license and the Town Car's registration along with his most ingratiating smile. "I don't think I was speeding."

Sisler read the documents like they were Russian novels. "Driver's side taillight is out."

"It is? I just bought this car a few months ago." Kirk only resorted to the truth when it suited him, and this was a prime opportunity. Picked up the Town Car not three months earlier after spending more to have it refurbished than it would have cost to buy it new back when Lincoln still made them. Checked the VIN to make sure it was one of the last hundred or so to come off the line in Ontario.

Sisler made a small pout. "Maybe I saw it wrong. Put your foot on the brake and I'll take another look." Kirk pressed down on the pedal. Watched in the side mirror as Sisler walker back, leaned over, and smashed the bulb with his baton. "Nope. It's definitely out."

Kirk still deciding how to respond when a second patrol unit positioned itself in front of the Town Car like they thought he might run, the first cop already holding his license. Rubes.

A young woman got out of the second car. Dark hair and not bad looking if you could forget she was a cop, which Kirk could not. "Whatcha got, Sis?"

"Busted taillight and a bad attitude."

"I'll keep an eye on them if you want to run the license."

Sisler walked back to his car. The woman—Burrows, it looked like—rocked heel to toe the way cops do. Always made Kirk feel like they were winding themselves up for an ass-kicking. An unmarked car, for sure another cop from the hub covers, pulled in behind Sisler. Guy in plain clothes at least as big as Sisler got out, squatted to talk through the patrol unit's open door. Looked toward the Town Car a time or two before coming up to stand outside Kirk's window. "Kirksey McCord?"

"Yeah." Kirk about out of patience.

"Detective Dougherty, Penns River police. Your wingman there. Is that Darryl Nix?" Darryl gave the cop his look. Didn't say anything. "Gentlemen, I need you both to step out of the car. Keep your hands where I can see them."

Kirk noticed the uniforms had taken flanking positions, hands on their weapons. “What’s this about?”

“We have reason to believe you’re armed. Step out so we can see you aren’t and everyone will be on their way.”

“Look, Detective—what is it? Dougherty? Mr. Nix and I often transport large sums of money and we’re both licensed to carry concealed by the state of Tennessee.”

“You’re saying you’re armed?”

“I’m not at the moment but Mr. Nix might be. He’d be within his rights if he is.”

The cop might have smiled. “You any good with a map, Mr. McCord?”

“A map?”

“Yessir. I’m asking can you read a map. Or if you have a GPS in this nice car. I’m asking because you’re in Pennsylvania and we don’t give a fuck what Tennessee allows you to do. Now get your asses out of the car. Please.”

Darryl stared through the windshield like he was trying to set the car in front of them on fire. “I’m legal.”

He was, too. Pennsylvania and Tennessee have reciprocal agreements for carry permits. More was going on here than a weapons check, and Kirk had no desire to end up dead because he misread the situation. “Stay calm, big man. Let’s play this one out.”

Their feet no sooner on the ground than the cops had them turned around and leaning against the roof. They took Darryl’s nine and Kirk’s butterfly knife and had both men cuffed and moving toward separate patrol cars inside of a minute.

Dougherty spoke to Kirk as he passed. “We’ll get someone to bring your car in for you. It’ll be waiting at the station when we get this sorted out.”

SUNDAY
JULY 28

1:30 p.m.

Tom Dougherty played golf and came home ready to eat every Sunday morning until arthritis stopped him thirty years previous. Ellen not a person to vary a routine for no good reason, still had dinner on the table at 1:30. Today's meal typical for a Sunday: roast beef, mashed potatoes and homemade gravy, a vegetable—summer, so fresh corn on the cob—and a small salad.

Doc decided to have what he and Drew were calling “The Talk” after supper. He and Tom would watch the Pirates’ game while Ellen finished with the dishes. Get her into the living room and lay it out for them: Dr. Raghuvver thinks it’s not safe for you two to stay in the house anymore; Drew and I agree. His parents knew how thorough their boys were. How they cared and worried about them. Tom and Ellen were intelligent people and practical almost to a fault. There would be some drama, but Tom had a long and honorable history of pointing out when the boys thought with their glands, how to take a deep breath and use your brain. Reason would prevail.

Sure it would.

Getting Ellen into the living room was no big deal. She liked baseball and more often than not watched at least part of the Sunday game. Doc waited for a commercial. Decided against the middle of the fourth after the Pirates scored three in the top of the inning. Heart of the order due up in the fifth, so he skipped that break, too. By the seventh inning stretch he knew he had to get on with it. Took the remote from the arm of his father’s recliner and turned off the game. Said he had something important to talk about and brought a chair in from the kitchen, straddled it to face them both. Took a breath and stepped right into the deep water. “Dad, I hear you need a rest to walk from one garage to the other.”

Tom glared at Ellen like she’d put horseradish in his ice cream. Turned back to Doc with no temper in his voice. “That was one time. I overdid it a little cutting the grass.”

Doc gave Ellen a chance to disagree, knowing she wouldn’t. Went on alone. “I also hear you fell off the mower the other day.”

This time Ellen received Tom’s full attention. “Do you two have some kind of open phone connection so you can keep tabs on me all goddamn day?”

“It’s okay, Dad. This is stuff Drew and I need to know.”

“It is? Do you need to know she falls about once a week?”

“I was already pretty sure she did. That’s why I’m here now.”

Tom fixed Doc with a look that had lost no intensity to age. “Do tell.”

Doc pulled the pin when he turned off the television. Starting the conversation released the spoon. Time to throw the grenade. “Dr. Raghuvver called me last week.”

“Raghuvver called you?”

“Said he’d tried to talk about this and you keep ignoring him.”

“Talk to me about what?”

“About how it’s not safe for either of you to live here anymore. How it’s time to look into other arrangements.”

“My ass.” Doc half expected this. Tom had a pacemaker installed three years ago and still refused to acknowledge he had heart trouble.

Ellen said, "I just want to die here," and left the room. Also not unexpected.

Doc waited until she was out of range. "She's probably going downstairs to fool with the laundry." No answer. "You know those stairs aren't safe for her. You told me so yourself." Still no answer. "I know how much you both love this house and yard, but they're going to kill you."

"You don't know."

"Yeah, Dad, I do. Much as you and Mom love this place, you both lived other places before. I wasn't much more than a baby when we moved in here. Drew came straight here from the hospital. We both love this place. We love you more."

Tom looked at something well past Doc. "You don't remember what it was like. When we first came here."

"I've seen pictures."

"Pictures don't do it justice. The walls were—Christ, the kitchen had linoleum. On the walls, Benny. We had to put all new paneling in every room of this place."

"I know. I remember some of it, helping with stuff like pulling out nails and catching wood as it came off the table saw."

Tom's smile had no humor. "By then we were making things nice. I'm talking about when we moved in. Did you know we had a well the first two years we lived here? God-damn pump died three times before city water came out this far. I didn't want to spend the money on a new pump and better well if we weren't going to use them—couldn't afford to and pay the tap-in fee both—but they kept delaying. Used to have to go to that spring out Milligantown Road with jugs so we'd have drinking and cooking water."

"I remember going out there. We used to have a ball. I still stop by once in a while for some real water."

"It might have been fun for you, but we needed that water to live. This yard everyone loves so much, we couldn't get a mower through it when we moved in and we couldn't afford someone with a tractor. Your Uncle Lee and I cut that bastard with sickles to get it down where I could get a mower through it."

Doc couldn't stop himself looking out the window. Tom bought an extra acre twenty years ago so no one could build too close, but the original lot covered an acre. Tried to imagine his father and uncle out there with sickles and realized he couldn't picture his father as a young man anymore.

A long, uncomfortable minute passed. Then Tom said, "It's no fun getting old, Benny."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

"I'm sorry. You're right. But I've been paying attention to you and Mom. I'm getting a pretty good idea."

"Your mother and I used to take those car trips all over the country. Been to all forty-eight connected states and southern Canada. Even went to Mexico once. We loved those trips. Looked forward to the next and started planning it soon as we got home. Breaks my heart when the weather warms up and we're stuck here."

"Why'd you stop?"

Tom hooded his eyes like he thought Doc was jaggging him. "You know I can't make the drive anymore."

"I didn't ask to break your balls, Dad. I know you stopped because it wasn't safe to

make the drive. I know it was hard, too. Drew and I even talked about each taking a week off and driving you, one out and one back. You were right, though. It wasn't safe anymore. You made the right decision." Left time for Tom to connect the dots. "Staying here isn't safe anymore, either. For either of you. It's going to be a hard decision, too, but it has to be made. Do it now and you get to decide how it goes and where you go. You wait too long, something bad happens...you might have decisions made for you."

"No one can take me out of my house."

"And no one will. Here's the thing: What if one of you falls and you're so badly injured you can't go up or down the stairs anymore?"

"Then we'll live someplace without stairs. Then."

"But you'll still be crippled." Then Doc saw the face that must have prompted Raghuv eer's call. The discussion had moved into an area Tom didn't want to think about and sure as hell didn't want to discuss, so he had no need to listen. Doc in too deep now to pull back. "You always taught Drew and me to stay ahead of things. We're running out of time to get ahead of this."

"We." Tom spat it at Doc.

"Yeah, we. What do you think, Drew and I are going to stir this up and walk away? 'Call us when you get yourselves situated?' This affects all of us. We'll be right there helping you with whatever you need. Always. You have to know that by now."

Tom's gaze fixed on the TV screen behind Doc and to his left. "When I said it's no fun getting old, I understand why. I had to stop playing golf when my hands got too bad to grip the club. I can't drive more than an hour from the house. Not even that some days. I miss those things, but I can live without them. Now that bastard old age is coming after the things make it worth getting up in the morning." Whatever Tom looked at now was far beyond the television. "First thing I do every day is sit in the kitchen by the front door and look out in the yard while I drink my coffee and read the paper. Last thing I like to do before supper when the weather's nice is sit under those trees we planted when you and Drew was little and enjoy the shade with a little iced tea. It's got so those are about the only things I enjoy that I can still do. I give them up, what's left?"

"I get it, Dad. Honest to God. It doesn't mean you can't learn to enjoy other things. You live in one of those senior communities, maybe you make some new friends. Take your morning coffee with them. They have activities. Clubs. Trips where you wouldn't have to drive. One of them just run a bus up to Pymatuning. You guys would love that."

"How do you know so much about this?"

"You think I'd recommend something to you I hadn't checked out myself?"

Tom's demeanor remained unchanged. "What about your mother?"

"It's not like you're going to leave her behind."

"You know she doesn't make friends well. She's self-conscious about her eyesight." A pause. "Her memory has me worried, too. I don't know how she'd adjust."

"I have to think it'd be a lot easier if you do it together than if she waits until you die and we have to move her by herself. Dangerous as it is here now, there's no way she can stay in this house without you."

That expression again. Tom spoke as if talking to himself. "You looked at these places?"

"Personally went to each one and got the tour."

"What's your brother think?"

“He’s with me on this. He would’ve come today but Elizabeth had a thing in Slippery Rock this weekend and we agreed this talk couldn’t wait.” Elizabeth Dougherty’s Girl Scout outing among the reasons Doc had come today, to leave Drew untarnished if things went bad.

“Still a lot of questions.”

Doc nodded. “I can take you and Mom for the same tours I got. Make up your minds for yourselves.” Tom gave an ambiguous look. “Dad, I promise you—Drew and me both—we will *never* do anything to take you and Mom out of this house against your will. You have my word.” Let it lay there a beat. “All the same, if things ever reach a point where a professional says flat-out it’s time to leave, things have moved from not safe to unsafe, we won’t fight them, either.”

Tom’s attention remained somewhere beyond the window. “I’ll talk to your mother.”

MONDAY
JULY 29

9:19 a.m.

Jefferson West drove Cedric Faison to St. Marys. Took some doing to convince Cedric he didn't make the offer just to make sure Cedric didn't back out. West knew this would be a hard day and wanted to keep Cedric's mind from wandering to all the potential downsides of the move, alone in the car two hours up and two hours back. Besides, it was a beautiful drive up PA-28 through Kittanning, New Bethlehem, and Brookville. Be even nicer in the fall when the trees turned, but today was a glorious summer day where thinking the best of life would not be a challenge.

They went in together so Cedric could see West vouch for him. West and Jim Mulvihill did a tour of Korea together thirty years ago and stayed in touch. Shot the shit for fifteen minutes and drank coffee until Cedric relaxed. West excused himself to "get some exercise," his euphemism for taking the Straub Brewery tour. A St. Marys landmark, Straub's was America's smallest pre-prohibition brewery still in business. West finished the tour, got his free beer, and on his way to the Bucksghuda and Western Railroad Museum when his cell chirped to tell him Cedric was ready. Found him standing alone outside Mulvihill's office. Asked how things went.

"Okay, I guess." Cedric didn't do coy well. "I start as soon as I can find a place to live, and he gave me someone to talk to about that. If you don't mind stopping by there on the way out." West did not. "I got one more favor to ask, Jeff."

"Ask."

"Can Wilver and David stay with you till I find a place we'll all fit in? What Jim's setting me up with is a room over a garage. Take me a little time to find a place for all three of us."

"The boys are always welcome with me. My only concern is getting them into school. Be easier if they could start the year up here."

"That's the plan. The sooner I start working and can show some pay stubs, the easier it'll be for me to get a place. This guy comes through with the room, I'm hoping to start work tomorrow."

This exceeded all West's expectations. A thank-you was due. "Where's Jim?"

"Something come up on the job he's working and he had to run. Says he'll call you."

"I guess you two got along, then."

"Jim's great. We talked about everything, including how I spent the last few years. He cool with it, says I get a clean start with him. He didn't say nothing like this, but I also get the idea he'll break a crowbar off in my ass if I fuck him."

"He will."

"He should." They exchanged smiles not shared before.

The room was available and the landlord trusted Cedric for the first week's rent after Mulvihill vouched for him. The drive home was all about logistics and right in West's wheelhouse, having spent time as a quartermaster. Calls to make, paperwork to do, transportation to arrange, schools to contact. Giving Lindsay Gramm in Tennessee the good news. The exponential growth of the to-do list gave Cedric pause; another reason West came along. Dougherty had warned him six-plus years in an environment where The Man tells you where to go, when to go, and how to get there does not hone decision-making

skills. West was happy to help, believing it would make things easier for Wilver and David if they saw he was all in.

They ate lunch at Plyler's in Brookville. "St. Marys a bigger town than I expected," Cedric said.

St. Marys' population no more than 12,000 and change if everyone was home and had company. West asked Cedric what he'd expected. "North of 80, I guess log cabins and shit." Cedric sounded like he was only half-joking.

West swallowed a bite of club sandwich. "You want to see a log cabin, there's a nice one right here in Brookville. Jim did some work on it, brought me by one day. Owner's retired Air Force, lived in the foundation almost ten years while he built the house over it. Did damn near everything himself until some weather come in and he needed help in a hurry. Beautiful place. Looks like Jeremiah Johnson's retirement home."

"Who?"

Little things sprang up to make West feel older every day. "Robert Redford. In a movie. You heard of Robert Redford, right?"

"Ain't he some kind of animal rights guy?"

"How much stuff you still have in Tennessee?"

"Clothes. A few tools. A friend sold everything else but the car when I went inside."

"How you been living since you got out? Before here, I mean."

"SRO hotel. Picked up a few bucks working odd jobs around the place. Treated me all right. For a con."

"I think there's an Aaron's in St. Marys. Rent-to-own furniture. Decent stuff and affordable. I used them more than once when I had to move around for the Army."

Cedric rubbed a thumb and forefinger together. "They work with someone has a con's credit rating?"

West waited until he swallowed the current mouthful so there would be no confusion. "They will if I co-sign."

Cedric set down his sandwich. "You'd do that?" West nodded. "Why? What am I to you?"

"No offense, but I'm not doing it for you. I want what's best for those children. You're game to be a father to them, I'll do whatever I can to help." No accident he left out Imelda. West believed any relationship sank to the level of the more fucked-up person; Imelda could lower Sling Blade's quality of life—another reference he doubted Cedric would get. West didn't know what he'd do if he sensed Imelda re-entering the picture, but he'd do something.

"I don't know what to say, Jeff. I never expected nothing like this."

"Nothing to say. Treat the boys right and we're square."

"I'll treat them good. You have my word."

"I don't mean treat them good like 'be their buddy.' They need a father. Won't always be fun."

"You probably don't believe me, but I was a good father. When I had the chance."

West chose not to read too much into that. "Getting up here in God's country be good for all of you. I think about retiring up here myself once in a while. Nothing to keep me in Penns River." Didn't tell Cedric—nor Dougherty—Wilver and David the only things keeping him in Penns River this long.

"I feel you. We got to do something so Wilver not afraid to leave the goddamn house."

“He say anything to you about that?”

“I axed a couple times. He good about not talking about things he don’t want to talk about.”

Cedric insisted on paying the check. West left the tip. They rode with their thoughts as far as where 66 splits outside Kittanning when Cedric said, “I know he been out since he got shot, but do you know if Wilver kept up with school till then?”

“Enough to keep his name on the books, I suppose. Hard to say what grade he should be in, all the time he’s missed. If he does go back.”

“He’ll go back.” No threat in Cedric’s voice. No machismo. West sensed determination, and part of the knot left his stomach. “He wants to see how things go if he don’t finish school, he can look at his old man every goddamn day.”

Quiet again until West spoke coming into Slate Lick. “I don’t want to step on your toes, make you wonder if I think you’re not up to it, but let me know if you need help with any of this.” Eyes straight ahead. “I got a friend I can maybe borrow a van from, and I can front you cash for a deposit within reason. I’m not going to bring it up again less you get the wrong idea but don’t be bashful about asking.”

Past Buffalo Township, Cedric said, “This means a lot to you.” West saw no need to answer. “I know it’s for the boys more than me. I’m just telling you I’m grateful. Anything I can ever do for you, say so.”

“Hold up your end. That’s all I ask.”

Nothing else said until West dropped Cedric off. The silence was not uncomfortable.

3:01 p.m.

The food in the Neshannock County jail was better than Kirk McCord remembered from Southern lockups. Not that he'd seen the inside of one since some confusion over an extortion charge Darryl cleared up, saving Kirk a bundle in legal fees. The few people he saw treated him decent. The guards weren't bulls, just guys doing a job. No real cops came by. No phone call, either. No charges. No court appearance. Three days in the can. Nothing else.

Dougherty sauntered in almost seventy-two hours to the minute after the door slammed shut behind Kirk. Had a fat man with him Kirk hadn't seen before. Wore a white shirt with a star on each collar point. Asked which one was McCord.

Kirk grunted. Shifted on the bunk. Fatso asked Dougherty if there had been any visitors.

"Nope."

"Anyone from our side talk to either of them?"

"Not so far as I know. I didn't."

Fatso turned toward Kirk. "Mr. McCord, do you know why you're here?"

"Busted taillight's all they told me. Busted by one of your cops. Sisler. I'll remember that."

"Remember all you want. Just don't try to do anything about it."

"Who the fuck are you, anyway?"

"Stan Napierkowski. I'm chief of police here."

"You're doing a horseshit job if what I seen is an example of the kinds of people you got working for you."

"We get by." Fatso let the moment ripen. "The taillight was an excuse. You were already on the radar."

"What for?"

"Menacing. Extortion." Turned toward Dougherty. "We ever make a decision about the terroristic threats charge?"

"Not yet."

"Leaning that way, though. Right?" Dougherty nodded. Fatso seemed satisfied. "We thought it would be best if we rounded you two up and had a talk before you did something stupid and got yourselves into real trouble."

"And you're just now getting around to it? It's been three days."

"You'd be surprised how busy a small town like this can get. What's your business with Orville and Norval Hatfield?"

"What makes you think we have business?"

"You went to see them."

"We know people in common."

"I know you do. You were also seen more than once hanging around their place of business after hours."

Kirk figured he could get away with calling the Hatfields liars. Trying the same thing on a cop while already in custody... "We been in here three days. We want a lawyer."

"You can have all the lawyers you want when we're done. Why'd you go to see the

Hatfield brothers?"

"What'd they tell you?"

"I'm giving you a chance to tell me. No matter what you might think, I don't automatically take their word for things."

"They owe money."

"The brothers do personally? Or is it their uncle... what's his name, Benny?"

"Hillard."

"Hillard. Those hillbilly names crack me up," said the man named Napierkowski. "The way I hear it, you threatened to burn his house and poison his well."

"That's a goddamned lie."

"That's why you're not charged. Right now, it's a 'he said, he said' situation. Still, you've been acting shady and the Hatfields are local. You probably think they're paying us. They are, in a way. They're taxpayers, and we don't like half-assed Dixie Mafia peckerwoods fucking with our taxpayers. We also don't want to make a federal interstate crime out of it, so we settled for breaking your balls. Detective Dougherty will take you to your car. You ever come back here, or send friends, we won't be so polite."

Kirk spoke to Fatso's back when he turned to leave. "You worked the home field advantage pretty good. Come on down to Memphis and see how good you are there, fat man." No reaction.

Dougherty stood half-blocking the cell door. Kirk showed his back as he turned to get by. Darryl tried to shoulder the cop when he went past. Dougherty stood his ground. The two eye-fucked each other from a foot apart.

"Don't, Darryl," Dougherty said. Not quite as big as Darryl but still solid. "It's a bad idea. Hum that song you crackers like so much. Look away, look away, look away, Dixie trash."

Dougherty led them through the usual halls and closed doors and voices heard but no people seen. Took them out a back door to a parking lot. Waved them on past. Kirk asked where his car was.

Dougherty pointed. "Right there. Next to the four-by-four."

The Town Car had no tires or wheels. No brakes. No glass. Closer inspection showed no sound system. No fucking engine.

Dougherty wore a half-smile. "We didn't get back for it as quick as we'd hoped. You're welcome to come back inside to arrange transportation. I hear Enterprise will pick you up."

Phone calls made. Enterprise there and gone. Town Car on a flatbed for parts unknown. Doc clapped Stush on the back. "You still got it, old retired man."

"Thanks for letting me in. That was fun." Stush looked at his watch. "I better hit the road before Sullivan gets back from his house closing."

"No hurry. I told Lana Pierce to drag it out until I gave her the high sign." Pointed toward the flatbed carrying the Town Car as it disappeared over the rise leading to the Tarantum Bridge. "You think we'll get any blowback?"

"Nah. They're pros. Assholes, but professional assholes. They know when to cut their losses. If they don't?" Stush gave an ambivalent expression. "What's Sully gonna do? Fire me?"

**MONDAY
AUGUST 19**

12:11 p.m.

Most detectives dream of working as primary on a homicide. Patty Polcyn was Teresa Shimp's first, and her dream was more like one of those recurring nightmares where you haven't been to class all semester and now it's time for the final and you can't find the room. And you're in your underwear.

It wasn't like she'd never worked a homicide: she'd been Dougherty's second a couple of times. Her name on the file made more of a difference than she'd expected. The upside was she got to command resources and tell people what to do. A primary homicide investigator is as close to being God as a cop ever gets. In theory, she could order Sullivan off her crime scene. The mayor. The Attorney General should he stand where he cast a shadow on something Teresa Shimp wanted to look at. She was the only person authorized to provide facts to the media. Under Sullivan's supervision and with him at her elbow, but if particulars about the case were to be divulged, Teresa Shimp would do the divulging. Sullivan spoke in generalities and handled nuisance requests to keep the media from diverting Teresa's focus, Penns River too small for a Public Information Office. It would be her under the lights—such as they were here—when the case went down. It was what detectives dream of, a homicide bust on a stone whodunit.

If the case didn't go down? That would be on her tab, too.

Sullivan gave her everything Penns River's resources allowed. No internal lab, which meant sending all evidence to either the state crime lab in Harrisburg or to a private company, which in turn meant she could expect results around the second week of Never. Neuschwander was great at collecting and preparing evidence, but he couldn't test it.

Dougherty had been outstanding. Not that he wasn't always, but she'd wondered how he'd deal with not being the lead dog, given his willingness to voice opinions or break balls at the drop of a hat, even if he had to drop the hat himself. He'd done everything she'd asked so far and then some, always with enthusiasm. Provided advice when asked and never volunteered how he would have done something. Teresa took comfort in knowing Dougherty would step in if he saw her about to mishandle anything and had shown no sign of doing so.

It also wasn't like this would be the first unsolved homicide in Penns River history. Almost a third of the twenty or so murders in the recent past were still officially open. The cops had a good idea who'd done all of them, lacking only evidence acceptable to Sally Gwynn's high standards.

Teresa's closure rate would be zero if this case didn't go down.

And it wasn't going down.

She'd read the file. Read it again. Reorganized it. Read it another again. Retyped all the reports she hadn't written herself in case she might notice something she missed. Retyped all the reports she had written herself to refresh her memory. Nothing.

Other cases demanded attention. The Coxcomb Estates burglaries were still open, though none had occurred in a while. She had court appearances pending in Allegheny County on cases Brian Kastelic give up after the Mrozcka robbery. A deposition in the case of a Canadian fugitive arrested in Penns River. A month to the day since Patty Polcyn's death and every intervening call drained a little momentum from the case. Teresa

still tried to carve out an hour or two every day. This was social media day. Teresa waded her way through the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram feeds of everyone she and Dougherty found online who didn't not look like the vague description they had and they couldn't eliminate otherwise.

Walter Goodlett was into heavy metal. Thomas Ziegenfuss had a disconcerting interest in younger actresses—younger women in general—so much so Teresa doubted he would have been interested in Patty Polcyn but made note of him should anything icky come up with a juvenile. Joseph Herps and Michael Adamchik were the serious gearheads. Herps posted about his car almost daily and shared photos every time anything got an upgrade, which was almost weekly. Adamchik about as bad but without the flood of photos. Randy Szul spent a lot of time at Allegheny Casino. Mitchell Milliron had a camper up near East Brady and took his pontoon boat out on the river every weekend. Hilarity ensued when Pete Miszerak retweeted a celebrity's comment, not realizing it was homophobic. Or maybe he did. Social consciousness didn't register high on Teresa Shimp's assessment of any of the potential suspects, though Goodlett had a fondness for funny animal videos.

Patty Polcyn had not friended nor followed any of the men who held Teresa's interest. None of their numbers in her cell phone. None of their email addresses in her Gmail contact list. Teresa focused on posts before or close after Patty's death. Goodlett went to hear a Led Zeppelin cover band. Milliron almost drowned when he leaned too far over the side of his boat to pull something out of the water. Beer was involved. Herps went to a rally. Adamchik got his car painted. Ziegenfuss swore he found naked pictures of Hailee Steinfeld on the Internet. Miszerak engaged in a spirited Twitter war over whether "faggot" was derogatory.

Adamchik got his car painted.

The post's timestamp four days after Patty's death. Teresa had seen it before and not paid it much mind, flooded with the volume of what she found online. Now she knew these men better. What they paid attention to. The kinds of comments they made. Adamchik liked to talk about what he had planned for his car, sometimes in great detail. The "I got my car painted. It's badass now" post came out of the blue and had no accompanying photos. Looking back through his feeds, Teresa found no photos of his car at all since Patty died, on any platform. Plenty of posts with self-congratulatory comments. No pictures.

She pulled on the loose thread. Adamchik didn't often post photos, but some of his friends had smartphones embedded in their hands and took pictures of everything. Teresa flipped back and forth through pictures where friends tagged Adamchik. Didn't take long once she understood what to look for. Adamchik had longish, dirty blond hair in older photos. More recent images showed him with shorter, darker hair. Black, even. The difference so stark Teresa not sure it was the same person at first, as the tags were in the posts and not the photos. Then she noticed the blond eyebrows and looked closer until she was positive.

The first photograph of Adamchik with shorter, darker hair appeared three days after Patty Polcyn's death. Teresa found no photos of him at all between then and the day Patty died.

It took three hours' work, but by the end of the day Teresa knew Michael Adamchik had his car painted and his hair cut and dyed within three days of Patty Polcyn's death.

Teresa treated herself to a Diet Coke from Dougherty's mini-fridge. Spent ten minutes

savoring it and the moment. Then she started typing the affidavit.

2:28 p.m.

Doc didn't care much for the concept of rousting dealers and indicting corners, but he couldn't deny the adrenaline rush of rolling up with three other units, sirens and lights, lookouts hollering "Five-Oh! Five-Oh!" and hoppers trying to run. "Trying" the operative word because they had no experience dealing with cops who'd been in the military and knew about cutting off avenues of retreat. All the running and yelling ended thirty seconds after everyone hit their switches and Doc, Sisler, Burrows, and Boston had things under control.

Sullivan had been after Doc for three weeks, so he dressed to impress. Penns River Police Department polo shirt with his badge hanging from a lanyard around his neck. Something in every pocket of his 5.11 tactical pants. Tactical boots instead of the Rockports or sneakers he preferred. Tactical holster with his gun strapped to his thigh. Felt a little silly as he saddled up, going all RoboCop on these two-bit slingers. Major league drug dealers like in Baltimore or St. Louis would probably laugh at him, but he hoped to make an impression out here in the bush league.

Scanned the four detainees for Reynard Mendenhall while the uniforms patted everyone down. Not here today. Sisler turned up a roll of bills. Boston found a baggie of weed nowhere close to distribution weight.

"Who had the money?" Sisler pointed him out. "Officer Boston. Is this the same gentleman as last time?" It was.

Doc crooked a finger in the kid's direction. No response. "What's your name, Bank?" No answer. "I'd rather not call you 'Bank.' It's impolite. Almost as bad as 'Hey, you.'" Still no answer. "Okay, we'll compromise. Where'd you get the roll, Wells Fargo?" No answer. Doc turned to the uniforms. "Tough guy."

"That's too bad," Boston said. "He was one gabby motherfucker last time. Told us a funny story about how a bunch of money got in his pants."

"When Sully was here?" Boston nodded. Doc turned to Wells Fargo. "Chief Sullivan can't make it today. He said you can bullshit me instead." Nothing. "You can talk to him if you like, but it'll have to be at the station. You probably don't want to go there—we'll have to handcuff you and all, make a big production of it—so I'll ask again. Where'd you get that kind of money? Got to be a couple grand here."

Wells Fargo spoke. "I pimped out your mother."

Trevor Boston stepped up and drove rigid fingers into Wells Fargo's gut. Dropped him to his knees. "Man asked you a question."

Doc saw Wells Fargo couldn't catch his breath and knelt next to him. "You got the wind knocked out of you, is all. Lay back flat." A banger shifted his feet. Sisler repositioned himself. Burrows drew her baton and squared off on the others. "I'm not gonna hurt him," Doc said so everyone could hear. Then, to Wells Fargo, "Lay on your back. I'll pull up on your belt a couple times and you'll be fine."

Applying the cure did not lessen the tension. Doc offered a hand to help Wells Fargo up. He ignored it. Stood on his own. Exchanged eye-fucks with Boston. "I know you now."

"You know where to find me, too. Anyplace you set up this half-assed operation of

yours.”

“We didn’t come here to argue,” Doc said. “Now, Mr. Fargo, where...do you mind if I call you Wells? Since I helped you to breathe and kept Officer Boston from whipping your ass for disrespecting me, I feel like we should be on a first-name basis.”

“You so big on names and shit, what’s yours, pig?”

“Detective Dougherty.”

“First name, motherfucker.”

“Detective.”

“Okay then, *Dee-tec*-tive, now we on a first-name basis and shit, how about you leave my black ass alone and go fuck yourself.”

“I’m good with the first part but I need something from you. I don’t want to take you in—I got much more important things to do—but I’m curious to know where an individual such as yourself—what some might refer to as a no visible means of support motherfucker—came up with this kind of walking-around money.”

“Ain’t no crime to walk around with money.”

“I didn’t say it was. I’m interested in where you got it.”

“I tole you. Your mama give it to me after she fucked every nigger in town, quarter apiece.”

Doc had to admire Boston’s quickness, if nothing else. Extended his baton and snapped into the outside of Wells Fargo’s knee so hard and fast Doc flinched when he felt the breeze pass by. Wells Fargo dropped like a puppet with its strings cut. Boston’s follow-through presented his back to the nearest hopper, who took a run at him. Burrows turned to assist. Sisler, the Marine, put the one closest to him down so fast Doc didn’t see how he did it. Hoo-rah. Doc flashed Wells Fargo a warning look, turned to see how Burrows was making out getting the one off Boston’s back. She showed nice technique with the baton, not hitting any danger areas while ensuring the kid would be sore a few days. Doc looked for the open man, the one Burrows had been watching before she went to help Boston. Kid didn’t seem to know whether to wind his watch or take a shit. Doc took one last inventory to see who might need help. Turned back to make sure no one interfered with Boston and Burrows in time to see the kid make up his mind, pull the strap off Burrows’s holster, and take her weapon.

“Gun!”

Doc drew and leveled his weapon. Sisler kicked Wells Fargo’s legs out from under him and pulled his own gun. Boston backed hard into the brick wall to crush the one on his back while Burrows stopped playing nice and brought her baton down hard on the kid’s wrist. Boston had his gun out and level before the kid hit the ground. Total elapsed time: four seconds and change.

The one who grabbed Burrows’s gun looked at it in his hand like he’d never seen one before. Doc kept his voice low but intense. “Keep your finger away from the trigger and lay the gun on the ground nice and slow. Be careful not to point it at anyone.”

Their eyes met and Doc looked into his worst nightmare: the kid was terrified. Might do anything, as far over his head as he was. Hell, already had done anything. What came next was anyone’s guess. “Nothing bad’s happened yet and nothing bad has to. Lay the gun on the ground and get down next to it with your palms up. Do it now.”

The kid looked around to his buds like he wanted someone to tell him what to do. Not pointing the gun at anyone. Not pointing it away, either. Holding it like he’d pulled it out

of a closet and didn't know what it was. None of this made Doc feel any better.

Wells Fargo still on his ass. Said, "Burn him, Dee." Sisler stepped on his hand.

Doc spoke before Dee could consider Wells Fargo's comment. "He'll get you killed, Dee. Right now we're all negotiating a way out of this. You point that in anyone's direction and you'll be dead before get your finger inside the trigger guard. I am *not* bullshitting you."

"What happens to me I put it down?"

Doc not a hostage negotiator and had no recent stays at Holiday Inn Express. He had taken a class and knew not to lie. "We're gonna have to take you in." Saw the kid's expression and hurried on. "I have no choice. You took a cop's gun. Put it down like I asked and we'll do some paperwork and get you released O.R."

"Or? Or what?"

"O.R. means 'on recognizance.' Means you'll sleep in your own bed tonight. But the clock's running on how long I can leave that option open."

Wells Fargo said, "Fuck him, Dee," and Sisler stepped on his crotch hard enough to break marbles.

"Fuck *him*, Dee." Doc felt the situation maybe slipping away. "Your boy Wells Fargo is looking to get you killed so he can tell stories of how badass you were, going out in a blaze of glory like you did. Thing is, you won't be around to hear them. Put it down, Dee, and we all walk away."

Dee's breathing was shallow. His eyes darted everywhere and focused on nothing. His voice on the edge of breaking. "What if I don't?"

"Then you might die right here. Today. In the next minute if you're not careful. We can cut you a break on grabbing the gun. Your buddy was getting roughed up and you pani—overreacted. Shit happens. Everyone gets that. But you shoot a cop, even just *at* one, and you die. Right here. Won't be no ACLU or Black Lives Matter coming to avenge you, either. You took a cop's gun and brandished it at police officers. Refused to put it down after repeated requests. Make one wrong move, even look threatening, and you go down with more holes in you than a golf course."

Doc still not sure which way Dee would go. Pretty sure Dee wasn't, either. Every breath reminded him all the equipment he'd put on for show did not include a vest.

Something a senior NCO told him in Iraq flashed to mind: If you're going to die, make sure it's you who calls the play. Thumbed the hammer on his Sig back to full cock. "Time's up, Dee. What's it gonna be?"

The gun hung loose from Dee's index finger. Hard to say if he was more scared or confused. At least now Doc had his undivided attention. "What I do? I don't know what to do and not get shot."

Doc's voice as low and calming as he could make it with ten gallons of adrenaline running through him. "You're doing it. Stay perfectly still. I'll come to you and take the gun." A quick look at the other cops. Burrows had her spray out and poised to cover the other hoppers. Boston's eyes steady, his knuckles showing the tension in his hands. Sisler looked like he was waiting for the foursome in front to clear the green.

Another glance at Boston and Doc had a memory of how this all started. "Officer Boston. Lower your weapon."

"I got you covered with a good sight picture."

"I said disengage, Patrolman. Do not holster but help Officer Burrows keep an eye on

the others.” Boston breathed as if to speak. “Now!”

Heard Boston reposition his feet. One last glimpse of Sisler, who raised and lowered his head a sixteenth of an inch.

Doc made sure to show Dee everything he did. Uncocked the Sig and holstered it. Showed both empty hands, palms out. “I’m going to walk up slow and take the gun by the barrel. Stay perfectly still and we’ll all go home today.” Made sure not to interfere with Sisler’s line of sight. Dee’s frame tightened as Doc took the first step. Nothing to worry about. Felt safer now than a minute ago, having taken more control of the situation and knowing Sisler would never allow Dee to move the gun into anything close to a shooting position.

Eight short steps, hands away from his body, palms facing Dee. “I’m going to reach nice and slow with my left hand and take the gun by the barrel. Let it hang from your finger like you are and I’ll do all the work.” Reached for the gun, its barrel warm in the summer sun. Slid it from Dee’s sweaty finger. Uncocked it and tucked it inside his pants at the small of his back. “Stay still while I put the cuffs on. It’s standard procedure when we bring someone in. Nothing’s going to happen to you. I give you my word.”

Dee’s lips moved but nothing came out. Doc cuffed him as gently as washing a baby. Handed him off to Sisler. Returned Burrows’s gun. She wouldn’t meet his eyes. “I don’t know what to say. I could’ve got someone killed.”

“None of this happens if I’d been half a step quicker. Next time be more aware of your six.”

“Thanks. I still owe you a beer.”

“That goes without saying.” Winked at her. “Spread the rest of this group to the wind.” To Sisler, easing Dee’s head into the patrol unit: “Give Wells Fargo his money back.” To Wells Fargo: “This time.”

At last he spoke to Trevor Boston. “Be in my office by the time I get back.”

**TUESDAY
AUGUST 20**

8:09 a.m.

Teresa Shimp's squad lined up and ready to roll: Doc, Neuschwander, Sisler, and Burrows. No one expected much resistance from Michael Adamchik. Sending five cops to pick him up minimized even that small chance.

Normal procedure brought the arrest team in at dawn or earlier. Catch the suspect in his jammies or underwear, sleep in his eyes, while a half-dozen caffeinated and adrena- lized cops pushed their way in like bursting out of a clown car, hollering conflicting in- structions. "Don't move!" "Hands on your head." "Down on the floor." "I said don't move, goddamnit!" The technical term was "tumultuous entry." Doc thought of it as big fun.

Shimp's warrant hit a technical snag and didn't come in until half an hour earlier. Adamchik already at work—a patrol unit had eyes on his car—and they could take him there. Bystanders were a consideration, but the cops had ways to minimize any safety concerns. Not like they'd never done this before.

Burrows took the back. Sisler stood between the front door and Adamchik's car. Adamchik had never seen Doc, so he went in to talk to the manager while Shimp and Neuschwander waited outside.

Doc showed his badge to the woman at the front desk on the downlow. Asked to see the manager, don't say who I am. A trim man with short, bushy brown hair and "Steve" embroidered on his shirt came up with a hand extended. Doc shook, identified himself, and asked if Steve had an office where they could talk.

Inside Steve's office, Doc said he had a small favor. "Sure. My brother-in-law's a cop down Picksburgh. Whatever I can do."

"Can you call Michael Adamchik in here without going out to the shop floor to do it?"

"Sure. What do you want with Mike?"

"Your brother-in-law's a cop. You know what it's like. Can't discuss an ongoing in- vestigation an' 'at."

Steve picked up his desk phone's handset and spoke into it. His voice resonated across the shop floor. Doc took a handy-talky from his jacket pocket. Told Shimp and Neuschwander to come to the front desk like customers. "He'll pass within twenty feet on his way to the office. Trail him in." Put away the transmitter but left the jacket hang open for access to the gun on his hip. Steve's eyes got big as the realization set in this wasn't like bullshitting with his brother-in-law.

Adamchik an inch or so shorter than Doc and twenty pounds lighter. Looked like an idiot with his dye job already growing out. "You wanted to see me, Steve?"

"Actually, it's this gentleman who does." Steve pointed to Doc, who turned to face Adamchik, who must have seen the gun and ran back the way he'd come like the Steelers were timing him in the forty. Damn near left footprints on Shimp's blouse as he ran her over. She wrapped her arms around his legs as Neuschwander stepped in to take him high, tripped over Shimp, and knocked Adamchik loose. He regained his balance and ran around the customer service counter out the front door. Doc couldn't pursue until Shimp and Neuschwander untangled themselves in the doorway, by which time Adamchik had pulled an Elvis and left the building.

Doc threw open the front door to find Adamchik frozen twenty feet from his car. Sean Sisler crouched next to the driver's door, relaxed as a cat in the sun. Held a Marine-issue KA-BAR knife two inches from the tire. "The master criminal here can't decide whether he'd rather go to jail or replace this shitty tire. Care to make his decision for him, Detective Shimp?"

8:27 a.m.

Jefferson West surveyed his crew and approved. Everyone on time and ready to launch the Faisons' move to St. Marys. Cedric repositioned a few things in Elrod Stokes's prized Transit van. First vehicle Elrod ever bought new. Still had a trace of new car smell. West had to promise on the heads of his children, his parents' graves, and both testicles no one but him would drive it. Even so, Elrod's expression reminded West of a ten-year-old watching a beloved pet taken away to a farm in Montana.

West had planned to defer to Cedric as much as possible and serve as wheelman only. Maybe buy everyone lunch before he headed back alone. Saw early on no one else had a clear concept of "big rocks first," and his experience loading trucks, helicopters, and cargo planes in the Army made him the default loadmaster. Took longer than expected, not too much.

Moods varied. Cedric looked nervous as a new groom whose father-in-law already didn't like him, hoping the wedding dress hid the bride's bump. Wilver still didn't want to come out of the house. West about to lay down the law when Cedric took his son aside to point out Reynard Mendenhall and his crew not likely to be morning people and would also be unwilling to gun down a half-dozen citizens just to get Wilver. The quicker they loaded the truck, the quicker the threat of Mendenhall would move into the rearview.

David put on a good face; his heart wasn't in it. Popular in school and had reached an age where he and girls started to pay attention to each other. The existing arrangement with West worked well for him. He also understood his place in the grand scheme of things and knew Wilver needed this. What he didn't know—at least West hoped he didn't—was a deal had already been cut to bring David back to Penns River if the move proved too great an adjustment for him.

Cedric jammed a gym bag stuffed with towels between two straight-back chairs from a small dining set Elrod had contributed. Gave the bag a final shove and satisfied himself the chairs wouldn't rattle. Said to Wilver, "Go ahead. See will it close. Or do we have to leave some of your style behind?" Tapped Wilver's arm and winked.

Wilver closed the back door. The latch caught with no audible shifting of the load. "Don't sound like nothing broke," Cedric said. "I think we ready."

It didn't seem right to West for Dougherty to miss this. He was as responsible as anyone for getting the boys out of an all-but-homeless situation a few years ago. Thought of sending a text. Reconsidered when he remembered Dougherty would be there if not already engaged. Be nice for him to be able to see this and say good-bye, but he and West already had plans to drive up in a couple of weeks.

West looked at his watch. Decided he couldn't sandbag anymore. Everyone standing around waiting for someone else to give the word. Wilver getting antsy, like he wondered what time Reynard's alarm went off. David made half-hearted good-byes to a handful of school friends, including one girl he showed no signs of wanting to say good-bye to, and one he did. Cedric looked uncertain about making the call. West had spent much of his adult life leading men and making decisions. Sensed the vacuum and made the whirlybird signal with his right index finger. "All right, gentlemen! Saddle up! David, you're with me in case I need help with the directions."

David looked surprised. “You don’t have a GPS?”

“Don’t need one.”

David showed confusion. “You just said I was riding with you in case you needed help.”

West slapped him in the chest with a map. “Which is why I don’t need a GPS. Sides, GPSes are for people with no sense of adventure. That sound like us?”

The kid’s first smile of the day. “Not even a little bit.”

West ruffled the boy’s hair. “Then let’s us go start one.”

9:18 a.m.

Shimp the primary so she took the lead in the interview. Fine with Doc. He liked playing backup. Truth be told, he liked everything about interviews. His five favorite things in life were questioning suspects, arrests, ceremonial eye-fuckings, fish sandwiches at the Edgecliff, and his mother's potato pancakes. Not necessarily in that order.

As secondary, Doc got to play the server. "Can I get you anything, Mr. Adamchik? Coffee? Tea? Famous Amos cookies from the machine? I think there might be a couple doughnuts left in the break room. No? You sure? Suit yourself." Then he settled in to watch Shimp get things rolling.

Doc long ago stopped counting how many of these sessions he'd been in. Never lost his curiosity about why suspects talked to the police without a lawyer. He and Shimp would spend the next hour or more trying to build trust and rapport in the hope Michael Adamchik would become so comfortable around them—maybe even like them—he'd say something could get him sent to prison for as long as he drew breath. That it worked at all amazed Doc. That it worked as often as it did was flabbergasting.

For some it was ego. Those with college degrees were the worst, not like Penns River got a high percentage of college-educated offenders. Towns with median household incomes twenty percent below the national average weren't often hotbeds of white-collar crime. The college types figured because they knew Socrates was Greek and could pronounce his name better than either Bill or Ted meant they could outwit this rube cop who, unbeknown to them, was almost sure to have a degree in criminology or criminal justice or sociology or psychology—maybe a Master's—and made their living interviewing people who thought themselves cute. Doc had fond memories of several with long stretches of time to contemplate their errors at state expense. One had the rest of his life.

For others it was the idea of being badass, which Doc decided was also a form of ego. You'll never break me, copper. I'm a stone wall. I watch every flavor of *Law & Order* and *NCIS* and *CSI* and *Cops*. I know all about that good cop/bad cop bullshit and all the tricks you're going to try. I'm no genius, but I pay attention and I know what can hurt me and you can't. Hell, bring in that broad's been on *SVU* since forever and not been laid the whole time and maybe I'll soften her up instead. This type specialized in self-glorification that almost always came back to haunt them.

Those overcome with remorse who couldn't tell their stories fast enough gave Doc the random sleepless night. Sometimes he wanted to shake them and scream, "Shut up!" until a lawyer could get there. They often became killers in fits of anger or drunkenness or, even worse, accidents for which they felt responsible. So laden with survivor's guilt they'd confess to the Kennedy assassination—Jack or Bobby or both—in the hope it would make them feel better. It never did, and everything they said made the situation worse.

The fourth category, Doc's favorite, were the knuckleheads. Smart enough to know their rights and too stupid to understand why they had them. In trouble because of their negligence or disrespect for the property of others or lack of regard for the frailty of human anatomy. The skim milk of sociopaths who didn't give a shit they might hurt someone and didn't understand why they were in trouble. They hadn't meant any harm. They

hadn't thought about it one way or the other and saw themselves as much a victim as the poor bastard in the hospital or morgue.

Doc pretty sure if he looked up "knucklehead" in Zulawski's *Practical Aspects of Interview and Interrogation*, he'd find a picture of Michael Adamchik. In color. Smiling.

Shimp placed the Miranda warning on the table in front of Adamchik. Read it off word for word. "Michael Adamchik, you are under arrest for the murder of Patricia Polcyn. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law..."

Not how Doc would have done it. He liked to hold off on Miranda as long as possible. Talk about innocuous bullshit, hoping once they got around to questions about the crime the suspect would see no reason not to talk to him. Shimp almost Mirandized Adamchik in the parking lot when they arrested him, not wanting any technicality to queer her first murder pinch. Doc talked her out of it. Told her of times suspects had blurted out confessions on the way to the house either because they thought volunteering information before getting the warning meant the cops couldn't use it against them—a true, 24-carat knucklehead—or because they were fishing around trying to learn how much trouble they had. Doc remembered one suspect who admitted to the crime on their way to the station, realized what he'd done, then put two more guys in the jackpot with him trying to talk his way out of it. Doc hadn't asked anything more probing than, "Are you comfortable back there?"

Shimp was wrapping up. "Do you understand these rights?"

"You're saying I don't have to talk to you?" Maybe Adamchik wasn't as big a knucklehead as Doc thought.

"That's right. If you want to stop, we have to stop."

"And I can have a lawyer in here with me if I do decide to talk to you?"

"That's right, too."

"In theory," Doc said. Shimp shot him a look. "In the real world, once you ask for a lawyer, the conversation is over. He'll—or more than likely around here, she'll—pull you out of here and will be the only person talks to us. I'll call you a lawyer any time you want, but any chance you have to tell your side of the story leaves with me when I leave this room to do it."

"You're saying I *can't* talk to you if I ask for a lawyer?"

Doc beat Shimp in with the answer. "Sure, legally you can. The lawyer won't let you." Shimp opened her mouth. "Let's say the lawyer will strongly advise against it."

"So I can't tell my side."

Again Doc was faster than Shimp. "Not without it being filtered through the lawyer's interpretation."

"That's bad?"

Doc shrugged. "Depends. Case like yours, lots of physical and circumstantial evidence but no one standing there with eyeballs on it? If it was my ass on the line, I'd want to get my unadulterated version on the record before some lawyer started mealy-mouthing around."

Shimp was not amused but held her fire while Adamchik made up his mind. Took him almost a minute. Looked once at Doc, who replied with a *what the hell* face. "If I say I'll talk to you, can I change my mind?"

This time Shimp was quicker. "You can ask for a lawyer at any time and we have to

stop until she gets here.”

Adamchik gave it five more seconds. Picked up the pen and scrawled a signature above the dotted line. “Okay. Go ahead. I got nothing to hide,” thus proving he was, after all, as big a knucklehead as Doc suspected.

“Mr. Adamchik, Detective Dougherty and I already have the answers to some of the questions we’re going to ask you—”

“*Most* of the questions,” Doc said.

“—but you won’t know which ones. If you lie, we’ll know. I’m telling you this now so there is no misunderstanding. Do you still want to go on?” Adamchik did. Shimp flipped open and glanced at a legal pad on her lap. “When did you meet Patty Polcyn?”

Doc spoke before Adamchik had a chance. He was getting good at it. “Detective Shimp, can I have a quick word?”

They stepped into the hall. Shimp’s lack of amusement showed. “What is it now? I don’t appreciate you stepping on my interview like this.”

“I know. You shouldn’t and I’m sorry. I think you’re rushing a little is all. Your first homicide as lead, you know you have the right guy, but you also know we’re going to need a confession. You’re trying to make things happen. Take a deep breath. *Let* things happen. He’s not going anywhere until you say so and we get paid by the hour. Let him tell his story his way. Lock him in. Then we’ll pick it apart.”

Shimp’s face softened. “You’re right. I should know better.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. I’m glad there are no videos of my first few big cases. I’m pretty sure one guy confessed because he felt sorry for me.”

Back inside, Adamchik decided he wanted a cold drink after all. Shimp volunteered to go. “Grab a Coke from my private stash in the office,” Doc said. “Bring my regular. And get whatever you want for yourself.” They’d done this before. She knew not to hurry.

Doc relaxed into his chair. “How long you been a mechanic?”

“About three years.”

“You like it?”

“I did until today when Steve set me up for you guys. I always treated him decent.”

“Not his fault. We come in with a signed warrant, what’s he supposed to do? He stalls me and you catch wise and split, he’s an accessory. He had one option and he took it. You’d of done the same. So would I.”

“I guess so.”

“Forget Steve. I’m asking about the work. You like it?”

And off they went. Doc knew Adamchik was a motorhead and wanted to get him talking about something he’d feel comfortable with. Asked questions to pretend to be interested while panning for nuggets he might be able to use later.

Shimp returned with a Coke for Adamchik, Mello Yello for Doc, and her favorite Point State Park mug with the string of a tea bag dangling. “Perfect timing,” Doc said. “Remember the trouble you had with that parking lot dent last year?” Shimp had no recent trouble nor dents. She nodded. “Mike, tell her what you told me a few minutes ago. The new technique they have for dents and dings and shit.”

Twenty minutes later, the conversation hit a natural lull. Doc and Shimp made eye contact and she said, “Tell us about that night. How did you meet her? Patty.”

“She was hitching a ride right outside here, maybe halfway to the bridge road.” Adamchik didn’t go on. Shimp told him he could tell it himself. No need for her to ask

him every little thing. "I gave her a ride."

Another halt. The cops were willing to wait Adamchik out. Nature doesn't abhor a vacuum any more than criminals hate to miss an opportunity to fill a silence with self-serving bullshit.

Adamchik didn't bite.

A minute passed. Everyone playing like the first side to talk lost. The cops wanted Adamchik to either confess or lie, so long as they got it on the record. Not likely he'd confess; they'd spend as much time as necessary breaking down the lies. But he had to tell some first. Giving away any of what they knew only gave him opportunities to build a story around it. Doc had no delusions they were dealing with Keyser Soze, but also knew they'd have to take what they learned to a jury, where any shades of gray Adamchik cast might prove fatal to a case already full of shady areas.

Two minutes. Shimp's inexperience as the lead showed, her expression begging Doc for an idea. He remembered Sullivan asking if he thought Shimp was making any mistakes and decided if anyone made a mistake it should be him. He had more history to fall back on. "Where'd you take her?"

"Home."

Doc went on after thirty seconds this time. "Straight home?"

"We drove around a little."

"Where'd you go?"

"Around. You know. No place special."

Too early to call bullshit. Doc liked his suspects to dig their own graves. His job was to throw the dirt on top. "You don't remember?"

"You know how it is. We was talking an' 'at. Just drove around."

"And then you took her home."

"Yeah."

"What time?"

"What time what?"

Changing his approach on the fly didn't mean Doc wasn't in the zone. Nothing Adamchik said or did would perturb him now. "What time did you take her home?"

"I don't know. Not too late."

Doc asked if it would be more accurate to say Adamchik didn't remember. "I mean, you *know*. You were there. It just didn't register at the time as being worth remembering."

"Yeah. Like that."

"See if this refreshes your memory. We have five witnesses who picked your picture out of five different photo arrays that only had your picture in common. These five will swear they saw you in Fat Jimmy's bar in the Flats for an hour and a half or so and she left with you. Help you any?"

Adamchik swallowed hard and laid out a story matching most of what they already knew. Things got interesting about the time they left Fat Jimmy's.

"What time did you leave?"

"Midnight. A little after."

Shimp asked where Adamchik took Patty. "Home. You know, her place."

"Where did she live?"

"Down the Flats somewhere. I don't remember the exact address."

“Can you describe the house?”

This answer didn't come quite as quick. “It was dark. Hard to say.”

“Single-family home or an apartment?”

Doc watched Adamchik toss a mental coin. “A house. I think she lived there with a relative. Niece, maybe.”

“If we took you there, could you pick out the house?”

“I told you, it was dark.”

“You could find the street, though. Couldn't you?”

Adamchik's eye movements increased. “It was dark, okay? Could barely see my hand in front of my face without the headlights on the car.”

Doc risked a quick look at his notes. Three nights shy of a full moon when Patty Polcyn died. Scattered clouds.

Shimp: “Patty had to give you directions as you went but it hasn't been very long. You remember the general area.”

“I told you. It was dark as a cave and...well, I don't know if I should say anything else.”

“Are you telling us you were impaired?”

“I might have been. Depends.”

“You were good to drive, though. Don't worry. Even if we cared, there's no way we could prove it now. If you were drunk or high, say so.”

“I, uh, I'll admit to having a few.”

“How many is a few?”

“Uhhhh...at least three. No more than four. I don't know. Five?”

“Did you smoke any marijuana in the car with Patty?”

“Uhhh...is this like the drinking part? You don't care?”

“Today you get a pass.”

“I little, I guess. Some. Not much.”

“Did you buy any marijuana when you stopped at Patty's friend's house on your way to Fat Jimmy's?”

“I didn't go in.”

“Did she buy any?”

“She said no.”

“So at least one of you already had some on you.”

“She did.”

“She did?” Shimp and Doc exchanged looks. “Do you know where Patty had been before you picked her up?”

Adamchik's face showed the effort of trying to retrieve—or manufacture—a memory. Gave up. “I don't remember.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'd tell you if I knew. It ain't like I been holding back.”

“She was here.”

“You arrested her?”

“She went over to the county side trying to bail out a friend.”

“There you go, then. I guess that's why I picked her up pretty much right outside.”

“Have you ever visited anyone in our jail, Mr. Adamchik?”

“No.”

“They run a tight ship over there.”

“Won a security award for it a couple years ago,” Doc said.

“All visitors and their possessions are searched and run through a metal detector before they’re allowed into the prisoner visiting area.” Shimp left it there for Adamchik to digest.

“They searched her. Sounds pretty standard for a jail or courtroom, isn’t it?”

“It is.” Shimp gave Adamchik a last chance to do the math. Not even math; arithmetic. “Patty Polcyn had visited friends before. She knew the policies, so she knew if she came in here with any contraband she ran the risk of being locked up herself.”

Doc tired of waiting for Adamchik to figure it out. “Unless she took her dope and hid it somewhere outside before she came in, then picked it up again on her way out, Patty Polcyn didn’t have any on her.”

The penny dropped so hard it echoed. “Okay. I had the dope.” Shimp asked why they stopped to buy more. “I didn’t have much and what I had didn’t kick any ass. Seeds and stems mostly.”

“Where did you go after you took Patty home?”

“Back to my place. It was late and I had work in the morning.”

Doc leaned in. Placed two fingers on Shimp’s forearm. “Detective Shimp? May I?” Shimp nodded. “Mike, there’s something I’m not clear about. You said you took Patty straight home from Fat Jimmy’s?”

“Yeah.”

“How far a drive was it?”

“Five minutes? No more than ten.”

“So you had her home...twelve-thirty? Somewhere around there?”

“About then.”

“And you went straight home after.”

Adamchik getting a little testy. “Yeah.”

“This is what I don’t get. Patty’s niece—you’re right, she lived with her niece—says Patty never came home.”

“Maybe the niece fell asleep and didn’t hear her.”

“The niece will swear she sat up until at least two o’clock.”

“So? I’ll swear I dropped her off around 12:30.”

“Will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Swear. It might come to that.”

“Why do you think I’m talking to you at all? I know when I dropped her off and when I went home. I didn’t do nothing to her. You think I’m dumb enough to kill her and talk to you about it?”

Doc kept what he thought to himself. Stared at Adamchik until the silence became uncomfortable. “You’ll swear you took her straight home.”

“If it comes to it.”

“To an address you’re not sure about.”

“It was dark.”

“To a house you’re not sure you can identify.”

“How many times I gotta tell you it was dark? It was dark, okay? I had a few drinks, okay? I guess I don’t meet your high standards for...whatever. Fuck your standards.”

Doc tapped a fingernail against his top teeth. Looked at Shimp then back to Adamchik. "You dropped her off at home, yet she was found in the lot where the old Gulf station used to be. Nearly a mile between the two. I can't figure out how she got there."

"That's your problem. I went straight home. How should I know what she did after I dropped her off? Maybe she went out again."

Doc pretended to think. "Maybe. The niece says she waited up, but eyewitness testimony can be iffy. Niece worked all day, she means well, but she gets tired, dozes off just in time to miss Patty tippy-toeing off to bed."

Shimp: "Didn't she say she checked later and Patty's bed hadn't been slept in?"

Doc snapped his fingers. "Thank you, Detective. I almost forgot." Back into the rhythm they'd developed over the past couple of years. He returned his attention to Adamchik. "Did you see Patty go into the house?"

"I wasn't paying attention. She got out and I backed the car out of the driveway and went home. It was late."

"Dark, too."

Shimp asked if there being a driveway might help Adamchik find the house again. "Yeah, I suppose, but so what? Yinz know where the house is, right?"

Doc crossed his legs. Leaned back in the chair. Mr. Conversational. "You're thinking she decided she didn't want to go home after all? Maybe she went back out?"

"I guess she must have if you found her down the Gulf station."

"Even though she specifically asked you to take her home right before and had to give you directions to make sure she got there."

Adamchik opened his hands. "Women change their minds all the time. It's a thing."

Once again, Shimp impressed Doc with her professionalism and reacted not at all. He said, "She changes her mind and decides to go for a walk down Greensburg Road. No sidewalks, approaching vehicles at her back based on the side of the street we found her. That's your story?"

"I ain't got a story about what she did after I left her off. I wasn't there. She was kind of a goofy broad. Who knows what she mighta done?"

"Goofy in what way?" Shimp said.

"I don't know. I mean, look at it. Woman her age hitching a ride with dark coming on. Then she gets me to take her to buy some grass, goes to a bar with a guy she met like an hour ago."

"She wasn't too goofy for you to tell her no, though. Was she?"

Doc took the wheel. "Hold on, Detective Shimp. I think maybe Mike means 'goofy' different than how you're thinking. He means it as a backhanded compliment, at least as far as what plans he might've been making on the fly. Am I close, Mike?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Mike. She didn't look like much by the time we got to her, but everyone who knew her said Patty Polcyn was an attractive woman. Very attractive, depending on who we asked. A certain...goofy attitude in a hot woman can be a good thing. You agree?"

"I...uh...I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"Never mind." A quick glance at Shimp, whose expression told Doc she was right with him. "Detective Shimp, do you mind if I take another minute? I'm still not clear on something."

“Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you. Promise not to tax either of your patience any more than I have to. Now, Mike, about what Patty did after you took her home. If she walked west along Greensburg Road—which she had to do for us to find her where we did—the only thing within a couple of miles worth walking to is Dairy Queen.”

“She said she liked ice cream.”

“She must’ve liked it a hell of a lot to want to walk to DQ that time of night.”

“Maybe she drove.”

“Where’s her car, then?”

“How would I know?”

“You must’ve seen it when you took her home. We found it parked right in front of the house.”

“Like I said, it was dark.”

“You’re missing the point. If she drove to Dairy Queen and wound up dead at the Gulf station along the way, how’d her car get home?”

“She must’ve parked it there.”

Shimp: “Now I’m confused. You’re saying you dropped her off and then she drove herself to Dairy Queen?”

“Could’ve.”

“Then she drove home, parked in front of her house, and *then* walked back to where she was killed.” Shimp still too new in town to think of it as the old Gulf station. Doc figured she’d need another couple years, though this case could speed the process.

“Fu—hell if I know what she did. I never said shit about nothing. Her going to Dairy Queen’s something you two cooked up.”

“Because it’s the only thing in reasonable walking distance in the direction she had to go.” Doc paused to give Adamchik time to refocus on him. “Forget the car. We’ll agree she walked, and what might prompt her to walk in that direction—alone—was some ice cream on a hot night. You remember telling us she said she loved ice cream?”

“I don’t know if I said she loved it, but I guess she liked it. Who doesn’t like ice cream?”

“My brother.”

“Your brother hates ice cream?”

“I didn’t say he hates it. It hates him.”

“Huh?”

“Lactose intolerant.” Shimp’s head sank an inch. Doc stifled a smile. The mention of Drew’s nonexistent lactose issues had diverted many a suspect. “If you dropped Patty off around 12:30—is that time still good for you? Approximately?”

“Yeah. Maybe a little earlier.”

“Quarter after?”

“Somewhere in there.”

“You drop her off at a quarter after twelve...” A pause to give Adamchik a chance to disagree. “I don’t see any way she walks to Dairy Queen before quarter to one. It’s summer and all, and I remember that day as being hotter’n a bastard, so maybe she had a hankering for ice cream later than usual, but Dairy Queen closes at ten. No one likes ice cream so much they’ll walk a mile just to look at the sign, see what time they open again.”

“Now you’re back on Dairy Queen. I never said she went there.”

“I’m trying to account for what sent her out walking—alone—that time of night.”

“Who the fuck knows? I mean, I dropped her off and she ended up down the road. If her car was at the house, she must’ve walked to get there. Why is her business?”

Shimp used what Doc thought of as her “still” voice. Never failed to get a suspect’s attention. “She didn’t walk.”

Adamchik turned toward her ready to argue. Her voice threw him. “How’d she get there?”

“Someone drove her.”

Adamchik looked from one cop to the other. “I told yinz already. I dropped her off at home. What she done after ain’t on me.”

Doc turned his chair so he could rest his elbows on the table. The scraping sound in the small, hard room seemed to unnerve Adamchik. “We can prove Patty didn’t walk. You’d like us to believe you took her home and she—what? Got bored? Asked someone else to take her out, with her own car sitting in front of the house? And that person kills her? The person who took Patty Polcyn to the Gulf station was you. Had to be.”

“Bullshit. Prove it.”

“Her shoe.”

Adamchik looked at Doc as if he’d said “her plimgarden.” “I don’t understand.”

“What kind of shoes did Patty have on?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Didn’t notice or don’t remember?”

Adamchik showed impatience. “Does it matter?”

“It might.” Adamchik stewed and hemmed and hawed around until Doc said, “It wasn’t her feet drew your attention is what you’re saying.”

“Yeah. Okay?”

“Patty Polcyn wore flip-flops that night. We only found one with the body, which is how we know she didn’t walk down Greensburg Road. No one would take that walk with one shoe off.”

“Maybe it fell apart or something. Those flip-flops are pieces of shit.”

Doc’s voice stayed quiet and calm. “We looked along the road all the way back to her house and a hundred yards the other direction. Besides, her right foot isn’t marked up like it would be if she’d walked barefoot with all the cinders, gravel, pieces of glass, and shit along the side of the road. No, she got a ride and she got it from the last person anyone saw her getting into a car with. You have it, Detective Shimp?” Shimp produced a folded sheaf of paper. “This is a warrant to search your car.”

“For what?”

“Anything that belonged to Patty Polcyn. Flip-flop, maybe.”

“That’s bullshit. I *told* you she was in the car.”

“We’re more interested in how she left.” Adamchik showed confusion. “No one—no one—gets out of a car and leaves a shoe behind unless under duress. We’re going to step out for a bit. Use your me time to think of how you’re going to explain away us finding her missing flip-flop in all the shit you have in your car.”

11:48 a.m.

“One thing we can prove right now is he’s a lying sack of shit.”

No one argued with Doc while he swallowed Mello Yello. Shimp and Neuschwander sipped bottles of water. “You were in the booth, Noosh. How’d he react when we left?”

Neuschwander had been with the recording equipment behind the one-way glass. The only person who could watch everyone in the interview room. “Relieved as much as anything.”

“He stay in the chair?”

Neuschwander shook his head. “He fidgeted until he must’ve figured you weren’t coming back. Then he started pacing.”

“Good,” Doc said. “I hope the prick has a seizure. He killed that woman sure as water runs downhill.”

Shimp worried Adamchik would ask for a lawyer. Doc smiled. “He’s forgotten all about that. We’ve got him trapped into defending his horseshit story. Calling for a lawyer now is the same as confessing in his mind. Right this minute, he’s refining answers to what he thinks we’re going to ask him. He plans on going home tonight.”

Shimp leaned her water bottle one way, then the other. Tightened and loosened the cap. “How do you think it went, Rick?”

“I didn’t hear him say anything particularly useful.”

“We’ve got him in a couple of easily proven lies,” Doc said.

“What did you catch?” Neuschwander said.

“He said he didn’t see Patty go in the house because he was backing out of the driveway and had his head turned, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Patty Polcyn’s house doesn’t have a driveway.”

“We need a confession,” Shimp said. “Catching him in a lie like that won’t convince a jury. Sally will let him plead to involuntary manslaughter.”

“If we’re lucky,” Doc read his pop can like an answer. “He’s not going to confess. Not to anything with intent. We can trip him up, though. We catch him in enough serious lies, put her in the car with him at the Gulf station, a jury might be willing to go Murder Two.”

Shimp made a *meh* gesture. “Everything he said up to them leaving Fat Jimmy’s checks out. It’s after that his story gets shaky, and we have nothing concrete to refute it.”

“What do you think happened?” Neuschwander said.

Shimp looked at Doc. He deferred. “They left Fat Jimmy’s together. She wanted to go home, and he took her in the general direction. Do we know who paid for their drinks?”

“He did,” Doc said. “One of the witnesses—I forget which one—said Adamchik acted like a big spender. It’s in my notes.”

“I thought so. Radaker’s statement confirms she didn’t buy any dope and we know Adamchik paid for the drinks. My idea is she asked him to take her home and he thought he was going to get lucky until she told him her niece might be waiting up. He got mad. He spent money and invested the last of his dope for nothing. He takes her to the parking lot to work something out and she doesn’t want to. He insists and she fights him.”

“The Hatfields said she’d fight like hell anyone who wanted something she wasn’t willing to give,” Doc said.

“Things get out of hand and she storms out of the car—”

“Or he drags her out.”

Shimp nodded. “Either way, she leaves in a hurry and one of her shoes comes off. The left one’s missing, right?”

“Yep.”

“That would be the trailing foot and the shoe most likely to be left behind. The medical examiner said she wasn’t knocked down by the car, so...what? She fell?”

“Fell or stumbled. Drinking had been done,” Doc said.

“Could he have come around, dragged her out, and thrown her down?” Neuschwander said. “She hits her head and he knows he’s in a jackpot when she wakes up.”

“It’s possible,” Shimp said.

“It’s more than possible,” Doc said. “Adamchik strikes me as the kind of guy figures Patty better be good for at least a hand job after all he’s invested in her. He almost has to be for the crime scene to lay out the way it did.”

“Did the coroner ever reach a conclusion whether there’d been a struggle?” Neuschwander said.

“The body was too badly mangled,” Shimp said. “No way to tell if she had a head injury prior to being run over.”

She turned to Doc. “The running-over part. An accident? Or did he do it on purpose?”

“I’m voting for on purpose, especially if she had a head injury he wanted to cover up. Truth is, I don’t really care. We know he ran her over. We just have to be able to prove it. Motive or intent is Sally’s job.”

“Are you comfortable leaving it up to her? Knowing how she likes to reduce charges?”

Doc opened his hands. “What choice do we have? We could hand her a videotape of Adamchik beating Patty’s brains in with a ball-peen hammer and crushing her under the car to cover it up, laughing like the Joker all the while, and she’d plead it down to involuntary if the video wasn’t high definition. I made my peace with our position a while ago. We provide evidence and what happens happens.”

“It’s not much of a case,” Shimp said.

Doc drained the can. Crushed it in his hand. “Two days ago we had an open file with no viable suspects. Now we’re filling in around the edges. Life is full of surprises. Let’s see if Erv can find anything in Mikey’s car.”

12:17 p.m.

Brendan Sullivan asked Doc for “a moment” before the three detectives got halfway to the stairwell leading to the garage where Michael Adamchik’s car was impounded. Doc waved Shimp and Neuschwander ahead and went into the chief’s office.

Doc’s eyes went to where Stush used to keep his dish of jellybeans or Hershey Kisses or little Tootsie Rolls. Sharing a piece of candy always a nice way to ease into an uncomfortable meeting, which Doc reckoned this would be.

His seat still warming when Sullivan asked what happened during the drug roust the day before. “What do you want to know?” Doc said.

“Everything.”

Doc gave the highlights without embellishment or opinion. Sullivan said, “You didn’t tell me anything you didn’t already have in your report.”

“I knew you’d want details so I took my time and wrote it as well as I could.”

“That’s not what I meant. It’s a good report. Thorough. I’m confident everything that happened is in it.” A beat. “I want to know why.”

“You’ve been in those kinds of situations, Chief. There’s never one single reason. Any of several things could’ve broken differently and nothing happens.”

Sullivan flipped through the report. “Tell me about Boston.”

“He engaged physically when he didn’t have to.”

“Which led to Burrows having her gun taken.” Doc nodded grudging assent. “Did Boston go outside the use of force continuum?”

Forget the candy. Doc could use a beer. “I’d say more like...overenthusiastic.”

Sullivan nodded like he didn’t really mean it. “An error of enthusiasm. I’m not trying to get you to talk out of school about another officer, but I need to know. Boston showed more ‘enthusiasm’ than he should have when I took a corner, too. I need to know if I have a problem officer on my hands.”

“How big a problem are you worried about?”

“Explain your question.”

“No offense, Chief, but I don’t think we have a rogue cop or anything like. He gets rough but not the kind of rough that lands someone in the hospital or the morgue. He does have rabbit ears, but we’ll take care of it.”

Sullivan leaned into his thinking pose. “Fair enough. He hasn’t been here very long, and this is his first job. Still, you see or hear of anything else along these lines, I want to know about it. Which brings me to the other reason I called you in.” Gave Doc a few seconds to shift gears. “I’m the chief. Snyder’s the deputy. Zywiciel’s the patrol sergeant.” His eyes might have smiled. “But everyone knows you’re the soul of the department.”

“I don’t know about that, Chief.”

“I do. People stand a little straighter around you, even when you’re jaggging around. No one wants to look bad in your eyes.”

Doc already knew he wouldn’t like what came next when Sullivan said, “I’m promoting you to detective sergeant. The other detectives will report to you, and you directly to me. Or Snyder. You and Zywiciel are peers.”

“Respectfully, Chief, I’d rather not.”

“That’s why I didn’t ask. Paperwork’s already in. Raise starts first of next month.”

Doc prided himself on not spending time in recovery mode, yet here he was. “Again, no disrespect meant, but with only two other detectives, we really can’t afford to have one taken off the street pushing paper.”

“I agree.” Doc showed his confusion. “Think of yourself as first among equals. Run the squad as you see fit. Get results and I won’t bother you.” Raised a finger before Doc could interrupt. “And we’re getting the fourth detective. I want you to help with the interviews.”

“They found money?”

“Money was always there. The mayor was squeezing Napierkowski.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I shit you not. I have it from good sources I won’t disclose that not only was the mayor starving Stan for resources, the city’s going to open the spigot a little on the assumption the more effective I look, the worse it looks for him. That’s a dirty trick and I don’t appreciate being used, not to mention it dishonors a good man who devoted his life to this town.” Leveled his sights on Doc. “I don’t think I like the mayor, and I already know I can live without Dan Hecker and his crew. They hurt this town to work out their personal issues. Whatever their motives, there are things we’re going to be able to do we couldn’t do before. At least for a while.”

A lot to absorb in a meeting Sullivan began with “A moment, please.” The chief’s posture made it clear the time had come for Doc to talk. “This is going to damage some working relationships.”

“Everyone likes you. They’ll get over it.”

“People aren’t going to be able to talk to me like they can now.”

“Eggs in an omelet. You’re already a leader here. This formalizes it.”

Ruins it came to Doc’s mind. As management, he’d be duty-bound to report things up the chain people were used to coming to him with in confidence. “How soon’s the new detective coming on board?”

“We have resumes I want you to look at. I have a couple on my shortlist, but I want your input, too. I thought I’d pick three, you pick three, and those are who we’ll bring in for interviews. Put them in the box if it’ll make you more comfortable.”

12:35 p.m.

“This is the sweet ride you promised I’d get to work on?”

Word on the street had Earvin “Don’t Call Me Magic” Johnson as one of the three best mechanics in Penns River; the other two conceded the top spot to Erv. What the cops needed was beneath his skill level, but Doc suggested Shimp get the best in case something unexpected came up. And to throw Erv some easy cash.

Doc and Erv enjoyed jaggng each other for an audience. Shimp and Neuschwander drew up seats to watch the show. “I told you I hadn’t seen the car, Erv. Didn’t have a suspect when we first talked about it. I guess you need more than the unofficial police department designation of best mechanic in Penns River. We could’ve got Jim Tesso cheaper and you have to admit he’s good—”

“Not as good as me.”

“—not as good as you but still more than good enough for what we need today. We give you this high-profile gig—with luck, you’ll get to testify, which is like free advertising—we pay you besides, and you want to be entertained, too? Should we put a stripper in the next car?”

“You coulda put a stripper in this one and we still not found her, all the shit in it.” Erv gestured toward a pile in the corner. “All that come out of the trunk.”

Doc looked toward Shimp and Neuschwander. Neither smiled now. “We took everything out of the trunk and back seat and inventoried what we could identify,” Shimp said. “Nothing useful unless Rick finds some fibers when he vacuums the interior. We don’t need Erv for that, so we’ll do his part first.”

“By the way,” Erv said to the room. “What am I looking for?”

“We need you for two things,” Doc said. “One is to give us as good a history as you can of this car’s paint jobs. The other is can you help us find any trace of this woman under the car.”

“Any trace of her *under* the car?”

“Pieces of her, Erv. Skin. Blood. Hair. Our suspect admits she was inside the car. We need to prove she was under it.”

That took the piss out of Erv’s vinegar. “This the car run that woman over down the Flats a while back?”

“We think so.”

Erv’s face showed this was more than he’d bargained for. He’d worked on thefts and accidents. A carjacking. Never a homicide. He was a pro, though, and got right with the program. “Anyone here knows what I’m looking for looks like?”

“I’ll help you, Erv,” Neuschwander said. “We just have to go real slow. Everything we find needs to be documented and its exact location accounted for.”

Erv pressed a button to raise the lift. “Let’s get to it, then.”

Neuschwander stood next to Erv while Doc took Shimp aside. “You’re the primary, so it’s your call, but can I make a suggestion?” He could. “Ricky knows more about evidence collection than both of us combined. Erv knows more about cars than everyone in town put together. Let’s us get out of their way and take another run at our boy upstairs.”

“We don’t have anything new to use on him.”

“He doesn’t know that. Besides, I think him making us draw his story out like he did threw me off my plan. I’d like to change things up a little this time if you don’t mind.”

1:09 p.m.

Doc looked through the window in the interview room door. Adamchik stood facing the two-way mirror, deep in thought. Didn't appear too worried. Not relaxed, either. More like a man with things on his mind.

Doc gave a light knock. Opened the door. "Sorry. I didn't think we'd be that long. You want anything? Another Coke? Sandwich? Bathroom break?"

Ushered Adamchik to the men's room. Held the door and stood aside. Adamchik asked if Doc worried about him making a break for it. "I work here, remember? This is the only way out."

"You're not afraid I'll try to beat you to death with a toilet seat or nothing?"

"There's a dozen sworn officers in this building, and we can get that many more here by the time you got to the parking lot. Get in there."

Adamchik decided he was hungry on their way back. Doc asked if McDonald's was okay. He liked Bob's better but he ate there yesterday and, besides, fuck this guy. McDonald's was fine with Adamchik.

Teresa Shimp stepped out of the observation room as Doc passed. "I'm going for lunch," he said. "You want me to bring you back something?"

"Where are you going?"

"McDonald's."

"I have yogurt in the refrigerator. I'll be in observation by the time you get back."

Doc returned in twenty minutes with two Quarter Pounder with Cheese meals. Super-sized. Doc's had bacon. (Fuck this guy.) Large Cokes. Laid everything on the table, including napkins. He and Adamchik started to eat.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Ketchup stuck to one corner of Adamchik's lip.

"I have a few more questions and I always believe these things go better in a spirit of cooperation. My partner, she's not always on board. I thought we could talk before she gets back from the garage."

"What are they doing to my car?"

"Poking around. No one's ripping anything apart. You know Erv Johnson?"

"Know of him."

"He's down there helping out. Nothing bad is going to happen to your car."

Adamchik appeared placated. "We're about done, then?"

"Pretty close." Doc chewed his burger. Took his time. Reminded himself Adamchik's had no bacon. "Detective Shimp's a good cop, very conscientious. She's also very by the book and...well, she's a woman. There are things she doesn't get. Know what I mean?"

"I guess. She does seem to have an idea about how she thinks things should've happened."

"Exactly what I'm talking about. She's never been in the situation you were in that night. Not the way another man would've been." Doc watched Adamchik's chewing slow. Went ahead when he saw the light bulb go on. "You see where I'm going here, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"They're searching your car right now. We both know you're more interested in vehi-

cle maintenance than tidiness so there's a good chance they're going to find something to place Patty Polcyn in your car."

"I always said she was in my car."

"That's right, you did. You've been straight with us on that."

"So what does it matter if they can prove she was in it?"

Doc ate a few fries. Swallowed some Coke to give the impression of thought, though he'd known what came next while standing in the garage. "I'm up here talking to you by myself because I don't think you did anything dramatically wrong. I have to tell you, though, the more we find the less likely I think it is your story will hold up."

"I *told* you she was in the car. Said so from the start."

"What I'm getting at is...if Shimp finds anything, anything at all, that casts doubt on that...say she finds something that can only be explained by Patty being in your car after you say you dropped her off. Or ties Patty to the gas station. She undermines any one element you haven't already copped to, then your whole story's in the shitter. You understand what I'm telling you?"

"How many times do I have to tell *you*? I dropped her off and went straight home."

Doc shook his head while sucking Coke through the straw. "I'm not interested in that anymore. You said you picked her up walking along Leechburg Road, which we know is true. Why'd you stop for her?"

"She was thumbing."

"You pick up every hitchhiker you pass?"

Adamchik started to answer. Stopped. Tried again. "There was still enough light to see pretty good, and she looked pretty good in it. She had on that baggy top, but the way it was hanging I had a pretty good idea of what was inside. You know what I mean?"

"A little side boobage?"

"Not like she put on a show or nothing. I seen she was older than I expected when she got in the car, but she was still good-looking. And I like women with reddish blond hair."

Doc lowered his voice, not so much the microphone wouldn't pick it up. "Between us, woman looks like her, dressed the way she was, hitching a ride with dark coming on? Give a man ideas. I know it would me."

Adamchik looked happy to have found a kindred spirit. "Don't get me wrong. I wasn't thinking of raping her or nothing."

Doc dropped his sandwich on the wrapper. Sat back with his hands up. "No no no no no. Last thing on my mind." Relaxed. "Still. You're a healthy specimen. What are you? Thirty?" Twenty-eight years, six months, and four days, as Doc well knew.

"Twenty-eight."

"Pssh. You're probably still good for three or four a night. Me? I'm forty. Pretty much one and done. Maybe two if suitably inspired. How's that song go? Now it takes me all night to do what I used to do all night?"

"They have stuff for that, you know."

"Here's the thing, Mike." Doc leaned in, a co-conspirator. "You get to be my age, what you really want after the first one is for her to leave so you can sleep. Why I don't bring them to my place anymore."

Adamchik almost looked sorry for this broken-down excuse for a man. "That's too bad."

"Circle of life an' 'at. At your age, I would've at least wondered what it felt like under

her shirt. Am I right?"

"It crossed my mind."

Agreeing on appropriate male behavior lowered the tension a degree. "So she's in the car and you're driving her in the general direction of home. Whose idea was it to score some pot?"

Adamchik shot a glance at the two-way mirror. Leaned in for a confidential exchange. "We was talking, you know? She was going on about what a shitty day she had and how all she really wanted to do was go home and catch a little buzz. Just take the edge off, right? But she didn't have any pot. I wasn't sure if she was fishing around trying to find out if I had any, but I did have a little, so I figured what the hell. We went down that park there off the bypass. You know, by Puckety Creek?"

"I know the spot. Took a couple girls there myself when I was a kid."

"It's about dark, no one else around, so I rolled us a little joint, but I only had enough for us to want more."

"You two're getting along pretty good by this time, right?"

"Yeah. She was fun. I liked her."

"So you smoked a little weed. You try to get in her pants?"

"No, man, nothing like that."

"A gentleman, like I figured. This must be when you went to see her friend the dealer."

"Right."

"Only he doesn't have any. Or so she says."

"Or so she says."

Doc let the silence linger. "Who came up with the idea of going to Fat Jimmy's?"

"She did. Neither of us felt like driving all over hell and gone looking for grass. We had a start. Beer would do us."

"Why didn't you pick up a six and go over to your place?"

"Dude, my girlfriend was home. She ain't into surprise threesomes."

"Ah," Doc said, chastened. "So now you're letting the situation play out hoping she'll invite you over to her place later."

"I didn't know about the niece yet."

"Gotcha." Doc's phone buzzed. Read the text from Neuschwander. Shook his head. "Never teach your mother to text. I thought it would be a good idea, her and the old man getting up there. She could keep me posted when I can't talk. Now it's like I got a vibrator in my pocket. I should've told her to text my sister. At least she'd have some fun with it. Where were we?"

"What's she want?"

"Who?"

"Your mom."

"She says Dad's cutting the grass and she's afraid he's gonna fall off the mower."

"He ever fall off before?"

"Once I know of. How old are your parents?"

"Late forties, early fifties I guess. Why?"

"Still young, then. Mine have reached the point where the house they live in and the yard my dad cuts twice a week are too much for them. She knows it's only a matter of time before he falls off the mower, and he knows the same thing about her landing at the

bottom of the cellar stairs doing the laundry, but neither one of them want to hear about moving to someplace safer. They'd rather break my balls worrying about them." Doc dry-washed his face. "Anyways, you were hoping Patty invites you home and figure you're in when she asks you to take her. I mean, she has friends in Fat Jimmy's who'd do it as a favor, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume she has plans for you. I bet you were pissed when she told you about the niece."

"It wasn't what I expected, her waiting till we were halfway there to say anything."

"You pulled into the old Gulf station to negotiate. I mean, she helped you smoke up the rest of your dope, let you pay for her drinks. I'll bet you got a nice tease. We heard about those titties half hanging out of her shirt from the witnesses saw you both at Fat Jimmy's."

"Well, yeah. You know, I was trying to salvage something out of it."

Doc snapped his fingers. "That's the word I was looking for. Salvage. If you weren't going to get laid, her going down on you shouldn't be out of the question. At least a handie, for Chrissakes."

"Something like that. I took her straight home after, though."

"After what? You get some?"

Adamchik looked half embarrassed. "No."

"Nothing?"

"Uh-uh."

"Did you press your case?"

"What do you mean?"

"How...forcefully did you handle the negotiations?"

"Hey! I told you I didn't rape her if that's what you're getting at."

Doc reacted as if the suggestion offended him. "I apologize. Bad choice of words. The rape kit came back clean so no worries there." Gave Adamchik a chance to settle down. Suppressed a small smile. He was finally going to get to do it. "I'm not working sex crimes here, Mike. I'm murder police. This *me-too* bullshit has men paranoid every pass the woman doesn't instantly accept is rape or sexual assault or an unwanted advance or whatever the feminists want to call it. You and me, we know better. Did you touch her? Did things get physical in any way?"

"No. I might've slid my hand along her arm but nothing rough."

"It's good you told me, and here's why. The ME got some scrapings from under her fingernails. We're going to get a DNA sample from you later. If this is your story and we find your DNA under her nails..."

"We kissed some. Does that count?"

"You get any tongue? Give any?"

"Uh, yeah. Probably. Maybe. Fuck, I don't know. It's not like I was taking notes."

"It's okay. Probably nothing to worry about."

"Probably? Can they get DNA from inside someone else's mouth?"

Doc leaned back in his chair. Finger-combed his hair. The pre-arranged signal. "Who knows? The science advances so fast I can't keep up with it and it's my job. Did she get enthusiastic while you were kissing?"

"What do you mean, enthusiastic?"

"Did she scratch you?"

"No. No. Wait." Deep and probing thought. "Yeah, now that I think about it, she

scratched me pretty good on my arm. All healed up now. It's been a while."

A knock at the door. Shimp and Neuschwander entered. Neuschwander carried a small evidence bag. Doc kept his attention on Adamchik. "Detective Shimp. Detective Neuschwander. You find anything interesting in the car? Stray flip-flop, maybe?"

Shimp showed disappointment. "No flip-flop." Adamchik fought off most of a smile. "We didn't waste *all* our time, though. Detective Neuschwander, show them what you and Erv found."

"Thank you, Detective Shimp." Neuschwander looked ready to burst. Took one paper and one plastic bag from the larger package. Laid the plastic bag on the table. Looked like he'd emptied a Shop-Vac. "It's bad to keep potential DNA evidence in a plastic bag, but we have enough we can afford to keep a demonstration sample and still have what we need for evidence." Showed Adamchik the paper bag, placed it back in the larger one.

Doc pointed to the mess in the clear bag. "What *is* that?"

"This is what Erv Johnson found wrapped around the axle of Mr. Adamchik's car. Most of it is the usual road junk and debris everyone's car picks up driving around."

"So?"

Neuschwander opened the plastic bag. Took forceps from his pocket and fished around inside. "Not every car has this."

Doc felt a gnawing worry Neuschwander might overmilk his moment in the spotlight. "And what exactly is this unique thing?"

"This." Neuschwander plucked a single strand from the bag with the forceps. "It's one of Patty Polcyn's hairs. See the color?"

Adamchik shrank in his chair. Doc said, "It's got shit all over it. Won't that contaminate the DNA?" Letting Neuschwander have his fun.

"It might." Neuschwander paused to give Adamchik a chance to grow a little hope. Doc swelled with pride for having taught him so well. "No way to tell in advance. What we can prove for sure is this hair has been dyed. Its natural color is darker, starting to show gray."

Doc's eyes absorbed everything Adamchik did. "Is there anyone connected with this case who has hair like that?"

"Patty Polcyn did."

"Patty Polcyn." Doc turned his gaze on Adamchik up a notch. "Mikey, Mikey, Mikey. Tell me again how you took Patty home and left before she got in the house and her hair ended up wrapped around your axle. Take your time. We have no place else to be, and this story will buy me drinks for a long time."

"You said yourself the DNA test might be fucked up. That could be anyone's hair."

"Jesus Christ, Mike. How many dyed copper blondes have you run over that you can't keep track of them?"

Adamchik stared at the table. Then his face brightened as if he remembered some cherished memory from childhood. "I want a lawyer before I say another fucking word to yinz guys."

**WEDNESDAY
SEPTEMBER 4**

2:28 p.m.

Doc heard Shimp the first time. Asked her to say again.

“Sally’s thinking of letting Adamchik plead to reckless endangerment.”

“Reckless endangerment?” Doc said it as if the words tasted like sewage. “Reckless endangerment? Christ on a popsicle stick, Teresa, reckless endangerment is a fucking second-degree misdemeanor. We got a woman dead because she wanted to help a friend. She needed a ride because she’d already loaned her car to her niece. She ends up dead because she wouldn’t blow a piece of shit like Adamchik, and good on her. Now Sally decides the guy who killed her can’t do real time? That’s her idea of justice?”

Brendan Sullivan walked into the detectives’ office before Shimp could reply. “It’s her idea of a conviction.” Dropped a folder on the vacant fourth detective’s desk. “You were smart not to go. We’d probably have to hold you on a felony charge.”

Shimp had asked Doc if he wanted to go. He and Sally Gwynn went way back, and Teresa said she hoped he’d know a button to push. Doc said his history with Sally wasn’t always a good thing, considering the disparaging comments he’d made about her plea deals, often in her presence. Sullivan went in Doc’s place to “get a better feel for the dynamic between the police and the DA’s office,” though Doc hadn’t ruled out the possibility Sully wanted a look at the woman acclaimed as the hottest in Penns River by unanimous consent, including hers.

Sullivan let Doc get it out of his system. “Maybe Sally needs to take a jury selection class. Maneuver for an all-male jury, get right up to the box for her closing argument, maybe give them an up-from-under look to make them think she might be willing to give a peek inside that blue silk blouse matches her eyes. Get the light to catch those freckles on her throat and chest and they’d send Ralphie from that Christmas movie to death row.” Sat on the edge of the desk, his anger spent. “Reckless fucking endangerment. Jesus Christ.”

“I’ll talk to her boss,” Sullivan said. “See if we can’t get him to try for at least involuntary man.”

“The next time we get him to override Sally will be the first. You think he doesn’t love a ninety-eight percent conviction rate as much as she does?”

“Look at it from their perspective,” Shimp said. “We don’t have any witnesses. We don’t have any impact injuries. No damage to the car. It’s not the greatest case.”

Doc respected the hell out of Teresa Shimp. Her first case as primary a stone whodunit and she broke it through good old-fashioned police work. No gee-whiz forensics. No DNA. The only trace evidence worth mentioning were the hairs from Adamchik’s axle, and she had to find him and the car before she could look for them. She showed the class Doc wished he’d have under similar circumstances, though he was outraged enough for both of them and two or three other people besides.

Teresa played with the bow on her blouse. “I knew we’d need a confession. I should’ve got one.”

“You might have if I hadn’t talked you into getting cute with that male bonding thing,” Doc said. “We should’ve stuck with your original plan and worn him down. Or done him like we did that kid last year. The one that gave up Jack Harriger’s shooter?”

Kept him confused with different angles. This asshole is too dumb for me to let him beat me like this.”

“He was smart enough to ask for a lawyer when he realized how deep he was in.” Sullivan leaned into the door jamb. “I read the transcript. You two were close. Fenced him into a story he couldn’t defend until he was one wrong comment away from going down when he remembered his escape hatch and took it. He didn’t beat you. He beat the system. You did good work, all of you.”

Quiet for a while until Doc said, “She’s not going to start with murder? See if the defense attorney surprises her by offering involuntary man? Even if he—”

“She,” Shimp said.

“She countered with leaving the scene, Sally could split the difference and end up with involuntary. The only way they could plead to RE would be if the alternative was to drop the charges altogether.”

“I asked about that,” Shimp said. Doc raised an eyebrow. “She told me if she started with murder the defense would insist on a trial. Any offer Sally made then would look like she was caving, and they’d end up here sooner or later, anyway. So she saved everyone the trouble.”

“Decent of her.” Doc not mad anymore. This was the job. Some days took longer to remind you than others. “What’s next, Chief?”

“This case is down. Michael Adamchik killed Patty Polcyn. The only thing in dispute is how the lawyers resolve it. We did what we do. Now we do something else.”

Doc checked his watch. Ten minutes till end of shift. “Speaking of which, I have a couple of something elses to do. I’m giving email one last check, then I’m out.”

“Mind if I steal a minute before you go?” Sullivan said.

“You want to do it now?”

“Come down to my office with me.”

Cutting Shimp out of the conversation and closing the door behind them told Doc all he needed to know about this chat. Sullivan remained standing on the visitor’s side of the desk. “You think about the sergeant’s job?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Sullivan showed his tight little smile. “Not really.” Saw Doc’s lips tense. “What can I say? Some men have greatness thrust upon them.”

Time for Doc’s own salvage operation. “Can I ask a favor?” Sullivan gestured assent. “I want a chance to get together with the detectives before you make any announcements.”

“Fair enough.”

“And I want to run the squad as I see fit. I fuck it up, demote me. I don’t want to be second-guessed or micromanaged.”

The tight smile again. “I wouldn’t promote you if I thought there was a chance in hell you’d fuck it up, but okay. I want to be in the loop and make an occasional suggestion. I am the chief.”

“I’m not talking about going rogue or being insubordinate. I want to keep my mind on the work.”

“Understood and agreed. We’ll get together a couple of times a week. I can make my suggestions then, though if you need something for a case, don’t wait. My door is always open.”

Sullivan extended his hand. Held on to Doc's as they shook. "I know you don't want the job and I appreciate you not bitching about it. I know it changes the dynamic between you and everyone else. The department needs this and you're the one person who can do it. Give it a year and you'll see I'm right."

Doc nodded and turned to leave. Sullivan called him back. "If it makes you feel any better, the mayor is not amused." Doc gave his version of Sullivan's semi-smile. A better man would not have felt so good about it, but no better man was available.

**THURSDAY
SEPTEMBER 5**

12:47 a.m.

No one in Crowe's Diner when Doc walked in except Phyllis Greer wiping down the counter. The kitchen already dark.

Doc took his favorite seat. "Don't worry. I'm not going to ask anyone to cook for me." Pointed to the chocolate cake under the dome on the counter. "And some milk."

Phyllis poured the milk. Brought it over. Separated a piece of cake onto a plate and placed it in front of Doc. "Kind of late for cake, isn't it?"

"I'm working a case." Doc took a bite. Chewed until the cake and icing dissolved in his mouth. "God damn, this is good cake."

"Having trouble with it?"

"With what?"

"The case. Keeping you up this late."

"It's coming together. Still got a few ends to tie off before I can go to sleep."

Phyllis got a gleam in her eye. "Is it really a case or are you on your way home from Stacey's again?"

Doc added another load to his mouth. Pointed the fork at Phyllis. "That's good. Remembering her name. It's not her, though."

"Still seeing her?"

"It's not like we were *seeing* each other, not like dating."

"I'm trying to be ladylike about this, Dougherty. I guess your cop buddies would ask if you were still fucking her."

"They might be a little more colorful, but yeah. Cops investigate things for a living. No point beating around the bush." A sip of milk. "We got together a few times. Nothing regular."

"Who makes the booty calls?"

"Anyone ever tell you what a nosy broad you are?"

"Just making conversation."

Phyllis resumed cleaning. Doc asked her to wait. "I've been busy and a little out of touch. Whatever happened with you and Dickie buying this place?"

"We're close. Joe and Sal gave us some extra time and agreed to finance a little themselves."

Doc chewed cake, careful to get every crumb in contact with as many taste buds as possible. "You're not afraid of getting robbed again? All the loose cash the casino draws in?"

"Not anymore. It was one of those planets aligning things, you know? Joe got sick, I got busy, the buses stopped in. What are the odds of everything happening at the same time again?"

"Not too good, you put it that way." Doc glanced around the room. "Earlier than now, right? The robbery."

"Closer to 11:30."

"Good thing it wasn't earlier. Might've given one of the old geezers stopped here to eat on the way home from the casino a heart attack, guy waving a gun around."

Phyllis folded the towel. Put it on the counter and rested her hands there. "Tell you the

truth, I don't think most of them would've noticed. It wasn't like the guy made a scene, yelling and screaming and making people get on the floor. He was...businesslike? Is that a word you can use about a robbery?"

"You just did." Doc waited for the feigned look of disgust to pass. "Guys who do this for a living have it down. They know to get in and get out. No screwing around."

"Like you said, this guy was probably a pro."

Another forkful of cake met its destiny. "Thing about professionals, though, is they don't like to leave money behind."

"You mean the silver? He took all the paper in the till and the safe."

"All diner money, though. How many people were still here when it went down? A dozen or so?"

"Around there."

"And he didn't rob them, too? That's unprofessional."

"You sound disappointed."

"I am, a little. Would've given us something to work with. The pros we have records on who use this MO rob the bystanders, too. They might not like to fool with fencing watches or jewelry, but they always get any cash people have on them. It's their job."

"Maybe he didn't think he had much time. You know, thought there was a silent alarm or something. You cops is right down the road there."

"Maybe. See, a pro would make it his business to know those things. For example, silent alarms work best when the victims are stationary, like in a bank. He'd know where we were and how long it would take us to get here. Picked his time around the shift change, which could be good or bad for him."

"Good or bad?"

"Not as many cops on the street but more of them close by."

Phyllis said, "Ah." Unfolded the towel and went back to wiping the counter.

Doc ate and Phyllis cleaned. Doc asked for another piece of cake. Phyllis told him to help himself, did he want more milk? Doc nodded and waited for her to bring it before he spoke again. "Lucky sumbitch if you ask me."

"Who?"

"The robber. Walks in here on what might've been the busiest night of the year *and* the one night no one goes to the bank. Must be why he didn't rob anyone else. Surprised at how well he did." Phyllis gave Doc his milk. He put a hand over hers to hold it there. "Must've been surprised as all hell not to ask for your ring."

"I don't think I had it on."

Doc said, "Sure you did" and felt her arm go rigid. "I remember commenting how lucky you were he'd missed it."

"Yeah, well, I guess I was due some luck. Too busy for the dishwasher to keep up so I had to wash some glasses by hand. Put on my rubber gloves. It ain't like there's a 'go faster' setting on it."

"I suppose not." The second piece of cake might have been a bridge too far. "So he walks in the door and comes right up to the counter. Shoves the gun in your face and demands all the money in the register and the safe."

"Exactly what he did."

"Which means he knew there was no drop safe."

"Lots of places don't have one."

“Not too many open this late.” Some milk. “Doesn’t matter. He found out somehow. Or he got lucky. We already decided he’s the luckiest crook in the world. Things aren’t adding up the way I’d expect, but that’s what makes this job fun. Things not adding up. There’s one other thing I can’t make up my mind about.”

Only a matter of time before Phyllis had to ask. “What’s that?”

“You were pretty shook up when I took your statement. You remember?”

Phyllis slung the towel over a shoulder. “God’s honest truth? I don’t hardly remember talking to you about it. I know you was here, but what we said is all a haze.”

“You were still scared enough I felt bad for you. Probably why I didn’t think of it at the time.”

“Think of what?”

“You not knowing the guy’s race, him wearing a short-sleeve shirt.”

“I told you, I was so scared I’m surprised I remember anything at all. Except the gun.”

Doc pushed his cake aside. “I wouldn’t of thought twice about it if that was all you remembered. Happens to a lot of people. They’re looking into the muzzle and it looks big enough to shoot a cantaloupe. But you remembered he wore gloves and what kind of gloves. How stocking masks distort facial features. How tall. How heavy. But not that his arms were white. That’s what made me wonder. How, scared as you were, you gave a description just about the opposite of what Dickie looks like. Except for the one thing other witnesses might be sure about.”

Phyllis went white as the towel. “What are you trying to say? You seen how scared I was.”

“Yeah, but of who?” Sipped his milk. “That gave me kind of a hunch, but I like evidence. So we pulled the cell phone records of everyone here when it went down. You know what we found?”

Phyllis five hundred yards into her stare. “Uh-uh.”

“A phone call was made from the house phone here less than fifteen minutes before the robbery. Who do you think got called?”

“What time was it again? Eleven-thirty or twelve? In there? I call Dickie every night before he goes to bed to let him know I’m okay and if I’m going to stop for one on the way home.”

“I wondered about that, knowing how close you are. So I checked a week in each direction, both the house phone and your cell. The robbery was the only night.”

Phyllis’s stare seven hundred yards and growing. “I know I called. I was thinking of going out for a beer before...you know. It happened.”

“What you did was let him know it was time, and to get over here while there were still some witnesses left so no one would think you cleaned out the drawer yourself. The way Dickie tells it—”

“Now I know you’re lying! Dickie didn’t say nothing like that! I know because it ain’t true!”

“Where do you think I been all night, Phyl? Putting it to Stacey? Dickie’s locked up. Took him a while to tell us what we wanted to know because he didn’t want to roll over on you.”

Phyllis’s stare settled in at the full thousand yards. Stood at the entrance to a bridge that crossed a river she wanted no parts of to a shore that frightened her. As much as she wanted to, she knew she couldn’t stay on this side. Everything that had ever provided

safety and comfort—even the illusion of them—now gone forever. The only thing left was to take the first step across to the other side. “It was my idea. Dickie didn’t want nothing to do with it. It was me wore him down.” Doc stared at the counter between his hands. Hoped Phyllis would continue on her own. She didn’t disappoint. “We was out of time and we weren’t real close with the money.”

“I thought they gave you an extension.”

“That was agreed to after. When we showed them how close we was. Tommy Gioia’d own the place now if we didn’t pull that job.” Looked at Doc for the first time. “I panicked. That’s the only reason Dickie went along. Here he was working and me working two jobs and we still wasn’t saving enough, especially my bastard car died on me last month. You gotta let Dickie go, Doc. It was all me. I nagged and nagged until he finally come around.”

“Dickie had the gun, Phyl.”

“The gun wasn’t even loaded. We was making sure no one got hurt. I *gave* him the money in the till and the safe. Anyone committed a crime, it was me.”

“The use of a gun in the commission of a crime is a felony in Pennsylvania, Phyl. The gun being unloaded don’t enter into it.”

“But it’s the insurance company’s money! You know insurance been screwing people like us for as long as there’s been insurance. Remember last year, Rudy Centorcelli had a tree fall on his house, took off half the roof? How long did it take those bastards to pay?”

“Too long.”

“Too goddamn long is right.” Phyllis stopped. Doc knew the guilty can’t bear silence. He’d wait as long as it took. It didn’t take long. “How far do we go back, Doc? Since I worked with your mum at Down Under and you used to stop by and leave the car for her after basketball games and wrestling meets. How long’s it been? Gotta be twenty years.”

“Twenty-three since I graduated.”

“That makes, what? Twenty-five years we known each other?”

“About that.”

Phyllis’s voice dropped into a lower, more desperate, register. “No one got hurt. Joe and Sal didn’t lose a dime. The only difference is two people who never got a break in their lives might get a chance to bust their asses and maybe get ahead a little. Can’t you look the other way one time?” Her final comment a squeak. “Just once?”

Doc knew how to throw a case. He’d worked the file without a partner. Did almost all the paperwork himself. Dickie hadn’t said anything Doc couldn’t spin. Messy, but doable. Turned it over in his mind as a hypothetical exercise until he realized he was giving Phyllis hope. “I might consider it if I was a PI like my cousin in Chicago. Say a lead didn’t pan out. Overlook a piece of evidence and hope an insurance investigator didn’t catch it.” Met Phyllis’s eyes. “I’m a cop, Phyl. I can’t do it.”

“That’s just you saying what you think you’re supposed to. I know you want to. Jesus, Doc, Dickie and me, we *need* this.”

Doc looked into his milk. Wished Crowe’s had a liquor license. “I make half a dozen arrests a year where I know the best thing to do, the smart thing, the decent thing, is not to put the guy in the system. Kick his ass, maybe. Put the fear of God into him. Or at least the fear of me. That’s what they need, not a jacket.”

He had Phyllis’s complete attention, her face unsure which side of the coin would land up. “The problem is there’s cops out there who like to kick ass for any reason. Or none.

So there's rules." Ran a finger along the icing on his cake. Put it in his mouth. "You're right. No one got hurt. But if I let this slide, then I'll let another slide, and sooner or later someone does get hurt. As much as it pains me to do it—and it does—you're going to jail."

"You gonna put handcuffs on me, you son of a bitch? Got TV people outside?"

"All I got outside is Lester Goodfoot. He'll take you down the station and get you booked. You might as well leave me the keys. I'll lock up and make sure Joe and Sal get them in the morning."

Phyllis looked through the front door to where Lester stood outside, smoking. Her eyes darted toward the back. "Don't, Phyl." Doc's voice as kind as he could make it. "Where would you go?"

She looked an extra second. Took her time untying the apron. Folded it with care. Placed it just so on the counter. Handed the keys to Doc. "I'm sorry, Doc. I really am."

Doc nodded. Pulled his cake and milk toward him. Took a bite. Looked over his shoulder to catch Phyllis flipping the sign from "Open" to "Closed." "Tommy Gioia buys the place now, huh? Done deal?"

"I guess so."

"Maybe you better tell me where you get this cake after all."

"Oakmont Bakery. They make them special for us."

Doc finished his cake and milk. Went behind the counter to wash out the plate, glass, and fork. Turned over the chairs onto the tables. Checked the back door. He'd worked in his aunt's restaurant before joining the Army, so he knew the drill. Turned out the lights and left through the front. Locked the door and gave it a shake. Took a rueful look back at Crowe's. Need to eat here as much as possible the next few weeks. Tommy Gioia would ruin it.

**SATURDAY
SEPTEMBER 14**

4:48 p.m.

“I didn’t think they were gonna pull that one out,” Stush said.

The Penns River Raiders had managed a 23—19 win by scoring a long touchdown with 3:27 to play and holding off a furious Jeanette rally at the Raiders’ nine-yard line as time expired. Jeanette came in as the consensus best team in the conference.

“Hell of a game. The Morrow kid might turn out to be a player, after all.”

“He keeps playing like he did today and they might do some damage. You ready?” Doc held out his glass. Stush replaced it with another from the freezer of his semi-man cave’s refrigerator. “Semi” because in addition to the refrigerator and wet bar and big-screen television, the room was the only access to the washer and dryer. Stan’s masculine need for privacy always in thrall to Helen Napierkowski’s household necessities.

Stush drew a fresh Rolling Rock from the built-in tap, handed it to Doc. “How’re those sergeant stripes fitting you? I keep asking myself where this lust for power was when I tried to get you to accept some responsibility.”

Doc took a sip, set his mug on a coaster. “Kiss my ass. I know you put him up to it.” Stush made every effort to look shocked and hurt. “Please. I know he at least ran it past you, and you did nothing to discourage him.”

“Which is not at all the same as putting him up to it.”

“Isn’t that what lawyers call a distinction without a difference?”

Stush swallowed beer. Tipped his mug toward Doc. “You like this?”

“Rolling Rock? Yeah. Why?”

“I’m thinking of brewing my own. See if I can get exactly what I like.”

Doc sipped foam from his mug. “Talk to my brother. He’s been doing it quite a while and I don’t think I’ve ever had a better IPA. He tweaks the recipe on me, which I guess is half the fun, but it’s always good.”

The Rolling Rock went down good, too, along with the beer nuts only Stush seemed to be able to find. Stush asked the status on “the asshole run that woman over. I heard you made an arrest but never saw anything else about it. Must’ve missed it in the paper, the busy schedule I keep being retired.”

“Hasn’t been in the paper. Court date’s on Tuesday.”

“Pretty quick for a trial.” Doc shook his head while he drank. “No trial?”

“Sally’s letting him plead to reckless endangerment, recommendation of one year’s probation and a hundred hours community service.”

“For killing a woman? Honest to Christ?”

“The way Sally tells it, getting what she got was not unlike breaking up the Mafia, al-Qaeda, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses all at the same time, considering the shit case we handed her.”

“How’d Sullivan take it?”

“Said we did all we could and the case was down. Time to move on.”

Stush ate a handful of nuts. Gave the impression of mulling how he would have handled it. “How’s he working out in general?”

“Did I mention he made me detective sergeant?”

“Only about forty or fifty times in the past few weeks. Has he done anything else?”

“We’re aggressively harassing corner drug dealers.”

“Making any difference?”

“Arrests and seizures are up. Activity reports are up. Drug sales appear to be about the same.”

Stush folded his hands across his belly in the traditional thinking pose. “He had to do something. I’d been here so long I could tell people to pound salt, up to a point. Sullivan bought a house. He needs something to show them so he doesn’t have to move in a year.”

“I don’t want to sound like I’m bad-mouthing him. He’s a good leader and has good ideas. Always has our backs and has told the mayor ‘no’ a time or two.”

“How’s the new guy working out? Boston?”

Doc waggled his hand. “He’s a little like a puppy chewing up half the house. Most of the time he’s a good cop. Broke that robbery at Mroczka’s pretty much by himself. He also tends to overreact, and it almost cost us last month.”

“What’d he do?” Doc gave the quick and dirty version of the corner roust that went sideways. “He’ll grow out of it.”

“I hope he does it before someone gets hurt. Me, for instance.”

Stush took a handful of nuts. Shook them in his hand. “I didn’t get that impression from him in the interview. Nothing in his academy record even hints at it.”

“I have a theory.” Stush grunted for Doc to go ahead. “Both his parents are academics.”

“I thought his old man was a prosecutor.”

“Was. Teaches college over by Philly now. Drexel, I think. Mom’s a schoolteacher. Trevor grew up suburban middle-class, a young black man in a white-bread neighborhood. Might feel like he has to prove his toughness.”

“You talk to him about it?”

Doc shook his head until he finished swallowing. “Time was I might take him out for a beer. Two guys talking after work, you know? Now I’m management. It’s not my place. He belongs to Mike Zywiciel.”

Stush looked like he might say something but didn’t. Took a drink. Asked how Nancy Snyder was working out as the deputy.

“Good and getting better. You didn’t do her any favors promoting her the way you did, but she’s done everything anyone could’ve asked and then some.”

“How’s her face?”

“They did a nice job on her nose. Not perfect, but not so the little bend in it demands attention. I guess the bigger issue was with one of her sinuses. Cracked a bone or something. She was off a week or so then came back all bandaged up.”

“Any scars?”

“None I can see. Not to say she doesn’t cover anything with make-up, but she doesn’t wear much make-up.”

“That’s good. She’s a pretty girl.”

“You really are retired, aren’t you?” Stush showed confusion. “You can’t talk that way about a fellow officer. Women in general, for that matter.”

“You mean say she’s pretty?”

“That’s borderline. What you *can’t* do for real is call her a girl. Someone in her mid-to late-thirties can’t be a pretty girl. She’s an attractive woman, and you need to be careful using language like that on the job.”

Stush pondered the twenty-first century. “What happened to the broad that decked her? Sally let her walk, too?”

Doc showed his best shit-eating grin. “Sully laid down the law. Said the prosecutor’s office has to show the police we’re protected.”

“Or what?”

Doc shrugged. “The way he put it implied the department could spring a leak.”

“Tough to win an election for DA if people figure out your ninety-eight percent conviction rate is hollow as a drug store Easter bunny.”

“I suspect that was on Bates’ mind when he told Sally to throw the book at the husband and the wife both. It’s hard to say what Judge Molchan will do even if Sally does get a conviction. I can’t remember the last time he had to come up with a sentence on his own.”

“How’s she doing personnel-wise? Snyder?”

“There are a couple of uniforms I’d like to slap the shit out of. Nothing overt or dramatic. Just unprofessional.” Doc’s second-harshest insult when referring to a cop.

“Who are they?”

“I’d rather not say.” Moved on before an interrogation could start. “How’s retirement treating you?”

Stush poured nuts from his hand to his mouth. Took time chewing. Washed everything down. “I don’t miss it like I thought I would. The job.”

“How do you mean?”

“You always hear about ballplayers saying how it’s not the games so much as they miss hanging around with the other guys. That’s what I thought it’d be like.”

“It’s not?”

Stush shook his head. “I miss seeing you and I’m not saying so because you’re sitting there. Shooting the shit with Mike. I even wonder sometimes what’s going on with Neuschwander’s kids. How many’s he have now? Eleven? Fifteen?”

“Still just the four.”

“Must be getting old. Rick, you, and Mike. I can’t think of anyone else. Augie and Skip, maybe. Not like I wouldn’t say hello I saw someone on the street, sit down for a beer. Guys I worked with what seemed like forever are pretty much gone now. Retired or quit because they didn’t like what the job had turned into.” Chased away a fly. “Get right down to it, that’s why I left. The job isn’t like it used to be even since you come back. We’re squeezed between politicians and their owners and a whole new kind of crime. I don’t miss the job at all. I miss what the job used to be.”

“I know what you mean.” Doc turned down half a dozen offers to work private security so he could come home and work for Stush. Operations ranging from the Pinkertons to Blackwater to the CIA. Never worried about Stush’s age. Stan Napierkowski had such permanence in Doc’s life that the idea the old man wouldn’t be behind his desk, hands clasped over his belly while he chewed a Tootsie Roll, seemed as ludicrous as Donald Trump becoming president. Doc enjoyed working for Stan Napierkowski more than anything he’d done in his life, and he’d slept with a movie star on a USO tour. B-lister all the way. “Play any golf?”

“Twice a week at Oak Lake. Played a round at Birdsfoot Wednesday last. Nice little course. Jack Widenhofer wants me to come over and play Champion Lakes with him before the weather gets bad.”

“Play the country club yet? Be a shame to waste an honorary membership.”

“No one asked me.”

“No one needs to. You’re a member.”

“The only people I know over there spent the last five years making it their life’s work to run me out of a job I loved. Why would I want to spend time with them?”

“Spite. Could be fun.”

“Don’t worry about me, Benny. I used to be like anyone else, wondering what I’d do when the whole day became available. I have more to do now than I have time to do it. You know what the difference is?” Doc didn’t and still too young to be curious. “If I don’t get around to it today, it’s not like someone’s going to break in here and deny me the pleasure of doing it tomorrow. You know what Helen and me did last week?”

“No, and I’m begging you not to get graphic about it.”

Stush flipped him off. “We went down Robinson Township—you know, by the airport—to that IKEA store. You ever been there?” Doc had not. “You’d like it. You could outfit a whole house with the assembly-required stuff they got. Helen and me had a ball putting a couple of dressers together. Spent the whole afternoon on them.”

Building furniture with the wife. Jesus. Only a matter of time before Stush took up painting decoys or mall walking. The tomato patch would morph into a full vegetable garden, the specter of free kale looming over everyone Stush knew. A passing thought of water aerobics brought to mind Stush in a bathing suit and Doc knew he’d be a long time unseeing that.

Stush seemed happy, though.

THE END

[Back to TOC](#)

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[Back to TOC](#)



Dana King is the author of seventeen books, including seven Nick Forte private eye novels (two having received Shamus Award nominations from the Private Eye Writers of America); eight Penns River police procedurals; a standalone novel titled *Wild Bill*, which is not a Western; and *Dead Shot: The Memoir of Walter Ferguson, Soldier, Marshal, Bootlegger*, which is a Western. Dana's short fiction appears in numerous anthologies and web sites. He is a frequent panelist at conferences and reads at Noirs at Bars from New York to North Carolina. You can learn more about him at <https://danakingauthor.com> or on his blog, One Bite at a Time

[Back to TOC](#)

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[Back to TOC](#)

