



**THE MAN
IN THE
WINDOW**

A NICK FORTE NOVEL

BY

DANA KING

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A Nick Forte Mystery

By

Dana King

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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ISBN 978-1512304121

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Everything a writer sees or does, and everyone he meets, affects his writing in some way. Here are some of those who have affected mine for the better, at least as far as this book is concerned:

The Writers of Chantilly, where continuous support in semi-monthly meetings gave me the confidence to show my writing to people I didn't know.

John McNally and George Washington University's Jenny McKean Moore Writers Workshop of the spring of 2002, where I learned the craft of both genre and "serious" fiction was the same.

The handful of stalwarts from John's workshop who continued on in monthly meetings, for their support and for finding ways to improve everything.

The Beloved Spouse, for being a dedicated and insightful first listener, two attributes that are the least of what she gives to me every day.

Peter Rozovsky, for his keen eye in spotting errors I was sure weren't there, thus keeping me from embarrassing myself.

Charlie Stella, who, though he hates PI stories, was the person most responsible for giving me the confidence to bring my books into the light.

The Private Eye Writers of America, for their acceptance that worthy novels can be produced independently.

And to all the brassholes I've known before: Higher, louder, faster.

To Charlie Schlueter, who taught us all a lot more than music

THE MAN IN THE WINDOW

“We call that person who has lost his father an orphan; and a widower that man who has lost his wife. But that man who has known the immense unhappiness of losing a friend, by what name do we call him? Here every language is silent and holds its peace in impotence.”

— Joseph Roux

1

Marshall Burton began our acquaintance with my seven least favorite words:

“I want you to follow my wife.”

Not as heart-wrenching as Christ’s last words on the cross. Lacking the utter hopelessness of a flight attendant saying, “Welcome to Cleveland.” I wanted to throw the four-eyed git into the hall somewhere between “follow” and “my.”

Any professional investigator who says he doesn’t take divorce work either has another source of income, or is lying. Divorce work is always there, and it almost always pays. It’s the proctology of detecting.

Marshall Burton stood about five-seven or -eight, a hundred forty pounds of snobbery supported by a body toned like a wet scarecrow. Hair the color of a dying mouse managed to look thick and stringy at the same time. Glasses no more than half an inch thick. His teeth showed English ancestry dating back hundreds of years. Who would fool around on him?

I tried to talk him out of it. “Have you asked her?”

“Of course not. She’d only be forced to lie. The tension and suspicion would never go away.”

The irony of this always escaped them. “Isn’t there a fair amount of suspicion now? I mean, you’re willing to pay me to catch her in the act.”

“It’s different.”

“Because she’d know you suspected her? She’ll find out. They always do.”

“I would hope you’d be more discreet than that.”

I shook my head. “She won’t see me. You’ll act differently. Suspiciously, even, and she’ll know something’s up. I’ve seen cases where the husband’s

behavior changed so much the wife started to think he was fooling around on her.”

Burton sniffed and colored a little, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with the middle finger of his left hand. I chose not to take umbrage, even if intended.

He didn't seem to know what to do next, so I did it for him. “What makes you think she's fooling around on you?”

“She's keeping odd hours. We always do; we're musicians, but the entire rhythm of her life has changed the past few months.”

“Has her schedule changed? Maybe you should casually volunteer to accompany her to a gig or two.”

Burton had a habit of looking at me straight on when he started to speak, then letting his eyes wander. “That's the point. We both play the same services. I'm principal viola in the Chicago Symphony. She's the associate. Her schedule is the same as mine.”

Now the World's Greatest Detective recognized him. I'd read Marshall Burton's name in programs since I started at Northwestern twenty years ago. Seen him on stage more times than I could remember. He didn't look the same without his fiddle.

“Sorry, Mr. Burton. I should have recognized the name. I've been going to hear you play since I was in school. I used to be a musician myself.”

“I know, a trumpet player.” He said “trumpet player” like they should be sweeping up after concerts. “Tom McManus recommended you.”

Tom McManus. An old Northwestern friend of mine, with a great deal more talent and a greater deal less hair. I joined the Army and taught after graduation. Tom got a master's at New England Conservatory and became a god. He'd been principal in the CSO for four years.

“Tom's a good friend. I hope you're not getting the impression I don't want to help you. Both sides are usually better off if they just put their cards on the table.” I'd snuck into too many hotel rooms looking for condoms and bribed too many chambermaids for soiled sheets. Next month's bills were paid. Counseling Burton out of this would be a good deal for everyone. “Is there a pre-nuptial agreement or something that requires proof of infidelity?”

“No. Of course there's some money at stake, but that will be decided during the divorce.”

“Then you’ve decided to divorce her. Do you want evidence of infidelity for a reason, or an excuse?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“A reason causes you to take action. An excuse justifies an action already taken.”

Burton sniffed again and adjusted his chin to let me know he didn’t like me. That didn’t make him special. I’m not a bad guy, depending on who you ask. Happy people don’t hire detectives. I only get paying visitors when something’s wrong; the person sitting in that chair resents being here in the first place. Too often I come to personify the problem instead of the solution.

Marshall Burton wanted me to do something he didn’t want to do himself. He intended to walk in here and tell me what he wanted, write a check, and leave. I’d be expected to deliver like some florist bringing blossoms of truth to set his life right. He never said this, nothing like it. I’d seen too many men and women with his posture and air not to recognize it.

“How much do you charge?” His tone implied he’d been listening to my half of a sordid phone conversation having nothing to do with him.

I told him my rates and how long it might take, made steeples of my fingers while he backpedaled.

“Tom implied your rates were quite reasonable.”

“They are. Ask around.” He moved parts of his face, trying to think of what to say next. Burton didn’t want to pay me that kind of money any more than he wanted to be embarrassed by walking out like a cheapskate.

I threw him a lifeline. “That’s why I asked about the amount of money involved. It’s not worth it unless you think you’ll save more than I cost. No one really cares much about adultery any more, except the offended spouse. I don’t want to seem insensitive, but hurt feelings aren’t grounds for divorce.” He gave me a quick look, more direct than any so far, like I was on to something with that comment. “Go home. Sleep on it. If you still want me to follow her, come back and we’ll get started. If not, keep your money and try to work things out.”

“I’ll call you. I hate coming down here.” Like I had an office in a crack house or a Wal-Mart.

“I need a signed contract and a retainer before I can start.”

“I’ll arrange to meet if I wish to continue. Will that be all right?”

It would. He offered his and allowed me to shake it. I felt the strength in his fingers—string players have remarkably strong fingers—there was no action on his part beyond extending his arm. It was like gripping a mounted fish.

I watched him walk through the outer office. He ignored Sharon typing at her desk while he adjusted a goofy little driving hat to an angle he probably considered rakish. I figured I'd never see him again.

That's why I don't get paid to do much figuring. A week later I sat holding his report in a manila envelope near the window of Coogan's Riverside Saloon on Wacker Drive at 4:50 on a weekday afternoon. A cold Sam Adams kept me company while I watched the sweet young things come out of their offices. They walked fast to get to Union Station in time for a good seat before the beefcake started by. It was warm for September, the twenty-somethings' skirts just long enough to make waiting for Marshall Burton a refreshing break without feeling like a dirty old thirty-something.

The report would be good news for most men. Margot Burton was even less likely to have a paramour than Marshall. Five feet tall after a week on the rack, a hot fudge sundae shy of three hundred pounds. She moved with the grace and elegance of a nose tackle.

Margot spent a lot of time with Vincent Percy, another member of the CSO viola section. They went to lunch together every day and walked to Roosevelt University twice that week to teach lessons. They shopped along State Street and drank coffee at Starbucks. Margot always had a *venti* Caffè Verona; Percy switched around. They were always alone and always in plain sight. Every night I thanked whatever higher power created platonic affairs. Taking pictures of Margot naked would have called for a lot more money than Burton had agreed to pay.

I saw him make the turn from Lake to come south on Wacker, lost him when a delivery truck drove between us. My eyes took a ten-second vacation to watch a woman at least six feet tall without her two-inch heels pass in front of my window.

There were several shots, too many to count in the rush hour bustle. Tires squealed. People screamed and started running. The truck passed; Burton didn't appear. I ran outside toward the commotion. Women with their mouths open, hands to their cheeks. Men walking away fast. When

people don't know what to do, women will at least stick around in case someone who does know will tell them. Men leave.

An attractive blonde woman about my age lay a few feet away. Skirt hiked up around her hips, panty hose torn. Right knee bloody where it had scraped the pavement. The back of her head hung open like it was hinged. A piece of brain clung to the hand of a twenty-year old girl. She screamed without sound, making no move to shake it off.

A few feet farther up lay a heavy-set man in a brown suit, brown shirt, shoes, socks. He looked like he'd been trying to crawl away from the trail of blood that followed him for ten feet. He didn't make it.

Marshall Burton sat against the side of a building, legs splayed in front of him. He looked more confused than dismayed. Blood leaked through tears in his trench coat and his goofy little hat sat slightly askew. He'd never play the viola again.

It would be a bitch to get paid now.

2

The elaborate script on the old-fashioned calling card read only "Zoltan." In purple. My sense of smell isn't much after a lifetime of allergies and four broken noses, but the card felt scented.

The man it belonged to could not be described well to anyone sober. A square head sat on a stocky torso. Hair razor cut on the sides and spiked on top, held with no more than a quart of mousse. A wispy embarrassment of a mustache had been allowed to grow until the ends could be curled and waxed. A be-bop tuft perched below his lower lip like moss on a cliff. He wore a purple—not lavender—sport coat, a black shirt and a tie with an abstract design of blacks and purples. His slacks were black, and he wore black loafers without socks in Chicago in September. He looked like Salvador Dali's pimp.

"Mister, uh, Zoltan, please have a seat." I gestured toward the infamous client chair, wondered if he had cards to match every outfit or if purple was his color. "What can I do for you?"

He took the customary time to conform himself to the chair. The imprint of hundreds of asses hadn't made sitting there any easier. It had nothing to

do with the chair. “I am Zoltan,” he said like I might want to think about it for a while.

“I am Nick Forte.” So there, Zoltan.

“I am creator of interior style.” He looked around my office. “I do not think you might have hear of me.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Forgive me. As you can see, my knowledge of interior style is somewhat deficient. What can I do for you?”

Zoltan crossed his left leg over his right at the knee, foot rocking. “You were following wife of Marshall Burton.”

“It’s only fair to tell you I’m not at liberty to discuss who I may or may not have been following.”

“Zoltan understands. You must be discreet. Marshall Burton was friend of mine. He tells me he hire you to follow wife.” Zoltan pasted his accent onto his speech like decals on a car window. “I want you to find who was killing him.”

“The police have that under control. They don’t like private guys sticking their noses in.”

“I read in newspaper police say Marshall shot as—what you call?—innocent bystander. Is true?”

“That’s what they say.”

Zoltan’s brow knitted together. He leaned forward and put both hands flat on my desk. “Is not true. Zoltan go to police, ask what they know. What they really know, not what newspaper say.”

“What did they tell you?”

“They tell me nothing.” He sat back, made a dismissive gesture. “Zoltan cannot even talk to police doing investigation. They send me away like child with no candy.”

“Don’t take it personal. They’ll only talk to the immediate family, and they won’t tell them much. The police are in the business of collecting information, not passing it out.”

“Is true, but Zoltan is like family to Marshall. Zoltan and Marshall were—how you say it?—I think word is intimate.”

I kept my tone as neutral as before. “You were lovers?”

Just the hint of a blush. “Yes.”

“Tell me what you want me to do.”

“Find out what police know. Zoltan see in papers rumors that woman was one supposed to be killed. I am afraid is Marshall. I am afraid wife find out Marshall hire you to follow her and kill him.”

“Calm down, Zoltan. That was no domestic shooting. Wives never drive down busy streets and shoot up several people. It’s a lot easier to do it at home.”

“Wife is pig, she blow nose on Marshall’s grave.” He spit a little when he said “pig.” “She would pay men for killing Marshall.” The concern was obvious in Zoltan’s voice and face, even if he was a blowhard and probably a phony.

“Okay, I’ll look around. I don’t think the wife did it, at least not for the same reasons you do. A week isn’t much time for a respected classical musician to round up a drive-by shooting.”

“Maybe she planning to kill him for longer time.”

“Does his wife know he was gay?”

“Was not gay. Is what you call bisensual.”

Close enough. “But does his wife know?”

“I think yes.”

“Does she know about you specifically?”

“I think no, but not perfectly sure.”

I pulled a legal pad across the desk. Picked up my good pen to show I meant business. Gels impress the most demanding client. “You knew Marshall was meeting me at Coogan’s, right?”

“Yes, he tell me at lunch that day.”

“Who else knew he’d be there? Even if they didn’t know why.”

“Zoltan did not say to anyone. I do not know if Marshall tell.”

I asked Zoltan a few more questions about Marshall and Margot. He knew enough about her to like her for the shooting and nothing else. His opinions were so colored I gave it up before my own expectations could be tainted. His information had the details a lover would know without being so precise it sounded researched. “Let’s get clear on one thing,” I said. “I’m not agreeing to investigate the shooting, just find out what the police know.”

“And to learn if fat Margot kill my Marshall.”

“The police will tell you that when the time comes. They’re not going to let whoever did this walk around.”

“Zoltan is not trusting police. In my country, police are ...” He looked at me as he searched for the word. I waved him off and he stopped looking.

Sharon answered the intercom right away. “Sharon, will you draw up a contract for us to find out if Marshall Burton’s wife had anything to do with his death?” I paused and looked straight at Zoltan. “Please include something that states we will turn over any evidence of wrongdoing to the police. Also that our client agrees not to take any acts of retribution, except through strictly legal means.” Zoltan nodded. “Standard rates. Client’s name is—” I turned to Zoltan. “What name should we put on the contract?”

“Zoltan. Is spelled like on card.”

“Just Zoltan?”

“Yes. Is perfect legality. I change it so much years ago.”

Zoltan and I passed the time waiting for the contract by discussing how I might improve my office décor. His accent meandered through several possible countries, mostly Eastern European. Much of what he suggested could have come from an alcoholic’s nightmare. I listened to it all. Asked questions, made comments as though what he said had a slug’s chance on a salt lick of being considered.

It looked like I had Marshall Burton’s case whether I wanted it or not.

3

Sharon showed me before I had a chance to ask for it. A finger pointed to “Zoltan” scrawled on the signature line.

“He show you any ID?”

“Illinois license. I got the number.”

“What do you think?”

She dropped her voice an octave and gave a horrible Zoltan impression. “I think Zoltan is bit much.”

I chuckled more at the effort than the humor. Two people were guaranteed to get a smile from me: Sharon and my daughter Caroline. Sharon Summers and I met when some work I did for her previous employer came full circle and implicated him. She was out of work; my business was growing, and I needed help. Now we existed in an exotic area between platonic and physical love: more than friends, not lovers. I didn’t

know such a place existed before she came to work here. “You’re the best. You know what comes next.”

“Everything there is to know about Zoltan.” A long time since I’d needed to ask if she knew what to do; I don’t lock my car unless I’m looking at the keys in my hand. Sharon understood.

“He walked in here like a fictional character,” I said. “We don’t take cases from fictional characters.”

She spoke when I turned to go back to my desk. “Delbert’s here.”

“Where?” I gestured around her office, even smaller than mine, if somewhat better appointed. Five-five, ash-blond hair and gray-green eyes, Sharon could make a well better appointed than my office just by standing in it.

“In the crapper, boss.” Delbert McCall a raw-boned Texan with a constant half-smile that showed a Tom Sawyer gap between his teeth. A couple of inches taller than me at six-three and not an ounce of fat on him. Except between the ears, as he said himself. Angular face, unlined but weathered, young Clint Eastwood without the sneer. “I hear you got a job for me.”

I snapped my fingers. “The Abernathy divorce. Come on back and I’ll lay it out for you.”

Delbert had been doing some of my legwork for about three months. A decorated Texas Ranger, he came to Chicago to execute a fugitive warrant. A couple of the prisoner’s associates tried to break him loose and all four ended up in Michael Reese. Delbert walked out two months later, by which time the others’ graves had grown a full cover of grass. He met a nurse named Corky Logan during his rehab and decided Texas could do without him. A friend of mine who worked the fugitive case with him thought he and I would get along. I fed him my excess work until he could get his own license or a police job came open.

“Where’s the hat?” I couldn’t recall ever seeing him without his cowboy hat.

“You said it was a divorce. That means I’m following someone. Can’t hardly surveil nobody in the big city wearing a Stetson.”

“Good point. Don’t lose it, though. It might come in handy, someone not paying too much attention. Wear it, don’t wear it. Most people won’t think you’re the same guy.”

“I do that sometimes. Bought me a Cubs hat and one of them car driving hats? Had to get rid of that one. Made me look like a dickhead.” He gestured with his hands as though adjusting a hat like Marshall Burton’s.

“They make everyone look like a dickhead.” I handed him a sheet of paper with some notes and the address. “Mrs. Abernathy’s home today. You can get the details from her.”

“I’ll get right on it.” He picked up the notes and stood. “Appreciate it, Nick. Really. So does Corky.”

“You’re doing me a favor. Now I can take more cases and stick you with the scut work.” I winked. “Let me know, you want to do this full time.”

“Thanks, Boss.” Halfway to the door he pulled a Columbo. “I almost forgot. You get the new piece?”

“In the safe.” Delbert started on me to get a new gun as soon as he felt comfortable enough to make suggestions, which was about half an hour after we met. I was perfectly happy with my Colt M1911 .45, just like the Army used to be. Delbert kept pointing out the relative virtues of revolvers versus automatics until I gave in just to change the subject.

“Let me see.” He slid the Abernathy information into an inside pocket and came back to my desk.

The gun a Smith & Wesson Model 25. A .45 like my ACP, even took the same cartridges. Delbert had pushed for the Anaconda, me being a Colt man and all. I didn’t want to carry three pounds of .44 magnum under my arm like Dirty Harry. Chicago passed out gun permits like they were licenses to shoot defenseless babies. I’d used mine enough not to want to press my luck.

“Nice gun. Good heft to it.” He opened the cylinder, took a look. Clicked it back into place with a snap of his wrist, made a satisfied face at the sound. Sighted out the window overlooking Federal Street, squeezed the trigger and nodded. “I’m telling you, you’ll never go back. No chance one of these babies jamming on you.”

“My Colt never jammed on me.”

“My Sig did once. Don’t know why, it was a hell of a gun. Loved it to death until I fired a demonstration round, you know, to show I meant business, and the ejector jammed. No brass came out, so we both knew I was holding a paperweight.”

I let him tell the story, even though I'd heard it more than once. He got so evangelical I half expected him to baptize me with a dab of ArmaLube on my forehead. "So what did you do?"

"Threw it at him. Dumb ass ducked, too. I rushed him and took his piece." Delbert's lop-sided grin flashed at the memory. "You always hear about cops getting shot with their own guns. I thought the irony might appeal to him."

I loved hanging with Delbert. No one else I knew could say "irony" in one breath, then describe a rain storm as a toad choker with the next. "Did you shoot him?"

"Nah. Beat the shit out of him with it, though. Teach him to try to shoot an unarmed Ranger." He gave the gun a good looking-over and handed it back to me. "Too bad I couldn't talk you into that Colt Long .45."

"I'm a PI, not Wyatt Earp. How the hell could I carry that foot-long thing under my coat?"

"But they're such cool guns. I ever tell you my daddy wears one?"

"He a Ranger?"

"Was. Got his thirty in last year and retired. Wore one of those Long .45s on his hip, just like the old Peacemakers. Told me a couple a times he pulled and didn't even have to shoot. Crook just stared at the gun like it came out of a movie."

"What's he do now?"

"Got a job chiefing in a little bitty town down by the Pedernales. Loves it. Wears that Peacemaker on his hip. People stop for gas by the state park there, Daddy tells their kids made-up war stories. They put his picture on the town web site. Kind of a 'Don't Mess With Texas' thing."

Delbert's face showed how much he loved Texas every time he talked about it. I hoped Corky's status could get him through his first Chicago winter.

"I'm out, Boss. Thanks for the job. I'll make sure Mrs. Abernathy knows every place hubby's wick gets dipped. Even if he's just sticking it in a light socket for kicks."

I made a mental note to find something more interesting for Delbert to do and checked my watch. Almost three. I still had time to get to the Area Four station before the shift changed.

Chicago's Violent Crimes detectives handle the four major food groups of crimes against persons: murder, rape, armed robbery, assault. Area Four runs from the lake through The Loop, out past the United Center. The geography and demographics range from the jewelry district and Orchestra Hall to "communities" that make *Midnight Express* look like a Chamber of Commerce promo.

The station resembles a YMCA from the outside, beveled edges and glass front, bring your towel for adult swim. Inside the counter is manned and womanned by uniformed police and auxiliaries who aren't much interested in your sad story; take a number. Civilians stand around in various attitudes of despair, defiance, or impatience, dressed in everything from evening clothes to FUBU, depending on the time of day. Things were quiet at 3:15 on a weekday afternoon. A middle-aged black woman in a cheap cloth coat sat on a bench with her arm around another woman who might have been younger, or aging better. The second woman's crying created an air of melancholy that seemed to occupy the room more than come from an individual source. Two kids in Oakland Raider jackets slouched in the opposite corner trying to look hard. They were too young to know you can't try to look hard. You either do or you don't. Just like you either are or you aren't.

The Violent Crimes detective bullpen was upstairs. About the size of a classroom, with folding tables pushed together in rows to fill the open area. Computers and phones covered the tables, jammed so close that alternate monitors faced in opposite directions so users could slide their chairs back as far as the next table. Filing cabinets lined every available inch of wall space.

I rapped on the frame of Sonny Ng's office door. He looked up still drinking whatever he had in his mug.

"Here's trouble." Lieutenant Ng ran Area Four's Violent Crimes detectives. Sonny had drawn the short straw ten years ago and got to be my field training officer when I graduated from the academy. We got along and stayed close after I left the job. No one would guess it to see or hear him. I'd spent enough time in close proximity to know we were buds: no one he

didn't like ever got to spend that much time with him. "Tell me you're raising money for Caroline's school."

"Next month. I know you'll need lots of wrapping paper for all the Christmas presents you're buying those adorable children." I gestured to the picture on his desk. Three kids ranging in age from 2 to 8, plus Sonny's wife, Kara. The kids really were adorable, in an exotic way. Sonny a first-generation Vietnamese immigrant; Kara looked like she walked out of an ad for Icelandic Air. The kids had traits of both. "Today I'm working. Can you tell me who drew the shooting on Wacker yesterday?"

"Sure, I can." He took another swallow and riffled through a file. Served me right.

"Okay, I know you can. Will you?"

"Why?"

"An intimate acquaintance of one of the stiffs wants me to talk to him."

"Which one?"

"Marshall Burton."

"The musician. Weren't you working for him?"

I nodded. "Divorce case, following the wife."

"I hear she's a piece of work."

"So do I."

"Talk to her?"

"Following her around was enough."

"My cops had to talk to her."

"I tailed her for a week. My dues are paid. Now who is it?"

"Who's what?" His chair showed as much expression as his face.

"Who's handling the case?"

"You're supposed to be a detective. Tell me."

Just what I needed. A stone-faced wiseass. "Let's see, three upstanding citizens shot dead on a busy street in time for live coverage on the evening news. All over the newspapers, outraged politicians, public uproar. A real heater." I pretended to think for two seconds. "Hanlon and Rusiewicz."

Sonny touched the tip of his nose. "Hanlon's interviewing a witness. Rusiewicz is in the bullpen." He pointed to the detectives' working area. "You must have seen her coming in. Why bother me?"

"Because Pat Hanlon wouldn't waste the breath to tell me to kiss his ass, and I don't want Jan to feel like I'm taking advantage." Jan and I dated off

and on for a couple of years. We'd been off since last winter. "Make it harder for him to refuse if I had your blessing."

"You need more blessing than I can give. Talk to Rusiewicz. Don't take all day. She has plenty to do." He picked up a folder, turned his chair away, and started to read. Subtlety even lower than warmth on Sonny's list of priorities.

Jan sat halfway across the room, studying a computer monitor with her back to me. I straddled the nearest vacant chair before she knew I was there. "Having fun?"

She turned and gave me one of her good smiles. Everyone knows a Jan Rusiewicz. Not the prettiest or best built or smartest girl in school, thought worthy of honorable mention for each. Probably the nicest, if any high school kid could handle such an abstract concept. The jocks too busy gunning for cheerleaders and majorettes; the geeks intimidated, through no fault of hers. "Oh, yeah. A laugh a minute. I guess you know Pat and I drew the Wacker drive-by."

"That's why I'm here. Sonny said I could pick your brain as long as I kept it short."

"What are you working on?"

"You hip to a guy named Zoltan?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, we're hip to Zoltan. He was here when I came in this morning. Wanted to know what we were doing about Marshall Burton."

"And you wouldn't talk to him."

"You know we don't talk to civilians about cases. I told him and sent him home."

"Uh-uh. You sent him to me. You just didn't know it."

"How did he find you?"

"Zoltan and Marshall Burton were, what you call it, intimate," I said, slipping into a bad Zoltan impression. "Marshall tell Zoltan what I was doing for him, following wife."

"Damn it, I should have talked to him. He came in demanding things like he owned the place, never said who he was except for one of those poofy cards. You have an address?"

"Sharon has his info at the office. Zoltan's having a hissy fit because you won't tell him anything. He thought I might do better. I'm not here to get in

your way. He looks like he really misses the guy, and he hates, I'm talking despises, the wife."

"Margot? Fennel broke the news to her last night. He thinks he bored her."

"I haven't met her. Between what Marshall Burton and Zoltan told me and what I saw following her around for a week, I think I'll get over it."

"So you want what?" Jan said.

"Whatever you can spare. Zoltan thinks Marshall was the target and the others got in the way. I told him I'd let him know if you were thinking along those lines."

She wrinkled her mouth like I should know better. "Wives don't kill husbands like that. Besides, she has an alibi."

"Don't tell me. She was with a guy named Vincent Percy."

"How'd you know?"

"I followed her for a week, remember? She hangs with him after every rehearsal."

"Well, she's consistent, then."

"So she's not a suspect?"

"Not unless she hired it out." Jan hefted a file three inches thick on the table between us. "We interviewed fifty-some witnesses last night. What we know for sure is the car was a late-model Chevy or Pontiac or Ford, black, or dark blue, or maroon with two or three men or women in it. Ten people got a partial plate, no more than three characters alike on any, no characters alike on all ten. We're running them down. One guy swears he got the whole plate. Belongs to a 63-year-old man living on a farm outside of Annawan."

"Where the hell is Annawan?"

"About twenty miles east of Iowa on 80. I had to look it up myself."

"And you don't think the old guy shot up Wacker Drive and hot-footed it back to Annawan."

She pursed her lips, shook her head an inch. "He had prostate surgery three days ago. He's doing well. His wife said it was very nice of me to call."

"You're a sweetheart. What do you have for sure that you can share?"

"Dead people's names. The woman was Marla Willingham, 38, divorced, two kids. Worked in the Cook County Clerk's office. Man was Peter Bixler,

59, salesman for, uh—” she shuffled a few papers, “EnterMan software. Bullets pulled out of all three victims were from two different nines. We even looked to see if there was any significance in who shot whom.”

“You mean like both of them shot one person and each other stiff was shot by a different gun?”

“Yes, but it didn’t work out. Burton and Willingham were both shot by both guns. Bixler was only shot by one.”

“So one shooter hit everyone, and the other hit only two out of three?”

“Right.”

“You really do have nothing.”

“If that. We’re doing background checks on all the victims. We’ll give your new client a call right away.”

“He’ll finger the wife.”

“I thought you said he hated her.” The corners of her mouth tightened in a stifled smile. Jan lived in a man’s world; she gave as good as she got. “He can tell us what he wants. I don’t see anything that points to her. Of course, we don’t see anything that points to anyone yet.”

“Okay, I didn’t come to bust chops, just doing my job. I don’t want to hold you up.”

Jan put her hand on mine before I could go. “Don’t be in too much of a hurry. I could use a breather.” She let the hand go when she saw she had my attention. “How have you been? I haven’t seen you around.”

“I’ve been spending more time in the burbs since I bought the place in Bolingbrook. I got a cable modem so I can work from home. Lets me spend time with Caroline when Diane has to work late.”

“That’s good. I know how much you love being a dad.” Hanlon stepped from the interview room. “I’ll call you if we get anything.”

Sonny not in his office to say good-bye, so I let myself out. Stood on the corner of Harrison and Kedzie while the sun warmed my face. I knew Jan couldn’t tell me everything. She wouldn’t stonewall me, either. The police had squat.

My contract with Zoltan left me with wiggle room. Telling him the police didn’t know anything except Margot wasn’t a suspect might be all I needed. I had time to draft a report for Sharon to finish in the morning before my next appointment.

“Picture this: You’re driving down a mountain, bunch of those switchback curves, and your brakes go out. So here you are, eighty mile an hour, sheer cliff up one side, sheer cliff down the other. Got it? Now here comes a conductor and a violist walking up the road like nothing’s happening. No place to bail out and no way you can miss them both. Which one has to die, and why?”

Tom McManus hated conductors and violists like a drunk hates last call. Every conversation started with a shot at one or the other. Both, tonight.

“I give up.” I already had a smile going.

“The conductor, dummy. Business before pleasure.”

“How foolish of me.”

“It’s okay, you’ve been away from it.” He spit gum into a trash can.

“Those guys drive me crazy.”

“Which, conductors or violists?”

“Yes.”

Tom spent part of every day thinking of ways to torment one or the other. The rest of his time was spent as principal trumpet of the Chicago Symphony. He’d been my friend since our misspent collegiate days at Northwestern, where we’d been inseparable. We got together at Hooters on North Wells once a month to trade stories, eat wings, and flirt with waitresses.

Tom had the perfect level of fame. No one at Hooters ever pegged him as anyone out of the ordinary. He could walk down the street, go to a ball game or a movie; no one would think twice about him. Never worried about picking up Preparation H at Osco and hearing John Q. Public yell, “Hey, Marge! Tom McManus has hemorrhoids!” He could walk out of Osco and into the Midwest Band Conference or an International Trumpet Guild meeting, and musicians would part for him like the Red Sea.

The big TV on Hooters’ upper level showed St. Louis and Cincinnati fighting for a playoff spot. We could have been watching the game in Cincinnati for all the love the Northsiders showed the Cardinals.

“When’s the last time you came to a concert?” Tom always after me to see the band more often, his motives less than altruistic. Yes, I’d enjoy

myself. I was also one of a small handful of people he trusted to tell him the truth about his playing.

“Since the season doesn’t open until tomorrow night, I’d say it’s been at least three months since I had an opportunity.”

“You don’t need a passport to go to Ravinia. We were there all summer.”

“I know, it’s been a while. I saw Bruckner Four in—what was it?—April.”

“Try January. Eight months is too long. I’ll get you a pair for Mahler Two tomorrow night.”

“How? That’s the opening night concert.”

“There’s this girl in the promotions office, and—”

“I get it. One’ll be enough, thanks.”

“No date? Still not back with the cop?”

“She wants babies, and—”

“And you don’t want Caroline to wonder if you love the kids you live with more than you love her. I’d pay for the wings to go a whole month without hearing that speech.”

“You’re paying for the wings, anyway. Odd months are yours.”

“I’ll cover you next time if I can get a reprieve.”

I watched Jay Bruce strike out on a pitch he couldn’t have hit with a bed slat, decided to quit while I was ahead. “Thanks for the ticket. Who’s conducting?”

“Der Führer is going to honor us with his presence this year.”

“You mean Obersdorfer?”

“Who else?” Helmut Obersdorfer had been the alleged music director of the CSO for two years. His schedule had yet to allow him to conduct more than eight weeks a season, or be present for gala openings, auditions, or fund raisers. The CSO Board hired him because they had an opening and he was the Hot Conductor that year. The Board wanted someone with a reputation to enhance the orchestra’s. It never occurs to management that it’s the orchestra’s rep that elevates the conductor. “I’m half surprised we don’t have to give one of those stiff-armed salutes when he steps on the podium. Did you hear what happened in Italy this summer?”

“No.”

“We did a concert at La Scala. Verdi overture, *Pines of Rome*, wopped it up good for them. Crowd went nuts, standing O. Obersdorfer comes out and

quiets them down like there's going to be an encore, then he rips them new assholes because ... because they had a good time, I guess. The concert sucked, the orchestra played like it had jet lag, none of our parents were married. All in flawless Italian. Fucking Nazi is what he is. But put a score in front of him and oh, my God. No one like him. If he can remember what's on the program."

"What do you mean? I thought he did everything from memory."

Tom nodded. "Photographic memory. Looks at a score once, and he's done with it. Supposedly he even does most of his prep from memory. At least that's what he says in interviews. Problem is, sometimes he gets spread so thin he probably forgets where he is, let alone what piece is up. One time last season, right before he flew to Covent Garden to conduct *Boheme*, he gets on our podium and says, 'Puccini.' Dougie Deacon, the concertmaster, goes, 'Uhh, Maestro, we're doing Brahms this week.' Obersdorfer looks at him like Dougie raped his daughter and left a stain on his autographed picture of Herbert von Karajan. 'Which Brahms,' he says, not like it's a question, and I swear the sound comes right from his brain. His lips never move. Dougie goes, 'Three,' and Obersdorfer goes '*sehr gut*,' and away we go."

I loved hearing these stories. I felt the way an athlete must feel when his playing days are over. I never missed the business of being a musician. I missed playing the horn under conditions that mattered, and I missed the camaraderie. Tom loved being my link to the only thing I ever really wanted to do.

Our waitress turned out to be well worth the wait. Tall enough for her name tag to be at eye level as I sat on my high stool, Connie didn't need to tie her T-shirt behind her back to fill it like some Hooters girls did. Strawberry blond hair and a rumor of freckles framed a thousand-watt smile and eyes the color of deep water. Her tips would send her through medical school if she could remember half of anyone's order.

Tom and I had the usual: fifty wings, two sides of celery with ranch dressing, a Bass and a Sam Adams. "Fifty wings?" she said. "You boys have some hefty appetites."

"We prefer to think of them as manly appetites, uh, Connie." Tom twisted his head to get a better look at her name tag and surrounding scenery with no overt leering. Too many people think classical musicians

are sealed in their plastic between gigs. Orchestra players spend at least as much time as the general public trying to get laid. Only their personalities keep the world from being overrun with them.

“We’ll take most of them home,” I said. “This is our monthly ritual.”

“To separate homes,” Tom said. “I wouldn’t want you to think there was anything unorthodox going on.”

“You don’t look the type.” She made a show of sizing us up. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“I’m impressed,” Tom said, “and I’m not easily impressed. *Seinfeld* had to be off the air before you were allowed to stay up late enough to watch it.”

“It’s on cable twenty-four hours a day,” she said.

“Except when *Law and Order* is,” I said, so they wouldn’t forget about me.

They bantered about *Seinfeld* while I looked over Connie’s shoulder to watch Yadier Molina double into the gap to tie the game. She confirmed our orders, and we watched her bright orange shorts walk away with suitable admiration.

“Nice girl,” Tom said.

“Very. Beautiful smile.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“Behave. She’s half your age.”

“It’s harmless fun. You’re just jealous because you’re not getting any. You should get a hobby.”

“I have a hobby.”

“Masturbation is not a hobby.”

He’d pout if I didn’t let him win once in a while. “Let’s talk about Marshall Burton before Connie comes back. I don’t want to interfere with your harmless fun.”

“I hate to speak ill of the dead, but Marsh was an asshole. I’m sorry, he was. Ask around.” Tom leaned back from the table with his arms crossed like nothing more could be added.

“Did you send him to me the other day?”

“Yeah. He heard I knew a detective and wanted—hello, Connie’s back.”

“Did you miss me?” She set our beers down in the proper locations.

“People who have never met you miss you. They just don’t know it yet.”

“That’s sweet. I’ll bet you say that to all the girls.”

I cut in. “No. What he says to all the girls is what he does for a living.” Tom glared at me. “I’m just saving time. You’d get to it sooner or later.”

“Some things shouldn’t be hurried,” he said.

Connie rested one hand on his shoulder. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a musician.”

“Really? You play in any bands I know?”

“Chicago Symphony?” he said.

“Get out!” She pushed him hard on the shoulder and took the seat to his left. “I went to Ravinia three times this summer. That Tchaikovsky concert you did in July was awesome. What do you play?”

“Trumpet.”

“What’s your name?”

“Tom.”

“Tom what?”

“McManus.”

“*You’re* Tom McManus? You’re so good! I saw you play that concerto last year, who wrote it?”

“Hummel.”

“Right.”

This was a done deal. Unless Connie took off engagement and/or wedding rings when she worked, she’d eat some of our leftover wings for breakfast. Tom had found a classical music groupie. A hot one. Like he needed the help.

Daniel Descalso singled in two runs and Joe Kelly struck out to end the inning by the time their mutual admiration society adjourned. “What were we talking about?”

“Why you sent Marshall Burton to see me.”

“He said he had some ICSOM thing he wanted to find out about.”

The International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians was a union within a union. It kept orchestra matters from falling through the cracks while the American Federation of Musicians watched fifteen-piece bands get replaced by two keyboards players and a DJ. “Why would ICSOM need an investigator?”

“He didn’t say.”

“You know of anyone might be happy he’s dead?”

“I don’t know anyone who might *not* be happy. Marsh was a real pain in the ass. Everything had to be a federal case with him. I almost felt guilty inflicting him on you, but how often do I get to throw you a gig?”

I noticed Connie intercepting the waitress with our wings so she could bring them herself. I didn’t mention it to Tom.

“Here you go, boys,” she said, facing Tom. Not quite ignoring me. She might notice if I had a seizure. “Fifty wings. Hot.”

“Just the way I like them.” A few minutes ago it would have been *we*. How soon they forget.

Connie did all the Hooters Girl activities. Opened the ranch dressing, gave us each a napkin. Tom’s she tucked into his shirt. Mine came by way of a behind-the-back pass Magic Johnson would have been proud of. I felt like the only man at a lesbian wedding.

John Jay robbed Joey Votto of at least a double. I put a half dozen wings on my plate. What the hell, more for me.

Connie said she had to go, nodded when I pointed to my empty glass. Tom looked at the wings on my plate and took six of his own. He devoted more concentration to eating chicken wings than carrier pilots do for landings. “What’s the deal with the wife?” I asked before he became non-responsive.

“Margot the Hutt? She plays in the orchestra. You’ve seen her at concerts.”

“I know. I’ve been following her around for a week.”

“*That’s* what he wanted you for? I wonder why he said it was ICSOM.”

“Maybe he didn’t want word getting out. How bad was it between them?”

“I haven’t seen them exchange two civil words since I got here. Remember what I said about Marsh? Times two for Margot.”

“That bad.”

He wiped sauce from his fingers, made eye contact. “Margot Burton is a bitch on a good day. On a bad day she’s a Rottweiler with menstrual cramps. She didn’t talk to Marsh in public for years. Now she’s the courageous widow, insisted on playing the rehearsal because her Marshall would want her to. You going to talk to her?”

“I hope not, but I may have to.”

He made the sign of the cross. “Go with God.”

I had no idea why I'd started grilling Tom; I wanted rid of Marshall Burton and Zoltan, not in deeper. Sometimes I can't help myself. Now that I'd started, maybe I could take a shovelful out of the pile of favors I owed Jan. "You could make it easier if you pointed me toward someone else."

Another head shake. The wings had him locked in. "There's Vince Percy. Marsh has been trying to get him fired for a year."

"The guy Margot hangs with after rehearsal?"

"Right. Vince isn't a bad guy, for a violist. Smarmy little pud, but he's okay."

"Marshall putting the screws to him because he's tight with Margot?"

"I'd guess Vince was tight with Margot because Marsh was putting the screws to him. Neither one killed him, though."

"What makes you say that?"

He swirled a celery stalk around his tub of dressing. "We're musicians. We wouldn't know how to find a hit man, even one so bad he'd have to shoot three people to get the one he wanted. It's not like they're in the Yellow Pages."

His innocence about human nature refreshed me. Tom could be insensitive, forgetful, an unapologetic hound, and never offend anyone. He accepted everyone at face value and without guile. Only music had hidden layers worth probing for him. Even if he scored with Connie, his joy would be almost childlike, contained in the moment. He had no idea what Margot Burton, or anyone, might be capable of.

We got down to serious eating. Tom not only didn't know any of Marshall Burton's friends, he didn't know *of* any. We'd talk, Connie'd come back to flirt with Tom, and I'd watch baseball. It went on like that for an hour and half and two dozen wings.

We said good-night standing under Hooters' sign on Wells Street. We each had a dozen and a half wings to take home. I offered Tom an Altoid strip.

"No, thanks. I love them, but they dry out the lining of my mouth or something. Can't play worth shit for a day after I have one."

"I used to be like that with Fritos. The salt would get in the cracks in my lips and I'd feel like one of those African tribesmen. You know, with the plates in their faces?"

“The sacrifices we make for art.” Tom paused and lost his smile. “I don’t mean to make light of what happened to Marsh. He was a jerk, but it’s not like he was evil or anything. There are a couple of things you might want to think about before we go.”

“Shoot.”

“Question One: What’s the difference between a violin and a viola?
Question Two, considering where we are right now, under this sign, do you think Connie’s are real?”

Question One was easy: violas burn longer. Question Two was in the capable hands of an investigator far more likely to solve his case before I figured out if I had one.

6

It didn’t take long for Zoltan the buzzkill to bring me back to reality the next morning. “What are you doing about Marshall being dead?”

“There’s not much I can do about that, Zoltan. He’s dead.”

“I am paying you lots money, and you are joking with me? Is not amusing.” Zoltan gripped the back of the client chair till his knuckles whitened. He looked peachy, literally, his suit the color of ripe fruit. Forest-green shirt, tie another abstract combination of peach, green, and red. Other designers probably got moist at the sight when they went clubbing together. It lacked the same effect at 9:30 in the morning. “What do you learn from police about Marshall? Is cow of wife in this?”

“I’m sorry, you’re right, this isn’t the time for kidding around. Let’s start over. Please have a seat.” I got him some coffee. He didn’t look any more comfortable than yesterday on my infamous visitor’s chair. At least he didn’t squirm around like an 8-year-old in a hot church.

I gave him the gist of what Jan told me. “That’s all they have. Nothing indicates Margot had anything to do with it. Sharon’s editing my report now. There’s no reason for you to spend any more money on this.”

“So you are wasting your time doing this for me, you say?”

I removed and replaced the cap on a pen while we spoke, giving him about half of my attention. “My time is being paid for. You’re wasting your money.”

“You are saying there is no reason for me to come to you?”

“I’d like to think this can put your mind at ease so you can get on with your mourning. When’s the funeral, tomorrow?” It would be worth going on my own time just to see what Zoltan wore.

“How easy should my mind be when I am getting threats since I come to see you yesterday?”

I stopped playing with the pen and focused on him without moving my head. “What kind of threats?”

“I get telephone calls at home late at last night, no one is speaking. Then at two o’clock I hear man’s voice say is accident, I should forget all about everything.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“I try. I ask who is this, what does he know about Marshall. He say nothing else, just repeat to forget about it and hang up.”

“Did you get any more calls?”

“Not after that one.”

“Do you have caller ID?”

“No. Zoltan uses rotary dialing telephone for home. Traditional look is always best.”

I gave his attire a quick going-over, kept half a dozen comebacks to myself. “I told you all I know. These phone calls change things.” I put the pen down, leaned back in my chair. The leather made comforting sounds. “Who else knew you came to see me?”

“Is exactly what I was coming here to ask you. Zoltan tells no one, before or after I come here yesterday. Who do you tell?”

“Just the police. They should be calling you today, by the way. Have you told them about the threats?”

“No. I come to you. Zoltan does not trust any police. This is why I am paying you to talk to them. I thinking paying for service means more than you going to station and asking—how you say it—what is up? After they send me away, I will not be speaking with them again.”

“Don’t fall in love with that idea. The police are your best bet to find out whether Marshall was a target or a mistake. Tell them what you know.”

He started to speak and caught himself. His cheeks reddened on top, giving the impression of two hot plates under his eyes. His voice came from somewhere between frustration and despair. “Then why am I paying you for?”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you: You can stop paying me right now. The police have resources I don’t, especially now that you’re getting threats. Tell them what’s going on and let things shake themselves out. You’re not involved, so you have nothing to worry about. Do you?”

Zoltan gave me a look I recognized. I shifted my weight in case he came over the desk at me. Interior designers aren’t known for violent feats of strength. Zoltan’s size earned him some respect until I knew for sure if he was the exception.

The moment passed. He spoke without tone. “No, I do not.” I had a second’s thought that his accent had left, hard to tell in so few words. “Zoltan apologizes if I gave you idea I think you are stealing my money. Zoltan trusts you, Nick Forte. Will you keep to helping me?”

“Yeah.” My voice traveled no farther than his chair. “There are a few things I can look into, and I’ll see what I can find out about your threats. My advice is to go to the police. They’ll talk to you now that they know who you are.”

We chatted a few more minutes. Zoltan tried to get me to tell him what I had in mind. I told him it was better if he didn’t know. It would have been even better if I did.

7

Zoltan made me feel guilty, even though I’d done what he asked, to the letter. Blame my parents for passing along the “conscientious” gene. I knew a lot of people on both sides of the law. Jan hadn’t much to tell; Goose Satterwhite might.

He agreed to meet me for lunch at Potbelly’s in the Merchandise Mart. His working hours tended to run later, when diminished visibility allowed people to deny who had encouraged them to meet their obligations, even though they had stood very close together.

Goose didn’t look like much from a distance. Average height, wore clothes that hid the tightly-bunched muscles in his arms and shoulders. Hair cut short, not right down to the scalp; goatee the same length. Dark chocolate skin, no major scars, nothing to make him stand out in a crowd until you got close and felt the menace rise off him like heat from a Phoenix parking lot.

Every once in a while someone either made a mistake, or thought he was badder than Goose, which also qualified as a mistake. Last year's example a hard case from East St. Louis. Decided to move from Triple-A to the big leagues by pushing out an established operation run by one of Goose's regular customers. Now the hot shot sweeps out thrift stores for the Salvation Army.

"How's the house coming along?" I said as we sat.

"House doing fine. Remember that arch I wanted between the dining room and kitchen? That look so good I put a couple swinging doors on, with the louvers, you know? Now I got to get some insulation in there before winter. That corner of the living room where I like to read cold as a motherfucker when the hawk blow."

No one I knew of had ever seen the inside of Goose's house but him. He kept it for himself, his refuge from how he earned the money to keep it nice.

"I think Lowe's is having a sale on the pink stuff. Did I hear Norm Abrams is coming to town?"

"My man Norm be at that big do in Rosemont next month. I want to ax him about squaring up that corner so my cabinets hang right." Goose took a bite of his smoked ham sandwich, chewed, stopped and looked at me until he had my attention. "White people always eat like this?"

"You don't like it?"

"I like it fine. It just seem so...so...clean. Where the liquids, the fluids, the—"

"You mean the grease?"

"Maybe. Yeah, I do. Where the grease? This is why you white folk all constipated and got arthritis and shit. Y'all not lubricated properly."

Chewing my sandwich kept me from having to answer right away. Engaging Goose in this kind of conversation would lead to a humorous disembowelment sure as milkshakes led to cellulite. If I let him he'd cover our lack of rhythm, inability to jump, and whatever else he could think of, all attributed to insufficient grease in our diet.

We ate in silence for a few minutes, Goose making questioning looks at his food like something unexpected might be in it, maybe Soylent Green instead of lettuce. Over time the feminine terrain of the Merchandise Mart at lunch hour chilled him out. "Not saying I don't like it, but why we having this sumptuous repast so far from my people and our native cuisine?"

I had something witty to say about the “my people” comment. For once I contained myself. “Triple homicide the other day on Wacker. Hear anything interesting on that?”

“Uh-uh. Three citizens capped at rush hour. One of the busiest streets in town. Thing like that got no legs.”

I took another bite and chewed like I had all the time in the world. We played our waiting game again, a parody of an old Western, two gunfighters waiting to see who would draw—talk—first.

He broke this time. “Three people, musician, salesman, some chick from the Clerk’s office. Look like the only thing in common be stepping in front of a couple a nines.”

“You read that in the paper.”

“I was wondering why you didn’t.”

“I did. I even talked to the police. Now I want what you know.”

“Oh, I see. All off the record and shit.”

“Yeah, off the record.”

“And shit. Come on, I know you not too good to say it.”

“All right. And shit. Off the record and shit. You happy now?”

He took half of what was left of his sandwich in one bite, pushed a little spillage into his mouth. “Extremely.” Made me wait again. Payback is so petty when other people do it. “Buzz say it the usual politics as usual. Chick be sleeping with the clerk, an alderman or two. Maybe at the same time, maybe not. Deputy mayor knock her up also a possibility. You know how it go. City employee chip a tooth on a rib, and it because someone making money on dental kickbacks.” He wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Why do you care?”

“One of the victims was a client.”

“You lose *another* bodyguard gig?”

“No, smart ass, I didn’t.” Last winter I bodyguarded an actor who got taken out. Embarrassing as hell; so what if he literally invited the killer over and held the door? “I was doing something else for him. Now the stiff’s friend wants me to make sure the police don’t brush it under the rug.”

“Three dead white people on the five o’clock news? You know that was bullshit, about no one being interested, right?”

“You and I both know that. Zoltan operates on a different plane.”

“Who Zoltan?”

I gave him a five minute description of the Zoltan Show while we ate. Goose showed his lopsided smile without laughing. “He for real?”

“The jury’s still out while Sharon checks on him.”

“And he says the old lady go to all this trouble to cap some fiddle player?”

“Not in so many words, but he wants to know she didn’t before he walks away.”

“Time to walk away. She didn’t do it.”

“Give me something to tell him. Just saying no isn’t going to cut it any better than it did when Nancy Reagan tried it.”

A man and woman of about 30 walked past. She had both hands on his arm, jabbering to hurry up and eat so she could show him the gown at Bridal Originals. He looked at her, then at his sandwich, a smile varnished onto his face while his eyes stared down the long, narrow road that ran through the rest of his life.

Goose waited until they passed. “Here’s what I got. I don’t think this the straight deal, but until I hear something better I’ll go with it.” I gestured for him to go on. “Five-thirty that afternoon, traffic’s *all* fucked up, so many cops on the corner of Wacker and Lake you could jack up the Macy’s on State Street and drive it away. Just exactly then someone beat the shit out of Marty Klimak and leave him for dead down by the Fire Academy. Bunch a people called 911. Half an hour later a squad from Monroe show up. Whoever did Marty long gone.”

“You’re telling me someone killed three people just to give Marty Klimak a beating in privacy?”

“Chechens.”

“Okay, maybe Chechens, but still. Why not take him someplace and work him over at their leisure?”

“They did it at their leisure. I hear it like this: Chechens be dealing on some gang turf in the South Side. You know how they work, do what they want, when they want. This time some Latino Homey looking for cred decide only Spanish-speaking illegals can work that turf. They been bumping ugly for weeks.”

“Where does Marty come in?”

“Marty run all the books that part of town, know what I’m saying? Pick up some tip money, too, laundering cash for the Homies. All that woofin’

bad for business. Marty go to the Chechens acting the great man come down from the mountain to pour oil on the troubled waters. They listen and everything cool for maybe a week, ten days. Then two days ago four ofays get out of a car, walk up the street, beat Marty least half to death. No disguises, no hurry. Walked back to the car when they done like coming out of a movie. At their leisure, as you say. Marty in a coma in Cook County. I hear Jesus be along any time now.”

“Still, *goddamn*, Goose, three people killed?”

“New crew, new rules. Maybe eliminating the competition too much trouble. Couple a those boys almost as goofy as the Chechens. Maybe the Chechens got plans for the Homies don’t include Marty. I don’t know. Look at it like this: you want to send a message you the baddest motherfucker on the block? Give them the full Keyser Sòze treatment. You think anyone going to fuck with them after a story like that get around?”

“Whether it’s true or not.”

“Therein lie the rub, as the man say. Not saying it true, just telling you what I hear. I thought you should know, what with your habit of getting into things over your head.”

It would take a lot of evidence for me to accept that story. At least now I had something definite to tell Zoltan: if the Chechens killed Marshall Burton, even as a diversion, he needed a different detective.

8

I got to Symphony Center as the orchestra filed out from the morning rehearsal. With their afternoon free before the concert, finding Margot would be a challenge unless I got help. Lucky for me Eddie Reifsnnyder worked the security desk at Symphony Center. Nice gig for a man sneaking up on 60 with too many chases in his legs, bumps and beers in his belly. The crew cut steel gray now, belt not as level as it used to be. His eyes were clear, and anyone who passed him today could be picked out of a lineup next week.

Eddie retired from the Chicago Police Department with half a dozen citations for valor. The steel plate in his head came when a ’roidded-up bodybuilder wearing a blood alcohol content higher than his IQ beat Eddie

with his own nightstick. He did 30 years in squad cars, shot it out with two armed robbers at a liquor store three weeks before he retired.

We rode together once in a while in the Second District when our regular partners were on vacation or injured, a bi-weekly occurrence in the Deuce. Eddie taught me the emergency brake trick. One of us—usually Eddie—would see something we thought deserved a second look on a dark street or alley. The passenger clicked off the inside dome light while the driver eased the car to a stop with the emergency brake to keep the brake lights from coming on. Sneak out of the car and walk back unannounced. We arrested a lot of bad guys with that trick.

“Officer Reifsnyder, good afternoon to you.” I liked Eddie. Sometimes I stopped by just to chat with him.

“Patrolman Forte, out of uniform again. Whatever are we to do with you?”

We shook hands and slapped shoulders. “How’s the music business, Eddie?” “Lyrical.” He tilted his head and raised his eyes as if looking for the Muse herself.

“Sorry, the Lyric’s across town.” I jerked a thumb in the general direction of the opera house on Wacker.

“As a cop, you were a hell of a musician, boy.”

“And as a musician, I was a hell of a cop, which is why I’m still paying to get into this place.”

“When’s the last time you paid for a concert? McManus comps you any time you want to come.”

“Which means I have to put up with him. Ain’t nothing free, Eddie. Speaking of Tom, is he around?”

“Haven’t seen him leave.”

“What about Margot Burton?”

“Left about ten minutes ago. Forget about her. She’s not your type.”

“Thanks for the compliment. I just want to ask her a few questions.”

“Too bad about Marshall.” He ran a hand over his crew cut. It sprang back into place like a scrub brush. “You working on that?”

“Indirectly. Did you know him much?”

“Not really. Funny thing about Marshall. No one could stand him, and I guess he was a pain in the ass, but I kinda liked him. He always treated me nice.”

“Define nice.”

“Always waved, said hello if I wasn’t busy. I don’t know what it was. I saw plenty of reasons for people not to like him, but he always had a good word for me. Asked how Mary was, about the grandkids. Small talk, but he remembered stuff about them, too.”

I hadn’t figured Marshall Burton to take an interest in the hired help. It might be interesting to see who else he made time for. I hadn’t finished considering the possibilities when Eddie spoke again.

“Margot’ll be at the Starbucks on Jackson in forty-five minutes.”

He scared me sometimes. “How do you know?”

He leaned back as far as his stool would allow and crossed his arms over his belly. “How long you known me?”

“Ten years, twelve maybe.”

“And what have you learned about me?”

Straight from his old cop routine. Eddie’s powers of observation bordered on the psychic. We’d be driving down the street, and he’d jerk the car to the curb, jump out, and grab a 20-year-old off the sidewalk. Kid never had time to even think about running. Without fail he’d be dirty. I’d look at Eddie during the frisk, and he’d say, “What, you didn’t see the—” and sure enough, it would be there. Eddie Reifsnnyder disarmed more natives of developing countries than the United Nations.

I grinned and gave it up for him. “You know things.”

“That’s right. I know things. Besides, I heard her tell Vince Percy on their way out.” He laughed his low, slow, laugh, *he—he—he—he* when he got one over on someone. “You want to look for Tom? I’ll sign you in on his name, tell him to wait if he comes out before you do.”

Passing Eddie’s desk took me from the public area of Symphony Center to the backstage of Orchestra Hall. I always got a weird feeling back here. Some came from the awe I still felt, standing where Herseth and Jacobs and Farkas had warmed up before playing Mahler or Strauss. Most of it was frustration. I had better access to the inner sanctum of the orchestra now than I ever did when I played.

Like the men’s room. I lowered my zipper and assumed the position before I realized who stood next to me. Close to six feet, silver-gray hair swept straight back from his forehead. Hooked nose between high cheeks made him appear to be peeking out from behind something. Extra weight

around the middle, not enough to be called a paunch. More like a slackening of the abdominal muscles, made visible by his turtleneck sweater. A button shirt would hide it completely.

“*Guten abend*, Maestro,” I said.

Helmut Obersdorfer looked at me with eyes almost silver in color, making his pupils seem birdlike. He bowed from the neck, meeting my eyes with his all the time. “Thank you, yes. It is a fine day. It would be finer still if the plumbing were to be fixed in my dressing room lavatory, but one must make do, yes?” He spoke with the accentless tone of a person who has learned the words of a language without mastering its inflections. “Do you speak German, *Herr*—I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage.”

“Forte. Nick Forte, Maestro. You may not have known my name, but I doubt anyone ever has you at a disadvantage. I’ve admired your work for many years.”

“Thank you again, *Herr* Forte. You are a musician? You are not a member of the orchestra.” He zipped up but remained standing in front of the urinal.

“Only in my dreams. I used to play. Now I leave it to those who know what they’re doing.”

“I think you are maybe too modest. Those whose talent falls barely short of their desire are often hardest on themselves. Might that apply to you?”

I laughed more inside than out as I zipped up. “It might. I was good. Just not as good as I wanted to be.”

We stepped back from the urinals and moved to the sinks together. “You should continue to play again. Remember why you began as a child, when it was not art to you, when the music was only pleasure at the sounds you could create.”

“I keep telling myself I should do that. So does Tom McManus.”

“You are friends with Thomas? You are also a trumpeter?”

I laughed out loud this time. “Everyone just assumes that since Tom’s my friend, I must be a trumpet player.”

“But you are, yes?”

My laughter had one last aftershock. “Yes, I’m a trumpeter. I stopped by to see Tom after the rehearsal.”

“He is in the hall. Practicing.” Obersdorfer’s lack of inflection made me wonder if the last word was intended as a compliment or to indicate

something Tom should do more often.

“Thank you. I heard him on my way in. It’s been a pleasure, *Herr Direktor*.”

“And for me as well, *Herr Forte. Auf Wiedersehen*.” He held the door, gestured for me to go first. We walked together for a few steps before he veered off toward the conductor’s dressing room. I watched him go, an old man of at least 70, perfect posture, and tried to figure what seemed out of place about him until I realized he limped. Not so much anyone would notice without paying attention. Even that slight infirmity seemed at odds with his bearing.

The stage almost deserted, the musicians gone for the afternoon. A couple of crew members worked on something near the apron. Tom sat spread out over his chair, feet hooked around its legs, back straight, trying out a phrase from the Mahler. One of the trumpet’s first entrances early in the piece, a small tune played softly with the woodwinds, ending on a high C. He played it half a dozen times; each would sound identical to a layman’s ear. My skills hadn’t eroded that much. Yet. I heard the minute adjustments in his sound, trying to match the woodwinds’ timbre, seeing how much he could lay back on the last note without missing it.

I stayed out of sight until he finished. “That the new horn? Sounds good.”

“I like it.” If it surprised him to see me it didn’t show. “Still slippery in spots, but it’s getting there.” He couldn’t fool me. He and that horn were locked in. I felt flattered to be the only person I knew Tom didn’t feel compelled to be cocky around. “You want to try it?”

“No, thanks. Not in front of you.”

“Bullshit. You’ve played in front of me hundreds of times.”

“When I was playing. I haven’t had a horn out of the case in a year. I’m not going to let you hear me now.”

“You’re not going to get your lip in shape finding excuses not to play.”

“Who says I want to get my lip in shape?” Tom didn’t say a word, tucked his chin down and looked at me from under his eyebrows. “Okay, maybe a little bit. Don’t distract me, I’m working.”

“How was I supposed to know? I can’t tell from looking at you.”

I returned the look he had just given me. “Who was tight with Marshall Burton?”

“No one. I don’t think I saw three people talk to him all summer at Ravinia. I about shit when he came over to ask me about you.”

“Eddie Reifsnyder liked him.”

“I know. Marsh *loved* Eddie. Well, you know, not like that. It was weird. The little geek would walk past fifty people, ignore even the few who might still say good morning to him. Then he’d ask Eddie how his granddaughter’s birthday party went last weekend.”

“So there was no one he might tell what he had going on, where he was going, stuff like that?”

“No, man, no one. People were too glad when Marsh went anywhere to care where it was. I know that sounds cold, and I feel bad for the little twerp, but he was universally disliked.”

“Except for Eddie.”

“Eddie even likes Obersdorfer.”

“I think I like Obersdorfer. I just met him in the men’s. He thinks I should start playing again, too.”

“*Der Führer*? Really? What was he doing there?”

“Take a guess.”

“He *talked* to you?” Tom couldn’t have sounded more dubious asking if Obersdorfer had mutated into a bat and flown out the window.

“A little. He seemed nice enough. A little sterile, maybe.”

“The world only wishes he was sterile. One of him is enough. I gotta tell you what he did today. We’re doing the Mahler, fifth movement, where the chorus gets loud for the first time. He stops, makes them do it a couple of times, then, I swear to God, asks how many Jews are there.”

“How many Jews?”

“No shit. He gives them that look he has, like they’re little kids just figuring out they can sing, and he says, ‘Ve neet more Chews. Mahler vass ein Chew. Vat kind uff Chews are you who cannot zuffer more zan ziss?’ You could have heard a pin drop.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“The bitch is, it worked. I think they did it to spite him.”

“It’s amazing no one’s killed him yet.”

Tom shook his head more in disbelief than disagreement. “You read this crap about the spiritual enlightenment that comes from music. Follow that prick around for a day and tell me about music’s benefits for the soul.”

He looked like he might rag on Obersdorfer again, then his face cleared and he put an arm around my shoulders, leaned his head in toward mine.

“Remember Connie? From Hooters?”

“Of course. You had some questions about her T-shirt.”

He looked up to make eye contact. His smile almost swallowed his ears. “They’re real.”

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment before staring at him with my mouth ajar. “You have firsthand evidence of this?”

“I have both-hands evidence.” He made a kissy face at me. “And guess what?”

“There’s more?”

He looked around to ensure our privacy, then pulled my head even closer. “She’s a screamer.”

Poor Tom. Unable to appreciate the simple pleasure of an encounter so intimate it’s like there’s only one person in the room. Maybe I was prejudiced, since so many of my recent encounters had been exactly that.

9

I found Margot Burton where Eddie Reifsnyder promised she’d be, stress testing a wing chair in the Starbucks on Jackson. Watched her cram what might have been bruschetta into her mouth with a handful of pudgy fingers. My name’s the most Italian thing about me; I can’t tell bruschetta from tiramisu.

I bet Margot could. I never got within thirty feet the week I followed her, not nearly close enough for the full effect. Unattractive as she’d been from that distance, every step closer brought a less flattering adjective to mind. Toneless skin hung from her cheeks, too high to be jowls, too low to be a turban. Hair pushed in a more or less uniform direction, gathered into an off-center bun that leaked from all sides. She wore no makeup and had the table manners of a starving Bedouin. Nature had not been kind to her. She wasn’t too charitable herself.

I parked myself in the chair across the small table from hers and waited. She deigned to acknowledge me when the last remnant of her treat had been swallowed, no crumb left behind.

“You can’t sit there. I’m expecting someone.” She brushed at herself with a napkin, elegant as a woman her size could hope to be. She was as dainty as a walrus at a salad bar.

“I’ll just be a minute, Mrs. Burton. My name is Forte.” I offered her a business card.

“A reporter. Don’t you people know I’m in mourning? Of course you do, that’s why you’re here, ghouls that you are. The public can’t get enough of other people’s suffering, and you’re here to dump more slop in the trough. Fine. Ask your questions and go away.”

The pig analogy showed me what she and Marshall had in common: no sense of irony. “I’m not a reporter, ma’am. I’m an investigator.”

“I’ve spoken to the police already. What more can I tell you people?”

“I’m a private investigator. I have a few questions, and I’ll be on my way.”

She broke down and took the card, read it while slurping her *Caffè Verona*. “What are you investigating?”

“Did you know your late husband suspected you of being unfaithful to him?”

She snorted into the cup. Coffee burbled up to cling to the noticeable mustache on her upper lip. “Did I know? The better question is ‘Did I care?’ Look at me. Do I look like somebody anyone would worry about being unfaithful?” It might have been the most rhetorical question I’d ever heard. “What gives you the idea he thought I was adulterous?”

“He had you followed.”

“Marshall? He never. My late, dear husband didn’t have the spine to do anything of the sort. He’d be too afraid I’d find out. What makes you think I was being followed?”

“I was the one doing it.” I laid out enough of her activities for the past week to convince her. Her face grew harder as I went, only let slip a couple of times that anything I said surprised her.

“Well, don’t you have the wonderful job,” she said when I finished. “Do you slip a little mirror under bedroom doors to peek at people *in flagrante delicto*?”

“We use fiber optics for that now. Did you know?”

“No, I did not, and, as you should know by now, I had no reason to care. I haven’t done anything actionable, even if Marshall did suddenly grow

enough testicles to do anything about it.”

“Did you know where he was going on the day he was shot?”

“I did not, and I did not care. It’s obvious why you’re here. I’ll give you what you want so you can leave me in peace. Except for the rehearsal, I didn’t know anything about Marshall’s day until the police told me he was dead. I was sorry about it, but not for the reason you think. Marshall amused me. He didn’t mean to, but his constant whining and anal habits were fodder. Sometimes I think Marshall lived so I could point out his flaws and let him stew in them. I knew all about his faggot, I knew right away. I could have thrown him out then. It was so much more fun to watch him play juvenile games he thought were deceiving me.” She looked over my right shoulder. “Vincent, will you ask this man to leave? He’s disturbing me.”

Vincent Percy moved in front of me as I half turned in my chair. Percy had average size and the wiry build of a runner. Around 30, with a head that widened at a uniform rate from what passed for a chin to well above his ears. He combed his hair straight back off a forehead already high enough to rent out advertising space.

“You heard her. Thanks for warming the seat for me.” A smile crinkled his tan face around the eyes, not enough to hide the uncertainty. “She’s in mourning, you know.”

“Why? Did they run out of pastry?” Margot’s ability to make Marshall a sympathetic figure in less than five minutes made me dislike her faster than anyone I could think of except my ex-father-in-law. She dressed herself in an artist’s sensitivities, then referred to Zoltan as a faggot with the same comfort she’d use to call Beethoven brilliant.

“There’s no need for that.” Percy stepped forward with what he probably thought was a hard look on his face. He gripped my right shoulder with his right hand to show me how tough he was. I had news for him: viola tough isn’t tough even by musician standards. To a cop it falls somewhere between schoolyard bully and poet.

I turned my head to the right and burrowed my chin into the collarbone. My voice stayed soft and level. “Vincent, if you don’t take your hand off me right now, you won’t play the concert tonight. Do you understand?”

Percy flicked his eyes toward Margot, looking for a way off the spot he’d put himself on. “There’s no need to get abusive.” He pulled the hand

away slow enough to show it was his idea. “We don’t have to cause a scene.”

“We don’t, but we could.” I took my time standing to let him appreciate the three inches and fifty pounds I had on him. Percy swallowed twice. Once when I started up and he saw how far I had to go, and once when I was all the way up and turned directly to him. “Enjoy your coffee. I’ve had all the highbrow conversation I can stand for today.”

I turned to look when I got to the door and caught them air kissing. I had no idea about the dynamic of that relationship and didn’t want one. I believed everything Margot said about enjoying Marshall’s torture too much to kill him. I wondered if I’d just spoken to the fly whose wings she’d pull off next.

I noticed a loose shoelace and knelt close to Starbucks to stay out of the flow of pedestrian traffic while I tied it. When I stood a man across the street looked away in a hurry and moved under the awning of the building opposite me. I knelt to tie the other shoe. He hadn’t moved when I stood up.

There were probably a million reasons for him to be there, and 999,999 of them were innocent. Still, Zoltan had received threats, and whoever threatened him knew he’d hired me. All detectives have higher than average paranoia levels. Being paranoid doesn’t mean you’re wrong.

I had the afternoon free. I walked to the corner and stood at the curb to let anyone interested see me, crossed to his side of the street and went south on Plymouth. He’d follow me or he wouldn’t.

10

He followed me. Not the most elegant tail job, he at least made an effort. I’d stop to look in a window, he’d stop and look. Once I stopped in front of a window when he wasn’t close to one and almost caught him wall shopping.

I led him down Plymouth to Harrison, west to Dearborn, turned south toward my office. Made no effort to lose him. I wanted to seem as clueless to him as he did to me, if that was possible.

Kasey’s Tavern had three people in it at three o’clock in the afternoon; one of them worked there. Sandy had the day off from studying this year’s chosen major at DePaul. She greeted me by raising her eyebrows. I

responded with a tilt of my head. A Leinenkugel's had sweat running down its side before I got to my stool.

"Getting kind of late in the year for one of your afternoon beers," she said. "You only come in here this early to cool off."

"It's always hot in here when you're working." I winked and sucked the head off my beer. No one would describe Sandy as hot. She was plenty attractive; didn't have the attitude. Some women with marginal physical gifts exude a sexuality Jose Feliciano could sense wearing mittens. Sandy had a pretty face, everything in the right place, and inspired thoughts along the lines of grabbing a couple of gloves and playing catch in the street.

"Tease." She made sure I got a good look at her ass when she walked to the other end of the bar. Nothing wrong with her ass. The way she did it had all the sexual tension of a kid playing dress up.

I didn't go into Kasey's out of thirst. That part of the block didn't have a place from which I could be watched without being obvious, and my new friend couldn't risk coming inside. I took my time with the beer and watched him suffer. He walked up one side of the street, then the other. Tried to look busy, then lost, then like he was waiting for someone. Every impression he went for made him look like a bad mime.

I had an inch of beer left when I called Sandy over and asked if I could use the back door. I'd done it before, preferred to ask permission than to need forgiveness if something went sideways. I slid a few bucks across the bar with the palm of my hand. We made several gestures intended to look like I needed to find the men's. I stepped behind the open door, used its slow closer to cover me while I went out the back.

The afternoon's warmth disappeared as soon as the sun fell low enough to put most of Plymouth Street in shade. I walked north to Harrison, west to Federal, and south to Tony's garage, let myself in through a workman's entrance on Federal. I'd parked there since I moved my office into the Rowe Building and had my run of the place.

The joint looked great, considering the owner. I worked on him for years to do something with the shell of a building he parked one level of cars in. Add a ramp to another floor, maybe some of those stackers to park cars on top of each other. He always found a reason not to. Said he didn't want to ruin the ambience.

That changed when a hood put a bomb in my car and almost killed Tony's assistant. Joey got off with bruises and a story that got more terrifying by the year. Tony swept up my car with a push broom, and the insurance let him fix the place so he could make some money. Now it had four parking levels and Tony could afford to hire a couple of guys to work there, cutting his sixty-hour weeks to something closer to forty. It couldn't have worked out better if he'd bombed me himself.

Tony saw me before I had a chance to say anything. "For Chrissake, how dumb are you? If you want to skip out on the bill, you *leave* through the back. You don't come in that way."

I put a finger to my lips. "Where's Joey?" I loved Tony's sidekick like a nephew, pretty much adopted him after I almost got him killed. He could charitably be described as slow and could not be counted on to keep my presence anything like a secret.

"I give him the afternoon off to buy his mother a birthday present. I think he's getting her a video game."

"For his mother?"

"He went shopping with her one day and said that looked like a good game. She said something like 'Yes, that does look like fun,' and now it's hers."

I could see Joey doing that. "Do me a favor. Check the street and see if some guy looks like he's trying to look like he's not watching Kasey's."

"What the hell would someone look like who's trying to not look like he's looking like—aw, shit, there he is." Tony laughed. "You know what he's doing? Standing on his tiptoes like he's trying to see into Sandmeyer's window." Sandmeyer's Bookstore filled the first floor of my building. The bottom of the window was almost six feet above street level.

"What's he look like?"

"Right now he looks like a douchebag."

The things I put up with. "Is he a tall douchebag? A fat douchebag? Any special kind?"

"Basic vinegar and water from here. About my size, maybe a little thinner. Dark hair, baseball cap. Can't see what it says from here."

"That's the guy. Keep an eye on him for me. Let me know where he goes."

“Jesus Christ, are you being followed again? Last time this happened police cars and that TV broad had the street fucked up for an hour.”

“I’m not going to brace him, I just want to follow him. Let me know what he does.”

“He crossed the street, walking in front of Kasey’s. Now he stopped, he’s looking in the window.” Tony started laughing under his breath, building steam as he went. “This guy’s too much. He’s standing in front of the fucking window with his hands cupped around his eyes—wait, now he’s going in—he’s out again. Oh, man, he’s pissed. Duck back, here he comes. Running through the lot across the street, looking up and down Plymouth.” Tony stopped to laugh, hawked up a wad of phlegm and spit it into the street. “Now he’s running back this way, looking everywhere. Christ, I gotta come inside. He’s gonna see me laughing and know what’s up.”

Tony went to his little office across the doorway from me, laughing and coughing and wiping his eyes. He faced the street again when he couldn’t be seen from outside. “Fucking guy’s standing there with his hands on his hips like his wife’s late picking him up from the el. That’s it, he’s had enough. Walking north like he’s going somewhere.”

I got into my car and pulled out my cell phone. “Watch him. I want to know what he does when he gets to the corner.”

“He ain’t going that far. Looks like he parked in the lot up the block. Lay back, he’s pulling out now. Brown Toyota.”

“Let me know what he does when he gets to Harrison.”

“Light’s red—wait—left. He’s signaling left.” A few seconds of Tony extending his left arm, wobbling his hand to keep me back. “There he goes.”

It would have been easier with Delbert. It’s hard for one man to follow someone, impossible if the subject has half a brain and suspects you. I could only hope my mark’s evasive instincts weren’t any better than his surveillance talents.

He lost me in traffic, no credit to him. I hung as far as Congress, couldn’t keep up in the Eisenhower’s Friday afternoon congestion. No great loss. I got his tag number and called Sharon with it before he got as far as the post office. She was ready when I got back.

“Was the car a six-year-old brown Toyota?”

“It was a brown Toyota that needed some body work.”

“Registered to Steven Plum. Mr. Plum is a licensed private investigator, has an office in Cicero. Fifty-fifth and Cermak.”

“Got a phone number?” She gave me her version of the evil eye. I made a show of slapping my forehead. “Sorry, dumb question. Can I have a Mulligan?” She nodded. “What’s his phone number?”

I punched the number into my cell and got voice mail. I left a message to meet me in his office at ten o’clock sharp the next morning. An urgent and confidential matter. I didn’t leave a name. Plum surprised me today. I’d return the favor tomorrow. I hoped he enjoyed surprises as much as I did.

11

Sharon spoke when I broke the cell connection. “Do you have time for any Zoltan information?”

I looked at my watch. “How good is it? I still want to get something to eat before I go to the hall.”

“Is his real name worth sticking around for?”

I took her by the elbow, pulled back her chair, escorted her into my office and closed the door. “Please, have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?” I rummaged through my middle desk drawer, held up what I found. “Snickers bar?”

She didn’t tell me right away. Held a file so I couldn’t see it while she made a great show of pretending to search for this vital piece of information. I made gestures of exaggerated patience until she decided I’d suffered enough.

“Homer Ledbetter.”

“No way.”

“Way. From Greensburg, Indiana. Honor roll at North Decatur High School. Vice president of the Drama Club.”

“Drama Club. Who’d’ve thought that?”

Years of working with me had trained her to ignore my pithy interjections. “B.I.A. from the Maryland Institute College of Art—”

“B.I.A.?”

“Bachelor of interior architecture.”

“Ahh.”

“Are you jumping to conclusions?”

“None I hadn’t jumped to from meeting him.”

She pursed her lips like a mother reminding herself how boys could be. “He worked around Baltimore until about ten years ago. Then he came here and changed his name to Zoltan.”

“Any arrest history?”

She shook her head. “Not even a moving violation. He paid both of his parking tickets on time.”

“Two? Scofflaw.”

“His business does well. No national reputation yet, but he shouldn’t have any money worries. He’s highly respected as a designer.”

“Personally?”

“He’s a real flake, but seems to be well-liked outside of the usual professional jealousy.”

“Shoe size?”

“It’s only been a day. I’m working on it.”

“All right, but no slacking off. This is good for a start.” I reached for my jacket.

“Don’t you want to hear about Marshall Burton?”

I stopped, jacket half on. “He’s still dead, isn’t he?”

“Him and Elvis. I got some background on Marshall in case you were looking for a reason for someone to want to kill him.”

“Aside from his personality?”

She made her disapproving mother face again. Raising two boys on her own and working for me taught her aging doesn’t change us much. “He *is* dead, and he *was* our client. A little respect, maybe?”

“I hate it when you do that. I feel like you’re going to scold me and use my middle name.”

“That *would* be scolding.”

I held up an index finger. “Be careful. Four people in Illinois know my middle name, and I sign paychecks for one of them.”

She smiled without showing any teeth, knowing she could hold that one over me like a paternity suit over a politician. “Do you want to hear about Marshall?”

“Yes, please. Any information about our late, lamented ex-client is vital to me.”

“He was a lot less exciting than Zoltan. No criminal or even a traffic record. Good credit history, no family scandals, didn’t live beyond his means. Went right into the Philadelphia Orchestra from Juilliard. Stayed there five years, then got the gig here.” She beamed when I acknowledged her proper use of “gig.” “He was a respected teacher and past president of the American Viola Society. He recorded Berlioz’s *Harold in Italy* with the Chicago Symphony five years ago and got great reviews.”

“Being a violist probably isn’t a motive for murder.”

“Probably isn’t?”

“Depends on who you ask. Tom McManus told me Marshall was a real pain in the ass in the orchestra. Maybe that’s the place to hang around.”

“What about talking to the wife?”

“I did that already.”

“And?”

“I can’t rule out the possibility that Marshall called the hit on himself.”

“That bad?”

I made hand gestures, acting as if thinking of the perfect phrase. For once in my life, I knew exactly what to say to a beautiful woman.

“She’s the anti-Sharon.” She smiled, might have blushed. “You’re done here. Have a nice weekend.”

12

I’d seen the Chicago Symphony a hundred times since I discovered Orchestra Hall as a freshman at Northwestern. Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben* was the big blow that night. The shape and steepness of the seating area made me think of looking down a well. I can still picture Bud Herseth warming up, playing his Monette then, the horn looking not merely unfinished but incomplete without any lacquer or silver. I still come half an hour early to experience the exhilaration I felt when I played, the anticipation of helping to create something greater than oneself. Only the sounds end with the applause. The music stays inside anyone involved with the concert, audience or performer.

The orchestra tuned and Helmut Obersdorfer came out, impeccable as the groom on a wedding cake. The transformation that came over him

during a performance was eerie. I knew what a prick he could be, seen some of his stiffness first hand. All of that stayed in the dressing room. No trace of his limp, no milking the applause. He floated to the podium as though he were a vessel containing the music, the orchestra here to help him pour it over the audience. He turned to the house and gave a perfunctory, unsmiling nod before facing the musicians. When the hall was quiet he got right to it, gripping the podium rail with his left hand and shaking the stick as if summoning Mahler himself from the grave for the opening string tremolos.

No one who heard the orchestra that night would imagine they hated playing for him. I knew, and couldn't keep my head around it. The opening string figures were as crisp as I had ever heard, the volume rising and falling with the fluidity of an incoming tide. Obersdorfer had a gift for bringing out Mahler's Jewish angst without wringing it dry, allowing you to be moved or touched on your own. Maybe his father really had been SS and this was Obersdorfer's way of atoning.

Tom played like I'd never heard before. Mahler 2 was special to him. He did more with it, took chances, played at the edge, looking for more than just a trumpet part. He'd always been a horse; I never knew a stronger player. Now he could play softer than the woodwinds without losing the core sound that made him special even in an ensemble of exceptional players. Charlie Schlueter taught him that at New England. Tom came back with something indefinable, his playing lifted to a transcendent level.

He'd always stood apart from my other trumpet buds. I took it as a personal challenge when I met someone better than me, my incentive to improve. I knew the first time I played with Tom I had no more chance of reaching his level than I had of throwing a no-hitter for the White Sox. His talent came from a place I would never find, the sound projected from his trumpet as free and luminous as a sunbeam emerging from behind a cloud.

The introduction of the Resurrection theme in the last movement is a brief trumpet solo. Tom's tone floated from his bell, the melodic line rising as if drawn by divine attraction. He held the top note longer than a purist would like before letting it sigh downward, and that lingering made all the difference, as his willingness to take the chance carried him across the line between beautiful and sublime.

I never listened to Mahler 2 without parts of my life flashing before my eyes. Absent friends, opportunities lost, mistakes made. Tonight was no exception. The tears came in the usual place, the intensity of the music overcoming my inability to translate the German, too caught up to read the program notes. Something about resurrection and my heart and God.

I left the hall with my standard emotion, something between elation and melancholy. Tom always invited me for a beer after a concert. I never went. The music was too close to what I'd always wanted to do, my happiness at his success tempered by my jealousy of his talent. I went home and took my time with a snifter of Courvoisier, replayed favorite parts in my mind. Hearing how I would have played them had I the gift, until I fell asleep in the chair.

13

Steve Plum's office squatted above a photographer's studio in a two-story building half a block off Cermak. No name on the sign, just "Investigations/*Investigaciones*." The door from the parking lot opened onto a flight of stairs. The treads showed a lot of traffic over an extended period of time. The hand rail felt tacky.

Stains held the hall's floor runner together more than the remaining threads. I passed three empty offices, a *dentista*, and an *abogado*. Suite 208 had a closed door with "Steven Plum, Investigations" lettered on the glass. No light showed. I tried the knob and the door swung open.

Plum's office layout resembled mine the way Motel 6 is similar to a Marriott, and my office is no Marriott. The waiting room couldn't handle three steps in any direction. Three plastic chairs were arrayed around an end table with half a dozen faded magazines. No plants, no outside windows, no air. The place was cozy as the back room of a gas station.

A door opposite the one I used had "Steven Plum, Private" lettered on it. This one was locked. Must be where he kept the sensitive documents. Political secrets. Industrial espionage. Big-money stuff no one would suspect from the humble surroundings. I shook the knob twice. It wasn't worth bothering with the picks. I slid a credit card along the jamb and had it open within ten seconds.

Plum's inner sanctum made mine look well-appointed, with or without Sharon. A office surplus desk with a straight-backed chair on either side. Two battered filing cabinets. The top drawer of the left cabinet didn't close all the way. The foul, sweet smell of a banana gone over, fruit flies circling the wastebasket. Mouse turds on the floor. I checked his desk calendar. No appointments with *Architectural Digest*.

The wall clock read 7:53; my watch had 8:30. My message said to be here by ten. I tilted back his chair to put my feet on the desk, read Carl Hiaasen's *Kick Ass* to get me in the mood while I waited.

The outer door opened at 9:50. I put Carl away and got out my best disinterested look. Plum unlocked the connecting door, stepped in, turned around, closed the door and took a step toward the desk before he noticed me. After he collected his jaw from the floor his hand went to his hip.

"You won't need a gun," I said without moving anything but my lips. "I have enough for both of us. Take a seat."

It occurred to Plum to be indignant. "Who the hell do you think y—"

"I'm the guy you followed all over Printers Row yesterday. I decided to make you look like an ass in private today. Now sit down."

"You can't just barge in here like this. I—"

"Shut the fuck up and sit the fuck down." I said it louder than I needed to. Plum tried to look tough by taking at least five seconds for the two steps to the visitor's chair. It didn't work. He gave me a dirty look the whole time, though.

He didn't look any more impressive up close. Five-ten, average build, small pot on him, sandy brown hair thinning into a widow's peak. An extra Adam's apple floated above his neck where most people kept their chins. He gathered himself as well as he could and sat with both feet flat on the floor and his hands resting on his thighs, casual as an immigrant at a deportation hearing.

"Tell me who I am," I said.

"I don't know, I never—"

"*Tell me who I am.*"

"Nick Forte. You're a private investigator."

"Who hired you to follow me?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

I curled the left side of my lip into a sneer. “Listen, friend, there’s nothing you *can’t* tell me. Let me clue you in on something. You’re in way over your head. I don’t know what your client told you, but you’re lucky I’m the one you followed. Some of the other people involved in this would’ve pushed your button for screwing around like you did yesterday.”

It was hard to believe Plum knew any less than I did about what was going on. Or maybe not. He looked pretty clueless sitting in the guest chair in his own office.

“I’m just supposed to follow you, not do anything. He only wants to know what you do, where you go, stuff like that.”

“You putting the finger on me?”

“No! Holy shit, where’d you get that idea? Guy just wants to know what you’re up to.”

“What guy?”

He almost said it, caught himself. “No. I’m not going to tell you. It’s not ethical.”

I stood up and he started talking so fast he almost choked. “Some queer named Zoltan runs a design place north of the river paid me. He said he hired you to do a job and wasn’t sure you were doing anything with it. He wanted to make sure you were working on his case.”

“Why didn’t you stick with me after I lost you in Kasey’s yesterday?”

“I didn’t know where to pick you up again.”

“Don’t you know where my office is?”

“Yeah, but I figured you wouldn’t go back there. Besides, I could see the door from where I was. There’s not a back way in. Is there?”

I suppressed a groan. “How long have you been a detective?”

“About a year and a half.”

“How’s it working out for you?”

“Look around.” He gestured to the four corners of his empire with the enthusiasm of a woman who just learned her jewels are paste, and you already knew. “What do you think?”

“What did you do before you went private?”

“Insurance claims adjuster. I liked figuring out who was scamming us, so I took one of those Internet courses and got a license.”

“That won’t get you a license in Illinois.”

“Want to see it?”

“Who do you know?”

“Here, it’s in my wallet.”

“I don’t want to see your license. I just want to know how you got it. You’re an embarrassment.”

He kept his unopened wallet in his hand, looked at it like he wished it was someone else’s. “My uncle. He worked with me at the insurance company, signed something said I’d been doing investigations. He knew a guy who worked for the licensing board, and nobody looked too close.”

“That still doesn’t qualify you to hang out a shingle.”

“Strictly speaking, I work freelance through another agency.”

“Who?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s what we *do*, dumbass. Now who’s letting you work under his license?”

For a brief second he had a chin. “Marty Fish.”

It figured. Martha Fish’s late husband worked as a bottom feeder in town for years, a true keyhole peeper. Mike Fish died about five years ago, and Marty kept the license going. She couldn’t find her oversized ass with both hands and a map, so she carved out a niche and a living for herself advertising, taking cases, and farming them out to numbnuts like Plum.

“All right, that follows. Here’s the deal: You’re fired. You can tell Zoltan what you want, but if I catch you following me again I’ll hurt you. Not bad, but you’ll know better when I’m done. We straight?”

“I guess so. I mean, I don’t have his number or anything. I’m supposed to see him on Monday to fill him in.”

This guy gave the whole profession a bad name, not like it needed any help. He probably didn’t even have a signed contract. “I’ll see him for you. Bill him for the weekend if you want. I don’t care. I’m just telling you what’ll happen if I see you again.”

Plum looked around his office like I might take it with me. “You won’t say anything, will you?”

“To Zoltan, absolutely. About your license, no. Do yourself a favor. Find another line of work. Or specialize in something easy. Records searches. Background checks. You know, inside work.”

“Can a guy make a living at that?”

“Definitely. Try one of the big agencies, work your way up. The hours are good, you’re not wandering around in the weather all day and night, and you don’t have to put up with assholes like me pushing you around like I just did.”

“Tell the truth, I didn’t know what to do when I saw you sitting there.”

“You did about as well as you could, but you got lucky, too. I’m not a leg breaker.” I came the rest of the way around his desk. Plum forced himself not to shrink away. “I’m leaving. I expect not to see you again.”

“You won’t. Thanks for the advice.”

“My pleasure.” It was, too. Plum told me all I needed to know, not that he knew that much.

I drove to Zoltan’s studio on the south side of Franklin Street, between Huron and Orleans. Locked. Sharon had his home address and I thought about it, decided it would keep. With Plum off my back, Caroline and I could spend tomorrow in peace. Tonight I’d watch the Sox, do some laundry, and finish Hiaasen’s book. An investigator’s life isn’t all fast cars and faster women.

14

“How come you always buy the black one?”

My 9-year-old daughter Caroline and I stood in the home electronics section of Best Buy off 75th Street and Lemont Road in Downers Grove. My DVD player quit producing sound during *The LEGO Movie*. Best Buy wanted to charge me more to accept it for repair than to buy one. I had a Blu-Ray under my arm.

“What do you mean, I always buy the black one?”

“All your stuff is black.”

“Is not.”

“Is too.” Caroline had the disconcerting habit of looking me in the eye like an adult when she talked. Not asking or hoping to be treated like a person instead of a kid. Assuming it. “The TV is black, the CD player is black, the speakers are black, the VCR is black. All your stuff is black.”

“Not all my stuff. The refrigerator’s white.”

“That doesn’t count. All the electrical stuff is black.”

“You don’t think the refrigerator is electrical? How come I have to plug it into the wall?”

“Not *electrical*. You know what I mean.”

“You said electrical. That means it needs electricity, right?”

“Yeah, but not like a refrigerator.”

“How about the toaster? That’s white.”

“No, that’s like a refrigerator.”

“How is a toaster like a refrigerator? One keeps things cold and the other one makes things hot. They’re nothing alike.”

She chewed on a strand of hair still light enough to be blond. It darkened in winter and got lighter in summer, but never as light as the year before. I saw her every week, and each time she was noticeably taller, her features different in a way indiscernible to someone who lived with her. The child I taught to tie her shoes showed less by the day. Not a bad change. She matured as she grew, became interesting on more levels, learning so fast sometimes I felt as though I could see the connections being made inside her head. Still, what came before would never come back. Every time I saw her was one less time before that child would be gone forever. “Not alike like that. I mean like, you know, like a TV or a computer. You know, *electronical*.”

“Oh, you mean *electronic*.”

“Yeah, *electronic*.”

“Well, the computer’s not black.”

“Sure it is.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s not white, but it’s definitely not black. It’s one of those off-white colors your mom might call *ecru* or *ivory* or *sand* or something like that.”

“Dad, it’s sitting right on top of the desk, and it’s black.”

“Ah ha! The *monitor* is black. The computer’s off to the side there, and it’s—eggshell! That’s a good name for the color. *Eggshell*.”

“But all the *electronical*—*electronic* stuff you can see is black. How come?”

“Because black is the official color of state-of-the-art technology.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Is too. Look around the store. Everything really cool is black.”

“What about this one?” She pointed to a DVD player on the shelf above the one I was about to buy.

“Junk.”

“How can you tell it’s junk?”

“It’s not black.”

“Dad!”

This could go on for quite a while. Caroline had rocket scientist potential, and not just because she’s my kid and I said so. She attended a school for gifted and talented children and read at an eighth-grade level. In my job entire weeks could go by and she’d be the most stimulating person I’d talk to.

Her thinking did tend to be a little linear. Every so often I amused myself by running her around to see how long it took her to catch on. The entire weekend could turn into an extended Abbott and Costello routine when we were in the mood.

She stayed quiet by her standards until we got to the checkout line. She only asked why we couldn’t look at the digital cameras (her mother and I each already had one), how many things I could use a tablet device for (something I’d thought of myself that now had to be delayed or she’d try to talk me into everything in the store), and why we couldn’t eat at Fuddruckers since it was right there in the parking lot (because chicken breasts were already thawed).

Our checker couldn’t have been more than a year out of high school. She smiled with the self-consciousness of someone who’d worn braces and wasn’t used to being without them. I handed her the box, and she asked for my phone number.

“Sorry, I can’t give it to you.”

She stopped in mid-action, fingers poised over the key pad. Even her jaw stopped in mid-chew. “I need your phone number.”

“Sorry. Much as I’d love to give it to you, I think it’s a bad idea. You’re way too young for me.”

This confused Caroline at least as much as the cashier. “But I can’t ring up your order without your phone number.”

“I’ll bet you can. I can’t believe Best Buy makes invading my privacy a requirement to buy something.”

She didn't know what to say to that. Chewed her gum, jaws moving slower, then faster, an oral tachometer of her brain activity. The decision came after sufficient chewing to burn off at least four ounces of body weight.

"Please? I just started this week, and no one ever wouldn't give it to me, and I'm not sure what to do, and I don't want to ask because I know I'm supposed to know. They trained us on this already and—"

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Here you go." I made up a number with a local exchange. I never gave my number, never had a cashier cramp up on me like that before. My refusal couldn't have shocked her any more than her confusion set me back.

Caroline stayed quiet until we buckled ourselves into the car. "How come you got the black one? Really." We both knew she meant the DVD player, even though it hadn't been mentioned in almost ten minutes. We often left threads of conversation laying around, like Arctic explorers store caches of food.

"Because—"

"And if you say because it's black, we have to eat at Fuddruckers."

"Huh?"

"That's right, so you better tell me or take me to Fuddruckers."

"I hate to break this to you, but you're not the boss of me."

"Please?"

"All right. It's because this one will sound better plugged into the stereo system so we can have true surround sound when we watch a movie. It also got good reviews on the web site and is on sale. *And* it's black, but that's only because everything else on the rack is black and another color would look goofy."

"Oh, okay." If she'd known to say, "Curses, foiled again," she would have.

There was enough little girl left in her to get the squirms when I parked in front of Fuddruckers. I knew the difference between agitating me and really wanting to go. Moving to Bolingbrook gave us a lot more time together, not near enough to keep divorced-dad guilt from making me a sucker for a sincere plea. The chicken would keep. I had limited time to appreciate a 9-year-old girl with a taste for caramelized onions and Fudd Fries.

Zoltan expected to meet Steve Plum at the Celebrity Café in the Westin Hotel at 10:00 Monday morning. By 9:45 I'd found an obvious location and waited for his reaction.

The Entrance came half an hour later. Today Zoltan had the blues. A royal blue suit covered a navy shirt accessorized with the standard abstract tie of many blues. I thought his shoes were black until he turned and the light caught them. Midnight blue.

He carried the bearing of an exiled European aristocrat coming to grips with the loss of his retinue. Chin tilted upward as far as haughty, less than arrogant. His eyes scanned the room with the indifference of one who expected whoever he was meeting to come to him.

Until he saw me. He was good, his chin moved no more than a millimeter. His eyes gave him away, ransacking the room for Plum, hoping against hope my appearance might be a coincidence.

I focused on his face to establish eye contact as soon as he quit pretending to look for Plum. The few seconds must have seemed like an hour to him while I almost tied a knot in my liver to keep from laughing.

He did his best to carry it off. Swaggered over to my table with a smile as pasted on as his accent, looking for all the world like his shock was exceeded only by the joy of seeing me. "Nick Forte, my friend, is many surprises to see you this good morning! How are you been?"

"Hello, Homer," I said without tone. "Have a seat."

His façade fell apart in pieces, like a badly glued mosaic. Salvaged what he could as he realized what was happening. The debris of his psyche surrounded us like rubble after a bombing.

A waitress came to fawn over him, and he ordered with as little flamboyance as I'd seen. He waited until she got halfway across the room before he spoke. "How were you finding out?"

I frowned at his continued affectation. "I find things out for a living. That's why you hired me, remember? Now I'm here to find out why you paid Steve Plum to follow me."

"Plum did not tell you?"

“He has professional ethics to consider.” No point making Plum look worse than I had to.

“Then how did you learn it was me hiring him?”

“He told me that.” Zoltan looked confused. “I caught him tailing me and braced him. There was a battle of wills over how much he’d tell me. Who do you think won?”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want to know why.”

“You were not taking Zoltan serious. Zoltan need to know how truly you were working for him.”

I’d had about enough of this. “Zoltan is kind of hard to take serious. Why don’t you quit fucking around with this half-assed accent if you’re worried about being taken seriously? Let Homer Ledbetter talk to me.”

The waitress dropped off his coffee. He sipped it showing no indication he tasted anything. “Homer is dead for many years. Now is only Zoltan.”

“Uh-uh. I’m looking at Homer Ledbetter. This Zoltan shit has gone far enough.”

“You are not understanding me, I think.” His voice authoritative and sad at the same time. “There was time when Homer suffer much for how he was. Not many in Indiana small town understanding boy who like to work with color, design beautiful things. Homer wins award for set design for school play, other boys tape to it picture of man sucking penis. Call him names. I am sure you know them.

“Things better for Homer in Chicago. Other men there more like him. Homer open own shop, playing Zoltan as what you call gimmick, people wishing to be chic loving it. One day Homer feeling good about self, return to Indiana for what is class reunion, to show now all are grown up and no hard feeling. All are not grown up. In body, yes, but not in mind. Make fun of Homer, play cruel joke on him. *Humiliate* him in front of few friends remember him.

“On drive back I am thinking Homer is shit. No one respect him. *Zoltan* successful. *Zoltan* making money. *Zoltan* getting his pictures on magazines. Only thing Homer good for is pain and reminding Zoltan of pain, so I am Homer never again.”

I couldn’t help but wonder what they did to him. The pain in his voice and face were so real I dared not ask. Even I have limits. “All right. I’m

sorry for what I said before, when I called you Homer. I had you confused with someone else.”

He stopped midway through a sip, looked over his cup through the steam. “Is all right. You did not know.”

“How did you make out with the police? They give you any satisfaction on the threats?”

He opened his hands in a noncommittal gesture. “Police say things all police say. I should let them know if getting more calls. You know how it is.”

“Have there been any more calls?”

“No. Has been very quiet.”

“Okay. Let me know, too, if you get any more.” I took my time swallowing the last of my tea, thinking of a disengagement strategy. “You have my word, I’ll follow this case wherever it goes. I think I have a better understanding now why Marshall meant so much to you.”

“Maybe so. Marshall was what you call outcast, too. I know he did not have friends and you are thinking he was probably not good man to be friends with, but he was good friend to me. I want to be good friend to him. I am thinking I was not so good a friend as he needed before.”

“I think you probably did fine by him. Marshall had his moments. He was liked by a good friend of mine, and Eddie Reifsnyder’s as fine a judge of character as anyone I know. You’re going to have to trust me, though. I wasted a lot of time farting around with Plum. Let me do my job. I’m pretty good at it if you give me a chance.”

“I am sorry for that, Nick Forte. Forgive me. I will wait to hear from you again.”

What’s bullshit called when it replaces reality because the reality is too much to bear? It didn’t take Dr. Phil to see Zoltan had serious problems, the dead psyche of Homer Ledbetter rotting away inside for starters. A detective works for whoever signed the contract, and I had one with Zoltan’s signature. Him being fucked up didn’t invalidate anything. The time had come for me to start doing the job, not just look like I was doing it.

I paid for the coffee.

“You’re not going to believe what happened to me last night.” Tom McManus paused to swallow a mouthful of rice at My Thai on State Street.

“This isn’t another Connie story, is it?”

“No, but I have one if you want to hear it.”

“Spare me. Go ahead and tell your story.”

“I’m cleaning out that storage room in the loft where I practice, right? There’s all kinds of junk back there: tools, old mutes, everything you can think of. Anyway, I find this old bottle-looking thing, I’m not even sure what it is, maybe it’ll look nice on the bookshelf by the television. It’s all cruddy, so I take an old rag and start dusting it off and poof! A fucking genie comes out.”

“No shit?” I didn’t look up, never stopped chewing. “Three wishes and everything, right?”

“No smart ass, just one.”

“Sounds like a pretty lame genie to me.”

“He said he’d been sick.” Tom brought another load to his mouth. He ate like an Asian, using the chopsticks to shovel rice into his mouth instead of trying to pick it up like with a fork. “Anyway, you know how much I’ve always wanted to go to Hawaii and how I hate to fly, so I asked him to build me a bridge so I can drive there.”

“A bridge to Hawaii. Good idea. What kind of mileage your car get?”

“Good enough.” He swallowed, drank some water. “Where was I? Oh, yeah, I ask for the bridge. He says that’s way too much, lots of engineering and raw materials and shit. Sick as he’s been, can I ask for something else?”

“Which of course you do, saint that you are.”

“Hey, he was doing the best he could. I think for a minute, and it hits me. Just once, I say, just one concert, I’d like to hear the violas play in tune.” He held up a finger while he slurped a noodle into his mouth. “One time.”

“And?”

“He thinks, takes off that turban thing, scratches his head. Finally he says to me, ‘How many lanes you want on that bridge?’ ”

I stopped chewing and let my mouth hang open half an inch. “That’s the best you can do? You just took an old joke and changed it to violas.”

“For the time being. I had some good ones, but they seemed kind of tasteless, what with Marshall getting killed and all. Give me some credit. I did a nice job building it up, didn’t I?”

“You’re the Frank Lloyd Wright of viola jokes.”

“You should be nicer to me. I brought you a present and everything.”

“A present?” I didn’t see anything on him large enough to be an inflatable woman. “I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but what is it?”

Tom took a cardboard mailing tube from under his chair. “This, my friend, is a poster from our gig in Berlin last June.”

“Cool.” The orchestra had toured Europe before spending the summer at Ravinia. First stop was the *Philharmonie* in Berlin. June 21 at 8:30. Beautiful poster, picture of the CSO from their previous trip. Another of Obersdorfer looking serene yet misty-eyed, like he was watching the last flight of Junkers leaving to bomb London. “This is really nice, Tom. Thank you. It goes in the office.”

It was just a poster, and it wasn’t. This wasn’t something anyone could pick up at the gift shop at Symphony Center. It was the full-sized deal, had the marks where it was hung outside the *Philharmonie*. Only performers can get these. Tom giving it to me was his way of telling me I was still in the fraternity.

Men being what we are, the gratitude didn’t get maudlin. I ate as much as I ever did and set my plate aside. “That’s not going to be any more fun coming out than it was going in, is it?” I could live without Thai food. Tom needed it like sports gamblers need ESPN.

“Depends on your idea of fun.” He gestured for the check as he wiped his lips. “You still working on Marshall?”

“As much as I can. My client was flogging Margot for the rap and said he got some threats after he hired me. I don’t like Margot for the hit. I definitely don’t like her for threatening him.”

“Welcome to the club. No one likes Margot for much of anything.”

We both dropped money on the table and left to enjoy one of the fall’s last warm days and its complementary scenery. We turned from Jackson to Michigan toward Orchestra Hall and Tom said, “You still think Marshall was just at the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“Unless something dramatic changes my mind.”

“I don’t have anything dramatic, but I might have something you can think about. We just had a committee meeting to see what we’re going to do about principal viola. Margot’s acting principal, but no one wants her leading the section a minute longer than we have to. It was funnier than hell

to watch everyone trying to say that without actually using those words, her sitting right there and all.”

“What does that have to do with Marshall getting killed?”

“Probably nothing, but listen. Margot let it out she’s willing to step down right away if Obersdorfer agrees to let Vince Percy have the gig permanently and hold auditions for a section chair next season.”

“Are you saying Margot Burton and Vince Percy had three people killed so Percy could be principal viola?”

“No, that’s too much even for them. Besides, it’s not up to Obersdorfer. He’d have to get approval from the committee. We’d rather have Marshall’s rotting corpse sitting in the chair than have Vince stuffed down our throats.”

“So why bring it up?”

“Beca-a-a-u-u-se,” he said, drawing out the word almost until he had to come up for air, “I heard something else while most of the committee got drawn into a pissing contest over that.”

I maintained silent eye contact and waited. He loved to nurse moments like this, and I’d be damned if I’d kiss his ass to find out what came next.

He caved with a sigh and an expression of exaggerated resignation. “Marshall Burton was being sued by a civilian orchestra employee.” Tom referred to all non-performing orchestra members as civilians.

“For?”

“Sexual harassment.”

“Man or woman?”

“Definitely a woman.”

“You’re that sure? I’ve seen his taste in sex partners. What must this broad look like?”

“See the woman coming this way and waving to me? Just like her.”

Marshall Burton continued to amaze me from beyond the grave. Disliked by everyone except by the best judge of character I’d ever known. He married Margot the Hutt, did biblically abominable things with Zoltan the Weird, and had enough left in the tank to harass a woman who must have heard them all.

Finding Vanessa Jordan attractive didn't make Marshall special. Five-foot-nine in flats, not quite shoulder-length brown hair groomed to be elegant, not stuffy. Chocolate brown eyes that held me at less than arm's length with a bemused light both sophisticated and childlike. Nothing noteworthy about me provoked that look. I knew right away she looked at everyone as if fun waited around the next corner, and she'd be right.

"Tom, I'm glad I caught you. The brass quintet performance at Conductor's House next week has been changed to seven o'clock." Her resonant alto nestled inside my ear.

"Don't tell me. Der Führer has a pressing engagement for later."

"Something like that. Will starting an hour earlier work for the quintet?"

"I don't see why not," Tom said. "We booked the evening. I'll check with everyone and let you know by tomorrow morning."

"You're the best." She laid the fingers of her left hand on his right forearm. A toucher without being messy about it.

"Obersdorfer has a house here?" My masculinity wouldn't let me stay completely out of this conversation, invited or not. "For all the more he's around, I'd think he'd stay in a hotel."

Vanessa smiled like she was glad I joined in. "Meyer Levy donated his mansion to the orchestra when he died a few years ago. We have fundraisers there, and it gives guest artists a chance to sleep in a home for a change. Maestro Obersdorfer stays there when he's in town." She didn't call him Der Führer. Civilians never have the same disregard for the conductor as do the musicians.

"Sweet deal for the orchestra. Bummer for the Hilton," I said.

"The Hilton provides the catering and housekeeping staff. We acknowledge their contribution and let them advertise around it."

"So it's officially the Hilton Conductor's House?"

I got that smile again. "No, just Conductor's House. We haven't sunk as low as the White Sox and started selling naming rights."

"Yet," Tom said. "I can see it now: welcome to Allstate Orchestra Hall. No, even better, welcome to McDonald's Orchestra Hall." He spread his hands to indicate the building façade. "Play Orchestra-opoly and win prizes from concert tickets to free shakes at participating locations."

"The only reason they'd sell out like that would be to pay your exorbitant and largely undeserved salary," I said.

“My salary’s undeserved? The Big O makes more than all the principal winds combined, and he’s only here eight weeks a year.”

“Ten weeks this year,” Vanessa said. She turned to me. “Do musicians ever use the conductor’s real name? Or do they only make up insulting nicknames?”

“Musicians are happy to use a conductor’s real name on two occasions,” I said. “When he leaves the job or dies. No preference.”

“That’s terrible,” she said so we’d know she didn’t mean it.

“It’s not so bad,” Tom said. “Natural causes are okay. It’s not like he has to suffer or die gruesomely.”

“That’s true,” I said. “Musicians are a refined bunch, after all.”

“I see that now,” Vanessa said. “You seem to know a lot about this.”

“I used to be one,” I said. “I’m on the wagon.”

Her eyes kicked into another gear of sparkle. “What do you do now that you’re on the wagon?”

Tom didn’t miss his chance to get even for my pass interference with Connie the other night. “He works for people with death wishes. Do you remember that actor—what’s his name, Arbuthnot?—got killed last year?” He gestured toward me with a thumb. “Bodyguard. Our boy was working for Marshall Burton just last week.”

“Oh my God!” Vanessa said. “What do you do?”

“I’m not a finger man for the mob, no matter how Tom makes it sound. I’m a professional investigator. It’s been a tough year for clients.”

The sparkle in her eyes downshifted. “I didn’t know Marshall had hired an investigator.”

“It had nothing to do with you,” I said. “I can’t tell you what I was working on, but I can tell you it wasn’t you.”

“He knows about you and Marshall,” Tom said to Vanessa.

“There’s nothing to know about me and Marshall.”

“I know there was a lawsuit, or at least the potential for one,” I said. “That’s all. I doubt someone in the process of suing Marshall would kill him. You don’t look the type, anyway.”

“What type is that?” she said.

“The type to shoot down two innocent people just to get even with a guy for making some inappropriate remarks.”

“Do you flatter all the girls like this?” she said.

“That depends. Were you flattered?”

“No.”

“Then no, I don’t.” I winked to smooth whatever edge might be forming on the conversation.

“And just so you know, it was more than inappropriate comments. I wouldn’t risk a person’s reputation over something like that.”

“This is a conversation we don’t need to have,” I said. “I never heard of you until just now, from Marshall or anyone. Everything I know about you I learned in the last five minutes. I’m just happy to have met you. That’s the kind of guy I am.”

She didn’t know whether to buy that or not. Tom came as close to bailing me out as he ever did. “We were shooting the breeze about Marshall and the suit came up just as we saw you. Nick would never get to investigate you. He’s not that lucky.”

“Is he like this all the time?” Vanessa said to me. “On the make?”

“Who says I’m on the make?” Tom said. “That was an innocent comment.”

“It was a ‘not guilty’ comment,” I said. “Nothing you say is innocent.”

“That’s it, gang up on me. This is why I don’t introduce you to more women. You have no gratitude.”

“What about me?” Vanessa said.

Tom cocked his head and smiled. “Telling you what you have, Vanessa, could get *me* sued.”

She looked at me. “Please tell me you’re not a trumpet player.”

“Okay. I’m not a trumpet player.”

“Is that true?”

“No.”

“Then why did you say it?”

“You asked me to. Don’t you remember?”

She laughed like a man, her eyes crinkling with beads of moisture at the corners. “Are you two always like this?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Tom said.

“Another not guilty comment if I ever heard one,” I said.

“I’d better go before it gets too deep here,” Vanessa said. “Nick, it’s been a pleasure meeting you, really. I hope we can chat again.”

Chatting with Vanessa Jordan would be a definite improvement from my usual routine of dead clients. Tom broke my train of thought as we got to the hall.

“She’s a keeper,” he said. “Great looking and more fun than anyone should be.”

“I wondered about that. I can’t believe you haven’t been all over her.”

“Oh no. I knew right away Vanessa and I would be special friends, on a beautiful platonic plateau someone like you can’t even imagine.”

“Shot you down, did she?”

“In flames.”

18

Eddie Reifsnnyder waved me over when I left Tom at Symphony Center, gesturing with his left hand while looking over his right shoulder at something I couldn’t see.

“You remember Willie Schreckengost? Stringy blond hair, lazy eye. Used to work some small-time strong arm when we were in the Deuce.”

“I think so. Used to hang around the hookers so he could roll the johns. Didn’t he try to move up in the world and get sent away?”

“That’s him. Thought he could be a shy. His collection habits were sloppy, and he got too rough playing catch up. He was supposed to do a nickel in Stateville, but someone took a liking to him and he got out in two.”

“Who would take a liking to Willie Schreckengost?”

“Rumor has it he shanked a guy for the Outfit.”

“Thus earning a visit from the parole fairy. So he’s out.”

Eddie nodded. “And he’s here.”

“Where else would he go, now that he’s connected?”

“I mean right here.” He pointed to the floor. “In this building.”

“Orchestra Hall? Willie Schreckengost belongs in Orchestra Hall even less than I did when I was playing. Who signed him in?”

“Carol Findley, assistant to the Music Director.”

“Tell me about her.”

“In her sixties, been here at least since Solti, maybe even Martinon. Started out in fundraising or something, worked her way up. She has so

much pull now they hired another secretary for the guest conductors.”

“What would she have to do with Willie Schreckengost?”

“I think he came to see Obersdorfer. She just called down to have him signed in.”

“Obersdorfer’d have even less reason to see him than she would. Willie might know Findley from somewhere else. Maybe she’s his aunt.”

“Schreckengost only comes since Obersdorfer’s got to town. I checked the logs.”

Eddie would have, too. “What business would Willie Schreckengost have with Obersdorfer?”

“You’re the detective. I’m just a broken-down old flatfoot. You still looking into what happened to Marshall Burton?”

“Yeah.”

He nodded toward the elevator. “Schreckengost was here that day. I checked.”

“You know a hell of a lot for a broken-down old flatfoot.”

“My body’s retired.” He tapped his right temple. “This still works.”

“Schreckengost come down yet?” Eddie shook his head. “Might be fun to see where he goes when he leaves.”

“Might be.”

“Might be even more fun to see if it’s Obersdorfer he really sees up there.”

“Is having fun all you ever think about?”

“Sometimes I wonder about what I’ll do when I retire.”

“Buy a doughnut,” Eddie said.

“A doughnut?”

He raised one leg and lifted a rubber cushion from his stool. “Fucking chair’s hell on the hemorrhoids.”

Willie Schreckengost belonged at Symphony Center like a vegan at a bull roast. He’d taken the step from bush-league hood to life taker, and was known to be at Symphony Center the day Marshall Burton died. All I had, that and Eddie Reifsnnyder telling me it stank. So I pulled Delbert from his divorce case and we followed Schreckengost for the rest of the afternoon.

Walkie-talkies kept us in touch as we took turns moving up or back, crossing his T, changing positions so he wouldn't see the same car too often

His stops were small businesses, bars mostly, some liquor stores, all local operations. Go in, spend about five minutes, come out, pop a breath strip in his mouth, drive to the next stop. Had to be sharking or protection, some kind of collections. He must have found a mentor in Joliet.

We followed him north to a car lot off Dundee Road in Wheeling. Delbert kicked a few tires and tried to listen. Told me Schreckengost talked ten words a second to the dealer, with gusts up to fifty. I'd left my Texas-English dictionary in the office and assumed that meant he was laying it on thick.

Schreckengost came out after half an hour, leaned on his car, and looked back at the showroom for a minute. Popped two more breath strips, one before his meditation, one after. I made a mental note to stay upwind if I had to get close. He slammed the door and threw gravel spinning his car out of the lot.

Delbert and I wore out the radio trying to stay on him in the early evening traffic headed back to town. About 7:00 Schreckengost pulled onto Ontario west of Orleans. He put a bill in an unattended "pay in advance" box and walked west on Ontario to Reza's Restaurant in the old Berghoff Brewery. I pulled over and called for Delbert.

Reza's is a Middle Eastern restaurant with lamb Mary would lead hers to the slaughterhouse for. I ate there semi-often when I dated a Persian—not Iranian—woman with a taste for *shishleek*. The street side is all windows, easy to keep Schreckengost in view from outside. Like red meat and careless love, that, too, had its bad side: he could also see me.

He sat at a solo table in the back right corner. I got lucky and grabbed a space where I could at least see if he talked to anyone. A waiter came and took his order, brought back a drink. Delbert went around the corner to Mr. Beef's while I made sure Schreckengost finished his meal.

He checked his watch half a dozen times waiting for what looked like a kabob. Stripped off everything but the meat and savored that like it was road kill toad. The man had no class. Reza's kabobs kick ass.

I'd just paid Delbert for my sandwich and Coke when a man approached Schreckengost's table. They spoke for a minute, then the newcomer took a

seat. The waiter came and left, returned with a drink. Schreckengost picked at his kabob and made a show of not listening.

The new one had a swarthy complexion and close-cut curly hair so black it shone. Average size and build, his primary distinguishing feature a nose that looked borrowed from a larger, non-primate species.

He hurried through whatever he said, used more hand gestures than a deaf interpreter at a farm auction. Schreckengost made a show of being uninterested. Chewed each piece of meat into oblivion and scanned the room, looking everywhere except at the speaker. After ten minutes he pushed his plate aside and called for the check. Left some bills for the waiter and pulled an envelope out of an inside pocket. Slid the envelope under the check folder, popped another breath strip, and left without a word.

Delbert geared up to follow him until I laid a hand on his arm. “He has to come past us to get his car. I want to see what happens with the envelope.”

The dark man waited until Schreckengost cleared the room. Then he picked up the envelope and left through the same exit. He didn’t even finish his drink.

I looked at Delbert in the deepening twilight, already too dark for Schreckengost to recognize either of us. “I wonder where that envelope’s going.”

“I’m a tad curious myself.”

“Stay with Schreckengost. I’ll take this one. Key me up if you see anything interesting.” Delbert slid out of his seat and disappeared, quiet as fog.

My new friend came out of Reza’s and turned right. Following a walking man from a car is tricky. I watched him as far as the corner of Ontario and Kingsbury and had the radio in my hand to call Delbert when the guy got into a black Infiniti. I laid back and let him lead me around the corner onto Erie and back down Orleans to loop onto the endless ramp that leads across the river to the expressways.

He stayed with the flow of traffic, a little over the limit going north on the Kennedy. He didn’t give me any trouble, stayed in the second lane while I weaved behind him, using the decreasing visibility to make me harder to notice. Halfway onto the ramp for the Edens he swerved back onto the Kennedy, forced me to cut off a woman in a minivan. She gave me the horn

and the finger. The commotion could have drawn attention, so I took a chance and passed him. He didn't seem to pay any mind. I let myself get stuck behind a truck and hoped for the best until he passed me.

He pulled the same move at the 190 cutoff to O'Hare, then almost got on 294 headed for Wisconsin. Both times he settled back into his usual pace and I quit worrying if he knew I was there. He didn't even know where *he* was. Stayed in the right lane and slowed to under fifty passing the Allstate Arena. I knew his taillights by then and dropped back far enough to keep from having to be a stunt driver if he made a sudden exit.

We got off on Elmhurst Road and stopped for the light at Touhy. I wound up right behind him and had to sweat it out, pulled down the visor and fooled around in the console. If he jumped the light I'd have to either risk exposing myself or give it up. Neither appealed to me.

The light turned green. He waited for a semi to finish its turn onto Elmhurst, followed the truck across Touhy and signaled right as soon as he cleared the intersection. I chuckled. Allah would not be pleased.

20

Scarlett O'Hare's is a gentleman's club on the edge of an industrial area west of O'Hare Airport. Elaborate facades and bright lights visible from a distance did their best to conjure up Vegas glamour. Closer inspection lowered expectations to the seedy side of Reno. Remaining illusions died in the parking lot, illuminated by two lights hung from poles.

I paid my cover and badged the doorman when he asked for ID. Anyone can get a badge like mine at a police supply store: no number, no jurisdiction. No one but a cop or a felon ever looks that close. He asked if I wanted to see a manager

"Relax," I said. "I'm not vice. I'm just looking for a guy. You'll never know I was here."

He let me in, and I stepped to the side for my pupils to finish dilating. A power failure on a cloudy night wouldn't be as dark as Scarlett's. Spotlights and strobes highlighted the glitz on stage, directing the eye away from the stray sag or stretch mark. The seating areas got even less light so no disconcerting facial lines could argue against a twenty-dollar lap dance.

I took a high stool close to the door and rested my elbow on the eight-inch wide bar against the wall. The main room about the size of a high school swimming pool. Doorways led into unseen alcoves available for more personal entertainment. Stools ran the length of the room on my side, cabaret-style tables scattered across the main floor. The small stage near the entrance was empty, too early to bring out the full-court press. Two dancers collected dollars from a couple of guys seated at the main stage, sliding the bills into their garters with what passed for erotic enticement. *Sure, baby. You have a chance. You know I want you. Slide it in right there. Ooh, a five. That's good for a kiss.*

Decent crowd for a weeknight, half full at seven o'clock. A dozen well-crafted, strategically dressed young women cruised the room looking for partners. The afternoon shift had half an hour to go, the dancers looking for a few bucks to cap off the day. Girls wearing bulky sweatshirts and jeans walked through the door at random intervals, the night shift punching in. They all kissed the doorman on the cheek and waved just their fingers at the girls on the floor, their heads on swivels, scanning the room for money, never making eye contact. They weren't here for off-the-clock boyfriends.

I ordered an eight-dollar Heineken from a waitress half a size too voluptuous for her costume with eyes as big as nickels. The neo-rap vibrating my vision was so loud we practically had to kiss each other's ears to be heard. I took my time drinking the beer while I looked for my boy. Finding him wasn't a priority. He had to walk within ten feet of me to get out. It would be nice to see if he'd come for any reason other than the obvious.

A dancer tall enough to look me in the eye if I'd been standing came by halfway through my beer. The roaming spots backlit her hair to make it look so black it was almost blue. Eyes too dark to tell where the iris ended and the pupil started. She was almost wearing a black garter and push-up bra outfit that didn't leave much to even my imagination.

She gave her best forlorn look and a world-class pout. "No one will dance with me."

I shook my head. "What's your name, darlin'?" Delbert had started to rub off on me.

"Rebecca."

“Your customers have no taste, Rebecca. They should be lined up to kiss your ass in here.”

She smiled and hung an arm over my shoulder to mark her territory. Lowered her head and leaned toward my ear, dropped her voice into a throatier register. “Would you like a dance?” The lacy edge of the bra rubbed my chin, and I felt the heat from her breast on my cheek.

“Sorry, sweet thing. Can’t do it. It’s against my religion.”

She stepped away, put both fists on her hips and cocked her head. “Against your religion? Why are you here, then?”

“Keeping an eye on someone. Trying to help him stay out of trouble.”

“You could keep an eye on me sometime.” She moved in again and got her breasts around my upper arm without doing anything obvious.

I glanced down. So she wouldn’t feel ignored. “An enticing offer, but I’m sorry. I’m only human, you know. I have a feeling I might want to keep more than an eye on you. You could do me a favor, though.”

She had both arms around my shoulders now. Her breasts felt real. Not that I’m an expert. “And what might that be?”

“A guy came in here a few minutes ago. Not very tall, kind of skinny. Blue suit, dark curly hair cut short, looks like he borrowed someone else’s nose. Here’s fifty bucks to give him the same treatment I just got.” I let her see the badge when I pulled out the fifty. “No trouble. I just want to know where he is without being seen.”

Rebecca lifted her right foot up to the bar. Her legs went all the way to her ass. She slid two fingers inside her garter and I gave General Grant a thrill. She kissed my cheek, bit my ear when she leaned in to speak. “You should come back sometime when you’re not working. I’m here till 7:30 Monday through Thursday.”

“I thought the big money was on nights and weekends.”

“Too many grabby drunks. I make enough. Besides, I save that time for my little ones.” She kissed me on the nose and left.

I watched her put each four-inch heel directly in front of the other to create a swivel that could feed a starving man. She stopped three-quarters of the way along my wall and gave someone the same welcome I’d gotten and made sure I saw her. I didn’t know if I should be happy she’d done such a good job or pissed because I paid for his show.

Following John Doe got old in a hurry. I used my second beer to hang a name on him that fit a dark, ugly man with curly black hair and came up with Abdul. I didn't know what Abdul had or why he had it, but the beer was cold and the scenery wasn't. I settled in to enjoy the view and fend off dance partners.

Zoltan's expense account had just bought my third Heineken when someone even more Arabic-looking than Abdul came in. He walked with a purpose to the foot of the main stage and stood facing my wall with an expression like a rat had hold of his shoestring. A brunette wearing a red string bikini and thong at least the size of a half-dollar traced a finger along his jaw. The Arab stepped back like she'd run a few hundred volts through him and said something that sent her out of character. The girl spoke to the blonde dancing with her and they switched sides. The blonde gave the Arab plenty of room.

Abdul was up and moving before the other Arab had a chance to give Blondie the infidel treatment. The new arrival saw him coming and jerked his head toward the men's. It didn't take Dashiell Hammett to figure what came next.

Time to take a position. I could barge in and take whatever Abdul had on him, or I could wait and see where the new guy took it. If he took it anywhere. If he even made the pickup. If he brought something for Abdul I could be following this guy home to his prayer rug.

I wanted to slide into the men's room like some schlub one beer over the limit looking to make room for more. They could conclude their transaction without worrying about the drunk behind them, and I'd know who to stick with. Instead I walked in just as Abdul presented the envelope he got from Schreckengost to the new guy. Three of us exchanged looks before Abdul panicked and ran. The Arab said something unintelligible and unfriendly and tried to push me aside. I grabbed his lapels and ran him head first into the door of the stall. He landed with his head in the toilet, tried to get his hands under him. I slammed the lid on him a couple of times, and he gave up.

Inside the club, Abdul ran into a dancer no more than five feet tall, threw her at least twice that far when she grabbed him for balance. Several people yelled, and an Amazon wearing a leopard-print bikini slapped him across the face. Abdul ducked under her next swing and made for the exit. He'd

gone two steps when a couple of bouncers caught wise and started our way. Abdul ran through the closest door.

I swore under my breath. The sign read “Ladies’ Room.” It led to the dancers’ dressing area. There might be another way out through there; I couldn’t follow him without causing a ruckus. Cut my losses, or run into what might be a room full of naked women? Decisions, decisions.

The screaming started before I hit the door and saw Abdul hemmed in by several dancers trying to get out the back. I tipped over a row of lockers to stall the bouncers. He’d had almost made it through the T and A roadblock when I grabbed his collar and threw him back into the room. He tripped over a bench in the center and skidded across the floor. I didn’t follow up in time, and he deflected me with a kick on my way over the bench. I stumbled, and he got a shoulder into my gut and rammed me into a row of lockers. That disoriented me so he could slam my head into the metal doors a few times. I ducked him on the fourth try and came up from below with an uppercut. He moved back, and I staggered him with a punch that had some shoulder behind it. I stepped in to finish him and two hands the size of dinner plates grabbed my arms: A bouncer had made it through my locker roadblock. Abdul saw my problem, threw me what I assumed was an obscene gesture, and ran down the gangway.

I didn’t have time to negotiate. I let the bouncer turn me and smashed my forehead into his nose twice, hard. A knee to the balls and an uppercut to his descending jaw got me loose and after Abdul again.

The gangway had a door on either side before angling out of sight to the left. A small knot of dancers stood in the doorway to my right, and cooking smells meant the other door must be the kitchen. Halfway to the bend alarms started going off, like it wasn’t noisy enough already. I turned it up a gear and made for the outside door. Leaned over a bit to hit the panic bar, and a bullet rustled my hair before a splinter from the jamb cut my cheek. I touched the blood and saw a muzzle flash to my right, dove and rolled behind a bush. Feet skidded in the gravel parking lot.

I stood from behind the bush, new Smith & Wesson drawn. Abdul fussed with keys thirty feet in front of me. I scuttled two steps sideways, took a knee, and shot out the left front tire. He looked in my direction, tried to hurry, and dropped the keys. I took out the right rear. The new gun felt good.

Abdul fired a shot that kept my head down and ran through the parking lot. Fired again when he hit Estes Street and took off in earnest toward Elmhurst Road. I angled my way through the lot to keep cars between us until I made the street and started running through little clouds of my own breath in the quiet evening, surreal after the noise in the club. The only sounds my breathing and the soles of my shoes on the concrete and gravel, a train's horn somewhere around Irving Park Road.

He ran past Greenleaf, turned right on Lunt. Stopped behind a bus stop to send another round my way. I answered with two, shattered a glass wall of the shelter. He ran west on Lunt toward an Osco warehouse.

My longer strides were closing the gap when I tripped over the train tracks that ran through the industrial lots. I caught my balance in time to see Abdul turn toward a fenced-in area across Lunt from the warehouse. He stopped in front of a small security shack on the other side of the fence and shot off the lock.

I'd never get him out of there, and I wanted him before the police. I fired once and he ducked, then grabbed the hasp and pulled the chain through. I dropped to one knee, controlled my breathing as well as I could, laid my right forearm over the left, and fired once. The bullet pushed him over the step to smash through the wooden door with his shoulder. I ran full speed and crashed the door open before he could kick it closed.

Abdul lay on his back, left hand pressed high on his chest. Blood stained the front of his shirt. He reached for the gun no more than a foot from his right hand. I stepped forward and put the muzzle of my .45 in his face.

“Uh-uh-uh.” He stopped moving and met my glare. I sucked air through my teeth, held it to slow my heart. Then I couldn't help myself. Thumbed back the hammer, said, “I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, ‘Did he fire five or six?’” The night air burned my lungs. “Well, the fact is, in all this excitement, I kind of lost track myself. But seeing as how this is a Smith & Wesson Model 25, with Colt .45 long ammunition, and it'll blow your head just about clean off, I guess you got to ask yourself one question: ‘Do I feel lucky?’ Well, do you? Punk?”

Clint couldn't do it any better. It didn't matter if Abdul spoke English. The speech was for my entertainment, not his. The gun did all the translating necessary.

I'd never sensed hate from another person like I saw in his eyes. He moved his head a quarter turn and paused, maybe for a calculation. He reached for the gun, and my finger closed on the trigger and the small room filled with the sound of the hammer falling on an empty chamber.

I hate when that happens.

Abdul took his time standing. No need to hurry, he had the rest of my life to get off that floor. I'd been a wiseass. Now he'd get his pound of flesh before he blew my brains all over the wall. The door was closed and opened inward. I'd never get there and open it before he shot me. The only window behind him. He gestured me away from the door so I wouldn't block it when I fell. I was too disgusted to be scared.

He smiled and centered the gun on the bridge of my nose. A little snub-nosed piece of shit. No wonder he hadn't hit me. Yet. He wouldn't miss this time. Funny what you notice when you know the party's over. He pulled back the hammer, almost tenderly. Then he gave me a bad-toothed smile and said what he'd decided was the last thing I'd ever hear.

"Au revoir." He pulled the trigger. And nothing happened.

I guess he lost track, too.

He threw the gun at me and ran out the door and through the gate. The train's horn sounded again, close, almost in the shack with me. I heard the brakes, saw the sparks through the fence. Abdul sailed across the street, bounced twice, and rolled half a dozen times before he hit a pole. The calm night exploded with the fireworks and screeching metal of the train's desperate attempt to stop.

I ran across the street to get to him before anyone else. He'd preferred death to letting me have that envelope. I wanted it. His limbs were twisted into impossible angles. He hadn't enough life to animate a fruit fly. Flat eyes tracked me as I pulled open his suit coat and took out the envelope.

I stood and controlled my breathing, thought of questions with answers he couldn't give. I knelt and put a hand to his wrist. The bones moved like sand under my touch, his pulse too weak to feel. I stood and watched him watch me put the envelope he'd died for into my pocket. The faint light in his eyes faded like a child being led to bed too sleepy to protest. Ragged breath made transparent clouds over his face. Then I said the last words he'd ever hear.

“*Au revoir.*” Even that winded me, but I had more to say.
“Asshole.”

21

Joey had issues with the events at Scarlett O’Hare’s.

Tony’s right hand man-child could best be described as Baby Huey without feathers. Joey’s mom had malnutrition problems during her pregnancy. The only malnourished part of Joey was between his ears. The poor kid went six-three, close to three bills, with an IQ somewhere between his height in inches and room temperature. Lucky for all of us Mom’s nutritional shortcomings didn’t affect his heart. Joey was as good-natured as he was slow.

Unless you pissed him off. One day I made a disrespectful comment about Wolverine’s sexual preferences. Joey got a look on his face I’d only seen once before, placed his right hand on my waist, and picked me up to his eye level. Lifting a two-hundred-pound man with one hand didn’t even make his arm shake. Thank God I remembered about Wolverine and Jessica Alba before he got mad.

“Was this the guy that was following you the other day, when Tony saved you?” Joey said.

I looked at Tony, who’d become intense about cleaning an invisible speck from a windshield. “No, this was a different guy. I sure could have used good old Tony to save me last night.”

“Why was this one following you?” Joey said.

“He wasn’t. I was following him.”

“How come?”

“I started out following a different guy. He met this guy and gave him something. I wanted to see what it was, so I followed him.”

“Tell him about the titty bar,” Tony said. “He’ll like that.”

I gave Tony a look not much friendlier than Joey’s Wolverine expression. The psychological scars still fresh from the day we explained prostitution.

“It’s not really a titty bar,” I said. “More of a bikini joint.”

“I’ll bet they hang their bikinis all over your joint,” Tony said.

“You mean like they show you their boobs?” Joey said.

“They show you most of their boob,” I said. “They still keep part covered up.”

Joey had trouble with the picture. “So they stand around in this bar and show you most of their boobs?”

“No, they dance for you.”

“And you just watch their boobs?”

“You can watch whatever you want, kid,” Tony said. “They’ll even dance with you if you want them to.”

“Really?”

“You have to pay them,” I said. “And it’s not like *dancing* with someone. It’s kind of like, well, you sit still and they dance in front of you.’

This brought Joey to a new level of confusion. “How is that different from the free dancing they do?”

Tony stepped in. “They dance closer when you pay them, Joey. A lot closer. And just for you.”

This required calculation. “You pay them to dance closer. Real close. Right?” We nodded. “Is this like that prosecution thing you told me about?”

“Not really. Those girls will do anything you want when you pay them. These girls just tease you a little.”

“Why would you pay them to tease you? I get mad when someone teases me.”

Maybe Joey was smarter than we gave him credit for. His attention diverted, I got away, smiling as I heard him pester Tony for more information.

“How do they tease you? Do they call you names? What kind of names do they call you? That’s not a bad name. They do what? *No!* Where’s Nick?”

I hurried up the street toward my office pretending not to hear. Two men got out of the passenger doors of a dark Suburban and blocked my way in front of the tree that passed for a park on Dearborn next to the Rowe Building. Both about my size, dark-blue suits, white shirts, blue and red striped ties. Flag pins on their lapels. It creeped me out until I realized the tie on the left was red with blue stripes. The one on the right was blue with red.

I had neither the energy nor patience for this bullshit. Elk Grove Village and state police had asked me variations on the same questions until four in

the morning. I gave my story to one detective, then another detective with a stenographer, then someone I took to be chief of detectives. Or maybe just chief. All I know for sure is someone called him “chief,” and he wasn’t Sitting Bull.

I slowed a step at a time, stopped less than a foot away. No one spoke for a long second. It felt eerily like last night in the men’s room.

“Nick Forte?” the one on the right said.

“Who wants to know?”

“Federal agents.”

“Prove it.” Like their wardrobes weren’t enough.

Special agents Katcavage and Pitts, FBI. Katcavage spoke. He had the current GI civilian haircut and a nose broken at least twice. Looked like he might have done some boxing and could have been better at it. Pitts shaved no more than three times a month. He had the clear blue eyes of a devoted follower or a fanatic, depending on how the cards fell.

“I’m Forte. What do you want?”

“We’d like you to come with us so we can have a word.”

“You have a warrant?”

“We’re not arresting you.”

“We’ve established that, or I’d be gone already. We can chat here. It’s a nice day.” Not as nice as yesterday. The cold I’d felt in Elk Grove brought autumn in overnight, wind previewing the charms of a Chicago winter. Still better than getting into a car with these two. Three, including the driver I’d just noticed.

Pitts said, “He didn’t say chat. He said we were going to have a word.” His voice was tight, too reedy to convey the menace he wanted. “We talk, you listen. Now get in the car, asshole.”

I made a point of speaking directly to his partner. “What’s going on, Katcavage? I don’t mean to bust balls, but this could have been handled better.”

Pitts started to speak. Katcavage raised a hand. “You’re right. I apologize. We thought it might be better if we spoke before you got to your office. Our boss wants to talk about what happened last night in Elk Grove. He thinks you might have some information we can use.” Katcavage nodded toward Tony and Joey standing in the street in front of the garage.

“Unless I miss my guess, your friends have our license number already. We’ll have you back in less than two hours. You have my word.”

I almost commented on past experiences with the word of federal agents. Nothing would be gained, and Pitts was aching for any chance to do something rash. I hollered to Tony I’d be back in two hours and started to get in the car while Katcavage held the door. I stopped when I saw Pitts inside.

“Uh-uh,” I said. “Put Pitts in front. I don’t want drool on my shoes.”

Katcavage pulled a look that had smile potential. “Go on,” he said, and Pitts got out the other side. I got in and slid over.

The driver didn’t take us to either of the downtown federal buildings. We took the Stevenson Expressway into LaGrange, then north on Route 20. He parked next to a shabby two-story building between a Firestone and a foreign auto repair joint about a mile from the General Motors plant. No one spoke.

Katcavage took me to a room on the second floor, pointed to a seat, and left. Came back five minutes later with a new fed.

This one didn’t get the word on the uniform. Brown suit, tie, and wingtips. The tie’s knot wasn’t tight, and his neck overflowed his white shirt collar. I almost felt sorry for him until I remembered shirts come in different sizes and restaurants serve salads. Graying blond hair upholstered a square head and a red face. He looked like a man full of bluster and self-importance, a redneck in a bad suit. He handed me a card with “Forrest Sturdivant, Special Agent” printed on it and gave me time to absorb his importance.

“Mr. Forte, I want to start by telling you what a fine job you’re doing of fucking up my investigation.” At least that’s what I thought he said. He wasn’t from around here. Farther south, Alabama or Mississippi maybe. Someplace where cross-eyed children ran barefoot in the front yard while first cousins played hide the salami in the trailer. What came out sounded like, “Mistuh Foe-tay, ah wanna staht by tellin yew whut uh fine job y’all’re dewin uh fuckin up mah vestigashun.”

“Everyone should be good at something,” I said. “This conversation might go better if had an idea what investigation you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about that Algerian gentleman you killed last night at the titty bar.”

No one seemed to care about the differing levels of exotic adult entertainment anymore. “I’ll take your word about him being Algerian, but I didn’t kill him. And, technically, I think the women have to show their nipples for it to be a titty bar.”

“You a comedian, ain’t you?” All Sturdivant lacked was a spittoon. I didn’t think they still made federal agents like him. Any minute he’d tell me I was in a heap a trouble, boy. “You think you can waltz in here and stick your nose into a surveillance that’s been going on two years now. Two fucking years down the shitter because some cowboy private *dick* don’t know when to quit.” He leaned on “dick” like I’d never heard it before and it would hurt my feelings.

“Look, I just happened onto him yesterday. I was working something else, and the guy I was following met your boy. They seemed like an odd couple, so I followed the Algerian, or whatever he was. He met someone at the bar, they went to the can together. I wandered in to maybe overhear something, and they panicked.” I moved my head around to indicate Katcavage and Pitts. “Is this part of your crack surveillance team? Seems to me they had plenty of opportunity to do something last night if you were so worried about the guy.”

“He’s not under constant surveillance,” Sturdivant said. “We’re tracking his movements, seeing who he spends time with, how his money comes and goes. We spent two years building a file on this sumbitch and his friends, and you pissed it away last night.”

“I’m sorry if I got in your way. You have to admit I had no way of knowing I was crossing some line. Give me an idea what you’re working on and I’ll tell you if there might be a connection.”

“Yeah, we got us a real comedian here,” Sturdivant said, addressing Katcavage and Pitts. “Boy thinks we’re gonna tell him our bidness and he’ll decide if he’s in our way or not.” He turned back to me. “Here’s the deal, you dumb sumbitch: I don’t tell you shit. You tell me what you’re working on, and I’ll make the decisions, and then you’ll do what I tell you. What led you to Madani?”

“Who?”

“Abu Ali Madani. The man you killed last night.”

“Let’s get *one* thing straight: I didn’t kill anybody last night. Your man—what’s his name, Madani?—was hit by a train.”

“Call it what you want, you run him into it.” I couldn’t argue with that, even if it seemed a lot more cold-blooded today than it did last night after staring into the barrel of Madani’s gun. “How’d you find him?”

“Following a guy named Willie Schreckengost. He and Madani hooked up at a Middle Eastern place called Reza’s. I couldn’t see any good reason for them to be together, so I followed Madani out of curiosity.”

“And let this other one go, this Schreckengeyer?”

I shook my head. “I had a man working with me. He stayed with Schreckengost.”

“Why were you following Schreckengoose in the first place?”

“Same reason, pretty much. He showed up somewhere he didn’t belong. I wanted to see what he was up to.”

“What were you working on?”

“Triple homicide on Wacker last week. You might’ve heard of it.”

“That’s a police matter. Why are you messing with it?”

“It might have something to do with a divorce case I’m working on.”

“Might have?”

“That’s why I was tailing Schreckengost. To find out.” I filled him in on Schreckengost’s background and why he belonged at the hall as much as Sturdivant belonged at a Mensa meeting. That might not have been the example I used.

“So you follow Schreckengosh around all day till he meets up with Madani at this Middle Eastern joint. You ever hear of Madani before?”

“Never.”

“What interested you so much you had to follow him?”

I had the envelope in my breast pocket. I’d had just enough time to put an address on it before the Elk Grove cops showed. They took my word it was just a letter I hadn’t gotten around to mailing yet when they went through my stuff. I left it in my inner breast pocket until I got home, where I had enough energy to drop it on the nightstand before I passed out. I’d looked at it this morning long enough to see it had two laser printed pages that appeared to be in code and a couple of hand-drawn sketches. In a perfect world a model private citizen such as myself would hand everything over to Sturdivant and be done with it. It’s what I probably would have done if the Keystone Feds hadn’t brought me to this dump acting like their

shit didn't stink. I at least wanted a copy, and I'd never see it again if I handed it over now.

Sturdivant got pushy while I pondered my options. "God damn you, I asked a question. Why'd you follow Madani?"

"Schreckengost passed him something. I don't know what. It didn't look right, so I followed him."

"Nothing was found on his body."

"I know, I looked. He must have ditched it somewhere. I didn't have him in sight the whole time."

"You tell any of this to the locals?"

"They didn't ask. They're not as sharp as you."

"And since they didn't ask, you thought you might go on out there later and have a look around."

"It crossed my mind."

"Uncross it. You're gonna tell Katcavage every place you chased Madani last night, every place he was out of your sight, and every place he might have stashed something." He turned to Katcavage. "Take his statement."

"I can see you're a little cramped in here." I gestured around the room. "I thought crack investigators like you had unlimited funds for homeland security. It must have been a real disappointment to get this assignment. What'd you work before? Civil rights?"

Sturdivant's face got red and his collar lost a size. "Who said anything about Homeland Security? Katcavage?"

I spoke before he put Katcavage on the spot. "Their badges said Bureau, but this isn't a Bureau operation. You're detailed for something. I thought you might be looking to sting Schreckengost until you had the hissy fit about the Arab."

"What would I want with this Schreckengost?"

"You could've been OC. Schreckengost clipped a guy in Stateville and got himself connected. He's pretty dumb, even by mob standards, probably a good candidate for some kind of setup. Now you tell me you never heard of him, you're after some Arab. That's Homeland Security, no matter what it says on your ID. Low level, too, or you'd have a nicer office."

Sturdivant almost said something. Then, "Get him out of here, Katcavage. I got work to do." Katcavage took me into an outer office with two cheap desks and gave me a map to draw out last night's festivities. No

recording, no stenographer, nothing signed. I said no when he asked if I had anything to add.

Katcavage and Pitts dropped me off in front of my office an hour and forty-seven minutes after we left. Pitts reminded me to stay the fuck away from their case, they'd find what they were looking for. Katcavage held the door for me, asked me not to take it personal. Give him a call if I thought of anything. He had potential. I didn't think Sturdivant and Pitts could find their own asses with a map and a flashlight.

I'd "find" their evidence for them. Tomorrow. After I copied what I wanted.

22

Pitts splashed me with dirty water when he pulled away. Rain yearning to be sleet tried to burrow inside my collar. Late-September weather in Chicago can be an adventure. Yesterday it was seventy; I wouldn't bet my house payment against it being that warm again two days from now. Today the humid cold crawled up my sleeves and down my back like a snake. I'd be cold inside long after my skin warmed up.

My most recent meal had been Italian beefs with Delbert outside Reza's last night. The weather was still worse than my hunger, and I wasn't dressed for it. I went inside to see if anything might be in the mini-fridge, even though I knew there wasn't.

Sharon had gone to lunch, depriving me of her customary post-adventure greeting, always a sure bet to cheer me up. I hung my dripping coat on its hook in my office and checked the fridge. Three cans of caffeine-free Coke and a *faux* Tupperware of what might be spaghetti. Opened it and found the beginnings of green fuzz on the strands.

A flyer some new pizza joint had stuck under my windshield wiper last week was on my desk. I didn't usually ask delivery people to endure the weather if I wouldn't, but I was in a funk and told myself this would be a perfect way to help them establish a reputation for customer service. They said my small with pepperoni would be here in half an hour or it would be free, the deliveryman would be fired, his wife cast into the streets, and his children sold for medical experiments. Good enough.

I took the envelope I got from Abdul—Madani, whatever his name was—from my pocket and opened it. Two sheets of paper with various characters in laser printed groups of five, six groups to a line. A couple of drawings on the back of one page. Below the drawings, on a diagonal at the right bottom, one handwritten notation: *28/9@2040*.

The drawing didn't look like much. The cipher might be fun. I liked playing around with them, sometimes made up treasure hunts for Caroline with coded clues easy enough for her to break if she was willing to expend more than a token effort. I doubted Willie Schreckengost had come up with anything much tougher than that.

I got my copy of Martin Gardner's cipher book off the shelf to see if I was lucky enough for it to be a simple substitution code. Made a quick spreadsheet and started counting letters. If I could see which characters appeared most often, I might have a leg up on what some of them stood for. After that it could be a mammoth game of "Wheel of Fortune" to figure out the rest.

The pizza came in twenty-eight minutes and forty-six seconds, sparing the deliveryman's family. The box came out of his insulated carrier almost too hot to touch. I dropped it on my desk blotter and tipped him about twice what I would have on a nicer day. Cold Coke in hand, I opened the box and saw pools of grease on my lunch deep enough to have waves. It was the kind of pizza that made you feel like washing your hands after you ate it.

Halfway through creating my frequency chart signs of life appeared in the outer office. Door opening and closing, shuffling of feet, female voices, one of them Sharon's. A pause, then a rap on my door, which opened to show Sharon's head.

"Are you all right?" she asked without coming in.

"I'll live. I don't know what you've seen in the papers, but you know they exaggerate." Amazing how matter-of-factly I presented it a day later. The employees are entitled to their illusions about the boss.

"There's someone here to see you if you're working today."

"A client?"

"Her name's Vanessa Jordan. She said you met yesterday."

What I needed to do was work on the code. On the other hand, Vanessa might have some info on Marshall she didn't want to spill in front of Tom.

Even if she didn't, she was smart and funny and great-looking, and I was having a bad day. "Sure, send her in."

Tuesdays were good days for Vanessa Jordan, even after the high standard she'd set on Monday. Her hair was a little more carefully put together. Her suit, while businesslike, gave a man's id more to work with. She wore a somewhat muted version of the same smile I'd seen the day before and sat in the infamous Client Chair of Discomfort as easily as in a La-Z-Boy. Crossed her right leg over her left knee. I'm not always that observant. Just when I'm given reason to believe the leg being crossed is wearing stockings and not panty hose. So sue me.

"You had a busy day yesterday," she said. "You don't look much the worse for wear."

"I'll live." The more I said that, the more I liked it. Verbal shorthand, guaranteed to redirect any conversation.

"That's good. I'd hate to lose you so soon after meeting you. I enjoyed our talk."

"Thank you. So did I. Not to seem ungrateful for the attention, but I doubt you came over here just to see for yourself I'm still in one piece. Is there something I can do for you?"

"I might be able to do something for you. Tom told you about my problem with Marshall Burton, didn't he?"

"Just that you had one and legal action was either underway or being considered. I think he heard something on the grapevine and wanted to pass it along in case it mattered to me."

"Does it? Matter to you, I mean."

"Probably not, but it might if the harassment had anything to do with him getting killed. You didn't do it, did you?"

"No."

"Have it done?"

"Uh-uh."

"Any suitors who might've clipped him in a fit of jealous rage?"

"I should have such suitors."

"Jealous or violent?"

"Neither. It would be nice to spend some time with a man who wouldn't shy away from a challenge."

"I can't imagine finding well-qualified men is a problem for you."

“I work at an orchestra. There are a lot of refined, cultured men—”

“And Tom. Don’t forget Tom.”

“—and Tom, of course,” she said, laughing. “But I don’t come across too many men who are willing, maybe even eager, to take action when they see something that needs to be done.”

“Not too many, or none?”

“Usually none, but this week might qualify as not too many.”

“So there’s at least one this week.”

“Yes.”

“And the week is young.”

“Tuesday.”

“So you met this person Sunday or Monday—”

“I was home all day with my daughters on Sunday.”

“—or this morning—”

“Busy at the orchestra until just a little while ago.”

“—so we’re talking yesterday.”

“Yes. Yesterday afternoon.” She paused and made sure we had eye contact. “Right after lunch.”

“So you met this man of action right after lunch yesterday. Hmm—why I’ll be darned. I met you right after lunch yesterday. I must have walked right by him. What did he look like?”

“You’d recognize him right away. His picture was in the morning paper.”

“Tall, well put together, good looking in a homely, yet virile sort of way?”

“Close. He’s better looking than you’re giving him credit for.”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to hear that. You knew he was the rare man of action right away?”

“I had suspicions, but I didn’t know for sure until I saw today’s paper.” She reached across the desk and touched the cut on my cheek with the outer molecule of her finger. “You didn’t have that yesterday. What happened?”

“Shaving cut.” She didn’t buy it. “I was careless.”

“Really? It’s not a—”

“Don’t believe everything you read. They’re in the business of selling papers.”

She kept her eyes on mine as she resumed her seat. “I have to wonder about the smart, funny man I met yesterday being involved in what

happened last night.”

“That’s my job. I have to be able to do both.”

She lifted Caroline’s school picture from my desk. “And a father, too. A good one?”

“No father who doesn’t live at home can be as good as one who’s there all the time. I give it my best effort.”

“I suspect you give everything your best effort.”

“If it’s worth doing. I hate doing anything half-assed.”

“Another admirable trait.”

“Since we’re listing what you consider to be admirable traits in men, where does a willingness to buy dinner for intelligent, clever, attractive women fall into your pantheon of virtues?”

“Right near the top.”

“You like Italian?” She did. “Scoozi, tomorrow night?”

“How’s six o’clock? I like to be home to tuck in my girls.”

“Six works. How old are your girls?”

“Katy’s 11; Maggie’s 7.” She showed me their pictures to complete that round of the divorced-parent dating ritual. “My mom watches them while I work.”

“Mom doesn’t mind staying late on short notice?”

“Mom thinks I should go away more often so she and her girls can have some quality time. Sometimes I think my mother only lends them out to me instead of the other way around.” She looked at her watch. “I ought to be getting back. Community Relations is a never-ending job.” She gathered her purse. “I’m looking forward to tomorrow night.”

“Me, too.” We were at the door leading to Sharon’s office, standing closer together than Miss Manners would recommend on such short acquaintance. Vanessa had a thin white scar an inch long below her right ear. Her hair kept it hidden most of the time. Maybe she wore it that way on purpose.

“So you and Tom are both trumpet players.” I nodded. “Good lips, huh?” With just enough of a smile.

“Lips are overrated.” Finally, after twenty years, something I’d heard Tom say became useful to me. “They’re just membranes. Two rubber bands could produce the same effect with something holding them rigid enough.” I waited for the small cloud of confused disappointment to gather before I

went on. “The tongue, on the other hand, is a muscle, which can be developed over time to increase its strength, precision, and stamina.” My turn to smile.

“Oh, my.” Her voice had all the resonance of a six-week-old kitten. “I hate to do this, it’s so cliché, but would you mind telling me your sign?”

I thought asking signs went out with leisure suits. “Under Construction,” I said. Then I asked hers, just to be polite.

She smiled before she said it. “Slippery when wet.”

Now it was my turn for, “Oh, my.”

We stood in the half-open doorway like that for several seconds, close enough to feel each other’s heat without touching. Sharon kept herself busy facing the other way, re-filing things she filed an hour ago. The outer door opened and Jan Rusiewicz walked in. Her look was half disappointment, half hurt, half jealousy, and half anger, which says a lot about the kind of face it was.

From oh, my to oh, shit in five seconds flat. A new Nick Forte record.

23

“Have you seen your client lately? I’ve been looking for him since we talked last week.”

Jan smoothed her skirt as she seated herself in the still-warm visitor’s chair. She had too much class to make any snotty comments after being introduced to Vanessa. I appreciated the courtesy. I would have appreciated it even more if it had helped.

You’d think a man who spent as much time around attractive women as I did would have a clue about how to deal with them. Jan was cute after six hours on a midnight stakeout. On a good day she was as pretty as is possible before you’d have to call her beautiful. Diane, my ex, grew into her beauty, more attractive now than when I met her at Northwestern, and she was on her sorority calendar then. Vanessa Jordan still looked like a model for hair products well into her thirties. No one who passed through this office ever forgot Sharon.

I couldn’t sustain a relationship with any of them. Sharon didn’t count. Our friendship began as employee-employer and moved into its unique super-platonic realm before either of us thought much about it. Diane left

me over my job. Jan dumped me in large part because of unresolved issues with Diane. The clock hadn't even started running with Vanessa, if it ever would.

All of that ran through my head as Jan got right down to business by asking about Zoltan. It took me a beat or three to get back in the game. "Zoltan hasn't seen you yet?"

"It's worse than that. He's avoiding us. We call and leave messages. I went by his studio. Pat went by. We sent Fennel over. We don't have the resources to stake him out, but we're thinking about it. Anyone with information on this case going to so much trouble to avoid us is someone we definitely want to talk to."

"No kidding. I saw him yesterday and he told me he'd seen you. Not by name, just that he'd been to the police." Zoltan's blue suit came to mind, him sipping his coffee and saying...something. "Come to think of it, he was kind of vague. I don't even remember for sure what he said when I asked him what he told you about the threats."

"He's getting threats?"

I filled her in on my last two meetings with Zoltan, and about Steve Plum. "Maybe he lied about them," I said when she had no immediate comment.

"Why would he do that?"

"He said he paid Plum to follow me because he didn't think I was doing the job. Maybe he wanted to scare me, or at least give me something he thought I'd take seriously. I gave him hell and I don't think he'll do it again. I'm tempted to give him hell for ducking you and lying to me about it."

Jan digested the idea, didn't find it too distasteful. "It's possible he thought we'd ask about the threats and he didn't want to dig himself a deeper hole with you. I still want to talk to him."

"I'll arrange to meet him and you can sort of accidentally show up. You should've seen the look on his face when he walked into the Celebrity looking for Plum and saw me. You're entitled to some fun, too."

"Thanks. Let me know when you're ready. Are you having any luck on his case?"

"You must be desperate to ask me straight out like that. Hanlon would kill you."

“Desperate’s too strong a word, but not by much. Even Pat’s stressing.” Jan leaned to her right, adjusted the gun on her left hip while she decided how much to tell me. “You hear the rumor about the Chechens?”

“Sounds goofy to me.”

“We still had to check it out. No one saw or heard anything, of course. Man beaten almost to death on a street in broad daylight. We have someone there all the time in case he feels like talking. We know the Chechens did him. I’m having a hard time thinking they shot up Wacker as a diversion.”

“That did seem kind of ruthless to me.”

“I didn’t say they’re not ruthless enough. They just don’t give a shit about being caught. No one’s going to call them on it; why go to all that trouble and risk heating things up?” She paused, deciding how much to tell me. “We’re still tripping over rumors about the Willingham woman. As far as we can prove, she was a divorced mother of two who went to work five days a week while her kids were at school. She picked them up from day care right after work and spent three weekends a month with them. The weekend their dad had them she took her mother to visit her father in one of those assisted-living places in Prospect Heights.”

“What about the other guy? The software salesman.”

“Based on his salary and lifestyle he should have more debt. We’re checking to see if he had some money we don’t know about yet.”

“Nothing on Marshall Burton?”

“Marshall Burton didn’t do anything. You could’ve knocked me over with a feather when you told me he was sleeping with your friend Zoltan. Burton played his concerts, did some teaching, and went home to his wife. She’s a piece of work, but she didn’t kill him. Torturing him was too much fun.” It was like Jan could read my mind. That was half the fun of dating her. We’d look at things from 180-degree different perspectives and arrive at the same place.

“She does have a future in military interrogation if the music thing doesn’t work out,” I said. “Do you know Marshall had a sexual harassment suit in the works?”

“Who would harass Marshall Burton?”

I exaggerated a smile. “He was the defendant.”

I watched her go through the same inventory of Marsall’s known sexual partners as I had. “What kind of woman—person would Burton make

unwelcome advances to? Wait, pretty much any advance from him would be unwelcome. Who'd he take a run at?"

"The woman you just met." I saw the look on her face. "Honest to God."

"His taste runs from Margot to *her*?"

"Don't forget Zoltan."

"I wish I could. Do you think this woman could have anything to do with—wait, don't tell me. You're prepared to do whatever it takes to find out."

I knew a Jan Rusiewicz who could say that with the perfect inflection to make it biting and teasing at the same time. That Jan couldn't make it today. This Jan wouldn't be nearly as much fun to be around, even as a friend. I hoped I hadn't made this one the regular visitor.

"I think she can safely be discounted," I said. "She had no reason to kill him if she was suing him. Let's not forget that was pretty far over the top for any normally law-abiding citizen. That's why I never liked Margot for it, no matter what Zoltan thought."

Jan fussed with a strand of dark blond hair hanging past her ear, nearing its winter length. "I'm sorry, Nick. Sometimes I forget it was me that broke up with you. I didn't even ask how you were."

"I'll live." If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

She had more to say, and I had a pretty good idea what it might be. It hung between us for a few seconds, both of us aware of it, neither knowing what to do about it. I felt it leave, like watching the last train for home pull away.

Jan cleared her throat. "You'll hook me up with Zoltan?"

"I'll set something up for tomorrow if I can find him."

We walked to the door together, as close as Vanessa and I had been, the chemistry completely different. We both felt it. I wondered if she knew how much I missed it.

"Before you go," I said, standing at the door to Sharon's office, "do you know a small-time crook named Willie Schreckengost?" She didn't. I caught her up on Schreckengost's history, ending with his sudden interest in classical music and how he related to last night's events. "It's probably nothing. I'm throwing it out there in case his name came up. Sonny probably knows him. He worked the Deuce the same time as Eddie Reifsnyder and me."

We stopped by Sharon's desk on the way out so Jan could say good-bye and hear me ask Sharon to round up Zoltan for tomorrow afternoon. Jan gave me a peck on the cheek as she left. I felt it all the way back to my desk.

At last I had a chance to look at what Madani thought was important enough to kill and die for. The code had to be less involved than my social life. You'd think only men who got laid a lot had complicated relationships with women.

24

I'd entered at least half a dozen characters into my cipher matrix when Delbert came in, carrying his Stetson. It was my own fault for not closing the door.

"What do you have there?" he said.

"This is what Schreckengost gave the Arab last night."

"Can I see?" I turned the paper thirty degrees. Not enough for him to see it better than me, just invite him around to my side to look at it. "Looks like some kind of code."

I rolled my eyes up to look at him. "They teach you that in Ranger school, or were you always this smart?"

He glanced down to meet my glare, got his half-smile going. "I was pretty smart going in. They buffed up the finish a little. What's it say?"

I turned back to the desk. "I just started working on it. I'm figuring out which characters come up most often and use this to see if I can find a key." I nodded toward Gardner's book.

Delbert watched me for a minute, jaw slowly working on some gum. "You really think it's a simple substitution? Codes get complicated nowadays."

"This is Willie Schreckengost we're talking about. I doubt he had an Enigma machine with him."

Delbert stayed quiet longer than I expected. "You doing a frequency analysis?"

"Yeah." This explained why I never got work done: I'm too goddamn sociable.

Another minute, then: “If it’s a polyalphabetic cipher, this won’t help. You’ll need the key. It could be simple enough even a doorknob like Schreckengost could use it.”

I looked up at him again. “Polyalphabetic?”

“There are twenty-six possibilities if he’s using a Vigenère cipher. Each line could be a different key. Hell, each a them clusters could have a different key. Now, if you’re lucky, it might just be a Gronsfeld. Only ten possible keys. A Beaufort would run them backward. Might even be a double substitution going on.”

I pushed my chair away from the desk and spun it a quarter turn, looked straight at him. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

“A little. I did some intelligence work in the Rangers.”

I picked up the sheets. “You want a crack at it?”

“Only if you don’t mind. Looks like you got a pretty good start there.”

I handed him the papers. “Make a copy. Leave me the original. I’m probably going to have to give it to the feds sooner or later.”

Delbert took the papers into Sharon’s office and chatted her up while he ran the copies. He was laughing about something when he came back.

I said, “I’m glad you’re in a good mood. Have a seat.” I gestured toward the client chair. Delbert handed me the originals and sat. “Let’s talk about that gun you so highly recommended.”

“The S & W? Something wrong with it?”

“Couple of things. I’m used to a good old-fashioned Colt automatic, right?”

“Right.”

“The kind that holds seven or eight rounds and kicks the slide open when it’s empty.”

His coloring got a shade more pastel. “Yeah?”

“And you talked me into a gun—a fine weapon, no argument there—that holds six rounds and keeps it a secret when it’s empty.”

“Don’t tell me.”

I did anyway. Every gruesome detail, right up to the where the Elk Grove cops impounded it. “It’s yours when I get it back.” I turned and opened the safe, took out my trusty Colt. “You’re a Texas boy. You ever hear the phrase ‘dance with who brung you?’”

Delbert swallowed hard and nodded. “Sorry about that, Boss.”

“It’s not your fault. I had a chance to bust your stones, and I took it.” I smiled to show him that’s all it was. “What about Schreckengost?”

“I lost him.” My expression must have told him I expected more. “I followed him to a club down on 95th Street, went in to see if he might meet up with anyone else interesting. He left when I had to pee.”

It happens. That’s why one-man surveillance was so hard. “He make you?”

Delbert shook his head. “I think he just got lucky. You want me to get on him again?”

“Yeah, something’s up with him. Schreckengost is low rent, but he leads us to that Arab. I follow him out of curiosity and almost wind up dead. Then this morning three feds roust me and put on a song and dance about how I hosed some big investigation.”

“You said Schreckengost is connected, right? Maybe they’re working something on the Outfit.”

“I don’t think so. Far as I could tell, they never heard of Schreckengost. They’d been on the Arab for a couple of years. So they said.”

“Homeland Security?”

“That’s my guess. They denied it enough to make me think I was right.”

Delbert sat with his ankle crossed over his knee, tapping the Stetson’s brim on his boot. “They think the Arab was a terrorist.”

“Appears so.”

“What do you think?”

I stretched. Everything cracked from my neck and shoulders down through each vertebra. I gave my torso a quick shake, almost like a dog drying off. Got rid of enough stiffness to feel the fatigue better. “It’s a bad fit. Terrorists are patient. They wait for the long-term payoff. Schreckengost lives for his next score, probably hasn’t saved enough money to buy those breath strips he’d addicted to. Something else is going on.”

“And the feds never heard of him?”

“That’s what they said, and I had the impression they were on the level. I don’t know what Schreckengost is up to, but this is the first thing worth looking into with any connection to Marshall Burton. I can’t imagine it had anything to do with him, but nothing else is happening.”

Delbert watched himself tap his ankle a few times. “Is Schreckengost something Zoltan’s willing to pay you to check out? I thought he was mostly worried about the old lady.”

“Maybe. I’m supposed to see him tomorrow. I’ll see what he has to say. For now let’s say I’m taking more of a personal interest. I’m funny that way when I almost get shot.”

“Just asking. You know I’m in if you are.”

“Thanks. This is only personal for me. You get paid, Zoltan or no Zoltan. For now, stay on Schreckengost. I might even have something to help you tail him.” I reached into the bottom drawer of my desk and pulled out a box with a small GPS device. “This little beauty,” I held up the unit like a QVC host, “will tell you where it is anywhere in the world, within three feet. Or yards. Or meters. I forget. We attach it to Schreckengost’s car, you hang a few blocks away. Let’s you keep an eye on him from a distance with no chance of being made, and we’ll have a record of everyplace he’s been.”

“How do we get it on his car?”

I did my huckster bit again. “Magnets.”

“I figured it was something like magnets. How are we going to find his car where we can get at it?”

“Finding his car is no problem.”

“Where is it?”

“Beats me. But I know a guy.” I slid the GPS into its box and stood up. “Get your hat. It’s time you met Goose.”

25

We found Goose in a barbershop on the 6200 block of South State, next to Elmo’s Tombstones While You Wait. If any location could sustain a carry-out headstone business, Elmo had found it. His shop sat across the street from former Robert Taylor project, at one-time the badass motherfucker capital of the Midwest.

A Black P-Stone walked into Elmo’s one day many years ago, and ordered a marker with the name of a Black Disciple who’d been doing the nasty thing with P-Stone’s bitch. This wouldn’t normally call for extreme action by gang standards. Maybe a beat down, make the girl pull a train. But the Black P-Stones were People Nation; Black Disciples were Folk

Nation, and tensions were high over some recent graffiti defacement. The P-Stone gave the Disciple's DOB, told Elmo to put in the day after tomorrow for the other. Then he parked the headstone in front of the Black Disciple's building.

This was back when Taylor was the biggest project in the country, twenty-eight sixteen-story buildings. Hundreds of people saw the headstone every day. Reactions varied. Black P-Stones thought it was funny as a motherfucker, stood around slapping hands, falling down laughing. Black Disciples knew their homey was being called out. This was so brazen, they weren't sure what to do about it. The only people with a clue about how to handle the situation were the civilians living in the area. Those who could went away for a few days. The rest stayed indoors.

The date came, and the Disciple couldn't ignore the gauntlet at his feet, even if he couldn't tell a gauntlet from a first baseman's mitt. He had to represent. Walked out telling his boys to lay back, everyone know the P in P-Stone stand for pussy. He was walking down the street doing his pimp roll when the P-Stone stepped out from behind a van and capped him with a forty-four. Even the cops ran for cover then.

Goose grew up there. Not much fazed him. He sat in one of the barber chairs reading *The Devil in the White City*. His eyes flicked in our direction enough for me to know he'd seen us, then went back to reading. Delbert and I nodded to the barber, who went on cutting what was left of an elderly man's hair as if white people walked in here at least every five years.

I took a chair. Delbert wandered around looking at the relaxers and dread wax. Goose read for another two minutes, then slipped a bookmark from Bookman's Corner between the pages and spun the chair to face me. "Do you know we maybe half a mile from the worst murder site in the country, maybe in the world?"

"You mean the Taylor?"

"The Taylor nothing compared to this. Man killed over a hundred women, some children, maybe a man or two, all by himself. Right over there." He pointed to the west. "Sixty-third and Wallace. Where the post office at."

"Is that what this book is about?"

"I let you read it when I finish." Goose gestured toward Delbert. "This that Ranger up from Texas? McCall?"

“Do I know you?” Delbert said, not unfriendly.

Goose said to me, “You tell him who I am?” I nodded. “Then yeah, you know me. What surprising you is *I know you.*”

I chuckled in spite of myself. Delbert didn’t seem to know what to do. I couldn’t remember if I’d ever seen him unsure before. “Goose likes to know things people don’t think he knows.”

“Looks like he’s pretty good at it,” Delbert said.

“I got-damn good,” Goose said. “That why you here now. I know Forte not bringing you down here for a haircut.”

I picked up on my cue. “What do you know about a second-stringer named Willie Schreckengost?”

“Name ring a bell. Word is he moving up in the world, got hisself some connections.”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. He keeps showing up places where he doesn’t belong.”

“That should be easy. You know all about showing up places you don’t belong.”

“True, but places I don’t belong are different from the places Willie don’t belong. I have a last known address and some associates if that helps.”

“It might. What names you got for associates?” I showed him the list. “I don’t know if I could find any particular one right now, but some of them hang at a place up by Sox Park and IIT. They think they smart, make a killing off the sharpies coming in for the games. I’ll drive. Y’all follow.”

I rode shotgun in Delbert’s car while Goose drove north on State, pulled over between 35th and 36th, and got out. Delbert parked a few cars behind him.

“Uh-uh,” Goose said. “The Midnight Cowboy stay here.” Goose hurried on when Delbert looked like he might take offense. “No disrespect. I can’t be walking in here with two cops. Forte look enough like a cop for both of you as it is. We be right out.”

The Chin Music Lounge sat on the east side of State. The interior almost as dark as Scarlett’s, a neat trick that early in the day in a place with windows. It helped that they were barred and showed no evidence of being washed in this century. A screwdriver held the front door’s rolled-up

security cage in place. PI work doesn't pay much, but the places you get to go make up for it.

A diverse group sat drinking their lunches at a bar that made Kasey's look like The Four Seasons at high tea. Age range from 20 to 70 with at least that much range in grooming and degree of hardness. One of the younger ones leaned against the bar flipping a half dollar and catching it palm down. George Raft's grandson, no doubt. Goose and I attracted as much attention sidling up to the bar as a roach in the corner. We ordered a couple of MGDs in bottles. The brewery's sanitation standards had to be higher than Chin Music's.

The guy on the stool next to Goose looked about 50. He wore a plaid wool jacket-shirt with a navy blue watch cap perched on the back of his mostly bald head. "Terry, right?" Goose said without looking at him.

The alleged Terry turned half far enough to look at Goose, slid his eyes the rest of the way. He didn't say anything.

"Thought so," Goose said. "You remember me. Walter Satterwhite. We hooked up those two guys, one had some merchandise fell off a truck the other was in the market for. 'Bout six months ago."

Terry nodded. A conversation between him and Sonny Ng would be like listening to chess on the radio.

Goose wiped the lip of his bottle, tasted some beer. Took his time like he was reading the bottles behind the bartender. Superman couldn't read the labels from where Goose was. He waited until Terry sipped his drink before saying anything else.

"Seen Willie Schreckengost lately?"

Terry didn't turn a fraction of an inch. "Why?"

"Might have something for him."

"Like what?"

"For him."

Terry finished his drink, pushed the glass to the end of the bar for a refill. Goose caught the bartender's eye, pointed to the glass and nodded. Terry turned his head only enough to indicate me. "Who's that?"

"Insurance. What I got might turn into something big."

"You got it on you?"

"You watch too many movies. Not all niggers dumb as those crack heads on HBO. No, I ain't got the shit on me, but there's people might want to

talk to me about where it is I don't need to talk to right now. My boy here to make sure I talk to who I want to, when I want to. Right now I'm talking to you."

"You sure you want Willie for this? He ain't been out that long, still getting his feet wet in the bigger deals. Tell me what you got, maybe I can help you."

"Appreciate the offer, really, but Willie know a man I think can help me directly. Just need an introduction. Give Willie a nice taste, he do this solid for me."

"Don't I get nothing for finding Willie?"

"I find Willie sooner or later. You doing the favor for him. Maybe he'll give you something, you hook him up." Goose tried some beer, stared at Terry's image in the mirror behind the bar. "You got a point. I can't be running my ass all over town looking for him. Niko, give the man fifty," he said to me.

I laid fifty bucks on the bar in front of Goose and gave him the hairy eyeball. Giving Terry half a C wasn't nearly as much fun as slipping one to Rebecca at Scarlett's. Terry never looked my way, slid his hand over the bar to palm the bill. He folded it without looking, put it in his shirt pocket. "Willie got a broad over in Berwyn on Scoville, near the school. I don't know the number. He ain't there, she'll know where he is."

"She be home this time of day?" Goose said.

"She's a dancer, works till three at Club O in Harvey. Not much on top, nice ass, knows how to walk away. I hear she's saving up for new tits. She'll make some money then." He adjusted his shirt pocket, took a peek to make sure my fifty hadn't escaped. "She's home. Willie says she works out all fucking day."

We left the Mel Kiper of exotic dancers with my fifty and an extra drink. Delbert slumped in the car with his Stetson pulled low. Half a dozen Black Disciples eyeballed him from across the street. Goose and I stopped ten feet from the car and watched the Black Disciples watching Delbert. This got their attention and they started watching us instead, but not for long. After twenty seconds one of them tapped his homey and pointed our way, said something I couldn't hear. The other nodded, then they all nodded. Then they all left.

It wasn't because of me.

We found Willie Schreckengost's car parked in front of a house on the 3500 block of Scoville Avenue in Berwyn, a block and a half north of Pershing Elementary. The house could have been any one of a million in the Chicagoland area: dark red brick, porch in front, small yard with concrete walkway leading to the sidewalk.

I had my door open, GPS in hand, when it occurred to Delbert this wasn't the place to do it. Schreckengost could appear at any time, and it wouldn't do to be seen in the vicinity, even if we weren't caught in the act. That made sense even to me. We agreed to follow him until we could hook it up someplace we'd blend into the scene.

We parked on the end of the previous block, across the street where we could see anyone going for the car long before they got there. Both of us slumped down to stay below the level of the car's headrests.

"How do you know this Goose character?" Delbert said.

"I booked him once for mayhem. I'm proud of that. No one else ever arrested him for anything."

"Ever?"

"Nope. And he walked on my charge. Goose Satterwhite has never spent a night in jail."

"That's impressive, considering how I guess he makes a living."

"Your guess would be right."

Delbert stayed quiet for five minutes, then, "What's up with you two?"

"We're not gay, if that's what you're asking."

"I know you're not gay. Well, I didn't figure you were gay." Delbert attention diverted by something in Schreckengost's direction. I didn't know if he thought he saw something or was deciding how, or whether, to proceed. "Goose doesn't seem to be the kind of guy you'd work with. You sure as hell don't seem to be someone he'd work with."

"I used to wonder about that myself. I'm the only cop Goose ever talked to, even to bust balls. Other cops would give him shit, he'd give them that face."

"It's a good one."

“He’d show up out of the blue to feed me tips after I quit the job. I never saw him any other time. Turned out I’d kept his sister from a beating once. Pimp was whipping her bad with a car antenna or something and gave me shit when I told him to stop. I took out his knee with my nightstick and made sure she wasn’t hurt. Nothing special. Are you okay, are you cold, hang my jacket over your shoulders. I guess I took her to the local clinic to get her cuts dressed. Goose saw the whole thing on his way over to kill the pimp. Something about that stuck with him. We don’t hang out together or anything, but I can always go to him when I need help.”

“He ever come to you?”

“Goose never needs help.”

We sat like that for over an hour, telling stories. The car retained sufficient body heat for us crack a window and still be comfortable in the shade of a chilly day. Delbert wished he’d brought his laptop so he could fool around with the code instead of sitting around waiting for this peckerwood to get out of bed. I wished I’d taken a leak at the barbershop.

Two men sitting in a car on a residential street all day draw attention sooner or later. A woman pushing a baby stroller paid us more than casual interest. I suggested we pull around the block and Delbert shook his head and pointed without extending his arm.

Willie Schreckengost walked to his car, tossed an empty gym bag in the trunk, opened the unlocked driver-side door, and slid a breath strip into his mouth. Delbert waited until he turned right on Ogden before starting the car and pulling out.

Tailing someone with two men in the same car is riskier than using two cars. It’s still better than going solo. Delbert kept an eye on traffic, I paid attention to Schreckengost. He took us north on Ridgeland, east on Cermak, going toward Chicago. Perfect tailing conditions. Enough traffic to keep Delbert’s car from being obvious; not so much we’d lose sight of Schreckengost.

He took Cermak to Cicero and pulled into a White Castle near 22nd Place. Delbert parked at the curb half a block up 22nd, Schreckengost’s car between him and the restaurant. I handed him the GPS tracker. We paused with our doors ajar, hands on the handles.

“Where are you going to put it?” I said.

“I’m thinking under the hood. Won’t be seen, and it’ll be out of the weather.”

“How are you planning to get under the hood?”

“The master criminal didn’t lock his car last night, right? It’s probably open now. Even if he locked it, I doubt he has an alarm system. I can be in and out of that piece of shit under three minutes.” He smiled when he saw my raised eyebrows. “Don’t you know all good cops got some criminal in them?”

We worked out our plan and separated. I found a spot where I could see Delbert and White Castle’s front door. Delbert would wave when he finished. I’d approach Schreckengost if he came out. If Delbert couldn’t see me, he’d know time was up.

It didn’t matter that I couldn’t see inside from where I stood. White Castle is fast, but Schreckengost still had to take fifteen or twenty minutes to order food and eat it. Imagine my surprise when he walked out less than four minutes later carrying a sack of Sliders and two cups.

Delbert didn’t have the car open yet, Schreckengost being someone who’d let his car sit unlocked on the street all night, then seal it up for five minutes in a busy parking lot. No way for me to signal without being obvious.

“I’ll be damned, Willie Schreckengost. How the hell are you?” I intercepted him before he could see Delbert. “How long has it been? Eight years? Ten? No longer than that, right?”

Schreckengost stopped and looked at me as much as he could, his lazy eye more interested in the traffic on Cicero. “Who the hell are you? Get out of the way. My food’s getting cold.”

“Willie, I’m hurt. I can’t believe you don’t remember me. I know it’s been a while, and I’m sure lots of people have arrested you, but how many have arrested you twice? I even got you a free trip to Joliet one of those times. You’ve seen me out of uniform before, haven’t you? At the trial, maybe?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Get lost.” I learned in a hurry why he popped so many breath strips the other day. His breath smelled like the stairwell at a bus station.

“Come on, Willie, don’t take it personal. It was always just business. You did your job, I did mine. Your job was being a low-life crook extorting

nickels and dimes from immigrant businessmen. My job was to put shit birds like you away.”

“Forte. Jesus Christ, I—”

“I knew you’d remember sooner or later. I never realized we had so much in common.” I tapped his White Castle bag. “I love these greasy little buggers, too. Can’t get enough of them. I was just telling my friend—”

“Get the fuck out of my way!” Schreckengost tried to push by me on the building side. I moved to block him without pushing him into the wall.

“This is harassment. You can’t pull this shit just because you’re a cop. I did my time. I got rights.”

“Calm down, Willie. It’s not harassment. I’m not even a cop anymore. I’m just catching up on old times. I’m practically fogging up here, I’m so nostalgic. You’re a special person. I mean, how many people are there in the world I can walk up to and ask if they remember the time I chased them half a mile in the rain and then pulled them out of a Dumpster by the ankles? Just you, baby. Just you.”

“Forte, you were an asshole when you were a cop and you’re a bigger asshole now. I got lunch for me and my girlfriend here and she don’t like it cold.”

“A girlfriend? That’s great, good for you. I heard things were looking up since you shivved that guy. You should thank me for that, you know. You were there on a parole violation, but I’m the one who sent you up in the first place. I should almost get a percentage.”

I peeked over my shoulder without turning my head. Where the hell was Delbert? “Tell me about this girlfriend. She white? Addict? Streetwalker?” I snapped my fingers. “Wait, I almost forgot. You’re moving up in the world now that you’re connected. I’ll bet she’s a stripper—oops, I mean exotic dancer. No offense. I hear a lot of them are lesbians, but if you found a good one, go for it.”

Schreckengost so mad his eye almost looked at me. “You got ten seconds to get the fuck out of my way or I put this shit down and kick your ass right here.”

“Gee, Willie, I’m sorry. Let me help you.” I reached for one of the cups. “I’ll carry some of this while you open your—”

“Sorry I’m late, man.” Delbert came up behind me wearing reflective sunglasses, his Stetson low over his face. “Had to take that call. Let’s eat.”

He kept walking, never gave Willie a recognizable look, not without the hat and glasses.

“Sorry, Willie, I got to go.” I shook my head and pursed my lips. “I don’t want to keep my friend waiting. Maybe we can catch up some other time. Give my best to the little woman. It’s got to be better than yours.”

Schreckengost didn’t move while I followed Delbert into White Castle. Delbert said he stared at me until I was inside. “Looks like his engine’s running, but ain’t nobody driving.”

I arched an eyebrow. “In English?”

“Not too sharp, is he?”

“It’s safe to say Willie’s not the brightest candle in the menorah.”

We got a sack to go and sat in the car telling jokes about morons we’d arrested. Schreckengost took his burgers straight home. The gadget worked like a charm. We had him all the way and never started the car. Delbert dropped me at the Cicero el station and I rode into the Loop while he went off to see how Willie Schreckengost spent his day.

27

Zoltan had the blues again. Navy suit, shirt and tie the color of cornflowers except for random lightning bolts running diagonally across the tie. He wore a raincoat over his shoulders like a cape. The midnight-blue loafers so glossy they looked wet, with tassels suitable for golf shoes. He wore socks in deference to the sub-forty temperatures and occasional standing water. Zoltan was flaky, not stupid.

It pissed me off he declined to come within two blocks of my office, then showed up late. Jan Rusiewicz and I sat in Starbucks on Dearborn between Harrison and Congress, discussing everything except our relationship and Vanessa Jordan. We nursed empty cups for half an hour while people with fresh coffee and nowhere to sit glared at us.

Zoltan’s entrance had the same swagger as the day I surprised him looking for Steve Plum. The smile slid from his face like melting snow off a steep roof when he saw Jan.

He bought time as well as coffee when he ordered, going to the counter before acknowledging us. A short line, by Starbucks’ standards. Zoltan

made up for it by engaging the *barista* in conversation that appeared to be about a piercing the kid had under his lower lip.

Zoltan approached our table with the reckless haste of a French cavalry charge. “Have a seat, Zoltan,” I said when he got within ten feet. “I’m sure you’d like to get out of here before the radioactivity in your shoes wears out.”

“Zoltan is sorry. I am not expecting pretty police lady.”

“She’s been expecting you. You’ve dodged her for almost a week and lied to me about it. Let’s have a talk.”

“Is not true. Zoltan does not—what you say?—dodge anyone. I do not know she is looking for me.”

“Pay attention, Zoltan, I’m only going to say this once. I told you before I didn’t want to play games. That was when I thought you were being straight with me. The police have been trying to find you for almost a week. I did it with one phone call. That means you’ve been ducking her.” I kicked the empty chair out from under the table toward him. “Now sit the fuck down, and let’s get this over with.”

His face reddened and a comment rose through his Adam’s apple to die on his lips. He straightened the chair and sat facing midway between Jan and me. Took the lid off his cup and breathed in the steam. Crossed his left leg over the right at the knee. A loafer dangled from his toes as if to show the scorn such disrespect deserved.

“Zoltan, I’m sorry we didn’t make time to talk to you the other day,” Jan said before he could direct the conversation. “We didn’t know how close you were to Marshall Burton. I have a few questions, and we’ll be done.”

“Very good.” Zoltan shifted his chair to face Jan. I guess that showed me.

She walked him through several things I already knew. His friendship with Marshall, what he thought of Margot. My ears perked up when she asked him about the threats.

“I am not been getting threats.”

“Zoltan.” I put enough presence in my voice to make the conversation mine. “Do you remember coming into my office and whining about the threats you’d been getting? About how I’d better start taking your case more seriously? How there was more at stake than just finding out if Margot had anything to do with it?”

“Zoltan did not say threats like someone coming to threaten him.” He spoke to Jan as though he had brought up the subject in the first place. “Zoltan talking like whoever kill Marshall might be coming to look for him now, with Marshall dead.”

“Zoltan.” I said it louder than I meant to. A woman aged between 40 and 70 stared from a neighboring table. Her face had seen so much UV it had already started decomposing. One second of eye contact and she remembered our conversation was none of her business. “You told me you got phone calls at night threatening you. Now did you or didn’t you?”

He turned his chair even farther away from me. “I am telling you for record I get no threats. Is enough I can go now?” He pushed back his chair as if about to get up.

“Sit your ass down.” I kept my voice low, slapped the flat of my hand on the table for emphasis. It startled Zoltan into turning toward me. The cuff of his suit brushed his lidless coffee cup and sent it straight into my lap.

“*Son of a bitch!*” Everyone heard that. The scalding coffee missed my crotch by an inch and drenched my left thigh. It was something thick I didn’t recognize, and dabbing at it with a napkin didn’t do anything like clean it up. I made a cursory attempt for lack of anything better to do, but the coffee had soaked through, dripping down the inside of my pant leg. “Are you finished with him?” I said to Jan. “I want a few words when you are.”

“Almost.” She opened a large envelope and drew out half a dozen photographs in clear plastic covers. “Do you know any of these men?” she said to Zoltan. “Take a good look.”

“Are they suspicious?” Zoltan picked up the photos and sorted through them like giant playing cards.

“Just look at them, please.” Both of us watched his eyes scan the photos. None of the faces meant any more to him than a beaver shot to a Buddhist monk.

He went through all six in less than a minute and gave them back. “Zoltan knows none of these men.”

“Are you sure?” Jan took one from the middle of the stack and handed it to him by its corner. “Take another look at this one. Hold it up so the light’s better.”

Closer examination didn't make the picture any more recognizable. Jan shrugged and put it on the pile with the others, then slid them all into a Ziploc bag she put back into the envelope. "I'm sorry to take up your time, Mr. Zoltan. If you think of anything else, please give me a call." She handed him her card.

"Thank you. It's a pleasure to do what I can to help in finding who killed Marshall." He stood, taking pains to show how careful he was not to spill anything. "Good day to both of you."

"Not so fast, Zoltan." I leaned on the table with my elbows. "You and I have one more piece of business."

"What business are we having? You want pants cleaned? Put charge on your bill. Zoltan will pay."

"Uh-uh. I'll clean the pants. You're fired."

That got him. "How are you firing when you are working for me?"

"I'm not working for you anymore."

"You are quitting?"

"No. I'm firing you as my client."

"Firing is only for employer, no?"

"This is a special case. Quitting's too passive, just telling someone you're not going to work for them anymore. I'm telling you what I'm going to do: I'm firing you. Are we straight?"

Zoltan couldn't even summon up indignation. He'd lived a lifetime of insults. Being told off was different. A career as whipping boy had taught him when to walk away. His eyes flicked downward before he caught himself and squared his shoulders. He bowed at the neck toward Jan and left without a word.

She spoke while I surveyed what had been my favorite slacks. "Are you really quitting?"

"Yeah, screw him. He's done nothing but lie to me since I met him."

"He's not the first client to lie to you."

"Most clients don't keep lying to me after they almost get me killed. His act is old."

"You're just walking away?"

"From him. As much as I hate to work for free, working for Zoltan got me into something. I want to be sure I'm out before I let it drop."

Jan craned her neck around the table to see if I was making progress with my pants. “Try cold water and a Stain Stick.”

“We’ll see. Now I have to run my ass home so I can get back in time for dinner with—so I can get back for dinner.” Too late. Secretary of State Forte had let another one out.

“The woman in your office yesterday?”

“Yeah.” It shouldn’t have bothered me. Jan and I hadn’t been out together in over six months. She broke it off. Who I ate dinner with didn’t concern her. I still felt like a kid caught doing something he knew not to do, even though it hadn’t been forbidden. “It’s just dinner.”

“Dinner’s good. She seems nice.” Jan gathered her purse and the photos. “Do you want me to keep you in the loop on Marshall Burton?”

“Please. It might fit with what I stumbled into. I’ll let you know if anything there looks related to your case, too.”

“Fair enough. Enjoy your dinner.”

She meant it, too. No snide comments. No arch looks. Not even a frosty tone of voice. I knew from Jan’s expression she was hurt when she saw me with Vanessa Jordan. We’d danced around our feelings since we split up. Jan had enough class to do the right thing, to make an effort to show it was all right with her. Class made it tough. I could deal with snide or arch or frost. Dealing with someone who’s doing the right thing is always hard, most of all when it’s being done to you.

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Bolingbrook dozed, still as any bedroom community, two o’clock on a weekday afternoon. I put Stain Stick on my slacks and took a shower. Dressed by deciding which combination Zoltan would recommend and wore something else.

I accessorized myself like a fashionable professional investigator—hip holster, meaningless badge, automatic pistol that made damn sure I’d know when it was empty. On my way to the kitchen for my cell phone I remembered an article on the Blackhawks’ Jonathan Toews in last week’s *Sports Illustrated* I’d promised to bring in for Sharon’s younger boy.

I found the magazine halfway down the stack of back issues next to my desk. I’d put everything away and made it halfway to the door when a

feeling tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to stay. I stopped, turned, and gave the room a going-over without moving. Nothing out of its approximate place. Nothing missing. Something was off, though. I knew it, sure as I didn't know what it was.

I stood like that for at least a minute before it occurred to me. The magazine I just spent time looking for should have been on top of the stack. I put it there last night. Now everything got a closer look. The clock might have been moved. The chair closer to the desk than I usually leave it. Nothing obvious, only different enough to whisper *someone's been in the house*.

The search shifted gears from idle examination to investigation. There were pick marks on the sliding glass door that opened from the front room into the backyard. A smudge of dirt on the carpet. Caroline's papers out of order on the refrigerator. Newspapers in the trash instead of recycling. I took them out and felt a sandy grit. Someone had dumped out the sugar bowl.

I smiled to myself going back for my jacket and the magazine. He didn't find what he came for. I knew, because whoever he was, he had to be looking for the papers I took from Madani the other night, the ones in my office safe. Too secure a building to break into after hours; someone almost always there during the day.

Like Sharon was now. Alone.

I grabbed the phone and called the office. She answered after seven rings. I started talking over her before I recognized the office greeting. Voice mail would pick up immediately if she was on the line, after four rings if auto answer was on. Sharon *never* forgot to turn it on, even for a bathroom break.

I jumped both stairs of the front stoop, had the car started before the door closed. I caught 355 at Boughton Road going north and blew through the I-Pass lanes of the Tollway doing at least sixty. I reached for my cell phone after the ramp for 88 and remembered it sitting on the kitchen counter when I didn't feel it in my pocket. Maybe Sharon left to use the jane and picked today to forget to push the answer button. I had no way to tell.

I slowed for the cluster fuck at the Hillside Strangler and got things moving again once I cleared the merges. Signs for north-south cross streets flashed by overhead. First Avenue. Austin. Cicero. Traffic picked up around

Western, and it occurred to me too late to jump off the Eisenhower at Kedzie and get the Eleventh District to send a squad car.

I swerved across lanes until I made it to the shoulder and stayed there. Horns yawped and a forest of middle fingers waved. I held my badge up to the window and kept my foot down. Back into the driving lanes before the ramps for the Dan Ryan and Kennedy. Traffic lightened up at the big post office, and I blew a red light at LaSalle. Greeted by shocked stares doing fifty down the block and a half of Dearborn to my office. Out of the car before it stopped rocking. Steps two at a time to the third floor. I took stock in front of the closed office door. No need to come in like Gangbusters and panic anyone. Open the door and walk in like I owned—leased—the place. Calm down. See what's in there. Be ready for anything. I opened the door, right hand resting on the butt of my gun.

Sharon sat at her desk working a nail file. Took her time to finish one while I stood there breathing hard. A mild flush showed on her cheeks and the hollow of her throat. "I wondered when you were coming back." Someone who didn't know her as well as I would miss the tremor in her voice. "There's a man in your office. He made me break a nail."

Willie Schreckengost lay on his right side between the desk and the door, facing me. Blood covered the lower half of his face. Except for Willie and some wood splinters on the floor, everything seemed to be in order. I turned back to Sharon.

"You all right?"

She put down the file. Her green eyes were clear as they looked straight into mine. "He came in about half an hour ago and said he knew you. I told him you were out and he should leave his name and you'd get back to him. I thought he was leaving, but all he did was lock the door. He told me you had some envelope that belonged to him. I told him I didn't know anything about any envelope and he'd have to talk to you. He said it didn't matter, he was sure there were lots of things I did know about, he didn't see any reason to waste a trip. He told me to get up and go into your office. He showed me this when I said no." She held up a nasty-looking folding knife with a four-inch blade. "I went into your office and walked over to your desk and leaned way over it, let him have a good look? Then while he was making up his mind I took that little baseball bat by the phone

and hit him with it twice, and there he is.” Her voice rose as she got close to the end.

“You mean the Carlos Quentin one I got at the Sox game?” She nodded. “Sharon, how many times do I have to tell you to keep the trademark *up*? This is how bats get broken.” She tossed me her version of Goose’s Look. “What the hell, I’ve been meaning to get rid of it ever since they got rid of him.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

I gave her a little hug and she leaned into it. “Did you tell me everything?” She nodded. “Go home. Watch Ellen or eat chocolate ice cream or something till the kids come home. I’ll take care of this one.” I got an idea, stopped shooshing her toward the door. “Do me one favor before you go. Run down to Gourmand’s and bring me up a large black coffee, please.”

“Sure. Anything else?”

“Try not to put anyone else in the hospital between here and there. Okay, Sharon-nator?”

She squared her shoulders and tried to look mean. It didn’t work. “I’ll be beck,” she said in as bad a Schwarzenegger impression as I’d ever heard.

I tidied up while I waited. Turned the visitor’s chair so the back rested against my desk. Rolled Schreckengost onto his back with my foot. He grunted like he might wake up, then resumed his carefree state.

Sharon got back in five minutes. “Here you go, good and hot. Since when did you start drinking coffee?”

“It’s not for me. He’s going to need something to bring him around after the job you did on him, and I’ll be damned if he gets any of my booze. Now go on home.”

She left, and I opened the twenty-ounce container, held it under my nose to savor the aroma. I loved the smell of coffee, never understood how something that smelled so good could taste like recycled motor oil. I’d only had two cups in my life and didn’t plan to drink any more. This one was just to help wake up Schreckengost.

He woke up good and quick when I poured the whole scalding cup on his face. He screamed and grabbed for it, which seemed like a natural reaction once I thought about it. Lifted him by the back of the collar, much

as his mother must have done when he was a baby weasel, threw him into the visitor's chair. By then he was fully recovered and invigorated.

"Forte, you son of a—"

He almost finished before I jammed the fingers of my right hand into his gut below the navel. Air ran out of him like a balloon with its end cut off. I stepped back in case he heaved.

"Here's the deal," I said. "You tell your boss don't ever send one of his boys to see my secretary again, or he'll get a lot worse than a coffee shower. I know why you came, and I'll save you some trouble. The envelope isn't here, and it's not at my place, so quit looking for it."

"What did you do with it, ass—"

This time I hit him hard enough to rock the chair. "Don't make me do a remedial listening class. Just send word to call in a day or two. Tell him to think about what it's worth if he wants it back so goddamn bad. Tell him generosity is a virtue. Now get out."

He did, though there wasn't much hurry in him. He had to be hurting, and his efforts to hide it weren't working. A few feet from the door he turned his head over his shoulder. "I'll kill you, Forte. I'll cut out your fucking heart."

He didn't have his mouth closed before I had him jacked up against the wall a foot over my head. "Who do you think you're kidding? My hundred-twenty pound secretary just kicked your ass, and you're going to cut out *my* heart? Get those grape seeds you call balls out of here before I stick that knife up your ass." Then I threw him into Sharon's office. I probably should have opened the door first.

Delbert waded through the broken glass and splintered wood while I spoke with Building Maintenance on the phone. He stood on my side of the threshold kneading his Stetson. Sharon stood to his left, two steps behind.

I hung up. "I thought I sent you home, Sharon." I didn't trust myself to talk to Delbert yet.

"I thought it might be a good idea to stay out here and make sure things didn't get out of hand."

I shot her a look, for what it was worth. Even in my current state Sharon knew it was impossible for me to get mad at her, so I shifted gears.

“Nice to see you, Delbert.” I held back the anger as well as I could. It still gained momentum with every word, as though carried out of my mouth with the air as I spoke. Most people who hadn’t known me too long thought I showed glimpses of temper for effect, like method acting. The truth was it hadn’t gone away as much as I got tired of feeling like an asshole after an outburst. Today had worn my patience too much for me to be trusted. “If you’re looking for Willie Schreckengost, he left about five minutes ago. He was moving pretty slow, so you can catch him if you hurry. If you can recognize him, that is. I know it’s been a while since you’ve seen him.”

“Nick, I’m real sorry about that.” The trademark drawl slower, softer, its usual cockiness muted. “I’ll take the rap for it, but it wasn’t all my fault.”

“Tell me the GPS gadget quit working or the battery died or something like that. Even if it’s not true. I’m not in the mood to sit through some long, sad song.”

“I’ll tell you straight: He sold the car.”

That was a lot shorter song than I expected, with a completely different tune. I stopped moving, unable to think of anything to say except to repeat what he’d just said, like maybe I heard it wrong and was giving him a chance to correct me. “He sold the car.”

“Yeah, at that dealership we followed him to the other day. Traded it in. He was gone before I knew what happened.”

“How do you know he sold it?”

Delbert came into the room, tapped his hat on a filing cabinet. “I found a spot where I could see inside the showroom through the big windows. I figured he was making a collection or something. Second trip there this week, we both saw him have words before. I thought they were behind on a payment and Willie was throwing some fear.

“Anyway, things seemed a lot more mellow this time. Guy he talked to before is all smiles, puts his arm around him, real buddy-buddy. They talk for a while, Willie goes in back. I stay put. Figured I was seen there the other day, can’t start showing up every time Willie does. He can’t go anywhere without me knowing it, right?”

“After an hour or so some kid comes out and drives Willie’s car around back. Pulls into this other lot they have, with a fence around it, locks

everything up tight, and comes back into the showroom. I still haven't seen Willie all this time.”

He paused and gave me a chance to do something encouraging. I'd learned too much about interrogation from Sonny Ng to give anything up one way or the other. Delbert looked in Sharon's direction. I was too busy staring orange laser beams into his mouth, waiting for words to come out, to see what he got in reply.

Ten seconds of silence unblemished even by extraneous sounds got him started again. “Now I go in. I didn't see him anywhere, so I ask the guy we saw him talking to where he was, said I was supposed to meet him here and got held up in traffic. Guy told me Willie was gone, picked up his new car today. Said they were supposed to have it a couple of days ago, but the delivery got hosed.”

“How much of head start did he have?”

“Half an hour, according to the salesman. Said they felt bad about screwing him up the other day and got him right out. I looked in some of the neighborhoods we saw him in before. Quit after an hour or so. I wouldn't've recognized the car even if I saw it.”

“Why didn't you call me?”

“I did. Well, I called here first, and Sharon didn't answer, so I called your cell, and it rolled over to voice mail.”

“What time?”

“Hour ago, maybe a little more.”

“That's about when Schreckengost was here,” Sharon said. I would have been in the shower, getting ready to rush out of the house without my cell phone. It figured.

Few things are more deflating than working up a full head of righteous indignation and finding out the person responsible had done all he could. Not even I could stay mad at Delbert after that story. “All right, no harm done. He'll take the rest of the day off. We'll take a chance and hook it up at his place.” The state of my ass had been downgraded from red to pink. I still wasn't ready for Delbert's next news flash.

“I don't have the GPS.”

My voice was low and even. It was the voice Sharon says could freeze paint off a wall. “What?”

That voice and its accompanying face were new to Delbert. It threw him a little. "It's still in his old car. I couldn't really ask for it back."

He couldn't, really. I took a few seconds to come up with a plan. Seventeen hundred dollars too big a chunk of my income to adopt an "easy come, easy go" attitude. "They don't know me. I guess I can go up there tomorrow and take it for a test drive. We'll get it back when I'm out of sight."

Delbert looked like he had more to say and his mouth wouldn't open for it, a teenager who just told dad he wrecked the car and now is afraid to mention that, by the way, his girlfriend's pregnant. "It gets better doesn't it?" I said.

Sharon said, "Nick, it's not so bad. Give him a chance to tell you."

I gave her a look that implied my patience was not unlimited, even with her. Delbert finally spoke up.

"You can't test drive the car. They don't sell them. It goes to an auction up in Wisconsin where other dealers buy them. The way the guy described it made it sound almost like money laundering, but with cars."

"He volunteered this?"

"I acted pissed, told him Willie promised to give me a shot at the car if I could beat the trade-in offer. He laid it out for me when I asked about seeing it. I couldn't just ask for it back because the dealer will reckon we were following Willie. For all we know, this guy's the Outfit's official auto dealer."

"What did Willie buy?" I said.

"Caddy."

"Figures." I was too disgusted to be mad anymore. "You have a plan?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," he said. "I could use a little backup."

"How little?"

"Lookout mostly. There's wire on top of the fence, so I'm thinking I'll cut through and make my own little door. Cutting the chain on the gate'll be too obvious in the morning."

"You're afraid they'll come in the next morning, see the cut chain, and think, 'Gud-dam, I'll bet some sumbitch come in here last night and stole wanna them there GPS dee-vices.'" I hammed up his accent ten times worse than his worst day. "Is that about right?"

“I didn’t deserve that. I’m from Texas, not Oklahoma. I just thought a night watchman would be a lot more likely to see a cut chain than a crack in the fence that’ll lay just about flat once I get through it.”

He had me there. “All right, I’ll do it. When?”

“Tonight works for me.”

“Tonight’s bad. Got a date.”

That perked up Sharon. “Is it the woman Jan caught you with yesterday?”

“Jan didn’t *catch* me with anyone,” I said quicker than I meant to. “Vanessa and I were talking when Jan came in. All we were doing was talking.”

“That’s what I said.” She had me now, and knew she could get around my funk when no one else would try.

“No, it isn’t. You said she *caught* us. People don’t get caught talking. They get caught cheating. Talking isn’t cheating, even if you’re dating someone else, which I am not right now, at Jan’s option.”

“Was it one of *those* conversations?” Delbert said to Sharon. She nodded.

“Don’t change the subject,” I said. “I can do it, but it’ll have to be late. Eleven or twelve.”

“Later’s better. There’s a bunch of family restaurants around. Be better if everyone else is home when we go in.” He smoothed the brim of his Stetson where he’d been fooling with it. “I bet we laugh our asses off about this in a few weeks. Beers will be on me.”

“Expensive beer,” I said. “Not that Lone Star shit you talked me into last time. No more recommendations from you until further notice.” Having to rescue my own toy didn’t offend me so much I forgot to be impressed by Delbert’s attitude. Texas cocky, still careful enough to get backup and try to control as much of the environment as possible.

Since Sharon didn’t appear to be too badly shaken up to work, I had her see if Schreckengost’s new car had hit the DMV system. I cleaned up the remainder of my door and worked on Madani’s code. Two hours later I admitted defeat and went to dinner. Delbert hadn’t had any luck with it, either. Tomorrow I’d give what I had to Sturdivant. A cover story good enough to satisfy him about the delay shouldn’t be too hard to come up with. As long as I didn’t use any big words.

Vanessa Jordan's belted blue dress fit well enough to flatter her and remain businesslike. The slit in back inspired curiosity instead of demanding it. Simple buttons in her ears, elegant yet unpretentious watch. Professional without seeming impersonal; sensual, not cheap. Oh, my, indeed.

Our meeting in my office was the trailer; tonight I got the whole movie. She had two daughters two years either side of Caroline. Her financial analyst ex worked twenty-four hours straight when he ran a buzz, crashed for a week when he came down. She got a decent settlement, sometimes even got her child support on time, if it was due on a day his clients or his dealer didn't have their own demands.

She never phrased it like that. There was plenty of fault to go around, she said. Two adults both have to accept responsibility. He did things the best way he knew how. Her tone and enthusiasm implied she had almost convinced herself. It took a bottle of red wine, chicken parmesan, and generous helpings of laughter for me to put together the picture of a shitheel from the crumbs of information that fell from her stories. She spoke with an alluring lack of self-consciousness, finding humor in her misfortunes and taking her share of the blame for how things didn't work out.

"You're not originally from this area, right?" I said.

She sipped wine, shook her head as she swallowed. "New York. Not the city. Upstate."

"How far up? I have a friend in the band at West Point."

"Not that far. Westchester County."

"What brought you here?"

"Pete felt underappreciated in New York. He jumped when his firm had an opening here. Said he was going to show those rubes how markets worked."

"I'll bet that went over well."

"About as well as you'd expect. He never fit in here. I don't think he ever wanted to. He finally found a group of friends who didn't fit in any better than he did."

"And you stayed when it fell apart."

“I like it here. I thought about taking the girls back east; it’s not like their dad spends any time with them. He’d probably see them more if we did move. Then he’d have to make plans, buy plane tickets, stuff like that. Now he sets things up and doesn’t come through. Big deals at work.”

Her face came as close to clouding over as it had all night. The waitress bought us time by dropping off our coffee and tea while I fumbled for a way to change the subject.

Vanessa took care of it, as I should have expected. She looked at me over her cup after we’d finished creaming and sugaring and said, “I should be ashamed of myself.”

“Why?”

“We’ve been here over an hour, and I don’t know any more about you than I did yesterday. You know everything about me.”

“That’s not true. You know a couple of new things about me.”

“Such as?”

“I’m a good listener.” She stuck out her tongue. “With exceptional bladder control.”

She almost spit coffee on me and made an un-ladylike snort to control it. “If you have to go, don’t let me keep you.”

“No, I’m good for another half an hour, thanks.”

“Mmm, not just exceptional bladder control. Extraordinary.”

“That’s where most of my Google hits come from.”

She got quiet, still smiling. “No, they don’t.”

“You Googled me?”

She might have blushed. The only blemish on her face, a small scar below the right eye, showed for that moment. It was about the same depth as the one I noticed yesterday on her neck. A touch more make-up would have hidden it. “Do you mind?”

“No. It’s probably a good idea. Find anything interesting?”

“You killed a man a couple of years ago.”

“That’s why I’m available for dinner. Do you want to hear about it?”

She shook her head. “It’s just one more piece that doesn’t seem to fit with the man sitting across from me.”

“Does it bother you?”

She considered her answer long enough for it to be true. “Bother’s not the right word. It intrigues me, I suppose.” She held the cup near her lips,

tapped a fingernail against the rim. “Tom McManus told me you dote on your daughter.”

“I doubt that’s the word he used, but I guess that’s about right.”

“What word would you use?”

“I do what she needs. Not always what she wants, she’ll tell you that. What she needs. Or at least what I think she needs.”

“That’s what good parents do.”

“I try.”

“It sounds like you succeed.” She smiled, and I got the impression a mental check box had been filled in. “Your whole body language changes when you talk about her.”

“I do the best I can. We’re not together as much as I’d like, so I have to pick my spots. No absentee father can be as good as one who’s in the house.”

“You don’t cut yourself much slack, do you?”

I chuckled more inside than out. “You should have known me twenty years ago.”

“When you were at school?” I nodded. “Is that where you met Tom?”

“Waiting for a practice room. We’d both cut class to practice. After that we’d pick one class each semester. If one of us decided to cut, the other had to.”

“You cut classes to practice?”

“Absolutely. Can’t play trumpet six hours straight, you have to break it up—an hour here, an hour and a half there. Whatever it takes.”

“You really practiced six hours a day?”

“Just about. I lightened up on days I had gigs or lessons, but that was my standard. I wouldn’t go out on Friday night until I had my six in.”

Another smile, different again. Her complete repertoire of facial expressions appeared to be variations of smiles. All genuine, not the showpieces some women hang on their faces to look interested when they’re really thinking about new drapes or the pool boy. “A college student giving up a Friday night?”

“You can get your pick of practice rooms at nine o’clock on a Friday night. Sometimes even an auditorium.”

“My God, I’ve never felt that strongly about anything. Why did you quit?”

“I stink.” I sipped my tea to punctuate the statement.

Vanessa waited to be sure I’d finished. “I don’t believe that. Tom says you were good. He says you never should’ve quit.”

“Don’t pay too much attention to what Tom says. He makes six figures playing in a major orchestra. His perceptions of a musical career are a little skewed. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life scuffling for freelance gigs and teaching kids who didn’t practice as much in a month as I did in a day.”

She took her time putting things together, wrapped her long fingers around the coffee cup. She spoke in a tone between statement and question. “I’d think there were lots of things that use those skills. Why did you become a detective? ”

“Why do you do what you do?”

“I asked first.”

“You know how it is. One thing that seemed like a good idea at the time led to another, and here I am.”

“A rousing endorsement. Do you like it?”

“It’s all right.”

“Why not quit?”

“I’m good at it.”

“There must be lots of things you’d be good at.”

“Yes, but I *am* good at this.” I swallowed tea, used the time to gather myself. “How come you’re asking all the questions? I’m the detective.”

“It’s too late now. If you wanted to plead the Fifth, you had to do it right away. You can’t pick and choose.”

That smile again. I knew she was playing with me as well as I knew she wouldn’t let me off the hook. “How does someone who works for the CSO know that?”

“I had a year of law school.”

“Why’d you quit?”

“Knocked up.”

“That’ll teach you.”

“It taught me to be more careful. You know the saying, ‘Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me’?”

“It’s on the company letterhead.”

Vanessa laughed like she meant it, not some calculated chirp displayed to feign amusement or interest. Her whole body laughed, shoulders moving, torso shifting in the chair. Still well short of the braying that marks the other extreme of female unattractiveness. “Nice try. Now back to my question.”

“Which question was that? I forget.”

“About you preferring to do something you’re good at rather than something you like.”

I didn’t want to make this speech, not tonight. I thought of deflecting her, but she was too good. If I had to tell it, better to take control and get it over with. “I can’t like it if I’m not good at it. Not something I’d do for a living. I mean, I can stink at shooting pool, and that’s okay. I’ll work at it when I have time because I’ll like it more if I’m better. I couldn’t bear to spend all day doing something I wasn’t good at.”

“So you didn’t quit because you weren’t good. You just weren’t as good as you wanted to be.”

Damn it, she didn’t miss much. I was going to have to be careful if I planned on spending an appreciable amount of time with this woman. I’d get over it. “That’s pretty close. You always hear musicians complaining about how hard it is. You know what’s hard? Getting paid for doing something you’d do for free.” I knew she wouldn’t get it. “Pretty soon you learn when someone else pays, you play what they want, how they want it, when they want it. You put up with a million petty things that don’t have anything to do with music. Were you around when Bud Herseth played first trumpet?”

“Yes.”

“When Solti was here, they played Mahler Five on tour as much as the Stones play *Satisfaction*. People expected it. Herseth’s talking to Solti one day about what a great piece it is, and Solti turns to him and said, ‘My God, Bud, I can’t *stand* it anymore.’ Mahler Five, and he was sick of it. Think how it feels to play *Sunrise, Sunset* for the hundredth time at a wedding.”

She took a couple of swallows to finish her wine, set the glass down just so. Either looking for the right word or a little drunk. Maybe both. She looked at me as if someone new had snuck into my chair. “Wow. You will talk about yourself if someone finds the right combination of questions. Thank you.”

“Sorry. Sometimes that just comes out by itself. It doesn’t happen often.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’ve shown me a whole ’nother person in the last fifteen minutes, and they’re both you. I can probably get into a lot of trouble for saying this on a first date, but you are a fascinating man. Do you like Bernstein?”

“Lennie or Elmer?”

A quick laugh. “Lennie, as you musicians would say. The orchestra is playing his Kaddish Symphony the night Yom Kippur ends. Yefim Broflavski is conducting. Would you like to go?”

And so I would get a chance to be careful around a smart and attractive woman with a great sense of humor. Wow. I didn’t say that. I just thought it all the way to Wheeling to meet Delbert.

31

“Here’s the deal, boss. I got to get past this fence, then one more on the inside where they keep the trade-ins. I can climb this one, but the other one’s got razor wire across the top. I’ll have to cut my way in.”

Delbert stood on a side street off Dundee Road staring at an eight-foot chain link fence. The Stetson tilted back on his head looked like a halo when he faced me straight on.

“How do you know all this?” I said.

“This ain’t my first rodeo. I looked around last time I was here.”

“Explain to me again why you don’t just ask for the gadget back.”

“Because I don’t want this dealer to tell Schreckengost someone’s been following him. Besides, I figured letting a car dealer know we left something valuable in the car was like telling him to give me the runaround for an hour so one of his mechanics can steal it.”

Delbert’s lack of faith in car dealer ethics was disappointing. I would have felt worse if I had a counter-argument. “What’s the plan?”

“We both go over. This fence should be easy. Then you watch my back while I cut through the other one and get your toy back.” He held up a pair of bolt cutters that could snip the anchor on the Nimitz.

I looked at the fence. “If you’re going to cut one, why not two? Save us from climbing back out in case we’re in a hurry.”

“This is why you’re in charge.” He had the first link cut before the sentence faded. We were through in a minute.

The lot laid out like most dealerships. The main building screened us from the view of most traffic on Dundee Road. A few large halogen lights on poles lit the open areas. Cars with numbered tags hanging from rearview mirrors were parked in double rows.

The inner compound fifty yards from our entry point, not lighted as well. We stayed in the shadows as much as we could, picked our way between cars until we found a spot with enough room for Delbert to work the bolt cutters without being seen from either street.

We were closer to Dundee Road than I expected. Traffic was brisk for that time of night. “Do you see the car? Can you get the hood open? I’m going to be pissed if I get arrested for stealing something that belongs to me.”

Delbert’s voice came within half an inch of being patronizing. “Don’t worry about the mule, just load the wagon. I checked the base station from my car. It’s in there.” He cut a slit in the fence and pushed it open. I held the edges apart while he stepped through. “Let me know if you see anything.”

Nights are clearer when it’s cold; tonight was the coldest this week. Even the ambient light in an area this built up couldn’t keep the stars from twinkling. I shoved my hands into my pockets and wished I’d worn a coat over my blazer. The light reflected off little clouds of my breath to make them appear whiter than they were. It reminded me of the other night, chasing Madani.

My attention wandered in the direction of his coded papers, idle thoughts hoping to catch a thread working its way loose in my subconscious. Footfalls on the gravel inside the fence brought me back to the present. Not crunchy like shoes. Lighter, too quick to be a man walking. Some kind of animal. A dog, maybe.

Like the Doberman that turned the corner precisely as it occurred to me.

The first thought that ran through my mind was, “Of course they have a dog,” but Delbert said he checked the place, and he was too good to miss something as obvious as traces of dog. Must be a security service, drops the dog off at night, picks it up in the morning.

The dog noticed me, moved in my direction with that easy lope guard dogs use while they’re making up their mind which part of you tastes best. Slobber flew from his jowls when he skidded to a stop, teeth bared. The left canine was crooked. Probably caught it on some trespasser’s throat.

The dog backed down onto its haunches and growled low in the chest. It didn't know about Delbert yet, or it wouldn't be fooling with me. Delbert didn't know about the dog, either, and I was sure he'd like to before meeting him face to snout. I tried to keep my voice even and unthreatening and still project enough for Delbert to hear, not knowing where he was. "Hey, Delbert?"

The dog threw itself at the fence barking and slaving, trying to push its muzzle through the links to get at me. I moved ten feet to my left so the dog wouldn't throw itself against the cut section of fence. Then it tried to climb out. Fine by me. That dog couldn't clear the razor wire unless it grew wings.

Delbert came around the corner inside the fence running flat out. "Dog!" was all I made out. A shadow ran behind him and I wondered what he had in mind. "Open the fence!"

I ran to the gap he'd cut. My Doberman forgot all about me and faced Delbert, a Rottweiler closing from the other side. Delbert lowered a shoulder and ran head-on into the Doberman and raised up.

The dog flipped and landed on its back between Delbert and the Rott. Delbert had just enough time to get through the gap in the fence before they regrouped.

"Gud-damn, that was close. Ah hate them big ugly dawgs." Delbert's accent got worse when he was excited.

"What's Plan B?" I said.

"Get the fuck out of here."

"Works for me."

We moved back along the fence as fast as we could without running, Delbert flipping the finger to the dogs going berserk on the other side. Halfway to the outer fence the chain stopped shaking and the barking diminished. We stopped and looked at each other until we heard a deep growl and running dog feet. One had figured a way through the fence.

We broke into a dead run, or as dead as we could run while moving along and between rows of cars. The dog didn't much care. Paws thumped and scabbled as it found spaces between and under the edges of cars, gaining ground when it could.

"We can't outrun it, you know," Delbert said.

"Fuck him. I only have to outrun you."

Mentioning who had to outrun what was probably a mistake. Delbert was younger, rangier, and faster. I heard the dog gaining and went over a hood myself. The Rottweiler was younger and faster than me, too. I kicked a bite away from my ankle. Made it over the last row of cars and saw Delbert at the gap in the fence that led to the street waving me on. I was running toward him as fast as I could when the dog launched itself from a hood and caught me about mid-chest, knocking me into the fence and down.

We both lay there for a few seconds, wondering where the air had gone. The dog recovered first; it had a meal handy. I barred my arm across my face and neck as the dog charged. Then I saw something I'd never seen before.

Delbert threw a shoulder into the Rottweiler, rolling into it and propelling them both ass over cowboy boots into the gravel. I got up and started toward them when he yelled, "Go over! Now!"

It was at least twenty feet to the hole in the fence, if I could find it in the dark. Screw it. I'd climbed halfway up when a hand grabbed my shoe and threw me over. I caught myself before I fell down the other side, grabbed his hand, and hauled him up. Then we let ourselves down, breaking each other's falls the best we could.

Mists of our breath shrouded our faces. The dog staggered along the pathway like a guitar player after a three-day binge. Delbert and I started laughing like high school kids until I remembered a salient point.

"Let's get out of here before he finds that hole in the fence. We'll figure this out in the morning."

We checked each other for blood and bites and found scrapes and bruises. I drove home alternating between being pissed off and giggling like a drunken sorority girl.

I crawled into bed a little after two. Caroline's was the only message, she loved me and I shouldn't forget to pick her up after school tomorrow. By 2:30 I slept the pure, clear sleep of the just.

Tom McManus had me eating something unpronounceable again at a new Pho 88 three blocks from Symphony Center. I knew only as much about what was in my meal as Tom felt obligated to tell me. I liked it—I always liked what Tom “recommended”—even though I burned off more calories trying to eat soup with chopsticks than I did tear-assing through Elk Grove Village the other night.

We talked about anything that didn’t concern my case. Among the multitude of pains in the ass Marshall Burton inflicted on me was the loss of my outlet into non-work-related activity. Getting together with Tom to talk about sports or women or listen to him vent semi-seriously about life musical kept me sane when one more background check would put me in the psycho ward of the Old Detectives’ Home. Marshall’s case gave Tom too big a window into my world. This lunch was a welcome reprieve.

We went back to Symphony Center so I could meet Carol Findley. Eddie Reifsnyder and I were in the midst of our semi-regular discussion about which of us had a real job when Willie Schreckengost stepped off the elevator.

Sharon had done a hell of a job on him. A splint started between his eyebrows and ran the length of his nose, held in place by white tape across his forehead and cheeks that accentuated shiners under each eye. I couldn’t resist.

“Hey, Willie.” I said it to get his attention and that of anyone else in the lobby. “What happened to you? Your sister cross her legs?”

Tom choked on a swallow of bottled water. Schreckengost veered a half step in my direction. The visible part of his face flushed, and he winced. Eddie gave him thirty years’ worth of cop stare, and Schreckengost resumed his original path. He gave me the look that’s supposed to say I’m cool and I’m bad. What it really says is I’m not nearly as cool and bad as I think I am, or I wouldn’t be giving you this look.

I held his eye contact, expressionless, neither of us seeing anything juvenile about a stare-down. Alan Ladd and Jack Palance stared at each other like that in *Shane*. Lines were being drawn. Schreckengost letting me know we had business; me telling him if he planned to kick some ass, he’d better bring some ass.

I kept him in sight until he cleared the door. When I turned back to my group Eddie shifted his eyes to me. It had been years since we shared a look

like that. I nodded for only him to see, and he tightened the corners of his mouth and held the look for another second before he let it drop.

Tom missed everything after the insult. To him it was his friend Nick who'd say anything, saying anything. Any subtext went by him like air over a moving car. The bliss of his ignorance would allow him to look back and remember little of what prompted the event and nothing of Willie Schreckengost, except he was the guy I called an incestuous rug muncher in the lobby of Symphony Center.

Part of me missed that naiveté. Tom could tell if a piece of music deserved his interest as quickly and surely as Eddie Reifsnnyder could spot a crook. He'd distinguish the significant from the common in an instant, take pleasure from the good and ridicule the bad at least as much as I'd served Schreckengost.

I was like that once, though not as good as Tom, and the ability had atrophied with disuse. My skills now focused on the implications of trivial acts of everyday life. Took a psychology class at DePaul when I was a cop. One day the prof sent us out to walk the streets as a group and tell what we saw. Everyone else talked about nice weather, sailboats, traffic, someone jaywalking in front of a bus. I saw a pickpocket setting up a mark, a dope deal, and a guy ready to jump off a bridge if his girl didn't give him another chance. I'd taunted Schreckengost to remind him he was a punk and would never be anything else. Tom slept better at night because he didn't know. I slept at all because I did.

Tom still chuckling in the elevator. "Christ, you break me up." He finished his water, wiped his mouth. "Here's the deal with Carol. She's nice, but she's been working here since music was invented and thinks she owns the joint. I've seen you charm older broads before. This is one of those times. No oral sex jokes."

"I'll try."

I got that feeling again walking from the elevator to Carol Findley's office. Carpet plush enough to swallow any sounds except the leather creaking in our shoes and the material in our slacks brushing against itself. Photographs of past music directors lined one wall; the other was filled with guest conductors and prominent soloists who thought they graced the CSO with their presence. In fact, they made their names through their association with the orchestra.

Carol Findley's job included supporting the music director, which meant keeping away the endless list of people who wanted to bump up against a true celebrity. She came well-equipped. A thick body more solid than fat gave her torso an almost cubic shape. Steel-gray hair cut short around her ears framed a face not suited for showing humor. Crinkles around her pale blue eyes hinted a smile might be possible if you held up your end. She looked like a guard in a women's prison. The nice one, the one the inmates went to when they had a problem, but nobody got anything past Matron Findley.

She spoke when she saw us come in. "Hello, Tom. It's always good to see you. I hope you aren't looking for the Maestro. He's running late and has to be downstairs in fifteen minutes for rehearsal. Shouldn't you be heading that way, too?"

"Hi, Carol. I'm not here for Helmut. I brought a friend up to meet you." Tom smiled, no slouch at charming older women himself. "And I don't play on the Bruch, so I have an hour or so before I have to go down."

He made the introductions and chatted her up a bit. I was about to get the obligatory small talk out of the way when the door behind Carol opened and Helmut Obersdorfer came out. He looked bigger in maestro mode. Walked with a purpose that made his almost indiscernible limp seem like a mannerism, something he could stop if he put his mind to it. Hair swept straight back from his forehead, somehow more severe today, no longer the distinguished older gentleman. Today a leader of men who expected to be obeyed without question. An officer in a world of enlisted men. Or, in his case, *ein Offizier*. If not *der Führer*.

He would have passed by without comment if Tom didn't stop him with an overly cheery, "Quite a rehearsal this morning, Maestro."

Obersdorfer turned on him with a disconcerting quickness. "*Ja*, yes, quite a rehearsal this morning. I hope we shall never have another like it." His silver eyes lacked the ring of darkness most light-eyed people have. It made the line between iris and white indistinct, almost alien. "I should have Carol look at old programs to see if this orchestra has ever played Schubert before."

"I think you see things in the music we aren't used to having pointed out to us." Tom wouldn't back down from a conductor any more than I would from Schreckengost. "We've done the C Major before. We'll get it."

“By tomorrow, I hope. At least by week’s end so perhaps one audience may hear it.” Obersdorfer’s accent had the subtlety of expensive perfume. “I hope you will be able to join us in time for the Shostakovich.”

“I’ll work it in. I’m curious to see how it goes.”

Obersdorfer looked at Tom with something less than a stare, more than eye contact. Hardened guards look at convicts that way, eyeing an inferior, unable to take what they consider to be acceptable action. Then he acknowledged me with a nod so slight I might have imagined it and left.

The exchange had as much effect on Carol Findley as it had on her desk blotter. She and I waited until Tom and Obersdorfer finished their dis-fest. That was all the ice breaking I could stand. “Ms. Findley, I don’t want to take much of your time. You occasionally sign in a man named Willie Schreckengost. Do you mind if I ask why?”

Her face answered before she said a word. “Is he in some kind of trouble? It wouldn’t surprise me. Horrible man. I can’t begin to guess why the Maestro has anything to do with him.”

“You sign him in for Obersdorfer?”

“I hope you don’t think I have reason to speak with him. I don’t know any criminals, but I suspect they must be a lot like him.” If she only knew.

“Do you know why Mr. Obersdorfer has you sign Schreckengost into the building?”

“That’s not unusual. Conductors hardly ever sign anyone in; they have too much on their minds already. Even the guest conductors are swamped with interviews, rehearsals, meeting with musicians. It’s rare there isn’t some fundraising activity, even if it’s just lunch with a committee. I call down and save him the trouble.”

“I was more interested in why Mr. Obersdorfer wants to see Schreckengost at all.”

“I have no idea. He’s never said anything, and it’s really none of my business. I wonder sometimes if they might be related.”

“Do you know if they ever get together outside of the hall?”

“I wouldn’t know, but I doubt it. I don’t think the Maestro likes him much. He never sounds very happy when this Schreckengost is here. I think he only sees him because he feels like he has to. That’s why I think they might be related somehow. You know, black sheep of the family, but the good citizen can’t turn him away. That sort of thing.”

It could happen. Schreckengost might be a German name; they could go way back in the old country. I still had to wonder.

I left to give Tom time to get ready for his rehearsal. Eddie asked on my way out if he should keep tabs on Schreckengost's comings and goings. It couldn't hurt. He promised to call if anything unusual happened.

Things were zipping along like two slugs racing on a sheet of ice. I went back to my office to make a dent in the pile of papers Sharon kept piling on my desk. None of it would help with this case, such as it was. Whatever it was. It still had to be done. Paperwork got us paid, no matter how many TV detectives work on a handshake. I wanted to get at least half of it done before going home. Caroline was having dinner and sleeping over. Everything else could wait until morning.

33

Almost everything. A man built like two sides of beef riveted together walked into my office ten minutes behind me. It took a lot of muscle to carry around that much neckless weight. The shelf of his brow shaded small eyes showing the life and intelligence of charcoal. It lightened his olive skin by comparison, accentuated the acne scars. He was several inches shorter than me, and the doorknob disappeared in his hand like a baseball in a first baseman's mitt when he closed the door with surprising delicacy.

He crossed the floor without a word and stood next to my client's chair with his arms crossed. I could almost hear the sport coat's seams screaming in agony. "You know who I am?"

Hoods are all the same. He'd be a "man of respect" someday if he didn't get sent away for too long or get clipped for missing his revenue target. Today he was a cheap criminal wearing a T-shirt under a sport coat that probably had "The Outfit" on its tags where mine said "Men's Wearhouse."

"No," I said, "but I have a pretty good idea what you do for a living."

"Then you know who I work for," he said before I could get smart with him. Brought his hands and fingers up to make the letter A. His fingers looked like bratwurst with rings on them.

"Yeah, I know." Dominic Annunciato. A man who traced his Outfit lineage through Jackie Cerone and Sam Giancana all the way back to Frank Nitti and Al Capone. I was in a jam and got involved with Annunciato a

couple of years ago against everyone's better judgment. I earned points letting him know one of his *capos* had crossed a line. He returned the favor by intervening before my button got pushed. Off the record, of course. I said I had a unique problem and needed some advice; he said these things have a way of taking care of themselves, maybe I should get out of town for a few days. A party not privy to our conversation wound up in a parking lot with both eyes shot out.

Now someone who could only be from him stood in my office like he owned it. I owed Annunciato and knew the bill would come sooner or later. That didn't make me happy to see this greaseball.

"What do you want?" I said to keep things moving.

"My friend understands you have some business with a guy name of Willie Schreckengost."

Annunciato not fooling around. This "friend" of his was a made man, not just some wanna-be. It was like sending the ambassador instead of some half-assed military attaché. "I wouldn't say I have business with him. His business and mine might be intersecting."

That got as much response from the ambassador as from the filing cabinet. The intersecting business comment might have been too much for him.

"My friend wants you to know whatever Schreckengost is up to don't have nothing to do with him. Word's going around he did my friend a service. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. What he's into now is his business. My friend says you'd understand about his standards."

"What's he into now that don't have nothing to do with—your friend?" We apparently weren't using Annunciato's name today.

"That's your problem. All I'm saying is, that whatever happens to Schreckengost ain't no skin off my friend's nose. We straight?"

I nodded and he left, just like that. Delbert walked in as soon as the doorway was available. "What was that about?"

"That was the Outfit cutting Willie Schreckengost loose. Whatever favors he did for them in the joint are either paid for, or don't measure up to what he's into now. I guess we can stop wondering what went on between them the other day." I slid my chair back, crossed my ankles on the desk. Clicked a ball point pen to keep my hand busy. "What could a jagoff like Schreckengost be doing to make Dominic Annunciato wash his hands?"

“Beats me.” Delbert tossed his Stetson on the filing cabinet and sat in the Chair of Luxury. “What do we have on Schreckengost?”

“I see him at Symphony Center where he doesn’t belong. You and I follow him to Reza’s. He gives an envelope to a guy named Madani, who an alleged fed named Sturdivant says he’s tracking—”

“Alleged fed?”

“Yeah.” I leaned back in the chair, laced my fingers behind my head. “This morning I went out where they took me so I could give them the envelope. Place was empty. Dust, some litter, no trace of any federal presence. I poked around the neighborhood. Sturdivant and his boys had been noticed, but I doubt anyone there could pick them out of a line-up. Seemed like a set-up, someone wanted it to look it had been left in a hurry.”

“A little too tidy?”

I nodded. “When I got back I called Homeland Security and asked for him. Girl said she had no record of a Forrest Sturdivant working there.”

“So he’s either a fake or more of a spook than we figured. What’d you do then?”

“What could I do? I left a message.”

“Figuring they lied to you and word’ll get back to Sturdivant and he’ll find you when he’s ready.” A toothpick danced from one corner of Delbert’s mouth to the other. “So Sturdivant’s a man of mystery, surveilling this Madani character that gets hit by a train—”

“Thank you. You’re the first person who hasn’t said I killed him.”

“Hell, you didn’t kill him. You teed him up, though.”

“Madani decided he’d rather die than give me that envelope, which he received from Schreckengost after a trip to Orchestra Hall. Today I find out Schreckengost goes to Orchestra Hall to see the conductor, Helmut Obersdorfer. No one knows why.”

“At least two people do.”

“Schreckengost’s an asshole, but he’s been around, and it’ll be hard to brace him. Obersdorfer’s a respected member of the international music community. He gets a pass.”

“So it’s find Sturdivant.”

“Or press Schreckengost and hope he fucks up. Why did we assume Madani worked for him?”

“Because Schreckengost was the guy we were following. He was the most important to us, so we assumed he was most important, period.”

“Especially after I saw Madani at Scarlett’s. Everything said he was the junior man. He waited for the other Arab, acted deferential, followed his lead. I never considered the idea Schreckengost might be low man on the totem pole.”

“Until now.”

I tossed the pen on my desk. “I should’ve let Madani go. The guy I wanted was the one I left in the men’s room.”

“What choice did you have? Stay with the other Arab when he knows you’re watching him? Madani had what might’ve been the only piece of evidence. The extra guy tried to keep you from getting it. Madani died doing the same thing. Doesn’t matter *who* you followed. You went after the evidence.”

“Which we can’t use and have to give up now, anyway.”

“That’s the only way Sturdivant was going to get it. His surveillance wasn’t close enough.”

Delbert could have been pumping me up. I hadn’t spent enough time around him to be sure. “So what do we do next?”

“Following the Arab trail isn’t an option. Madani’s dead, and we don’t know how to find the other guy. All we have left is to work backward from Schreckengost. He got the envelope from someone. Find out who.”

I liked that Delbert kept referring to what should be my problem as a “we.” “He might have been carrying it since before we picked him up at the Hall.” I tapped a finger on the desk. “We have the list of every place he stopped that day.”

“Work with what we have.”

We divided the list almost in half. Delbert’s had more stops, since I had to take Obersdorfer and the car dealer and they’d be harder to get to. He went out to start right away. I had fatherly responsibilities and still had the paperwork I’d come for in the first place.

Jan Rusiewicz called to invite me to Area Four halfway through proofreading the first case file. She didn’t say what she wanted, hinted it might have something to do with what I’d been butchering for the past week. It broke my heart to leave the paperwork. I told her I’d stop by, only

because Area Four was on my way to Caroline's school. No point in looking overeager.

34

Jan didn't often look smug. She hardly ever did it at work; female cops knew better if they wanted good working relationships with their peers, even in the enlightened 21st century. She made an exception for me, her lips holding back a smile while her eyes practically clawed their way out of the sockets to see my reaction.

She laid an eight-by-ten photograph on the table in front of me. "Know who that is?"

A young man, not much more than a kid, 20 at most. He smiled unselfconsciously around a small gap in his teeth. A cowlick fought its way through what was probably just water on his hair. He looked like a small town's idea of a good kid.

"I give up," I said. "Tom Sawyer?"

"Homer Ledbetter."

My eyes froze on the photo. I had nothing to say and she knew I wouldn't. "There's no way this kid grew up to be Zoltan," I said after ten seconds of recovery time.

"Not unless he changed his fingerprints."

"You got Zoltan's prints?"

No stopping this smile. "Remember the mug shots I had him look at in Starbucks?" I nodded. "Suspected Chechen mob members. I didn't really expect him to recognize any of them."

"You just wanted him to handle the covers." I saw it all: Jan touching just the corners of the clear plastic jackets, taking great care when she slid them back into their envelope. "I know I've said this before, Jan, but you're very good."

"I wondered why he told you he was getting threats and ducking us at the same time. Could be he had something to hide."

"So who is he?"

"We don't know. As far as we can tell, he's never been printed. We just know the prints aren't Homer's. He got printed when he worked as a

summer camp counselor. Routine check for child molesters.”

“Where’s Homer now?”

“Dead.”

“Zoltan figure in that at all?”

“Not unless he gave Homer leukemia. He did die about the same time Zoltan appeared on the designer scene.”

“How’d he do it? Just step in and say he was someone else?”

“We’re checking. So far it looks like he showed up at that school in Maryland claiming to be Homer and got by with it. We’re looking for him for real this time, so if you hear anything...”

“He skip?”

“Looks like. We put flyers out. Someone like him can’t stay under for too long.”

This wasn’t doing much for my PI ego. I spent the past week getting involved in who knew what—certainly not me—and the person who started it all wasn’t even who I thought he was.

“I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong,” Jan said when my silence got too long. “You didn’t have his prints and you had no reason to think he was someone else. A client comes in and pays you money to do something lawful, you do it. I probably wouldn’t have checked his prints if you hadn’t told me some of the flaky stuff he did.”

“I still feel stupid. Why’d he come to me in the first place?”

“You said the bit about him and Burton being lovers checked out. Maybe that really is why he came to you. Doesn’t matter. He’s part of our investigation now.”

“Speaking of that investigation, you making any progress?”

“Some. I do have something unrelated that might interest you.”

“Shoot.”

“Marty Klimak died last night. We heard he got last rites and Barb Burke went down to try to get a deathbed statement. She took some pictures with her, same ones I showed Zoltan.”

“He make any of them?”

Jan smiled without opening her lips, shook her head. “Marty was old school. Barb held the pictures up for him and said he had one last chance to set his mind at ease, put these animals away before they hurt anyone else. Marty smiled and said what would really put his mind at ease would be a

nice-looking girl like her sucking his dick one last time. He died before she could answer him.”

That was pretty tough for a bookie. “Do I know Barb?”

“You might. Basic Irish cop’s daughter, red hair, green eyes, pretty face, a little heavy. Early forties. She said she was sorry he died before she could tell him she’d never met a bookie with a dick big enough to interest her. Marty didn’t look like he had enough blood left to make it happen, anyway.”

“Sounds like Barb’s kind of old school herself.” I thought about Marty Klimak for a second. I never met him, knew all about him, he was a legend. Playing the tough guy to the end, like there was honor in being a fucking bookie. “I guess that leaves you in the cold on whether his beating was related to the drive-by.”

“It pretty much closes the case on Marty. No one saw anything at five o’clock on a weekday afternoon. I never thought it had anything to do with our case. Not even Chechens are that goofy.”

“You still checking the woman—what’s her name?—Willingham?”

“We’re going through the motions. Everyone likes to talk about a good-looking divorcee taking on anyone important in the clerk’s office. So far talk is all it is. As soon as you start checking it’s always, ‘I didn’t see anything myself’ or ‘I heard it around the coffee machine, you know.’ We did find a few interesting things about that software salesman. Maybe we’ll get lucky and Zoltan will have something.”

I don’t think she elaborated on what was interesting about the software salesman. I wasn’t paying much attention after hearing about Zoltan. Every new thing I learned about this case made less sense. Marshall Burton asks me to follow his wife. It doesn’t matter that I don’t find her doing anything adulterous; Marshall gets killed before I can tell him. Zoltan presents himself as Marshall’s gay lover, says Margot killed him. No one thinks anything of that except Zoltan, but my job is to investigate what people pay me to. Zoltan says he’s receiving threats, which I tell him to report to the police. He doesn’t. Even better, he evades the police and hires Steve Plum to make sure I do my job. Today I find out Zoltan isn’t even the person I thought he was; he’s not even pretending to be Zoltan, he’s someone pretending to be Homer Ledbetter pretending to be Zoltan. Now he’s missing.

Did I have a case? Was there a case? The only thing I'd found worth investigating had no obvious link to what Zoltan paid me to find out, except that I saw Willie Schreckengost walk out of the building Marshall Burton worked in. Something was going on between Schreckengost and at least one Arab. And Helmut Obersdorfer. Probably over my head. Even if it wasn't, no one was paying me to look into it. As far as I knew, no one was paying me for anything right now, including people I'd already done work for. I'd been too busy chasing this ephemeral case to finish the paperwork that would allow Sharon to bill them.

Traffic on the Stevenson gave me plenty of time to think while I drove out to get Caroline. The smart move was to walk away. Get Madani's notes to the feds, try to refund whatever was left of Zoltan's retainer, clean up my paperwork. I'd do none of them. Madani shot at me. I wanted to know why. Vengeance didn't matter to me, so his death didn't settle anything. It just made things harder to find out.

35

"The most important thing is to cut the sandwich on a diagonal. Never cut a tomato sandwich straight across the bread."

Caroline had discovered the virtues of fresh tomato sandwiches on toast this summer. The fact that fresh, local tomatoes were out of season meant nothing to her. She'd found this year's favorite food and was going to eat tomato sandwiches until there weren't any more.

"Why do you cut them diagonally?" She cocked her head, flicked her eyes from me to the sandwich.

"Cutting across the grain puts more air inside the cut part of the tomato. That lets out more flavor and gets more salt and pepper into the seedy part."

"That's good?"

I looked at her like it was the most self-evident thing in the world. "Of course that's good. When the salt and pepper react with the acid in the tomato, it creates a flavor explosion."

"You're making this up."

"Am not. Here, taste this." I wouldn't have believed she could get that much sandwich into a mouth her size. "Is that not the best tomato sandwich you've ever eaten?"

“It’s good,” she said, stuffing an escaping strand of tomato into her mouth with a finger. “I don’t know if it’s better than the last one.”

“That’s because that one was cut on a diagonal, too.”

“Cut one straight across so I can see if there’s a difference.”

“Why would I waste a good tomato like that?”

“Maybe it’s just as good.”

“Caroline, look at me. How many tomato sandwiches have you eaten in your life? Fifteen, twenty, maybe?”

“Probably.”

“How many have I eaten?”

“A lot?”

“Hundreds. Thousands, even. I’ve eaten store tomatoes, farm stand tomatoes, tomatoes out of your grand-dad’s garden. I’ve eaten them on toast and on fresh-cut bread my grandma made. I probably know as much about tomato sandwiches as anyone alive, except maybe for Pap-pap. You’re a lucky girl to have someone like me to teach you about some of these finer points of life.”

Caroline was 9, young enough to trust me, old enough to wonder if I was full of crap. I knew within a year she’d be teetering on the brink and by the time she was 13 she’d assume I was full of crap and be done with it. For now it was fun to play with her and watch her learn how it worked, looking for flaws in each other’s stories, not taking any of it seriously. Just another game we could play when we got tired of Sorry.

Not that getting tired of Sorry appeared to be imminent. She won our regular hotly contested best three-of-five match in four games, making her Supreme and Exalted Sorry Goddess of the Universe until the next time she stayed over. Then I’d get a shot at becoming Great and Venerated Sorry Master of All Creation and Then Some.

The tucking-in routine never varied.

“Tell me a story.”

“What kind of story would you like tonight?”

She thought for ten seconds. She never wanted the same kind of story too many times in a row. Repetition of the same story was fine, though not on consecutive nights. Da Rules for story-telling were as arcane as the NFL’s playoff tiebreaker system. “Tell me one about you and Tom when you were in college.”

This topic always required judicious editing. Many—most—of the stories I could tell about Tom and me in college could get my visitation privileges curtailed if they got back to her mother.

I told her a personal favorite. A blizzard came in, bad enough to close even Northwestern at noon on a Friday. Our group immediately climbed into Tom's trusty VW for a run to the store for some beer—what did I say? Beer?—I meant pop. We didn't have enough refrigerator space to keep everything cold and knew it would freeze if we left it out. We stashed the beer—I mean pop—in the bathtub and took the empty cases outside to gather snow to pile in the tub.

It was Tom and me and two other guys. Dave Reavis liked to dip the bell of his alto trombone into his roommate's fish tank. Sent the fish into something like an epileptic seizure when he played. Another trumpet player—Mike Mazurski from Embarrass, Wisconsin—could name the starters on every Packer playoff team since 1961. All freezing our fingers off shoveling snow into the cardboard cases. I looked up and saw Tom holding his case open to the sky, watching snow float down into it. He waited until we were all looking before he spoke.

“This is gonna take all day.”

Caroline laughed like she did the other half dozen times I'd told her that story. She wanted me to tell her the one about four of us picking up Tom's car and carrying it from its parking space into the plowed street, but it was a school night. That one had to wait for a weekend.

I pulled up the covers and she snuggled in with Blackie, her stuffed bear. And Pooh. Marvin the Martian was in there somewhere. I kissed her on the cheek and forehead and turned out the light. She spoke when I put my hand on the doorknob, just like every time.

“Where will you be, Daddy?”

“I'm going to read for a bit, then go to bed. I'll come and get you in the morning.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too, sweetie.”

I stuck my head into her room on my way to bed. She lay on her side, curled a little. Pooh had decided to sleep on the floor, but Blackie snuggled under her arm. I watched her breathe for a minute, seeing every age she'd passed through in the small form sleeping before me.

I didn't know the prevailing child-rearing philosophy. I decided in the delivery room that worse things could happen than for her to fall asleep knowing her dad would never let anything bad happen to her. It didn't matter yet that it wasn't true. She'd catch me with my shoes off and see the clay in my feet soon enough. For now her ignorance was her shield. The least I could do was hold it for her as long as she'd let me.

I kissed her on the forehead and sent myself to bed.

36

A knot of people and a half dozen police cars were in front of my building when I pulled into Tony's garage the next morning.

"Neighborhood's going to hell." I flipped Tony the keys and looked around the garage. "Where's Joey?"

Tony gestured toward the crowd with his head. "Up there, checking out the commotion."

Joey's head bobbed above the small crowd, blond hair shining in the morning sun. He'd lost weight since the bomb almost blew him to his Better Place, not enough to keep his inner Baby Huey from showing.

"What's up?" I asked Tony.

"Dead guy on your front steps."

"Today? It's not bum-freezing weather for another month, six weeks, at least."

"Don't know. Joey's in charge of gossip. I been working alone all morning while he hangs around the cops." Joey lived for whatever excitement the moment provided. Almost had to be physically restrained when a fire truck went by. "Here he comes. Ask him yourself."

Joey ambled north on Dearborn, his head facing back more than forward, torn between his fear of missing something and waving to get my attention. I met him halfway.

"What's up, buddy? Tony says someone's dead."

"Jeez, Nick, I seen him when I got here. You know how I like to come early and make coffee for Tony? I seen him laying there. I thought maybe a dog got hit by a car or something so I go over and look, and it's this guy laying on his face like he was sleeping."

"A bum?"

“No, this was a regular guy, like you or Tony.”

I wasn't sure how regular Tony was, or how I felt about being grouped with him. I didn't say anything to Joey. I only insult my friends to their faces. “What happened to him?”

“The police says someone killed him! *Shot* him, I heard them say. They was talking to me for a long time, some mean guy, then this pretty girl come over and she was nice to me. I didn't know nothing, I just found him, but she made me tell it four times, anyway.”

“What did the girl cop look like?”

“She's pretty. Not as pretty as Sharon, you know, no one's as pretty as Sharon, kind of blond hair—”

“Nick! Nick Forte!”

I recognized Jan Rusiewicz's voice before I saw her. I walked south and she met me en route, steered me across the street with an arm inside my elbow. The familiarity of the gesture surprised me. Jan wasn't any more of a toucher than I am.

“What's up?” I let her guide me to the sidewalk in front of Kasey's. “Joey says there's a stiff in my doorway. Do I get the day off so I don't interfere with a crime scene?”

“Nick, look at me.” Jan took one of my hands in each of hers. Her skin was cool in the early fall air. “When's the last time you saw Tom McManus?”

Everything in the street disappeared. My eyes lost focus, and her hands kept getting warmer while mine turned to ice. The numbness started in my face and worked its way down my neck and into my shoulders.

“We had lunch yesterday. Jesus Christ, Jan, is it him? Let me see.” I tried to push past her, but she held me back.

“The ME put him in the squadrol fifteen minutes ago. Look at me. *Look at me.*” Her voice stayed low, its intensity coming from the lack of volume. I turned away from the cluster in front of the Rowe Building. “What time did you two split up after lunch?”

“He had a rehearsal. I left him at the hall.” The knot of people had loosened. “What was he doing here?”

“He was killed somewhere else and dropped here. Nick, pay attention. Why would someone bring him here?”

My mouth opened and an almost human croaking sound came out. I didn't realize it was me until I felt Jan's hands on my arms. She lowered me until I was in a catcher's squat, my back flat against the brick wall of Kasey's. I kept making sounds, trying to tell her, not sure what I said or if she got any of it. He'd been left there for me. Someone associated him with me, and I didn't even know what the fuck I was working on.

I gave up trying to talk, she got the gist of it or she didn't. I became aware of her crouching in front of me, one hand kneading mine, her thumb wiping something from my face. She spoke so I had to focus to hear from a foot away.

“Can you talk?”

I nodded.

“We'll notify his family. Evidence techs are at his place and we'll get the information from his address book or the orchestra.”

“They're in Connecticut.”

“Was he married? Divorced? Any kids?”

“No, never got mar—Jan, he was dating a girl. They were going to get together after she got off work last night. Is she all right?”

“No sign of her here. I haven't heard anything from his place, so I'm guessing the techs haven't found anything bad there. What's this girl's name?”

“Connie Something. She works at Hooters over on Wells.” That was all I knew about her. Tom McManus had been my best friend, off and on, for twenty years, and that was how much the Venn diagrams of our lives intersected. He'd talked about her every time we spoke since he met her, and I didn't know her last name.

“It's all right, we'll find her. She's probably home asleep.” My eyes kept wandering across the street. “Nick.” Jan steered my attention back to her. “Nick, does he have anyone nearby? We need someone to identify the body.”

“I'll do it.”

“No. Maybe this girl or someone from the orchestra if there's no family close—”

“I'll do it.” The strength in my voice surprised me. Maybe that was all I needed, something to do, to get me off the goddamned sidewalk.

Jan sat me in her car while she told Hanlon she'd take me to the morgue. I sat there until it became important to me to see the spot where they found Tom before the police tape came down and it was a public gangway again. I got out and eased my way into the dissipating crowd. A beat cop stood inside the crime scene tape. He eyed me the way I had looked at a thousand people from inside the crime scene. He saw my expression and gave me The Look to tell me he didn't want to say anything, but I wasn't crossing that line.

I didn't put him on the spot. I let the tape brush against the backs of my hands as it twisted and flapped in the wind. A silhouette showed where Tom had been, head and hands on the first few steps, feet at an angle to the street, the outline too indistinct to be sure. No blood on the pavement or stairs, no trace of him but a hollow drawing where Joey found him.

I stood like that until Jan led me back to the car. She talked to me all the way to the morgue. She might have been talking about Tom. Or the weather. Football. A crack in the windshield held my undivided attention. I didn't say a word.

37

Someone in the interrogation room across the way from Sonny Ng's office screamed bloody motherfucking murder at anyone who could hear him, which would be everyone on the second floor of the Area Four station. I sipped room-temperature tea from a paper cup while the voice went on about being framed. Even if he had killed the bitch she deserved it. There might have been something about how he should get a fucking medal for offing her. It didn't sound like he'd lawyered up yet.

Identifying the body didn't have much of an effect on me. I knew the drill, seen it done half a dozen times. A body on a stainless steel cart, all set for the autopsy, stereotypical tag on a toe. A closed coffin wouldn't be needed; the .22 round didn't have enough juice to make an exit wound. I looked at the face, some perverse part of my mind imagining the bullet bouncing off the inside of his head looking for a way out. The closed eyes didn't give the impression of sleep or any type of peaceful repose. Everything about it looked like what it was—a dead body—much more than it looked like Tom. The facial features were flaccid and stiff at the

same time. Less than an ounce of lead had replaced what had been my friend.

Sonny Ng came into the room stirring something in a mug decorated with pictures of his three children, his face expressive as an Easter Island statue. Sat behind his desk. Didn't pretend to read or fiddle with papers. Didn't make a phone call or look at anything but me. Not staring, showing as much interest as looking at a chair he hadn't noticed before. No one waited like him. I lost track of how many bad guys confessed just to break the silence. The slits of his eyes were barely wider than the pupils, his eyelashes almost touched. His expression could be thought of as sleepy or bored, a mistake for a criminal trying to blow something past him.

He spoke when it became clear I wouldn't. "I'm sorry you had to identify the body."

I'd been watching a ladybug crawl up the side of his desk and didn't look at him when I answered. "It's okay. Gave me something to do."

"You all right?"

"Yeah."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"You believe me." Sonny was my Field Training Officer when I graduated the academy. He knew me as well as anyone in this phase of my life. My first post-musician friend, just as Tom McManus had been my first friend at Northwestern. "You know I'm fine. Give me a little room."

He nodded. Tasted his coffee. "You make a statement?"

"Jan took it." I wondered how long I'd been there. Moving my wrist into sight seemed like a lot of effort. "What time is it?"

"Almost three."

"You about ready to turn me loose?"

"You can go whenever you want. I'd like to talk first."

"About?"

"Tom McManus. Marshall Burton."

The ladybug disappeared for a few seconds when it went upside-down under the lip of the desk. I marked time until she resurfaced and started across the top diagonally. "You think they're related?"

"They have two links: the orchestra and you."

"They weren't close on the job."

"We know."

Someone knocked. The door opened and Jan's partner, Pat Hanlon, stuck his head in. "You ready for us, Loot?" Sonny gestured with two fingers to come in.

Hanlon and Jan took seats opposite each other at the short sides of the desk. Jan searched for something in my face or posture. The empathy in her eyes crossed the desk like a velvet lifeline.

Hanlon spoke first. "Jan told me how close you and the stiff were. That's a hell of a way to find out."

Hanlon didn't mean any offense calling Tom a stiff. He was a good cop, worked Violent Crimes more than long enough to master the standard defense of de-personalizing victims. It had to be done. A cop would be dry in two years if he bled for all of them.

"You have anything to add to your statement?" Sonny said.

"I don't even remember it. Mind if I read it?"

Jan handed the sheets to me. No one spoke while I read. What Tom and I had done recently. How Tom sent Marshall to me. Not much of interest.

I gave the sheets back to Jan. "That about does it."

"Do you want to stay for this?" Sonny asked. I nodded. "You promise to behave?"

"Yeah."

"*After* you leave?"

"I just want a day or two off. I'll be good."

Sonny nodded. Hanlon paused before starting. He didn't look too thrilled about me being there. "This is real sketchy. Tests aren't back, and the ME hasn't even started writing the report yet. Victim was shot once, behind the left ear. Stippling around the point of entry, barrel less than six inches away, probably no more than three."

Hanlon went on with some medical information. Part of me listened. The rest noticed how the friend I watched shovel noodles into his mouth a day earlier had been demoted from Tom McManus to victim.

Something Hanlon said brought me around. "We haven't found the crime scene yet. We know it wasn't his place. He was there at some point and put up enough of a struggle to show he didn't go willingly." Hanlon flipped through his notebook between sentences.

"Did you find his girlfriend?" I said.

“The waitress? Yeah, she came to work right on time. She’s fine. Pissed at first. She was supposed to meet him last night and thought he stood her up. Took it pretty hard when we told her.”

“So she wasn’t involved. Good.”

“I didn’t say she wasn’t involved. Rusiewicz talked to her for about twenty minutes. Turns out she has another boyfriend.”

I looked to Jan. “Not really. He was more like a boyfriend wanna-be. Jake something. He’s been hanging around Hooters, changing tables so she’d be his waitress. Obnoxious enough to make her nervous without actually stalking her. He must have seen her with your friend. She said he was in a couple of nights ago and scared her pretty good.”

“Threats?”

“The usual BS. ‘You know it’s fate I always get your table. He’s not right for you.’ Nothing new. She said he was real tense, wired up like, when he said it.”

“You have anything on the guy?”

“Just Jake. We’re staking out Hooters in case he comes back to see her.”

“Who drew that choice duty?”

“Renfro,” Hanlon said. Everyone smiled, including me. Roger Renfro looked the part: tall, average to large build, early forties. Gay as a Maypole dancer.

“Is this Jake a good suspect?” I said.

Hanlon looked to Jan, who looked to Sonny, who answered. “You tell us.” He only used about two hundred words a day. No point wasting any if the rest of us were willing to talk. “Burton saw you a few days before he was killed.”

“He wanted me to tail his wife. Standard divorce stuff.”

“Where does Zoltan come in?”

“He came by the next day to see if I could find out what you guys were up to. He had some ideas about Burton’s wife.”

“Pretty quick to come looking for help, wasn’t he?” Hanlon said.

“You tying him in with what happened to Tom?”

“We can’t eliminate him. Here’s the deal: You’ve been involved or peripheral to three killings in the past week. You telling me there’s no relation?”

“I don’t know. I’m just fumbling around here.”

“What happened at the strip joint?”

“I already told Elk Grove.”

Sonny said, “Tell me.” I wished I had his interrogation technique. The less he spoke, the more important it seemed when he did. I once saw him sit alone in a room with a suspect for forty-five minutes. Never said a word, never moved a muscle. Just looked while the guy told him about fifteen versions of the same story. Suspect finished up with “I swear to God.” Sonny said, “Here’s what I know,” told him *one* fact so soft you had to turn up the volume to hear on the recording. Guy confessed so fast the stenographer had to keep pausing the tape. I knew Sonny too well to jerk with him when he used that tone.

“I came across a guy that didn’t belong there at Orchestra Hall and got curious. I followed him until he met another guy at a restaurant. They exchanged an envelope. That made the new guy more interesting, so I tailed him to that joint by the airport.”

Hanlon leaned back from the desk and pulled a face. “That was material evidence, asshole.”

“Not yours. The Algerian’s not your case.”

Sonny raised one hand three inches and we both stopped. “What was it?”

“Some notes in code.”

“Did you give it to Elk Grove?”

“No. A fed named Sturdivant came by the next morning all interested in the dead guy. Said he’d been on this Algerian for over a year. He didn’t know anything about any exchange.”

“Who did you follow from Orchestra Hall?” Sonny said.

“Two-bit hood named Willie Schreckengost.”

Sonny recognized the name. “Why?”

“Like I said, he didn’t fit. Burton was involved in some intrigues around the orchestra, so I was poking around. I knew Schreckengost from before and couldn’t think of any reason for him to be there.”

Sonny’s voice barely reached the corners of the room. “You saw McManus yesterday.”

“Forte’s seen a lot of dead people this week,” Hanlon said.

I hit him a glancing blow, the coffee cup still in his hand. My knees got hung up under the desk, the recoil threw me back into my chair, almost

tipped it over. Hanlon wasn't ready and couldn't save his balance. His chair went over with him in it, splattered coffee on the wall behind him.

I put both hands on the desk for another go. Sonny grabbed me just above the wrist in his own version of a come-along and stopped me cold. With the leverage he had he could break my arm without getting all the way out of his chair. Sonny knew martial arts that didn't have belts yet.

"Sit your ass down," he said in the same voice he'd used on Tom's name a few seconds earlier. I looked him in the eye. No threat, no challenge, no "I hate to do this, old buddy." I sat.

Hanlon struggled to get his balance with the chair splayed under him. He looked like he'd come my way until Sonny spoke again.

"That's all. Hanlon, get cleaned up. Rusiewicz, wait in the bullpen."

Sonny let go of my arm and sat back in his chair while they left. I got thirty seconds of his silent treatment before I tried to beat him to the punch. "It won't work with me. I've seen you do it too often. I don't have anything to tell you, anyway."

He looked at me, unreadable as Ikea assembly instructions. "I'll throw you in the tank myself you ever put your hands on one of my detectives again. I know how close you and McManus were, so I'll square this one with Hanlon. You *will* apologize."

I didn't answer. My breathing hadn't returned to normal and my two-thirds Irish was still up. It didn't matter. Sonny hadn't made a request; he'd told me how it was going to be. He said, "I want to see what you got in Elk Grove."

"That's Elk Grove's case."

"Humor me." That settled that. "We'll find this guy who's hot for the waitress. You think about Burton and McManus. Even if you don't see a connection, maybe someone else did."

A thought flashed behind his eyes. As opaque as his face was, his intelligence seeped through the pupils like light under a door. "Go home. Get drunk. Call me if you want a friend. Right now, this cop's telling you to get out before I change my mind." He let as much expression into his face as he ever did. "We'll get the guy for you. I promise."

Sonny's promises were rare as snow in July and as reliable as snow in January. So I didn't need to tell him about yesterday's run-in with Willie Schreckengost.

“Can a girl buy you a drink?”

Jan Rusiewicz intercepted me on my way to the sign-out desk. A burnt-orange blouse under a black silk blazer made her eyes even bluer than usual. Hair close to its winter length, pulled back behind her ears. The blazer had been tailored, the nine millimeter on her hip barely visible.

“Aren’t you on duty?”

“Watch change. Besides, I’m about to question a witness.”

A year ago she’d have been the first person I looked for. Today talking about Tom implied a level of intimacy I wasn’t sure I was comfortable with. Not to mention she was a cop and everything I said would be on the record, friend or not. “Planning to use the special techniques on me?”

She tilted her head, hair hanging free on the left side. “Depends on what kind of resistance I get.”

“Aw, hell, you know I can’t resist you.”

“Feeney’s?”

“Think they’ll let me in?”

“You’re with a real cop today. I’ll use my guest privileges.”

Feeney’s the bar where the white cops from District Eleven and Area Four drank, on Flournoy Street between Spalding and Kedzie, a block and half from the station. They were lined up holster to holster when we got there, stopping after their watches for a bump and a beer or two. More for some. No cop was ever locked out as long as someone was inside to open the door. Wally the night bartender could go home, and the last man out would lock up, unless the guard hadn’t completely changed when Vicki came on at seven. The law requiring Feeney’s to close at four didn’t hinder business when the people sworn to uphold it were inside drinking.

We grabbed a couple of Leinenkugels and a booth under a blacked-out window. All light in Feeney’s was neon-produced. Jan slid partway across her side of the both, made a face. Unclipped the holster from her belt and stuffed it into her purse, gun and all. “I think I’m safe here.”

I sipped my beer and watched a Schmidt’s sign flicker on the wall twenty feet behind her. Feeney’s not the kind of place to give up on an ornament just because the provider had gone out of business.

“How’s Caroline?” Jan said.

“She’s great. Got into the Talented and Gifted program at school this year. Loves it.”

“How old is she now?”

“Nine. Just started fourth grade.”

We drank in what passed for silence during a watch change for a couple of minutes before she spoke again. “How’s Nick?”

That question got more thought. “He’ll live.”

“He better.” I arched an eyebrow. “Just because you and I aren’t on the same page about some things doesn’t mean I think the world is better off without you. You have your uses.”

“Such as?”

“You’re tall. Good to have around for hard-to-reach places.”

“I’m not that much taller than you are.”

“You can open jars.”

“I’ve never seen you not be able to open a jar.”

“You’re a pain in the ass to compliment, you know that?”

“Real men don’t need compliments. We can pee anywhere we want.”

“So you’re okay?”

I delayed the answer. She’d know if I tried to bullshit her. “I will be. Right now I’m letting things go and wondering how long it’ll take.”

“I liked Tom.”

“Everyone did. Even when he got a little arrogant about his playing he could take a joke about it. Anyone that good deserved to be a little arrogant once in a while.”

“Was he that good?”

“Yeah. I’d work on something for three weeks, something he’d never seen before, and he’d say, ‘Why don’t you try it like this?’ Grab his horn and nail it. He was a freak.”

“How could he be that much better? I’ve heard you play. You’re good.”

“He was that much better when I was a lot better than you’ve heard me, and he wasn’t as good as he is now. Was, I mean.” I finished the first Leinie’s, held it up for a refill. “It’s talent, it’s something you can’t teach.”

“You have talent, too.”

“My talent is I won’t quit. I’d get into a new situation—college, the Army, whatever—and see where I stacked up in the pecking order. Then I

worked my ass off until I got better than everyone else there.”

“Except for Tom?”

“Except for Tom.”

Jan drank some beer, wiped the mustache from her lip. “You’re right about your talent. You’re a good detective, and I know you’re a good father and a great friend. You were a good boyfriend, too. Some of it’s easy for you, but I’ve never known anyone willing to work like you are, as long as you think it’s important.”

“Thanks, Jan. I appreciate that.”

She reached across the table and took my hands in hers. “You and I connect on some weird level. It might not be enough to make a life out of, but we’ll always be close. That’s why I brought you here. I wanted to see how you were, and tell you something I don’t think anyone else can tell you, not even Sonny.”

“Such as?”

“We’ll get this guy. Pat and I. I know you think we’re too busy on the drive-by case. Trust me, that one’s closer than we’re letting out. I promise to keep you in the loop about Tom. It’s a good idea, anyway, you’d know things we don’t. Plus, Sonny told us he’s taking a personal interest in this one. You know what that means.”

“I know.”

“So let us do it.” Her hands tightened on mine. “Promise me.”

“You asking me to promise you as a cop, or promise you as Jan?”

“Don’t get cute. Promise.”

“That’s not fair. You know me too well.”

“That’s right. I know you’ll fudge anything for a cop. But it kills you to promise a friend and not follow through.”

“Okay, I will.”

“Will what?”

“Let you handle it.”

“Say the word.”

I stared through her, half in jest. “I said I’d let you handle it.”

“But you didn’t promise.”

“What have we been talking about?”

“I want to hear you say it.”

“I promise.” She started to speak. “I promise to let you handle it.”

She kissed my fingers lightly. I said, “Now promise me something.”
“Sure.”

“Promise me when the time comes you’ll take an expansive interpretation of the term ‘resisting arrest.’”

The dimple in her right cheek waved at me when she smiled. “Female officers always have to be aware of their safety.”

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I let myself into Tom’s gentrified row house on Superior Street between Orleans and Sedgwick. It took me at least three minutes to get at the extra key hidden inside the fake rock in the chipped-out nook by the corner of the stairs. Tom wanted it hard to get to so he’d be careful not to forget his keys. That’s how musicians think.

The main living showed few crime-scene indications except for traces of fingerprint powder. The techs had what they wanted. Any evidence of the scuffle was already tagged and bagged and inventoried. According to Jan it wasn’t much.

I dropped myself onto the couch and listened to the sounds of a home in the city. The building settling. People heading home or going out. The television stand creaked from time to time. I let night fall around me.

When it was full dark I poured myself a glass of Courvoisier and went to the stairs. My hand bumped a head cover sticking out of a golf bag. I pulled out the driver and took my stance.

Tom took up golf after he won the Chicago audition, fell in love with it. That was good, considering the number of strokes it took him to play a round, visiting parts of the course not even the architect had seen. I was standing behind and slightly to his right at Seven Bridges once when Tom hit one off the toe of his driver. The ball went ninety degrees from the target line, hit a trash can, and ricocheted past my head so close I felt the air as it went by.

Tom turned, saw me staring. “Don’t say a word. That’s your own fault.”
“How in hell was that my fault?”

“You know the safest place to stand when I hit a golf ball is directly in front of me.”

Caroline liked that story almost as much as the beer case in the snow storm. I smiled, replaced the head cover as if pulling a blanket over a sleeping baby. No reason, it seemed the way to do it. I got to the top of the stairs in the dark without killing myself and turned on the light. He'd converted the upstairs into a loft for practicing. A vaulted ceiling created acoustics as close to a concert hall as any home I'd ever seen.

The Monette trumpet he'd used for the Mahler was on its stand, a soft cloth draped over the mouthpiece. A copy of an old model Tom liked better than the newer, heavier versions. I moved the cloth and looked at the mouthpiece. A C1-1. I wasn't man enough to play anything bigger than a C2. Too bad I'd retired before I figured it out.

The horn still heavier than most, so well balanced I could hold it with one finger behind the valves. I played a couple of scales and a breathing exercise, nothing hard. Horn practically played itself. No music on the stand, a pile on the floor to the right of his chair. Bartok Concerto for Orchestra on top, next week's big blow for the orchestra. I sat and put the Bartok on the stand, played the trumpet canon from the first movement. It sounded pretty good, so I played the second movement duet and third movement fanfare. The room held the sound for a few seconds, the resonance burnishing my sound.

I never had a problem sounding good. Tom used to tell me I could play second trumpet for him any time and these excerpts were right in my wheelhouse. I tried the big ending that always showed up on auditions and shot an air ball on the high D-flat. I never could play that, no reason tonight should be any different. I drank more Courvoisier. Halfway through that first glass now. It went down over beer better than I thought it would. Maybe I should try the good stuff more often.

I played some favorite excerpts from memory. Opening to *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Quite a bit of Mahler Five. *Song of the Nightingale*. *Lieutenant Kije*. My face tightened up on the off-stage solo from *Pines of Rome*, and the posthorn solo from Mahler Three finished me off.

I took care to leave everything as I found it. Laid the cloth over the mouthpiece, adjusted so it hung like he'd left it. No reason. Tom wouldn't care if I played his horn, even if he'd been here.

Back downstairs I turned on a light and poured another drink, bigger this time. Looked through his CD collection. Lots of old CSO recordings,

mostly with Reiner and Solti, back when the Chicago Symphony brass section ruled.

I put on Reiner's 1954 recording of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and sat in Tom's official listening chair, the one he used when he wanted to pay attention. Strauss died in 1948. Did he ever hear *Zarathustra* sound like this? I took another swallow, then two, each one bigger, living dangerously.

I noticed the picture of Tom and me after Herseth played the octave fanfares in the middle of the piece. Taken at Hooters, of course, this time at Pittsburgh's Station Square. Tom's first season in Pittsburgh, me fresh out of the Army with the haircut to prove it. Tom spent most of the evening telling the waitresses I was a highly decorated veteran with a black-ops background. I told them he was the new music director of the Symphony and how he could get all the seats in Heinz Hall upholstered in Hooters Orange if the manager would approve a contribution to the Sustaining Fund. We were drunk as Irish sailors on St. Patrick's Day, arms over the shoulders of each other and the Hooters Girls, who were the only people in the picture standing on their own. We put Tom's car keys in an envelope for the waitress to mail to him, took a cab to his place, and fell asleep more across than in our respective pieces of furniture.

Zarathustra finished at the same time as my drink. I made another, what the hell, I wasn't driving. The Boston Symphony recording of Mahler Two, Charlie Schlueter playing first trumpet, was on the shelf above the stereo. I loaded both disks into the changer and turned toward the couch, noticed it was the same one I'd crashed on that night in Pittsburgh. Tom had better things to do with his time than shop for furniture. I moved a couple of cushions out of the way and spread out, my feet on the arm of the six-foot sofa. Something dug into my back and I pulled out an Altoid strip dispenser. Stuffed it in my shirt pocket and lay down again.

Tom used to tell me how much he'd learned from Schlueter. Now I heard for myself, Tom's playing fresh in my mind from last week's concert. The phrasing, dynamic shading, the willingness to take a risk that could miss a note and not missing it. I'd listened to this symphony a hundred times and never heard it before.

The Courvoisier was gone and I was close behind when the chorus came in for the last time. I reached for the liner notes and read the translation of the section that choked me up at the concert, the same place it always did.

*You will rise, yes, you will rise again,
My heart, in an instant!
That which you have vanquished
Shall lead you up to God!*

I shut my eyes. My heart could begin vanquishing tomorrow. If Tom had gone anywhere, it was to a better place, if only because the one he left was so diminished by his passing.

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“God damn, boy, how can you can afford to pay this fine young woman, coming in at this hour? You look like you ain’t changed clothes or shaved, hell, even groomed yourself in a week.”

The list of people I could be talked into tolerating was short and didn’t include Forrest Sturdivant. Yet there he stood in all his Foghorn Leghorn splendor, the biggest cracker in the box. Katcavage and Pitts were with him. They stayed seated in Sharon’s office when Sturdivant stood to greet me. I couldn’t think of why they hadn’t made themselves at home in my office, unless word of Sharon’s recent exploits traveled fast. I walked past without a word, invited them in by leaving the door open. They could follow me, or they could kiss my ass.

No one spoke while I nuked water for tea. Sturdivant’s shoes creaked as he rocked on the soles of his feet. Motes of dust drifted aimlessly as snowflakes through the sunlight reflecting off the condo windows across Federal Street. I rubbed my face and shifted my head to keep the reflection out of my eyes without looking at my visitors. They might take it as an invitation to talk, and I already had all the conversation I wanted. I carried the tea to my desk, tried to ease myself into the chair without jarring anything. No matter how careful I tried to be, my brain moved two seconds longer than my head and bounced off the other side of my skull. Four months shy of 40 and a pussy already.

I took my time stirring in the sugar and taking a slow sip before acknowledging Sturdivant. “I should’ve figured you for a spook right away. FBI’s more polished, and that office had ‘front’ written all over it.”

“The less anyone knows about my activities, the better. I work in matters of extreme national security.”

“God help us all.”

“Don’t get smart, mister big-time private investigator. You look like you couldn’t take a sick possum in a fair fight right now, so how about you shut the fuck up and give me what I come for?”

I took the original envelope out of my top drawer and slid it across the desk. He tried to tread the line between staying cool and grabbing it out of the air. Cool won a close decision. He scanned the papers, looked at me. “You read this?”

“You know goddamn well I didn’t. It’s in code.”

“So you did try to read it.”

“No. I left it in my desk for three days for the sole purpose of busting your balls. Yeah, I tried. I wanted to give it to you a couple of days ago, but you were too busy playing double naught spy and I couldn’t find you.”

“I could bring you in right now for withholding evidence in a matter of national security.”

“Try. That could be his grandma’s hummus recipe for all you know. When are you guys going to figure out you’d get more cooperation if you quit pulling this national security shit every time you want something?”

“How many copies you make?”

“A few.” Sturdivant nodded. Katcavage and Pitts stood. “Uh-uh,” I said. “Unless you boys have a valid search warrant, the line to kiss my ass forms to the left. Make yourselves comfortable.”

Katcavage shrugged and sat. Pitts stayed on his feet and looked to his boss. Sturdivant nodded and Pitts joined his partner. “Stick with Katcavage, kid,” I said. “He has a clue. Take too much advice from Special Agent Cracker here and you’ll end up looking for seal smugglers in Sitka.”

“Who else knows about this?” Sturdivant said.

“Me. A couple of cops. You *think* you do, but I doubt it.”

“I want their names.”

“No.”

“Get up, boy. I’m tired of your shit. We’re going in.” Pitts on his feet with handcuffs in his hand so fast I thought he was spring loaded.

I moved only my hand and arm to press the intercom button while my brains tried to slosh out my left ear. “Sharon, would you please have Marian Abraham come over, or send someone right away? Thank you.” I leaned

back in my chair and used some tea. “Shouldn’t be more than fifteen, twenty minutes.”

“Lawyer?” Sturdivant said.

“Good one, too. Clerked for a Supreme Court justice, teaches a constitutional law class at U of C. I can think of a couple amendments she’ll have shoved up your ass before you can get your pants down. She’ll know at least one more.”

“You’re making a big mistake here, Forte. I’m someone’s a better friend than an enemy, even if you’re too dumb to know it.”

“I’ll muddle through. I suspect your definition of friendship is situation specific, if you get my drift. I just handed you more hard evidence than you’ve probably come up with in a year on this guy, and all I get in return is threats. Maybe if you told me something relevant I’d have a better idea of how I could help you.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are, telling a federal officer how to do his business?” It came out “bidness.” “I ought to run your sorry ass in as a material witness, see what your Jew bitch lawyer can do about that. *I* ask the questions, and *you* answer them. *We* don’t negotiate, and *you* don’t decide what you’re willing to talk about and what you ain’t. Now tell me what you have, and tell me now.”

“I have a headache, and you’re not helping. You want to know what else I have, break the code.”

Sturdivant’s face got so red I thought it would explode like a cartoon thermometer. Katcavage reached over and touched his shoulder before he could say anything else stupid. “Let’s go, Forrest. Let him work on his hangover while we spend some time with the U.S. attorney. He might be more reasonable when he feels better and we come back with a warrant.”

“He’s a good man, Sturdivant,” I said. “Listen to him. Hell, you come back tomorrow with a better attitude, and you might not even need a warrant.”

Katcavage and I made eye contact before they left. He knew the drill. Sturdivant bulled his way past Pitts and out the door. Pitts left last, slammed the door so hard I thought the new glass might break. It held better than my head.

I leaned back in the chair and fished the Altoid box out of my shirt pocket. My tongue felt like I’d cleaned the lint filter in a clothes dryer,

breath strip couldn't do any harm. I slid it in my mouth and my eyes watered. Curiously strong, my ass. Not to be used except under adult supervision was more like it, at least in my current state. No wonder Tom couldn't deal with them.

It hit me in the middle of sliding my feet off the desk. Breath strips did something funky to Tom's tongue, he never used them. I found these on his couch. They could be Connie's. Hell, they could be mine. I tried to remember if I'd missed any the last time I was there and remembered following Willie Schreckengost, sucking these things down like he had emphysema and they were pure oxygen. Skipped ahead to Schreckengost giving me that look walking across the lobby of Symphony Center after I'd commented on his nose. Eddie and I replied with cop stares. Tom laughed his ass off.

I hadn't done anything like a search at Tom's. I wasn't in the mood, and there was no point to it. The police had been through it, and I wasn't good enough to find anything they missed. A breath strip dispenser on his couch wouldn't look like evidence to anyone who didn't know Tom never used them.

I hit the intercom button and asked Sharon what Delbert was up to today.

Delbert couldn't make it, on his way to a car auction in Wisconsin to retrieve the GPS device.

"This the house?" Goose said. He had a few hours free before he had to split for delicate negotiations in East St. Louis. Staking out Schreckengost with me his way of killing time.

"I think so. We didn't actually see him come out the other day. This is the same block he was parked on before, and it's a safe bet that new Caddy is his. We'll wait."

Stakeouts are my least favorite part of being a detective. Sitting in a car for hours on end, can't read, can't really listen to the radio, can't leave the car to pee. The sunlight through the windows kept us warm, which was good. You have to start the engine to run the heater, which meant exhaust in the cold air.

Goose was a good stakeout partner. Never felt compelled to make idle conversation. If he wanted to know something, he asked. If he wanted me to know something, he told me. If I wanted to talk, he'd listen. It made waiting for someone like Schreckengost less like hand-copying *War and Peace* in the original Russian.

“What the four-one-one on the cowboy? Asides being from Texas.”

“You didn't recognize him?” Goose's lack of reaction implied I should continue. “Remember Lamar Tyler? Badass broke out of Huntsville, made it all the way here from Texas? Delbert was the Ranger they sent up to escort him back.”

“The one killed those three in the ambush when Tyler's boys try to get him back?”

“That's the one. He spent a lot of time in Michael Reese. He and a nurse took a liking to each other and he decided she was worth leaving Texas for.”

“That a compliment or an excuse?”

“You ever been to Texas?”

“Twice. One time some rednecks hassled me in a rib joint. Local law used his nightstick to advise me to move along. Other time some yo I thought was just a deadbeat shot me.”

“Bad?”

“You ever hear of being shot good?” He spit sunflower shells into a paper cup. “In the arm, up by the shoulder. Ruined a good leather jacket.”

“He pay you?”

Goose got a new mouthful of seeds situated. “He paid. I got the money, too.”

Goose never gave enough details of his business to put either of us in a difficult legal situation. He chewed his seeds and I picked at the cuticle of my left thumb until Goose sat up half an inch straighter and inclined his head in the direction of the house we'd been watching.

A woman stood at the front door, turned around to shout something that ended with, “...spoiled by now, asshole!” Slammed the screen door. She moved like someone with a mission down the walk, wearing a sweatshirt too big for her and an exercise leotard so tight I could tell if she had pimples on her ass. She didn't. Hair piled up on her head like she'd done it in a hurry. Or she'd been exercising. Terry had told Goose in the Chin Music that Willie Schreckengost shackled up with a dancer.

She opened the car with a keyless remote and dragged a plastic Jewel bag with what looked like milk in it out of the front seat. Slammed the door so hard the alarm went off. Called it a few choice names when the remote didn't kill it right away.

Schreckengost waited for her on the porch, splintless, shiners still obvious from twenty yards. He grabbed her by the arm and said something I couldn't make out. She tried to kick his shin, and he slapped her across the face and threw her into the house. The bag with the milk flew out of her hand to skid across the porch. Willie followed her in, still yelling, slammed the door. The dancer came out a few minutes later to pick up her groceries. Hair drooped along the sides of her face, cheeks and eyes red and puffy. Looked around the neighborhood before she went in like a kid ashamed about something, hoping not to be noticed.

I waited a minute, walked up to Willie's car and kicked the door as hard as I could. The alarm went off, one of those pains in the ass that changes its sound pattern every few seconds. I jogged across the yard and crouched behind a bush. Goose raised his seat and cracked the door open.

Schreckengost came out bitching. Tried to shut off the alarm from the porch. Out of range. Came down the walk clicking the fob every couple of steps. I kept the bush between us, stepped behind him as he passed. He killed the alarm, didn't look up until he'd taken four steps back and was less than ten feet away. He stopped and reached as if for a weapon and I saw the disgust on his face. Probably didn't think he needed a gun to make it to the sidewalk. It's a shame how fast neighborhoods deteriorate.

"Hello, Willie. How's the nose?"

He never was too smart. "Fuck off. You come down here to bust my balls about your cunt secretary suckering me?"

I made my move, too far away to grab him before he turned and ran north on Scoville. We chased him north and he turned right on Ogden. Goose caught him next to a transmission joint. We each took an arm and walked him behind a Dumpster. A chain link fence marked the end of the property, a building with no facing windows on the other side. Perfect.

"Nose must be a little better, you seem to be breathing through it okay," I said. "Got to be careful with adhesions building up in there, though, or it won't heal right." I took the back of his collar and rammed him face first into the side of the Dumpster. Something cracked, hopefully a few of those

dreaded adhesions. Schreckengost's scream was drowned out in the wad of blood and snot running down the side of the Dumpster.

"Watch the street," I said to Goose, stood Schreckengost up. I leaned him against the Dumpster and put my shoulder into a right below his ribs.

"Catch your breath and we'll talk." Goose scanned the street and nodded. "I want you to tell me about an Algerian and a conductor."

I really wanted him to talk to me about a trumpet player; I was afraid to ask. I didn't know what I'd do when I heard him cop to it, and he would, sooner or later. Not asking about Tom gave me an advantage, too. Schreckengost would assume that's why I was here. That might make him careless about what else he told me.

"I don't know any Algerians," he said.

I hit him again, lower this time, not so low I'd change his singing range. "You probably don't, not anymore. You had dinner with one a few days ago at Reza's. You slipped him an envelope. He got hit by a train in Elk Grove. Ring a bell?" He looked at me with a helpless expression. Probably pale under the blood on his face. "Yeah, I know about that," I said. "I got the envelope. I know about Obersdorfer, too. You've been signing into the hall, you stupid fuck. You were traceable."

Schreckengost's voice wet with mucus. "He'd only see me there. Said he didn't like to be with criminals, didn't trust me. Made me go where he'd feel safe."

"Why did you see him?"

He hawked up a wad of something and spit it out before answering. "I carried stuff for him. Messenger shit."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Envelopes, usually. I don't know what was inside."

"What was in it for you?"

"A grand a trip."

"He was paying you a thousand dollars for delivering mail, and you never asked what it was?"

"Fuck, no. That kind of money, you don't ask questions. It had to be something heavy. That's all I needed to know."

I gave him that one. "Always envelopes?"

"What always? I only done it two times before you fucked it up."

“A minute ago you said it was usually envelopes. Now you say you only did it twice. Which is it?”

“Envelopes. Usually.”

The hangover strained my legendary patience. “I think of usually as meaning more than half. If it isn’t more than half, then it’s *unusual*. If you only did it twice, it was either envelopes half the time, or all the time. Which is it?”

Schreckengost’s eyes darted like maybe help would come climbing over the edge of the Dumpster. “Like I said, envelopes. The first time had an envelope and the second time was the time you followed me. You know that was an envelope.”

“The first time *had* an envelope? Was there something else besides?”

“Like what?”

Goose’s intolerance for the abuse of women left him unsympathetic to such evasion. He crossed the parking lot to the Dumpster and stood next to me, a foot from Schreckengost. “Are you going to answer the man’s question? Or would you rather talk to me?”

“Fuck you. I am answering his—”

A blade materialized in Goose’s right hand. His left went under Schreckengost’s chin and tilted his head back. “You ever see *Chinatown*, motherfucker?”

Schreckengost couldn’t say much with Goose’s hand on his throat. “Wha? Huh?”

“*Chinatown*. You know, Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, that old Huston dude. That Polack child molester made it. Did you ever see the movie?”

Schreckengost was the bigger man, but whatever he saw in Goose dried the sweat off his face faster than a wind tunnel. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“*Did you ever see the goddamn movie?*” Goose slid the point of the blade to the edge of Schreckengost’s nose, which wasn’t as well defined as it had been a couple of days ago.

“Yes—no—I think so. I don’t remember. What about it?”

Goose pushed the point of the blade into Schreckengost’s left nostril. “You answer my man’s question right now, or I pull this straight out instead of the way it went in. I got places to be and no time to watch you play dumber than you are.”

“You got me so rattled I forgot the question.”

Goose pulled the blade through the flesh of Schreckengost’s nostril. I stepped back to avoid the spurt of blood. Schreckengost made a half-swallowed scream and reached for his nose. Goose had the blade in the other nostril before the hand got all the way up. His voice was so soft I had to pay attention to hear him.

“The first delivery was an envelope and what else?” Schreckengost busy catching his breath. Goose stretched the skin of Schreckengost’s remaining nostril. “Don’t think you be home free just because you out of nostrils. Answer the question or I’ll start axing what you know about bullfighting.”

“It was a tube. You know, one of those cardboard things like you mail posters or big pictures in.” Schreckengost’s voice thick with mucus and blood. He tried to hawk up a load. Goose tightened his grip, made him swallow.

It occurred to me this was my interrogation. “How big was the tube?”

“Couple of feet long, maybe three inches across.” He held a hand to where his nose used to be, looked at the blood. “Tell this nigger to let me go before I bleed to death.”

He knew he’d made a mistake before I realized what he’d said. Goose twisted the knife sideways as he pulled out and brought half of Schreckengost’s nose with him. He stepped to one side to avoid the blood and clasped one hand over Schreckengost’s mouth.

“Go on. Breath that shit in. See if the nigger let you bleed to death, or if your cracker ass suffocate first. Call it your contribution to medical research.”

“Goose,” I said. No reaction, so I said it louder. “Goose.” He looked at me. “I need him alive.”

Goose looked at me a few seconds, nodded. His expression didn’t change. He wasn’t mad so much as Schreckengost needed to pay for his stupidity. Goose let his hand down. Schreckengost sucked air through his mouth, covered where his nose had been with both hands. Winced every time he breathed, trying to get air through his mouth alone.

I spoke to Goose. “I got this. Just a couple more questions and we’ll be out of here.” He walked to his previous post on the corner like he’d come over to pick up a quarter and found it was really a metal washer.

Schreckengost crouched at the base of the Dumpster, his back flat against it. I squatted beside him. “Tell me about the Algerian.”

It took a while for him to be able to talk. I gave him his time. There was no question he wouldn’t answer, not with Goose twenty feet away. “He set it up. He knew a guy from my block in Joliet. Found me one day, heard I could be trusted to do something simple and not ask no questions. Said it was easy work and paid good. That was all I needed to know.”

I looked over at Goose. “How are we?”

“Take your time, it’s a free country. Far as I can tell, you ain’t breaking no laws.”

I stood Willie against the Dumpster. He didn’t have all his air back, and I stepped back in case he coughed something up.

“We have more to talk about, but it’ll keep for now. Today I have a job for you.” He looked at me without speaking, his eyes showing his attention. “Get cleaned up and go to Obersdorfer. Today. Tell him I have what he wants and he can have it back. It won’t be cheap. Fifty grand comes to mind. I’ll call him when I’m ready.” Willie might have nodded. “Don’t get cute. I have all I need to put both of you away for a long time. Nothing better happen to me. Any questions?”

He moved his head in a minimalist “no.” I let him go to slip down the side of the Dumpster, collapsing the last two feet.

“Someone will find you if you run. Could be the police, could be me, could be whoever the Algerian worked for. When you think about lamming—and you will—think about that. We straight here?”

He didn’t have to say it. I looked over and Goose gave me the sign to come along. Neither of us spoke walking back to the car. All Schreckengost had done was confirm names. I still didn’t know what they were doing together, or how they related to Marshall Burton. Or if. At least now people could react to me for a change.

The sun had already slipped behind some of the taller buildings by the time I got to my office. Tony had given his condolences that morning and greeted me with measured good humor, sensing my mood like a dog wagging its tail low. Joey found something urgent to do as soon as he saw

me pull in. Tony told me the kid felt guilty because he found Tom, “shoot the messenger” syndrome in reverse.

Sharon followed me into my office, shut the door. Neither of us spoke while I hung my jacket on the hook and sprawled in my chair. I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands. When I finished she said, “I’m sorry about Tom.”

“Before you get all mothering on me, I’ll be fine. I’m not quite ready to talk much yet.”

She nodded. She’d know when I was ready before I did. “Do you want your messages?”

“Anything worth dealing with today?”

“Nobody who won’t understand. Phil Chandler. That woman from Channel 19. Eddie Reifsnnyder. Vanessa Jordan called three times.”

“They’ll get over it if I wait a day or so to call. Anything else?” She shook her head. A strand of hair caught on the seam at her shoulder. It made her look like an unseen hand was tugging her head back and forth by a string. “I’ll talk to Jan or Sonny or Caroline. No one else comes to mind.”

She laid the messages on my desk and came around to my side, put her hands on my shoulders. I stood and she slid her arms around me. I hugged her in return, resting my cheek on her head. We stood like that for ten seconds before I felt it start and tried to pull away. Sharon held me only tight enough to let me know it wasn’t time yet.

“God damn, I’ll miss him,” I said.

She let me go when she heard the break in my voice. “We can do this later.” A final squeeze, and she went back to work.

I took a bottle of water from the fridge in my office. Chewed a couple of Vitamin Cs and drank the whole bottle. Someone with more hangover experience would have known to keep B-12 handy. Lawrence of Arabia never felt dryer.

I had Madani’s document in my hand when I heard voices in Sharon’s office. It sounded like token resistance being offered over something, then the door opened and Vanessa Jordan walked in.

Concern and grief looked unnatural on her, uninvited guests she knew better than to throw out and didn’t want to welcome. Emotion made the laugh lines that normally brightened her face seem out of place. Grief fits some people like an overcoat ready to be worn at a moment’s notice.

Vanessa looked childlike, the uncharacteristic emotions touching her face and body posture randomly, giving her an air of confusion.

“I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t have come, you might want to be alone. I know how close you and Tom were—”

“It’s all right. Have a seat.”

“No, I shouldn’t stay that long. Damn it, I should’ve just left a message.”

“You did. Three of them. It’s okay. Please sit down or you’re going to make me uncomfortable.” She sat with knees together, purse on her lap, like a fresh grad at a job interview. “There’s no need to apologize. Your heart’s in the right place.”

“Can you talk about it?”

“I talked about it to the police all day yesterday. I’d rather take today off, if you don’t mind.”

“But you came to work.”

“I’m taking the day off from talking about it. Today I’d rather do something about it.”

“What can you do?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is he’s dead because of something I said. I think this has something to do with it, too.” I held up the papers in my hand.

“Something you said? I don’t believe it.”

I told her about the encounter at Symphony Center. About my comment. About everyone’s reactions. Her face told me she couldn’t grasp it before she said anything. “You think this Schreckengost person killed Tom because you made fun of his nose?”

“I know Schreckengost from when I was cop. I busted him a couple of times, once with Eddie. I think he was mad enough to kill me and knew he couldn’t pull it off. He gave me a look on his way out. A hundred punks have given me that look. Nothing comes of it when you’re wearing a badge. Schreckengost doesn’t have the brass to make too much of it even now.”

“Tom didn’t have a clue what was going on. He laughed his ass off. I never should’ve said anything that included him in the discussion. Schreckengost knew I’d be too hard. Tom was easy. And Schreckengost knew that would hurt me as much as killing me, in its way.”

Disbelief and shock crowded the other emotions from her face. “He’d *kill* a man over something like that? People only do that in the movies.”

“No.” I massaged the lower half of my face while I thought of an answer. My eyes slipped out of focus near a leg of the desk while I told her. “You don’t understand. You can’t, really. Neither did Tom. That’s why I should’ve kept him out of it. You live in the sunshine. There aren’t bad people in your world. Jerks, assholes, liars, ex-husbands, sexual harassers, sure. No criminals, not like I mean.

“Willie Schreckengost is a criminal. That’s not just what he does, it’s who he is. He’s never held a straight job in his life and he looks down on people like us because we do. He’s always been second rate, went away for a couple of years because he couldn’t even run a loan shark racket. Stabbed a guy in prison the Outfit wanted rid of, and they showed their appreciation.”

“How?” She asked like she didn’t want me to go on but couldn’t help herself.

“Got him early parole, for one thing.”

“He killed a man and got out of prison early?”

“I know he killed him. The cons know he killed him. The guards know he killed him. No one will say anything for the record. The Outfit got him a better lawyer, maybe pulled a string here and there, and Willie’s out. Now he thinks he’s badass. Gets more aggressive, takes some risks. That’s fine, they go along. Maybe they even throw some work his way, see if he’s a good earner. Willie’s so clueless he got himself involved in something so far over his head a guy came in here just to tell me the Outfit is washing their hands of him.”

“Came in here?”

“Stood right there.” I pointed to the spot not three feet from her. “Big SOB, almost took the doorknob off on his way out.”

“You know these people?”

“Our paths cross once in a while. It can’t be helped.”

She liked this less all the time. Her knees pressed tighter together, arms wrapped tight across her breasts. My “dangerous man” attraction undermined by my dealings with truly Dangerous Men.

“And you think this has something to do with it?” She picked up the document from my desk.

“This didn’t get him killed. It just got the ball rolling.” I laid out the chain of events since I tailed Schreckengost from Symphony Center.

“And you’ll take care of him yourself?”

“I’ll make sure the police do. I promised Jan Rusiewicz—remember the cop was here when you came in the other day?—I wouldn’t take any revenge. She’ll get everything I have. She and Sonny will take care of it.”

“Why don’t they have it now?”

“I’m not through with Schreckengost yet. He has work to do so I can finish up with what this started.” I tapped the sheets of paper.

“I thought you gave everything to the federal agents.”

“I did.” I ran my hand through my hair, looked around the room like there might be a cue card somewhere to tell me what and how much to say. “It took a lot out of me to watch Madani die after the train hit him, and I’ve had more fun than staring down the barrel of his gun thinking he had a round left. I want to know what it’s about.”

“You’d go through all of this because you’re curious?”

“It’s more than curious. A man died trying to keep anyone from seeing what’s in here. That makes it inherently dangerous. I have to know how dangerous, and what to do about it.”

“So you just accept the responsibility.”

“If you saw a lost kid on the street, you wouldn’t just keep walking and call someone when you got where you were going.”

“I’d use my cell phone.”

“And you’d stay until someone showed up.”

She held the papers to catch the light. I watched her eyes move as she “read,” knowing she wasn’t making any more sense out of it than anyone else. Stifled a smile when she turned one sheet sideways, then upside down, like a high school kid giving a centerfold a good going-over.

“I had a horrible thought,” she said when she finished, laying the sheets on my desk. “What if this was all some misunderstanding over concert tickets?”

“Concert tickets?”

“You said Schreckengost had this with him when he left the hall. This drawing here could almost be an Orchestra Hall seating diagram, except the Xs are under the balconies, instead of on top where the seats are.”

I turned the paper so neither of us had to look at it upside down. “Show me the Orchestra Hall diagram.”

“Right here.” Her finger tapped the drawing. “See? Here’s the curve of the upper levels, these are the sides. Like you’d see them from the stage. Sometimes I go out there when no one’s around and sit in the chairs and wonder what it would be like to be able to play in the orchestra. The drawing’s kind of rough, but the seating area looks a little like this if you stand on the stage and look out.”

I knew Vanessa kept talking because I heard words, recalling others heard over the past few days. Words that didn’t mean much at the time, spoken out of context, told to me before I could understand their significance. My eyes lifted as of their own accord as she spoke, moving my sight above her to the poster Tom had brought me from Berlin. The picture of the CSO and one of Obersdorfer. Performing at the *Philharmonie* on 21 *Juni* at 2030 *uhrs*.

Europeans use what Americans often refer to as military date and time: day before month; 24-hour clock. 21 June instead of June 21. 28/9 wasn’t a fraction; it was September 28. Yom Kippur ended at sundown on the twenty-eighth, after which Israeli conductor Yefim Broflavski would lead the CSO in a special performance of Bernstein’s “Kaddish” Symphony, raising money for civilians injured in this year’s debacle over Gaza. Two thousand prominent Jews and their supporters in the audience. Obersdorfer’s comments during the Mahler rehearsal: “Where are the Jews in this chorus? There should be more suffering.” 2040 would be 8:40 PM. Right before intermission.

The chill started at the back of my neck.

Sharon had gone for the day. I got rid of Vanessa as elegantly as I could.

The first thing to do was call Sturdivant. He had the doc already and knew its provenance. I called the Homeland Security number that gave me the runaround the other day and got voice mail. I left a message for Sturdivant to call me on an urgent matter as quickly as possible. Somehow that failed to make me feel much better.

I found the DHS tip number on their web site. The phone was in my hand before I realized what I’d be getting into. The feds might send someone over right away, then spend a week verifying my information.

They'd ask where I got it and ask again and more than likely lock my ass up for a day or six to show me who was in charge. Worse things could happen; Yom Kippur still almost two weeks away.

They'd never touch Obersdorfer. Scheduled to leave town in the morning, he was an internationally respected musician. I couldn't link him to anything specific, never saw him alone with Schreckengost, let alone exchanging anything. A good lawyer would find out about my old run-ins with Schreckengost, add the Sharon episode, and have a jury convinced I set him up before I got out of the box. I could live with that, too. Even without the conspiracy charge, Sonny would nail him for killing Tom. I wanted Obersdorfer. He was the ringmaster of the circus that got Tom killed, even if he didn't pull the trigger.

I marked up a copy of Madani's papers to show what Vanessa had noticed. Then I typed up what I knew and printed it out, made copies of everything. Stuck one set into a FedEx envelope addressed to Forrest Sturdivant. The other copy to the FBI field office. Made sure each knew the other had a set. Locked another copy of everything in my safe. Left a note for Sharon to call everyone if I wasn't there when she came in.

Then I picked up the phone and called Helmut Obersdorfer at Orchestra Hall. I had no reason to think he'd be there, just a hope that Schreckengost had talked to him and he'd be somewhere I could find him.

It took a while to get connected. Eddie's relief answered the phone and needed convincing before he'd call up to see if I was legit. Dropping Eddie's name helped. I waited on hold for a couple of minutes before I heard the voice that spoke to Tom in Carol Findley's office, not the one I'd met in the john.

"Yes?" Not a greeting or a question; the tone of an officer to a subordinate he'd rather not see.

"Maestro, my name is Nick Forte. We met—"

"I am aware of who you are."

"I take it you talked to Willie Schreckengost."

"Yes."

"I have what you want."

"As do the authorities, I am sure."

"I gave them an edited copy and saved the good one for you."

"I take it you have reasons for this?"

“Very good ones.”

“I am aware of some of them. I have available fifty thousand dollars, as you requested.”

“I’m only letting you off this easy because we’re working against a deadline. It’s a good deal for you, if you think about it. I’m giving you a chance to kill two thousand Jews for twenty-five bucks apiece. Tell you what. Make it 49,980 dollars. That’s 24.99 each. The surviving Jews should appreciate the irony.”

“You are in sympathy with what we would do?”

“Some of us American mongrels know which branches of our family trees are strongest. I had a relative on the *Scharnhorst* and another in the Panzer Lehr Division.”

“We have been fortunate to find a man such as you. It will be a pleasure to hand you the money personally.”

“I’m looking forward to it. The Yom Kippur plan is brilliant. The Jews have much to atone for.”

“True, quite much, but we must take our victories where we can find them, however small. When do you wish to make the exchange?”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“That is impossible. The money is not here.”

“Where is it?”

“My residence.”

“Conductor’s House?”

“*Ja.*”

“An hour.”

“That is too soon. I cannot get there so quickly.”

“Make an effort. I’m taking a lot of risks here. I have to be protected.”

A pause. Then, “Very well. One hour.”

I couldn’t depend on fooling Obersdorfer with that sympathizer bullshit any more than he could hope I believed he had fifty grand in cash lying around. Squeezing him for time only limited his options; it didn’t remove them. The Book said I needed backup.

Delbert still in Wisconsin, Goose on his way to East St. Louis. Sonny Ng would be more than good enough if I could get him to forget he was a cop for a few hours. Fat chance. Jan Rusiewicz was good, not as good as Sonny. No criticism there: no one’s as good as Sonny. She had that cop thing going

against her, too. Eddie Reifsnnyder would do it in a heartbeat, rusty or not. I almost called him, had my hand on the phone, when I remembered how much belly had slid over his belt. He'd try to be the Eddie of old if it killed him, and it might. I chambered a round in the .45 and slid an extra magazine and a palm-sized tape recorder into my jacket pocket. Took off my shirt and slipped into the lighter of my two bullet-proof vests, to make it less obvious. Backup was overrated.

Before I left I opened the safe and laid the letter I occasionally re-wrote to Caroline on my desk.

44

I almost hit Jan with the door on my way out. The bags under her eyes together with her smile could only mean a long, but good, day on the job.

"I'm glad I caught you," she said.

"Just barely. What's up?" I stepped back into the office so she wouldn't see me in too much of a hurry.

"We broke the triple."

"Was it Marshall they were after?" Maybe he'd stumbled onto Obersdorfer and Schreckengost and didn't know enough to tell anyone about it.

"No, you were right all along. Remember the other two?"

"Well, yeah, I saw them all on the sidewalk. The woman—Wellington, Nottingham—"

"Willingham."

"Thanks. Worked in the clerk's office right? She got all the press, supposed to be *shtupping* half the employees of Cook County. The other one was a guy—salesman, wasn't he?"

"Peter Bixler, software salesman."

"What about them?"

"It was Bixler. He was selling more than software." I sat on the edge of Sharon's desk and made the "continue" face. "We're still backtracking on this. Somehow Bixler got involved with a street gang called the Latino Homies."

"The ones Marty Klimak laundered money for?"

“Could be. They come and go so fast you need a stock ticker to keep up. Anyway, Bixler’s job brought him in contact with lots of Type A’s: stockbrokers, floor traders, a lot of highly respected lowlifes. Pretty soon he’s making as much money selling crystal meth as he is selling software.”

“Provided by the Latino Homies.”

She nodded. “Bixler must’ve figured out what kind of profit margins were involved. He thought he could give himself a raise and no one would notice.”

“That’s why greed and stupidity are two of the eight deadly sins.”

Jan knew not to let my witticisms interrupt her train of thought. “The Homies got suspicious. Someone broke out the yellow bam, and a real meth monster named Yayo Ruffo thought direct action was best, if *thought* is the right word for it. Ernesto Rodriguez knew where Bixler hung out after work.”

“Coogan’s?”

She nodded. “The two of them and a driver loaded into a car with a couple of nines and caught up to Bixler on his way in. You almost got a front-row seat.”

“I was close enough. How did you get all this?”

“The driver’s a new kid, not in all the way yet. You know, one of those who drifts into the gang for lack of anything better to do. He got a little juiced up and Yayo and Ernesto talked him into driving the car. He swears he didn’t know they were going to kill Bixler, and he sure didn’t know they were going to shoot up the whole street. His story holds up and he’s a juvie, so we can cut him a good deal.”

“How good’s the case?”

“I think we got them.” Her voice even more confident than before. “Yayo was carrying when we grabbed him at lunch. Ballistics has the piece now. I picked up Ernesto with a tac team an hour ago. He was a little high. The first words out of his mouth were something about how this had better not have nothing to do with those people getting *muerta* on Wacker Drive last week.”

“Of course he said this before you had a chance to tell him why you were there.”

“Of course.”

So Marshall Burton really was an innocent bystander, the quintessential man in the wrong place at the wrong time. I could put him next to Tom on my personal death list. Burton never would have been near Coogan's if not coming to meet me. Bring your personal troubles to Kiss of Death Forte, folks. I may not find a resolution for your problems, but your ass will definitely get resolved.

Jan interrupted my reverie. "There's more."

"It gets better?"

"Zoltan."

"Zoltan was involved in this? How?"

"Zoltan was a customer. No hard stuff, just some uppers to keep him going through the night when the inspiration hit him. He owed the Homies some money, and he might have been the go-between that hooked Bixler up with Yayo. After the three amigos sobered up and realized what happened, someone got the bright idea of finding out how the investigation was going, in case they wanted to get out of town. Zoltan knew Marshall and Margot Burton casually from orchestra fundraisers. He knew about their bizarre relationship and used that as a hook to come to you. We think he fingered Bixler for the Homies, too."

"How'd he know about me?"

"He read the paper." My look told her that wasn't enough of an answer. "They all ran your name. You were first on the scene and there to meet Marshall Burton to boot. The *Trib* even quoted you. Neither paper said why you were seeing Marshall, but Zoltan must have known enough about the Burtons' home life to put two and two together."

"What about all the goofy shit he did later? Hiring a detective to follow me, faking those threats, dodging you."

"The threats were real. Yayo called him a couple of times, even went to see him once, because he wasn't telling them anything they didn't already know. That other thing, with the detective? Hard to say. Paranoia, probably."

"You get this from Zoltan?"

She shook her head. "No one knows where he is. Our witness doesn't think they clipped him, not that Yayo wouldn't like to. Whatever they did or didn't do to him, he's in the wind. We'd love to have a few words, if you hear from him."

“Don’t expect too much. I doubt I’m on his Christmas card list.” I had one last thing to do and Jan was the perfect person for it. “Now I have something for you. Willie Schreckengost killed Tom McManus.”

“That’s what we’re thinking, after what happened at Symphony Center.” She smiled and held eye contact, since I hadn’t mentioned it in my statement. “Right, you forgot that part. We got it from Eddie Reifsnyder. You have anything definite on Schreckengost?”

“Yeah, but I doubt you can use it in court.” I told her about the breath strips. “I handled the one I found too much for it to be of any use to you before I realized what it meant. I can give you a statement for a warrant if it helps.” I left out my conversation with Schreckengost earlier in the day.

“It might. For now your word’s enough for us to lock onto him. Reifsnyder said Schreckengost isn’t clever enough to get away with this. What he actually said is, Schreckengost is such a loser he has to hang a mirror under the toilet seat to wipe his ass.”

“Eddie always did have a way with words. He and I have known Schreckengost for years. You and Hanlon’ll eat him alive.”

“Speaking of alive, you look like you’re barely hanging on. Have you slept at all in the last couple days?”

I ran my hands over my face and felt the two days’ growth. I didn’t know I was tired until she mentioned it; now I could lie down on Sharon’s desk and sleep for twenty hours. “It got a little drunk out last night. Today’s been a busy day.” Saying more would set off Jan’s bullshit detector and she’d use her pink rubber hose on me until I fessed up. “I think I’ll go home and fall asleep watching a ballgame.” A better person would feel guilty for using Jan’s intimate knowledge of my baseball jones against her.

“Let me know if you want to watch any of the playoffs together.” She gave me a chance to say something. I passed. “I’d better get going. We’re going to tag team Yayo and Ernesto and see who lies better. Looks like I’m the one won’t be sleeping tonight.”

I called to her when she turned to go. “Hey, Jan.”

“Yes?”

There were a lot of things that needed to be said. And there were things I dared not mention tonight. “Thanks. I appreciate you thinking of me.”

“You’re welcome.” She looked at me like she expected more, then checked her watch. “Let’s find time to talk about what’s going on with us. I

don't mean like getting back together. We just need to quit walking on eggshells every time we see each other. We're too good of friends for that." She took me off the hook before I had a good answer. "I have to run. Ernesto and Yayo are waiting."

That was it. Marshall Burton imagined his wife spreading her sadistic bitchiness around and wanted her followed. He didn't like my office, so we arranged to meet at Coogan's just in time to get him shot for no good reason. Checking into it took me to Symphony Center to see Willie Schreckengost walk out one day. Would I have thought twice about seeing him if Marshall hadn't gotten clipped? If I hadn't followed Schreckengost I wouldn't have known to follow Madani. He wouldn't be dead, and I wouldn't have his papers burning a hole in my pocket. Schreckengost wouldn't have come to my office after those papers. Sharon wouldn't have broken his nose, and I wouldn't have made a stupid joke about it. Tom McManus would be alive, practicing in his loft until Connie got off work.

For now. Maybe he'd die in the Orchestra Hall bombing with hundreds of other innocent people, most of whom hadn't done anything worse than worship on a different day of the week than Helmut Obersdorfer. His plan would be moving right along if not for all those wouldn'ts.

Now it would end. I'd go to Conductor's House and settle Obersdorfer's hash for him. Sturdivant would if I couldn't; he had everything I had now except the hard-on. Marshall's final act would be his posthumous saving of hundreds of lives. And Tom McManus would still be dead.

I patted my gun and the extra magazine. Shifted my torso in the vest, and checked the batteries in the tape recorder one last time before I left.

Conductor's House sat back from Hutchinson Street between two other mansions designated as landmarks to preserve their distinctive Prairie architecture. They weren't mansions in the modern sense of the word, pretentious monstrosities with columns and extravagance that served no purpose but to advertise the owner's wealth. These were big houses with grounds too large and well-manicured to be called yards, two-story buildings with big porches and straight lines. No-nonsense Midwestern

homes for people who made their fortunes the no-nonsense Midwestern way, when rich men could point to something they'd made besides money.

Obersdorfer answered the door himself. His fade-to-white eyes seemed to pick out individual pores on my face. Hair swept straight back on top, more tousled on the sides. He wore a white ribbed turtleneck sweater and black slacks. A black leather jacket hung on a hook in the entry area. He looked like he'd just docked the U-boat after a spin around the lake. "*Herr Forte*. Yes, I remember you now. You were friends with Thomas McManus. A pity about him."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Obersdorfer stepped aside and I went in, pressing a hand into my jacket pocket so the tape recorder didn't bump against anything. The big house was impressive, not too imposing to be homey. The large front room had informal autographed photos of guest conductors and soloists who had stayed there in the year since its renovation. Interspersed among them were formal portraits of all the CSO's music directors. The furniture was expensive and comfortable looking, tastefully treading the line between a home and a museum.

Obersdorfer led me through the house, pausing occasionally to comment on a picture or item of interest. He played the trumpet chorale from Brahms' *Academic Festival* on the concert grand Steinway to show off the acoustics of the music room. At the door to the den he stepped back and gestured for me to enter.

I held back. "After you, *Herr Direktor*." He went in without comment.

The room too large for the pipe-and-slippers intimacy usually associated with a den. Twenty feet square, a baby grand Steinway in one corner with a music stand near the elbow. An open score on the piano's music rack, something Baroque from the looks of it. A leather sofa and wing chairs flanked two reading lamps in the other near corner. The door of an old-fashioned safe hung open an inch or two in the wall to my right, a small dry bar directly across from it. The mirror behind the bar caught the shimmer of a chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling. A desk large enough to accommodate a full-size score dominated the back of the room. A lot of money lay on it.

"As you can see, I have prepared for you." Obersdorfer's lips curled in an imitation of a smile. Nothing like that made it as far as his eyes. He walked to the desk and stood behind it. "You may know I am not a man for

what you Americans call chit-chat. Here is your money. You may count it if you wish, after which you will have something for me.”

“I expected nothing less from a man of your reputation and accomplishments.” He bowed his head a centimeter. “I hope I haven’t disrupted your plans too much.”

“Assuming you are telling the truth about what you have given the authorities, then I believe we shall have time to carry out our objectives.”

I flipped through the money to give the impression of counting. “Your secret’s safe with me. I should warn you some fed came around asking if I got anything from Madani. He came on too quick and too strong, and I knew there was something to be had if I could only figure out who to ask for it.”

“Your federal police have all the subtlety of what you call the bull in the glass house.” His English was beautiful, the accent light enough to give whatever he said an air of elegance. “They resent being hamstrung by your arcane privacy rules.”

“It keeps things interesting.” My cursory count came close enough to fifty grand to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Notice that these bills are not large denominations and are not sequentially numbered.” Obersdorfer held up a sheaf for me to look at again. “I wish you to see I have not played tricks with you. I have held up my end of our bargain. I now expect you to hold up yours.” He extended his right hand, palm up.

He did such a good job occupying me I didn’t notice the sound. Maybe there was none. The slow motion of the opening safe door caught my eye, reflected in the mirror behind the bar. The safe an old-fashioned job that could be opened from the den or the adjacent room. The door had drifted shut since we entered.

The person on the other side must have caught me looking. The door flew open the rest of the way as I turned and drew my gun, trusting to years of practice that I’d shoot where I looked. Two guns went off together. The mirror over the bar shattered. Something clanged against metal. I heard a thud and some clattering as I hit the floor, trying to keep Obersdorfer’s desk between me and the safe.

For a few seconds the room was still as one of the portraits in the hall, the smell of gunpowder overpowering in such an otherwise benign setting.

Obersdorfer withdrew his hand, the sole acknowledgement anything had happened. He showed no more emotion than if a butler had brought a tray of drinks. I stood and walked across the room, angling to keep him in sight, the open door between me and the hole in the wall.

A ricochet scar marred the wall of the safe. A Glock 9 lay inside. I switched my gun to the left hand, leaned in for a better look. Willie Schreckengost lay sprawled on the floor in the adjoining room. He'd had a tough week. The splint was back on his nose and most of his face was wrapped in gauze. Only his eyes were fully visible, and one of them was missing.

My head was almost clear of the safe when another gun went off. A sharp pain started in my left shoulder and ran down my arm. My fingers went numb and the gun fell to the floor and bounced away.

"You will put your hands where I can see them." Obersdorfer sat behind the desk, the middle drawer open. He held a small automatic, a .25 or a .32. "I do not wish to take the chance you have another weapon with you. You will remain perfectly still. I am not so good a shot as I might be and do not wish to have to shoot you several times."

I forced myself not to reach for my shoulder. The bullet felt like it had wedged inside the joint. Every movement presented a fresh nerve for it to rub. I couldn't feel much below that, and my fingers weren't moving, at least not so I could tell.

"I thought we were friends," I said. I wondered why he didn't just kill me. Schreckengost would have. Maybe Obersdorfer's refined sensitivities didn't want to search a dead body. Goody for me.

"Did you think your childish attempt to persuade me you shared my views would convince me of anything but your stupidity?" he said.

"At least I convinced you of something."

"A funny man. I had heard that about you, that you think you are a funny man. I confess I am impressed with your ability to make jokes at a time like this. You are not a man to lose his wits. An admirable quality."

"Thank you. You have many yourself." Tom had told me two things above all else about Obersdorfer: He had an enormous ego and a compulsion to justify everything he did. The fact that his justifications were often bullshit didn't bother him. "Without trying to flatter you, I've been a

fan of your work for a long time. I can't understand how a man of your gifts could get involved in something like this."

"Something like what? Killing you? It is now a matter of you or I, surely you see that. I understand Thomas was a close friend to you. I apologize for Schreckengost killing him. Schreckengost was—how do you say it?—*stockdumm*, stupid utterly—imbecile, perhaps? He allowed his emotions to control him. He needed...*Überwachung*."

"Supervision."

"*Sehr gut*. Do you speak German?"

"A little. Musical terms, mostly. Curse words." I tried to flex my left arm, felt the bullet grind in the joint. "I don't see the point of your apology. You were going to kill Tom, anyway, when you blew up the hall."

Obersdorfer's lips impersonated a smile again, his eyes hardening. "What your military so disingenuously calls collateral damage. I bore Thomas no ill will. He would have been in a bad place at the wrong time."

A lot of that going around. "I thought you were about killing Jews. What percentage of all the innocent people you're planning to kill will be Jews?"

"You dare to speak to me of proportion?" He glared now, the lines of his face etched as hard as the ricochet scar in the safe. "You, who tell me lies of your German ancestors in a pathetic attempt to feign sympathy? I am from Dresden. *Ja*, Dresden. I was there that day and night, 13 February, 1945. The most beautiful city in Germany, annihilated to what purpose? Dresden was no threat. There were no factories. No military installations. Dresden was eradicated as a gesture to the Jews. For revenge, nothing more."

"For the Jews."

"The Jews came running to their savior Roosevelt and said the Germans must pay for what they have done. It was of no matter to them who was innocent or guilty. My *Grossvater* and my 4-year-old cousin died for what? My brother hideously scarred. What does Shakespeare say? For a pound of flesh? I say no! No more! Send them all to hell where they belong."

"Even the grandfathers and 4-year-olds?"

"Yes, even them. The old man for what he has been, the child for what he will become. Spare the rest of humanity his degradation."

There was no argument to be made. He saw the righteousness of his view as clearly as I saw its depravity. I couldn't stop myself. Like picking at a scab, a perverse need to see how ugly and infected it got the farther I dug.

“What about Mahler? You must love Mahler. No one interprets his music as beautifully as you do.”

“Mahler learned the truth about his race and converted to Christianity.”

“Only because your enlightened forefathers wouldn’t let a Jew conduct the Vienna State Opera.”

“Mahler knew what was important. He said himself converting was as easy as changing his shirt. We are only passing through, it is the music that is forever. The Jews are but a footnote, the flotsam of history.”

“You’ll lose, you know. You can’t kill them all.”

“One never knows what can be done until it is tried.” He did something with his lips, making them a tight line, thin as scars. “You see, I try to learn your vernacular.” He gestured toward himself with the gun. “We have played your game long enough. You have something that belongs to me. You will please give it to me now.”

“Come and get it.”

“You do not think I will search your dead body? I am afraid you underestimate me.”

The bullet in my shoulder had either found a stable place or run out of nerves to destroy. My left arm had two sensations, numbness and burning. The sharp, stinging pain had died away while Obersdorfer ranted. Schreckengost’s gun was still in the safe. I was too close to reach in without stepping back and giving Obersdorfer time to shoot. I needed to take advantage of his hoped-for inexperience, do something unexpected, make him react. I could lean my head behind the safe door when I moved, trust the vest to protect my torso. My left arm all that would be exposed, and it was out of the game already.

“You try my patience,” he said. “Give me the papers.”

“*Geh fick deine Mutter.*” His face got red and the faint color in his eyes faded in contrast. “This *Übermensch* bullshit makes me sick. If you want the paper, come and get it, or shoot me and get it over with. Just quit fucking around about it.”

“You are a foolish man.” Obersdorfer put his left palm on the desk. “You think to upset me so I will do something foolish, *ja?* A pity for you.”

He pressed on his hand to push himself upright. He did it well, better than I’d wanted. The movement still made his gun hand waver as his weight shifted. I grabbed Schreckengost’s gun and fired three times, the safe door

between Obersdorfer and me. He shot once. The impact pushed me off balance as I hurled myself toward the sofa. I landed on my left shoulder and screamed. Rolled behind the sofa and lay there fighting nausea and dizziness, looking through stars while I listened for movement. I heard wheezing, then something metallic clattered against the desk and fell to the floor. Then only wheezing.

Standing up was like crawling out of a well. Helmut Obersdorfer sat in the high-backed leather chair, now tilted against the wall. His right hand gripped the armrest, the other grasped his chest like he was trying to hold something in. A sucking chest wound puckered his left side. Too much blood covered his sweater for that to be the only hit. A fine pink froth bubbled over his lips.

“Forte.” His face showed blank surprise. “*Mein Gott*, help me. I would bleed to death.”

“Yes, you will.” My voice surprised me. Colorless as Obersdorfer’s eyes, cold as Navy Pier in February. “I’m sending you to hell where you belong.”

“*No!*” As close to a scream as he could muster. His torso convulsed with a cough. Blood spurted from his mouth, ran down his chin to drip on the last unstained spot of his sweater. “Please. *Für die Liebe von Gott. Helfen Sie mir. Bitte.*” His voice a shadow of sound, no air, only what he could squeeze from his larynx. “You cannot leave me like this.”

I paused at the door, turned out the lights. His shape had no definition in the darkness. A smear of light from the bloody white sweater hinted at what remained of one of the great musicians of our time. I saw what might have been silent sobs as I said the last words Helmut Obersdorfer would ever hear.

“You never know what you can do until you try.”

I closed the door quietly as I could. The dive to avoid Obersdorfer’s last shot had taken a toll, my left arm connected to my torso more by habit than sinew. I took my first step toward leaving and staggered. Blood ran down the inside of my sleeve to puddle on the carpet. I wavered and looked up at my reflection in the window of the room across the hall. Someone my size, anyway, pale as skim milk, one hand caked with blood, the other dripping it.

I stared at the man in the window like I should recognize him. The person who tucked Caroline Forte into bed didn’t leave men to bleed to

death, so maybe it wasn't me. I'd killed men before, and Caroline and I had gotten through it. We'd get through Schreckengost, too; it had been him or me. Obersdorfer was different. He was alive when I closed the door. Barely, but a phone call to summon help might still be able to save him.

I fished the cell phone from my pocket, next to the tape recorder I'd forgotten to turn on. The man in the window watched me punch in 9-1-1 like he wondered what I would do. I held the phone, my thumb poised over the "Call" button, waiting for a sign. A crash and a thud came from the den behind me and I knew Obersdorfer's chair had gone over, and he was dead. I saw my reflection waver in time to keep from falling and let myself slide down the wall, sending the call on my way to the floor.

THE END

