



OFF THE BOOKS

A NICK FORTE NOVEL

BY

DANA KING

Praise for *Off the Books*

“The return of Chicago private detective Nick Forte, the tough protagonist of two Shamus Award nominated novels, is well worth the wait. Nick’s latest escapade *Off The Books*—the first in nearly six years—will surely earn additional praise for the acclaimed series.”

-J.L.Abramo, Shamus Award-winning author of *Chasing Charlie Chan*.

"Nick Forte reminds me of Robert B. Parker's Spenser: a PI with a finely tuned sense of justice who doesn't take anyone's s***. Any fan of hardboiled detective fiction is in for a helluva ride."

--Chris Rhatigan, former publisher of All Due Respect Books

"Six years since his last appearance, the return of Dana King's no-nonsense Nick Forte is cause to celebrate for fans of Robert B. Parker's Spenser and Loren Estleman's Amos Walker. As tough and unsentimental as Forte himself, *Off the Books* delivers all the action, acute observations, and wise-cracks required to satisfy that old-school PI itch. Now we just need King to not make us wait so long for the next one!"

--James D.F. Hannah, Shamus-winning author of *Because the Night* and *Behind the Wall Of Sleep*

Praise for the Nick Forte Series

“It's a kind of authorial magic that *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of* works as a tribute and as a story, and that neither aspect interferes in the least with the other... I can imagine this book finding its way into a class on writing crime fiction as an example of how to pay tribute to one's predecessors while at the same time writing a story that can stand on its own. It's an impressive accomplishment.

--- Peter Rozovsky, *Detectives Beyond Borders*, December 18, 2014

“Nick Forte is a throwback to the classic tough guy, politically incorrect PI who takes care of business. He's the kind of guy you'd want working for you, if you were in a tough spot. And Dana King is a master at creating a low-down, dirty world where everyone needs a someone like Forte on his side.”

—Charles Salzberg, author of the Henry Swann mysteries

“Tough, taut, unsentimental, and as hard-boiled as a dinosaur egg; Dana King delivers a private-eye procedural that would make Joe Gores proud.”

—David Housewright, Edgar Award-winning author

OFF THE BOOKS

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White Out

The Spread

Standalone Novel

Wild Bill

OFF THE BOOKS

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DANA KING

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Edited by Chris Rhatigan

Cover design by Corky King a/k/a The Beloved Spouse™

To the undocs who, regardless of the circumstances of their arrival, deserve to be treated with human dignity.

“The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respected Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges...”

--President George Washington

“Nearly all Americans have ancestors who braved the oceans – liberty-loving risk takers in search of an ideal – the largest voluntary migrations in recorded history... Immigration is not just a link to America’s past; it’s also a bridge to America’s future.”

--President George H.W. Bush

Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed.

--Psalm 82:3

PROLOGUE

I told Jason Worthington I'd find his daughter in a week. I surfed the internet and searched flophouses, cathouses, bar rooms, pool rooms, jails, hospitals, morgues, and SRO hotels. Found her in a pay-by-the-hour motel at 10:48 p.m. two days after her father and I spoke.

Worthington would have preferred me to find her alive.

Cindy's body was warm, the spike still in her arm. She looked as if she'd fallen asleep waiting and didn't hold my tardiness against me.

I did what any real-life professional investigator would do, and what no fictional private eye would even consider.

I called the police.

The cops kept me at the scene half the night, at the station until dawn. They asked the same questions both places and got the same answers.

"Why were you there?"

"Her father asked me to find her."

"Why was the father looking for her?"

"My guess would be to keep what happened from happening. You'll have to ask him yourself to be sure."

The usual bullshit.

I called Worthington on my way out of the police station. Told him I had news but would prefer to deliver it in person. I didn't suppose I needed to tell him anything after that, but it wouldn't hurt to allow him time to prepare before I scarred the rest of his life.

He answered the door already dressed for work. Navy suit, white shirt with French cuffs, gold links. His tie was blue with small designs, maybe horses, gathered in a perfect four-square knot. Red suspenders. A suit coat hung from the newel post behind him. His forehead gleamed beneath a silvery hairline. His teeth were as white and straight as a Klan meeting.

He didn't leave time for details or condolences. "Cindy's dead, isn't she? I'm not paying you another goddamn cent."

I spent the drive to his house looking for a graceful way to say what came next. None came to mind, probably because there weren't any. "I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am for your loss. I have a daughter

myself. Younger, but my greatest fear is being on your end of this conversation. You have my sincere condolences.”

Worthington brought up the subject, so we might as well get it over with. “The job was to find her, and I did. The payment is for my time and expenses. I’m sorry if that sounds callous.”

I knew he’d vent as soon as I mentioned money. “You were on your high horse preaching ethics to me that day. How you wouldn’t tell me where she was because that might make you an accessory if anything happened to her. ‘No offense’ you said, as if there’s any other way to take a comment like that. You said you’d bring me something with her signature as proof of life. You said you’d find her alive.”

I spoke as quietly as I could when he came up for air. “I said I’d find her. I never promise what condition I’ll find someone in, and I’ve never said, ‘proof of life’ to a client.”

The scorn in his voice could scrape rust from a girder. “You said you’d bring back a receipt. It’s reasonable to assume she’d have to be alive to sign it. Now she’s dead and you have nothing signed. By either of us. I won’t pay.”

I’d taken Worthington’s job off the books. What had been a thriving investigations business two years ago collapsed when my office manager quit after a dispute over a client. Within a year I lost the office on Printers’ Row and all the associates, most of whom I would have considered friends.

Now I paid the mortgage and kept the lights on doing background checks out of my house. Everything else came from cases like Worthington’s, off-license jobs I did as “favors” for people who showed their appreciation with “gifts.” A lot like Matt Scudder except:

I didn’t kill a little girl.

I wasn’t an alcoholic.

I wasn’t a fictional character. This was happening to me for real, which took a lot of the romance out of it.

Bad as I felt for Worthington, all unofficial work came through word of mouth. If that word included him browbeating me into doing his gig for half price, I’d have to resort to taking muscle jobs to fill the void. *Laissez-faire* as the relationship with my conscience had become, there were lines I wouldn’t cross, though some of what I’d done walked right up to them.

I added solidity to my voice. “I said I’d find her and bring back proof. I found her. The police report is proof. I know this is a bad time for you, but we had an agreement.”

“You want your money? Get a lawyer and good luck to you.”

No point arguing. I told him again how sorry I was. Said I’d be in touch after the funeral.

I rang his doorbell again a week later. After nine, most of the house dark. Worthington answered the door dressed much as he had on my earlier visit except his sleeves were rolled halfway up his forearms and his collar and tie were loose.

I put a foot on the threshold before he slammed the door. “I have something you’re going to want to see.”

“Move your foot before I call the police.”

“Have you spoken to Russell Bailey since the last time I was here?” That brought Worthington up short. “You really ought to hear me out. Won’t take fifteen minutes.”

He led me to the room—a den or study or office—where we spoke when I accepted the job. Sat behind the desk in his power chair. I took a comfortable wing-back. Slid a two-inch binder over to him.

I watched his composure erode like a junkie’s friendships. Closed the binder without reading to the end. Stared at the cover as he spoke, his voice dry as sandpaper. “Where did you get this?”

“Which part? Where you help Russell Bailey launder his money through your coin laundry business? I bet the two of you laughed your asses off when you came up with that. Or was it how you finance the stray kilo with what you skim? Pimping out co-eds in college for party money? Or the role play with hookers? I have to admit, the ‘Border Patrol agent and illegal alien’ was a new one to me. Hispanic girls only, or do Eastern Europeans and Asians qualify, too?”

Worthington flipped through the binder as I spoke as if something in it might change if he looked hard enough. “You’re a private investigator. I don’t know how even law enforcement would know some of these things.”

“I have friends.”

“I have friends. They can’t just hand out information like this because they’re your friends.”

“You’re confusing what’s legal with what’s possible.”

His shock veered toward outrage. He slammed shut the binder. “You must’ve spent ten times what you think I owe you to get all this.”

“Didn’t cost me a cent.” I saw his expression. “I told you. I have friends.”

“Friendship only goes so far.”

I kept as much condescension as I could out of my voice. I was here to be a teacher, not a prick. That guy was waiting in the next room.

“Friendship for you is transactional. Those people aren’t friends. They’re whores. They provide services for payment. Period. The people I’m talking about have my back because they know I have theirs.” I pointed to the binder. “I could’ve had twice this much.”

His voice was hollow as an empty box car. “What are you going to do?”

“Cash the check you’re about to write.”

“It’s blackmail, then.”

“Blackmailers don’t take checks. You’re paying for services rendered.”

“That’s all you want? What we agreed to?”

“You seemed to think it was a lot when you refused to pay.”

Worthington flipped through the binder again. Closed it and rested his hands on the cover as his natural arrogance mounted a comeback. “Nothing in here is any good to you. I’m not a public figure. I have no political career to ruin. It’s not admissible in court. In fact, the *friends* who gave this to you could find themselves in a lot more trouble than I’d be in if any of it came to light.”

I used to work for a guy who told me it was easier to get a stallion off a mare than to get a rich man to part with a nickel for anything he couldn’t show off or fuck. “My friends are insulated. Most of what they did was point me toward people who had the most intimate knowledge of your weaknesses.” I nodded toward the binder. “May I?”

He shoved it across the desk. I already knew which page I wanted. “Here’s an affidavit from Russell Bailey, notarized and everything. Seems he’d rather turn himself in and try to cut a deal than face what I threatened him with.”

I slid the book back to Worthington. Gave him the full Cheshire Cat treatment. “Whores *love* to talk about their johns.”

Worthington started to reach. Thought better of it and held his hands shoulder height, palms out. Tilted his head toward the desk.

I nodded. “Slowly.”

With infinite care he lifted a leather-bound check register from the top center drawer. Used an old, expensive fountain pen to write a check for the exact amount we’d agreed to. Made it out to “cash” without me having to tell him. Placed it on the binder and slid both across the desk as if they were viruses.

I shook the check dry, placed it in my wallet. “Thank you. You can keep the binder. I have copies.”

“Get out.”

His brain overcame his glands before I was halfway to the door. “The police have already written off Cindy’s death as just another overdose. I know there’s more to it.”

“I thought there might be.”

“Can you find out?”

“You know I can.” I resumed my seat. Set the binder on the floor and took a notebook from my pocket. “Tell me what you know. Including the parts you left out last time.”

He handled defeat relatively well, considering it couldn’t have happened often. Answered my questions. Finished by saying, “I guess this is when I ask how much you want in advance.”

I put the notebook back into my pocket. “We’re good for now.” Saw his confusion. “It’s not like you’re going to stiff me.”

CHAPTER ONE

I only went to Lake City on this warm July evening because Donald Bower was a swinging dick and insisted we meet at his home to make sure I knew it. My gut started to tighten once I passed Skokie as memories of the Mitchell catastrophe – I mean case – flooded in uninvited.

Bower's house was a multi-million-dollar pile with a view of Lake Michigan. I never saw the inside. Bower met me at the door and we walked across the grounds—no one would call landscaping like this a yard—to a boathouse on the lake. Outside creased jeans he wore a striped polo shirt with a sailboat on the left breast. Boat shoes with no socks. He had the face of a man who spent a lot of time in the sun and the body of someone who didn't do much while he was there. The kind of guy who'd ride eighteen holes and tell you what an appetite he worked up doing it.

He talked as we walked. "I take as many meetings as I can on the boat. You know, out of cell range so we won't be disturbed."

"You're the client. Wherever is fine with me." I would have preferred turning off our cells and sitting in the kitchen, but he might be about to pay me a lot of money, so it was his call.

Inside the boathouse I saw the sailboat on his shirt was an affectation; a large powerboat filled the space. Bower did the usual stuff boat people do that landlubbers don't understand to prepare for launch. I did my part by untying a couple of knots and throwing the ropes onto the dock. "Casting off," he called it. Another two-word phrase that ended with "off" came to mind. I didn't share it.

Bower asked if I had a boat as we pulled away from the mooring. I did not. He asked how much I knew about boats, which was nothing, except for what I suspected he'd tell me about this one.

Bower did not disappoint. In the next few minutes I learned I was riding an XO-250 fabricated from a Marine-grade aluminum hull that had:

A 320-horsepower engine.

A radar arch. (He didn't embarrass me by describing what that meant.)

A "huuuge" plotter and sounder.

A twelve-volt drawer refrigerator.

The boat's name was *Jefe IV*.

He said more, but the wind in my ears and the churn in my stomach diverted my attention.

I tuned in again as he was telling me how *Jefe IV* "could go like a bat out of hell and is practically indestructible. Has a low planing speed and flat transition," which might as well have meant it made boards smooth as a baby's rear end for all I understood. Or cared.

I knew the happy ending was near when he turned to face me and waited for eye contact. "I don't even want to say what this baby set me back." Which meant there was no way short of an aneurism I could stop him. "Take a guess."

"I have no idea."

"Come on. What do you think something like this costs?"

The politic thing to do was guess low so he could impress me with how much more he'd spent. I'd already decided I didn't like him and could live without his money, so I said, "Half a million dollars."

He almost broke his jaw pulling back the "You're way low" he already had formed in his mouth. "Half a million's a lot of money."

"I thought this was a lot of boat."

"It *is* a lot of boat. But half a million...goddamn, half a million's a lot of money. A *lot* of money."

By now anything he told me would seem paltry, so I made him do it. "How much was it?"

"Oh, I, uh, I got a deal on it. Practically stole it for two seventy-five." More than my house and he was embarrassed to admit it.

I took out my cell. "I got no bars. I think we can talk now."

He ran the boat balls to the wall while he checked his own cell. Looked disappointed. "I guess this is far enough." Throttled back and turned into the mild breeze to let the boat drift. "You want a beer?"

"Maybe after we're finished."

"Suit yourself. I'm having one. Come below with me. I want to show you something."

I'd lubbed the land my entire life, so going down the stairs was a challenge, even though the Marine-grade aluminum hull made the boat's rocking almost indiscernible. Banged my head pretty good lowering myself into the hold or cabin or brig or whatever it was called.

From down here I would have guessed *Jefe IV* cost more than my house. The chairs and sofa were leather and still smelled like the good stuff. “Folds into a queen-sized bed. We can open another one from the cargo area if we need it. They’ll both fit, though it does get a little cozy. Not always a bad thing, you know.”

There was also a galley kitchen Gordon Ramsay would sacrifice a virgin for. A fifty-inch television that must have had a satellite hookup to be worth having, though I wasn’t about to ask.

After giving me time to be suitably impressed by the furnishings, Bower directed my attention to what could only be described as a shrine on the left—port?—side. “This is what makes everything worthwhile.”

A modest plaque no more than six feet long and decorated with artificial holly and pinecones covered the wall. Artfully etched into a highly polished brass plate were the words:

FIRST PLACE
CHICAGO YACHT CLUB
HOLIDAY DECORATIONS

Bower seemed to glow. Maybe not “seemed”; the space actually felt warmer. Maybe he was hard. “*Jefe IV* is the only power boat ever to win. The damn sailboats have an advantage with all the rigging to string lights from. But that year, fuck the sailies. *We* won that year.”

“Not since?”

Bower snorted derisively. “Not for what it cost me. I hired the people that used to do Marshall Field’s Christmas decorations just to show it could be done. Let everyone else fight to outspend each other now. I made my point.”

On a shelf below the plaque were three models of powerboats. Even I had to admit they were beautifully done. “What are these?”

He looked like he was choking up. “Perfect replicas of *Jefes* one through three.” He took *Jefe II* from its cradle. “Look inside. Everything’s perfect.”

Never having seen the boat I couldn’t vouch for the reproduction’s authenticity; I certainly couldn’t argue with its quality. I gave it a thorough look and didn’t notice a missed detail, down to the burner grates and control knobs for the galley stove.

Bower beamed as if he'd built the models himself. "I couldn't bear to part with any of them when I moved up to the next boat, so I had these made."

I had an uncle who'd worked as a model maker for architects and developers, so I appreciated the workmanship of the replicas more than the sex appeal of *Jefe IV*. "They're beautiful," I said, hoping Bower might stop trying to impress me and get down to business.

He opened the refrigerator. "You sure you don't want a beer?"

I passed. He took a can of Budweiser from the door and my "gift" went up twenty percent, a man who'd pay \$275,000 for a boat to drink Budweiser on.

He took a sip and gestured toward the ladder. "Let's go topside. It's nice down here, but the fresh air is the reason to go on the water in the first place."

Back on deck, Bower took the captain's chair. Rested his feet on a console. Gestured as if the lake were his swimming pool. "This is why I work as hard as I do. Great, isn't it?"

It *was* great, no question. I could get used to spending time on the water. I also enjoyed relaxing at home on my screened deck watching a Sox game more than being trapped on a lake with this blowhard. "Mr. Bower, what is it you want to talk to me about?"

Bower gazed across the water as if trying to decide whether to part it. "My wife and Michelle Connelly are friends, you know."

I was more confused than irritated when I said, "Why would I know that? I've never met either of them."

Bower looked at me as if I was jaggging him. "You don't know Michelle Connelly? Used to be Michelle Mitchell? She changed back to her maiden name after the divorce."

Goddamn right I knew Michelle Mitchell. Her husband Doug set in motion the events that kept me away from Lake City all these years. Michelle was blameless and my memories of her were favorable, though tinged with sympathy. What Doug's selfishness had cost her was beyond measure. "I hadn't heard."

"It was Michelle's idea I talk to you. I guess you did some work for her a while back."

"Her mother-in-law, actually."

“What kind of job was it? If you don’t mind me asking.” Bower sat forward in anticipation.

“I don’t mind. I’m just not going to tell you.” He didn’t like that. “Any more than I’d tell someone else about your business.”

He recovered quickly, though not quick enough to fool someone trained to spot lies. “That’s good. You passed the test.” Relaxed into the chair. “My wife Evelyn had an incident a couple of weeks ago.”

That was all he said. Resumed gazing possessively across the lake. Maybe he was testing my interrogation skills, now that I’d proven my discretion. “What kind of incident?”

“Traffic accident.”

“Is she all right?” I said, wondering why it wasn’t her telling me this.

“She was a witness.”

I didn’t consider that to be as complete an answer as he apparently did. Found myself on the cusp of having to decide which was worse: kissing his ass for details or spending half the night on this goddamn boat while he parceled them out with an eyedropper.

Much as I hated kissing ass, the only thing I spend half a night on these days is passing water. “Mr. Bower, what happened, and what do you want me to do about it?”

His already florid face deepened a shade. “Evelyn was coasting to a stop for a traffic light. There were two cars in front of her. One had already stopped.”

He paused until I wondered if he expected me to deduce what happened next. “And the other car?”

“Drove right into the back of the one at the light. Not full speed, but hard enough for Evelyn to hear the impact.”

Another hiatus. I said, “I’m not an insurance investigator.” Not for bullshit like this, anyway.

“This isn’t about insurance. Goddamnit, pay attention and let me finish the story. Evelyn got out to see if everyone was all right. She walked up and the guy in the middle car, the one at fault, told her to get back in her car and go about her business. Aggressive about it. Evelyn was frightened, especially since she had our grandchildren in the car.”

Bower looked across the water as if composing himself. When his body language implied we could proceed, I said, “What did she do then?”

Your wife.”

“She sure as hell didn’t back down. She kept walking toward the first car to see if everyone was all right until the driver in the second car, the guy who told her to go back, got out.”

More waiting. “What did he do?”

“He told Evelyn and the other woman to get back in their cars or they’d be sorry. Now Evelyn, she doesn’t back down from anyone.” Not backing down appeared to be Evelyn’s salient quality. “She told him she was going to see if the other woman, the one he hit, was all right.”

A break for refreshment. Dragging information from Bower he supposedly wanted me to have was tedious as picking head lice. “Did she?”

Bower finished his beer. Crumpled the can in one hand as if he were the destroyer of worlds. “Did she what?”

Christ on a crutch. “Did she see to the other woman?”

“The guy pulled a gun.” Now Bower had my attention. “Started waving it around, carrying on about how they both needed to get the fuck back in their cars or they’d be sorry.”

“Then what happened?”

Bower’s disgust with my lack of acumen was obvious. “What do you think? She got back in the car. She had our grandkids with her for crissakes.”

The next intermission was so long I began to wonder if the show was over. “Then what?”

“He drove away.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all she told me.”

“What did Evelyn do after she got back in the car?”

“Took the kids home.”

“Did she have any interaction with the other woman? The one who got hit?”

“No. All she wanted after that was to go somewhere safe.”

“Did she call the police?”

“Uh, no. She thought the other woman, the one who got hit, did.”

The story was weird enough and had enough holes to be true. “Where do I come in?”

“The police aren’t doing shit. I want you to find out why and get some answers.”

“You’re sure it was reported? That could be why nothing is happening.”

“Take my word for it. It was reported.”

Taking Bower’s word for anything up to and including tonight’s weather was risky, but he was talking about no more than a day’s work. Maybe only half. “Where did it happen? I have contacts on the Chicago police. I can make a few calls—”

“It didn’t happen in Chicago.”

“Where did it happen?”

“Lundy.”

“Where’s Lundy?”

“You know where Normal is?”

Nowhere near Lake City, that’s for sure. “About two hours toward St. Louis on I-55.”

“That general area.”

“What was your wife doing way down there?”

Bower hit me with a look I suspected his employees knew well. “Where it happened doesn’t matter. What that son of a bitch did isn’t right. Something needs to be done and the police aren’t doing it.”

What he was asking could have been handled by opening a routine, aboveboard case. A bad feeling about what lay at the end of this rainbow was coming into focus. I added another twenty percent to my takeaway. “Have you asked them? The Lundy police.”

“Several times. They keep giving me the same runaround about how they can’t discuss an ongoing investigation. Like they were working on some national security matter.”

“Don’t get too upset over that. Not discussing open cases is an actual thing. That might just be their way of asking for some room to work.”

“I have a right to know what happened. Evelyn was scared shitless. Still is.”

Sounded like maybe Evelyn finally encountered a situation she should have backed down from. “Speaking of your wife, it would be helpful if I could talk to her.”

His voice made it clear that decision had been made. “No. She might have PTSD or something. I just told you everything she knows.”

“I’m a trained investigator, Mr. Bower. I know how to ask questions that might get information you didn’t.”

“About things she doesn’t want to talk about. She told me everything. Now I’ve told you.”

I asked just for the hell of it. “She didn’t happen to get the guy’s license plate, did she?”

“Yeah.”

This pause lasted until even Bower must have wondered why I wasn’t asking while I added another ten percent. “Are you willing to share that with me? The plate number? There’s a good chance it’ll be useful.”

He made me wait five full seconds before giving it to me from memory. Dick.

Neither of us spoke on the return trip. He backed the boat into the boathouse. I helped him tie it down. I told him what it would cost as we crossed the lawn.

Bower stopped walking. “That’s a lot of money.” Made it sound like *half a million dollars*.

“What you’re asking me to do is something we could’ve opened a regular case for. The fact that you came to me on the down low and asked to keep it off the books means you want me to do something neither of us can afford to let see the light of day. That costs.”

“I assume you want something in advance.”

“Half. Cash is preferable, but I’ll take a check made out to cash.”

Bower produced a roll of bills that would have choked a horse. Handed it to me. “Check okay for the rest?” It was. “I’ll expect daily reports.”

He could expect whatever he wanted. “I don’t work that way. Anything comes up I think you should know, I’ll call you. I’ll go down there first thing Monday morning and won’t work on anything else until I’m done, at which time I’ll give you a complete report. Orally.”

Bower stopped walking. “This is Friday. Why waste the weekend?”

“From a practical perspective, I’m not packed, have done no preparation, and the people I’ll need to talk to will be a lot harder to round up on a weekend. On a personal note, I promised to take my daughter to the

aquarium tomorrow and the Sox game on Sunday. I'll pack up and do some prep after I take her back to her mother and be on the road early Monday morning."

"You're wasting two full days."

Enough was enough. "If you can find someone else to take your off-the-books case and hit the ground running, feel free. I'm starting on Monday."

CHAPTER TWO

Caroline was thirteen and getting into all the things a middle-schooler gets into: shopping, movies with friends instead of Mom or Dad, shopping, parties at friends' houses, shopping, making her own fashion decisions (at least trying to), and, when her schedule allowed, shopping.

Boys had yet to become a preoccupation; they didn't worry me. When the time came, I'd find a way to be at her mother's house at the same time as Lothario. Let him notice the .45 under my arm. If I still had doubts, I'd suggest he Google me. I'd killed seven men more or less legitimately. If that didn't give him pause, he was too stupid to interest Caroline for more than a couple of days. Problem averted, either way.

I was tying my shoes in preparation for going to the aquarium when Caroline asked if we could stop at an Apple store on our way into town.

"Sure. What do you need?"

"My earbuds are messed up. The troubleshooting guide says the magnets are probably bad and I should see a genius and get new ones."

"The one on Michigan Avenue okay?"

"Is that pretty much on our way to the aquarium?"

"Fifteen minutes down Lake Shore Drive." I waited to see if she'd bring it up herself. Went on without her. "Since we'll be in the neighborhood, we might as well stop at the Billy Goat Tavern for lunch."

"Do we have time?"

"The aquarium's open till six. Plenty of time if we get a move on. The Billy Goat shouldn't be too busy this early on a Saturday."

We'd gone as far as the Hillside Strangler on the Eisenhower Expressway when Caroline asked how much I knew about earbuds.

"Depends. What do you want to know?"

"Magnets."

"What about them?"

"The website said the problem with mine is that the magnets are bad."

"That could happen."

"Why do earbuds need magnets?"

"Why do you think? To keep them in your ears."

There was a time I could amuse myself by telling her just about anything. We were shopping a few years ago and I pointed to a door with a sign reading FIRE DOOR. DO NOT OPEN.

I said, “That’s stupid.”

“Why is it stupid?” nine-year-old Caroline asked.

“How are we supposed to get out?” We circled the logic on that one for the rest of the day.

Now she knew enough to call me on my most egregious “explanations.” “Magnets won’t keep earbuds in. There’s no metal in your ears.”

“There’s different kinds. These must be bone magnets.”

She knew that was bullshit, but such a statement conveyed with sufficient authority still gave her pause. The last thing she wanted was to argue, then find out I’d been right about any minute aspect. I’d break her balls for the rest of the weekend, so she decided discretion was the better part of valor and swallowed it. For now.

Caroline wanted to be a doctor but if Apple had any sense they’d pay her whatever it took to work as a product evangelist. She pointed out everything in the store that was an upgrade over what I had, which was everything. Full marks to her for never being dismissive or acting superior. I had no doubt she genuinely believed Apple products would improve my life. She might have been right. My problem with Apple products wasn’t the quality of their equipment. It was:

The price.

The fact I learned everything I know about computers on Windows-based machines and that’s what I was comfortable with.

The price.

They’re damned expensive, too.

I eavesdropped on her conversation with the genius but didn’t participate. The topic of magnets holding the buds in your ears did not come up. Apparently this kid wasn’t as much of a genius as Apple wanted people to think.

We left The Apple Store – “The Orchard” as I called it when I wanted to show my absence of reverence – and walked down the stairs to the Billy Goat for cheeseburgers. I’d been there only a week or so ago, but I would have gone anywhere Caroline wanted. Most of what I did on our weekends

recently was drop her off places. Friends' houses. Movies. Malls. I'd find a library or fast-food joint and read until it came time to pick her up. She knew I was reachable and handy if she needed me. Every time I took her somewhere I knew my shelf life as the primary man in her life was that much less. Any adjustments were on me.

I dropped my straw as we situated ourselves. Caught it on the first bounce, a clear application of the five-second rule. Wiped my hand along the shaft and was about to put it into my cup when Caroline's innate germaphobia overwhelmed her.

"You're not going to put that disgusting thing in your mouth, are you?"

I gave her the *how stupid do you think I am?* look. "Don't be insulting." Reversed the straw so the other end went into the cup.

"Dad! That's just as bad."

I raised an index finger to make a point. "Not really. Did you know that Coke can take rust off metal? What chance does anything on the floor here have against that kind of power?"

That logic was too stupid to either accept or argue with. She was stymied.

Remembering the earlier magnet discussion, and knowing the day might come when I'd have to depend on her to take care of me, I threw her a bone. Crumpled the straw. Rose to get another. "You win. This time. I understand you're making an inventory of what's bad for us in preparation for medical school, but remember this: if everything that could kill us, did, there'd be no one left."

The aquarium had nothing dramatically new, which was fine. We spent a few pleasant hours wandering among our finned friends and talking about them and school and baseball and movies and life in general. I'd lost track of how many times we'd seen the dolphin show; it was as much fun as ever, especially on a hot day when we scored seats in the splash zone. We took a break near the beluga whales to decide what to do about supper.

I treasured these simple moments with Caroline. I genuinely enjoyed her company and took advantage of every reasonable opportunity as my statute of limitations approached. We ate at the Woodridge Fuddruckers and went home to broaden her cultural horizons by watching *The Man Who Would be King*. She was old enough to watch *Jaws* but I had decided to

hold off on it until after beach season, though shark attacks were at a record low in Lake Michigan.

* * *

We hooked up with Jan Rusiewicz at our seats in the stadium I still insisted on calling Sox Park; “Guaranteed Rate Field” was the *nom du jour*. A lot of old-timers still called it Comiskey Park, but I’d learned enough baseball history to know Charlie Comiskey was a penurious prick. There was a reason Arnold Rothstein’s minions went to the Sox to fix the series, and it wasn’t because of the players’ undying loyalty to Comiskey.

Jan and I worked together when I was a patrol officer in Chicago. A detective now, she was about to make rank if the scuttlebutt I heard was true, which, of course, it always is. Whether she got the promotion or not, she was a hell of a cop and would be a great boss.

I asked her to join us because Jan was more like a sister to Caroline than the aunt one might suppose based on the age disparity. Caroline was an only child and Jan had three brothers. Their impromptu surrogate arrangement served them well. We didn’t get together as much since Jan got married, but hubby was cool with her spending time with Caroline and me so long as we didn’t abuse the privilege. He would have come today but for a prior engagement. He also knew that between Jan talking to Caroline about girl stuff and talking to me about cop stuff, he’d have nothing to do except watch the game. Jim was a football guy. Jan married him anyway. Love is truly blind.

The White Sox were having a typical season: one good trade away from winning ninety games and one injury away from losing ninety. Perfect day for baseball, the Sox up 2 – 0 in the fourth inning, so I sat back and pretended not to eavesdrop on Jan and Caroline’s conversation.

I enjoyed listening to them talk, if only for the happy cadences of their voices. Jan was a trained listener and would ask questions or make comments when Caroline came up for air, which wasn’t often; my daughter could out-talk an auctioneer. In addition to being relaxing, listening to them gave me intel on things Caroline might not have told me directly, never mind I was sitting right next to her.

Sixth inning, Sox up 4 – 3, and a foul ball popped over the screen, landed on an empty seat, and came so neatly to my hand all I had to do was open it to make the catch. Hundreds of ball games, my first foul ball.

I gave it to Caroline, who examined it like an archeological artifact. She'd expected the ball to be whiter, so I explained how the balls were rubbed up with special mud before the game to make them easier for the pitchers to grip.

Then she noticed the writing:

* OFFICIAL *

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

Robert D. Manfred Jr.

COMMISSIONER

“What does the commissioner do?”

I didn't have time to list all the ways Rob Manfred was fucking up the game without making Caroline late for the first day of school next month. “He signs the baseballs.”

A pause. Then, “That's all?”

Jan had seen this act before and knew not to interrupt. “Do you have any idea how many baseballs they go through in a day?” Caroline did not, and who could blame her? Good thing she had me for a father. “The average game has, I don't know, three hundred pitches, give or take. Balls hit into the stands are souvenirs, and any ball that gets dirty or scuffed is thrown out of play, so the average life expectancy of a major league baseball is six pitches.” I was on safe ground there. I'd seen an article in *The Athletic* a couple of weeks ago. “So that's fifty balls a game, absolute minimum.”

“That's not a lot if it's all he does.”

“He needs spares in case the game goes extra innings. Not to mention there are an average of fifteen games a day. Even if he only uses fifty a game, multiply that by fifteen and you get...” Waited for her to do the math.

“Seven hundred and fifty.”

“So seven hundred fifty is the rock bottom minimum he has to have ready every day.”

“That’s still not a lot if it’s all he does.”

“It’s harder than it looks, writing that small on a round smooth surface. Remember, the balls haven’t been rubbed up yet when he signs them.”

“Why doesn’t he sign them before they sew the covers on?”

Jan smiled and it occurred to me that this time it might be Caroline jerking *me* around. “They tried that. It didn’t work.”

“Why not?”

My first answer had been incomplete to give me time to come up with a better one. “Sewing the hide together stretches it. That distorts the signature. It’s barely legible as it is.”

Caroline gave me a look like she *knew* that was bullshit but had decided to give me a pass. “Still, that’s *all* he does? How long can it take to sign seven hundred-fifty baseballs?”

“Look at it this way: if it takes ten seconds to sign a ball—and that’s pretty quick for a man of Rob Manfred’s intelligence—that’s six balls a minute.” I stuck out my tongue to show I was mathing. “That’s two hours and five minutes. Leave time to eat lunch, go to the bathroom, and remember where he parked his car, and that’s a full day for a man of his ilk. Particularly since he has to work ahead to cover the weekend games.”

Caroline looked at me with an expression not unlike an entomologist examining a fruit fly on a pin. “Can I have some Dippin’ Dots?”

“You know where they are?” She did. “Jan? You want some? On me.” She did. I took a twenty from my wallet. Handed it to Caroline. Held onto it until I had her attention. “Steal *none* of this money.” She looked confused. *Deadwood* was not yet part of her cultural literacy. “I expect change.” She laughed and scurried off, excited that I let her go alone.

Jan watched Caroline scamper up the aisle. “You let her go by herself?”

“She’s thirteen and the Dippin’ Dots stand is twenty feet from the aisle. Besides, I know the usher up there. She’ll make sure nothing happens.”

“You don’t leave much to chance, do you?”

“Not if it can hurt me.”

Caroline disappeared around the corner, freeing Jan and me to talk shop. “Did that information I got for you last week help?”

I snapped my fingers. The second investigation I did for Jason Worthington led me to an arrest his daughter had a year ago. Jan checked the file for known associates. “Thanks for reminding me. I didn’t want to say anything in front of Caroline. One of the KAs, Leon Tolliver, said he wanted to do the dead girl a solid and slipped her some of the good stuff. Practically uncut. She’d only gone as far as chipping. Chilled her right out.”

“I’m guessing he says it was an accident.” I nodded. “Do you believe him?”

“Not at first. I pressed him for details and he fell apart so hard I almost felt sorry for the skinny fuck.”

“What did you do?”

“To him? Nothing. He was hurting bad enough already. I did give his info to Narcotics as a low-level dealer who was squeezable and a potential CI.”

“How did the girl’s father take it?”

I shrugged. “Nothing I could’ve told him would make him feel better. At least this way he can tell himself Cindy was only experimenting, and her evil dealer did her in.”

Jan watched a couple of pitches. “Did he ask you to kill the dealer?”

“Never gave him a chance to. Told him nothing about the kid and that I was finished with the whole business. He wants to find someone to take it from there?” I opened my hands. “That’s on him.”

I knew this made Jan uncomfortable. I wasn’t supposed to have access to what she gave me. Her changing the subject was no surprise. “You have anything else coming up?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Tomorrow morning I’m driving to Lundy, down by Normal. Guy wants me to look into a traffic accident.”

I noticed motion along our row. “Here’s our Dippin’ Dots, right on time.”

Caroline struggled to hand off three cups of *faux* ice cream. “Your change is in my pocket.”

“Is it less than four dollars?”

Her face fell. “I didn’t know it was so expensive.”

Another reason I'd let her go alone. It was time she learned how much things cost. "How much less?"

"Two dollars."

"So six bucks apiece times three for a total of eighteen dollars?" She nodded, looking unsure. "Keep the change. It's your tip for going." She brightened considerably. "Don't be too happy. Standard tip for eighteen dollars is three-sixty. I still stiffed you."

We stayed to the end, per Forte family policy. Not that it was a hardship. The Sox won 5 – 4 on a walk-off single in the ninth inning.

The women needed bathroom breaks on the way out. Jan emerged first. "Your new case. In Lundy."

"What about it?"

"I've heard bad things."

"About Lundy? How bad can it be? There aren't three thousand people living there."

"It has a reputation in law enforcement."

"For what?"

Jan took a few seconds to decide how much to tell me. "The state police had something going there a few years ago and got stonewalled by the locals. Do you know Marian Bradshaw?"

"We've met. Can't say I know her."

"Did you get along?"

"Well enough for her to tell me a few things off the record."

"She might be worth talking to. It was her they locked out. ISP ended up calling off the investigation for lack of evidence, but Marian was sure there was more to be had and the local cops buried it. She didn't know if they were actively involved or just covering up."

"How do you know all this?"

"I met her at an IAWP meeting right after it happened."

"IAWP?"

"International Association of Women Police. Some of those small towns don't like working with us big city cops. I banged heads with a guy last year, said we treated them like rubes."

"Which you do."

"I don't!" She swatted my arm. Thought. "I try not to."

“I’m sure you succeed better than most. Rube skin is notoriously thin.”

Caroline approached, working her iPhone. “Can you drop me at Tyler’s house? They’re cooking out.”

“Did you ask your mother?”

“I just texted her.”

“If she says yes before we get to Arlington Heights, then sure. Either she or Tyler’s folks will have to get you home, though. I have work early in the morning.”

Diane approved the stop at Tyler’s before we cleared the parking lot. On the drive I considered adding “Chauffeur” to my business card. Might as well get paid for it, and it had a lot more class than “Unpaid Uber Driver.”

CHAPTER THREE

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I left Bolingbrook at first light with a Tervis of Irish Breakfast tea and a half-dozen mini-donuts. Light traffic on I-55 allowed me to enjoy the scenery.

A lot of people don't think the Midwest even has scenery. *Flat as a pool table. No trees. Nothing but farms.* Most of those folks only see the terrain through an airplane window at thirty thousand feet and five hundred miles an hour. I was right down in it.

I grew up in western Pennsylvania. Beautiful country, trees everywhere, but visibility is rarely more than a half mile before the next hill resets the horizon. From the highest points trees and rivers stretch seemingly forever. Lovely as those vistas are, the hills create a feeling of isolation.

Driving through Illinois that morning gave me a sense of infinite space. The sun rose on my left to light an endless horizon. Any direction I looked was a virtual sea of agriculture: corn, wheat, soybeans. Other things I couldn't identify. The skyline was so distant I felt I could see the curvature of the earth. The sense of space and freedom, that I could go anywhere I wanted, was liberating.

Inbound Chicago traffic fell to a trickle as I passed Joliet and I-80. Mostly corn fields here. Gas stations, truck stops, convenience stores, fast-food restaurants, and chain motels clustered around most, not all, interchanges. Some things about farm country are immutable for both better and worse.

I grew up in the outer reaches of a small city. Lundy was practically a village. The main street—Main Street—had angled, pull-in parking. Downtown ran three blocks with the standard occupants: grocery store (not a supermarket), pharmacy (not a chain), locally owned Ace Hardware, White Hen Pantry with gas pumps, auto repair, body shop, Tractor Supply, urgent care, and several smaller businesses, including, praise be, a bookstore. The public school and library sat a block off the main drag. On School Street.

Driving through town and back took five minutes, round trip. I pulled into the parking lot of a building with a neon DINER sign at 7:15.

A small bell attached to the door announced my presence. A sign near the cash register read PLEASE SEAT YOURSELF. The counter was full, the booths about half. I picked one where I could see the entire room and made myself available.

Less than a minute later a quintessential Midwestern farm girl of about twenty came over. Cuter than she was pretty, a tendril of black hair hung between Windex blue eyes. A rumor of freckles dappled her cheeks. Name tag read "Laurie." She was adorable.

Laurie blew the strand off her face. I must have chuckled. She looked herself up and down. "Guess I must look pretty stereotypical. All I need is to be chewing gum."

"Popping it," I said.

"I never learned how to do that. Stopped chewing altogether when I got braces." Smiled a thousand watts' worth. "Came out all right, though. I guess my parents got their money's worth."

"They sure did. Can I get some hot tea and a menu, please?"

"All we have is Lipton."

"Lipton's fine. And a menu."

"Caff or dee?"

Took me a second. "Caff. And a menu."

"The menus are right—" She pointed and frowned. "They should be on the rack with the salt and pepper and ketchup. I'll get you one. Don't go anywhere."

"Where would I go?"

"Beats me. I just met you."

I watched her walk away without lewdness. Laurie didn't inspire lewd thoughts, at least not in a man of my age and disposition. Not that I had outgrown them, but I managed to restrain my more prurient interests to women closer to my age than Caroline's.

Laurie returned a few minutes later carrying a stainless steel tray that held a ceramic cup, a stainless steel carafe large enough to fill the cup twice, and two Lipton tea bags. Cocked her hips and held her pad and pen at the ready. Spoke as if deliberately trying to duplicate the image she'd raised with the gum chewing reference. "What can I getcha?"

I smiled. "A menu."

She rolled her eyes. "Duh. Sorry. Be right back."

I watched her walk away again. She reminded me of someone, I couldn't figure out who, though I was willing to spend time bantering until I did.

She returned with the menu and produced it with a flourish. I said, "Sorry. I probably wasted your time. Just bring me three eggs over easy with bacon. Sourdough toast if you have it. White's fine if you don't."

"We have sourdough." Tapped the menu to direct my attention. "You get hash browns, too, for less than what you just asked for if you order the Plainsman breakfast. Only two eggs, though."

"Can I get a Plainsman, hold the hash browns, and an extra egg?"

"Wouldn't be a Plainsman then, would it?"

"What is this? A Monty Python routine?"

She brightened. "We have Spam!"

I used my version of the Python woman's voice. "But I don't like Spam." Laurie laughed. "Actually, I do, but today I'm in the mood for bacon. How about this? Get me a Plainsman and I'll pay for an extra egg."

She wrote. "How do you want your eggs?"

"Do they all have to be the same?"

She paused, pen an inch above the pad. "Not all the same?"

"Can I get one scrambled, one poached, and one over easy?"

She looked at me as if no one had ever asked her that before. "No one's ever asked me that before. I don't see why not."

Laurie turned toward the kitchen. I put a gentle hand on her wrist. "No one ever asked you for different kinds of eggs? How long have you worked here?"

"This is my second summer. I start my senior year at Southern in the fall."

"Carbondale?"

She nodded. "Go Salukis!"

"What's your major?"

"You'll laugh."

"Try me."

"Liberal arts. My dad says I'm majoring in unemployment with a minor in welfare."

“A lot he knows. Too many people think of college as a glorified technical school. A liberal arts degree is a wonderful thing.”

“I know, right? My advisor says a liberal arts degree teaches you how to learn so you can do anything.”

“Exactly. What do you want to do when you graduate?”

“Teach, maybe. Or journalism. I’m on the staff of *The Daily Egyptian*.”

“Investigative reporter? Digging up dirt on faculty meetings?”

Laurie flashed a self-deprecating smile. “Women’s sports.”

“Don’t be bashful. Title IX is no good if people don’t know about it.”

“I know, right? Maybe I can get a job at ESPN or something.”

“*Dio volente*.”

Her face clouded for a second. “How did you know ‘god willing’ is the school motto? Did you go to SIU?”

I almost told her I started out at an old normal school myself. I’d have been happy spending another hour bantering with her, but I’d figured out who she reminded me of. Not physically, but the aura of wholesomeness and innocence she projected. The relaxed sense of comfortable joy I got from being around her.

She reminded me of Caroline.

“You better get my food before we both get in trouble. I’d chat with you all day, but I have an appointment.”

She nodded, not put off at all. “On the way.”

“Oh, Laurie.” She stopped mid-turn. “Over easy on all the eggs.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lundy Public Safety Building housed both the police department and volunteer fire company. It would fit right in on a college campus if not for the large roll-up garage door with a backboard and hoop hung over it on the firehouse side. Behind the building a grassy field had room for softball, football, or soccer. Maple trees lined the street—Maple Street—and two edges of the parking lot.

A three-foot half wall separated the waiting area from the rest of the police department. A rail-thin woman of about fifty with reading glasses suspended from her neck sat at a receptionist's station. Behind her were half a dozen low cubicles. Farther back was a walled-off area I assumed contained the interview room and holding cells.

The receptionist smiled when I asked for the detectives' office. Said to walk to the end of the hall and turn right, I couldn't miss it. Sent me on my way unescorted.

I'd been half right about what was back there: the interview room. Next to it an unmarked door probably opened into an observation area and storage for recording equipment. Cells would be better placed downstairs to avoid having to listen to a rowdy suspect raising hell six feet away.

The cubicle at the end of the short hallway had higher walls than the others, lending an aura of privacy, if not the actual thing. The sign by the entrance read "Detective James Eastman."

I knocked on the frame and asked Eastman which detective was working the hit-and-run from week before last. He turned and gave a wary smile. "That would be me, since I'm the only detective we have. What can I do for you?"

He stood to shake my hand. A shade under six feet, square faced and solid through the body, hair cut tight and right. He wore a navy golf shirt with "Lundy PD" embroidered on the left breast and "Detective" over the right. Khaki tactical pants and black Under Armour police shoes.

I didn't imagine small-town cops liked having their time wasted any more than I did, so I identified myself and got right to it. "I've been asked to check on what progress you're making on the investigation."

Eastman resumed his seat, relaxed and attentive. I suspected he took a good statement. “Who asked you to do it?”

“I’d prefer not to say.”

“You understand you have no privilege unless you’ve been hired by a lawyer on behalf of someone else.”

“I know how it works. I’m only here to ask a few informal questions.”

“Ask what you want, but bear in mind I can’t—”

“Talk about an ongoing investigation. I get it.”

Eastman opened a hand for me to continue. Did not offer me a seat in the chair stuffed into the corner, but that could have been because two men our sizes in a space that confined might have squeezed all the air out of his cubby. At least that was how I chose to interpret it.

I leaned against the frame of the cubicle, Mr. Casual. “I’m assuming you know who this guy is. Would you be willing to share that with me?”

I already knew who he was. TV shows love to portray PIs as kissing ass to get cops to run license plates for them and their cop buddies fussing about how much trouble they can get into. The truth is we have access to way more sensitive information than who owns the car a plate is attached to. I asked because I wanted to see where Eastman drew the line on what he’d talk about.

He drew it right up my ass. “You’re right. We know. Would I mind sharing that with you? Personally, no. As a sworn officer, I can’t. Ongoing investigation.”

“Is the file still open?”

He showed me a well-practiced apologetic smile. “Ongoing investigation.”

“So it’s open?”

“Ongoing investigation.”

“Are charges pending?”

“Ongoing investigation.”

“Do the witness statements hold up to scrutiny?”

“Ongoing investigation.”

This went on another few minutes as I tried different approaches to the same questions, looking for a breach in Eastman’s affable stone wall. His recitations of “ongoing investigation” took on the same cadence as a

mobster or insurrectionist taking the Fifth Amendment, having already decided those were the only two words they'd speak.

While the stone wall remained intact, I did manage to breach his demeanor. "Mr. Forte, I don't mean to be rude, but I have plenty of work to do."

"On this case?"

An edge crept into his voice. "Ongoing investigation. Is there anything else?"

I took a second to make sure my voice was smooth as warm wax. "Detective Eastman, I used to be a cop. I get the 'ongoing investigation' business. I'm also being paid to look into this, and I'm going to. I came to you as a courtesy, so we don't step on each other's work. Point me in the right direction and I promise to share anything I find."

"You think you're doing me a favor, picking my brain for information so you can get paid for it? Give me a break. Do you know what the four great lies are?"

I knew three and had a pretty good idea of the fourth, considering the context. I pretended not to. Let him have his fun.

Eastman held up a finger as he recited each. "One: the check is in the mail. Two: I'll respect you in the morning. Three: I won't come in your mouth. Four: I'll share whatever I discover with the police. Tell your story walking, pal. You found your way in. It's the same route out."

Not the first time I'd heard some variation of that speech. "All right, but I still have a client and I still have a job to do."

Eastman showed a smile I bet he thought was tough. "We cross paths again on this and maybe I'll see how you like an obstruction charge."

The wax in my voice hardened. "*Now* who's turn is it to give who a break? Since 'maybe' is the operative word in your obstruction threat, *maybe* you should take ten minutes to check me out. I can provide cop references. I imagine you're stretched pretty thin, one-man shop like you are. I can help you."

Eastman jerked a thumb for me to leave. Turned back toward his computer.

I straightened. "Suit yourself. I gave you a chance to have me on the inside pissing out. You'd rather have me on the outside pissing in, my conscience is clear."

That reacquired his attention. “Fuck with me and I’ll see about your license.”

Given Eastman’s attitude, it had only been a matter of time before that hoary threat showed up. “Knock yourself out. It’s been tried by people with a lot more juice than you, yet here I am.”

I left before he could manufacture a witty reply. Maybe big city cops aren’t wrong when they treat these yokels like rubes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Marian Bradshaw was no longer with the Illinois State Police, and they wouldn't give me her contact information. I had to call Jan Rusiewicz to learn Marian had retired and taken a job at the University of Illinois in Champagne-Urbana. The campus was only an hour and a half down the road from Lundy, and face-to-face meetings are always better. I phoned and Marian agreed to see me later that afternoon.

The first time we met I found her balanced on a chair watering a plant hanging from the ceiling of her office. The years had added a few lines to her face and grayed her hair, but she was still trim, energetic, and plant loving. Half a dozen occupied her office, none suspended from the ceiling.

Most of Marian's work with ISP focused on supporting small towns with police departments that were in over their heads. That was how we met, when she assisted Lake City police on the Mitchell case. Another reminder of a period I liked to keep buried as deep as possible.

She offered me coffee, tea, or water; I chose water. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

"You said you had questions about Lundy. I have questions about Lundy. Maybe we can help each other."

I feigned shock. "Maybe we can help each other"? Chatting with Lundy PD gave me the impression cops had that phrase surgically removed from their brains and I didn't get the memo."

"I'm not a cop anymore. I still have friends who are, though. Maybe we can help them. What's on your mind?"

"Rumor has it you found the Lundy police to be less than fully cooperative."

"That's fair and extremely diplomatic."

"How bad was it?"

"Who did you speak to this morning?"

"Detective John Eastman."

Her nod told me she knew him. "What did you ask him about?"

"My client's wife was threatened by a hit-and-run driver. He wants to know what the police are doing about it."

“And the Lundy police won’t tell him anything.”

“Right.”

“What did Detective Eastman tell you?”

“That he couldn’t discuss an ongoing investigation.”

“I’ll bet he said that even if you asked him the time of day.”

“Pretty much. He ended the conversation with the standard insecure cop threats to charge me with obstruction, take away my license, and suspend my Facebook account.”

“He couldn’t say those things to state troopers, but that’s about the same tone and respect we got.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what were you working on?”

“Well, since the file’s closed,” Marian smiled, “and I’m retired, I guess I can tell you. As long as you promise me this is for background only.”

“Nothing you tell me will leave this room.”

She nodded. “Five, maybe six years ago we received a complaint about possible smuggling activity in Lundy. Trucks hauling things in and out of town at unusual hours, things like that.”

“Lots of trucking companies work nights. Less traffic.”

“There is no trucking or hauling company in Lundy. Did you drive through town?”

“This morning. Twice. Took me almost five minutes.”

“Exactly. The whole town is a few blocks of businesses that exist to serve the farmers and the meat packing plant.”

“Maybe the trucks were picking up from the packers.”

“The packing plant said they don’t work nights. We took a longer look at the town and none of the truck traffic we observed seemed unusual, and we watched twenty-four hours a day.”

“Did you inspect any of the trucks?”

“We never had enough for a warrant.”

There are ways to search without a warrant. Real or concocted weight violations, fabricated safety issues, driving described as erratic. The evidence wouldn’t hold up in court and couldn’t be used as probable cause for a proper warrant. The point was to see if there was a case there.

I’d heard Marian Bradshaw went by the book, so I didn’t press it. “Sounds like a bullshit case. What I can’t understand is why Lundy PD

asked for help if they weren't going to cooperate."

"They didn't ask. We received a direct complaint, apparently from a civilian. The tip was anonymous and we never got a name. We took it as seriously as we did because the caller had confirmable facts that piqued our interest."

"But you couldn't find enough to sustain the investigation."

"That's right. I still can't shake the feeling someone there tipped the operation and they shut it down until we left." She swallowed water.

"Here's where it gets interesting. About a week after we left town, Lundy had its first homicide in over thirty years. It might interest you to know it was a hit-and-run."

"Any arrests?"

Marian smiled at me over her bottle as she refastened the cap. "We wondered if there was a chance their victim might be our complainant, so we called and asked if they'd like some help, since none of their cops had ever worked a homicide before."

"None of them?"

"Not a one. We were genuinely interested in helping, but I admit our motives weren't pure. We also wanted to look for a connection to our case."

"Was there?"

She sat forward and smiled at me without humor. Marian Bradshaw was a pleasant-looking woman, but the smile she gave me was not something I'd like to see from across the table in an interview room. "The chief wouldn't take my call. The administrator said he was out of the office."

"You call him back?"

"I didn't have to. The next day, bright and early, I heard personally from their state senator."

"Thanking you for your interest?"

"Informing me that his constituents in Lundy were tired of ISP treating them like red-headed retarded stepchildren, and that if I didn't leave them to their business he'd take it up with the director personally."

"You let it drop?"

"I went to my major, but he gave me the old 'that's dog shit, don't step in it' speech. I would've loved to open a corruption investigation but

nothing I could use as a fig leaf presented itself. Then I retired, and, frankly, it doesn't mean that much to me anymore."

She left a space until I made eye contact. "Now, if information came to light that provided an opportunity for the state to look more closely at what goes on in Lundy, I still know people who'd love to hear about it."

This sounded like something I could get my teeth into. "Are there any trees you think might be more prone to shaking than others?"

"I have an idea, but I can't prove anything."

"That's okay. It wasn't you who told me."

This smile was friendlier. "You and I should've met earlier. We'd have gotten along. The only thing in town that produces the kind of revenue needed to shut things down so completely is the packing plant. Do you have a name for your driver?"

"Kenneth Dowd."

Marian's eyes rolled up as she thought. "It's been a while since I thought about this, but you could do worse than to see if Dowd or anyone close to him has a connection to that plant. Like I said, this is a hunch, but it's been several years and nothing has happened to make me like it any less."

"Thanks. I'll take a look from that angle before I go around poking random bears."

"Be careful. If the hit-and-run victim *was* our complainant, then the local police are willing to cover up murder." Gave me a second to grasp the gravity of her comment. "There's not much I can do for you directly, but like I said, I still have friends at ISP who might be able to help if you have questions." She took a business card and wrote something on the back. "Call Sergeant Bergin in Troop Five if you come up with anything usable. He worked the case I told you about with me and doesn't feel any better about how it turned out than I do."

I was grateful for the offer and said so. We shook hands. I was halfway to the door when she spoke.

"If you don't mind me asking, whatever happened with that business in Lake City? I heard the mother and father divorced and the chief of police retired and moved out west. Any of that have to do with you?"

I didn't mind Marian asking. I'd also never told a soul the full story of that investigation—not even the client—and had no intention of ever doing

so. “Not to my knowledge. I never found anything worth reporting.”

CHAPTER SIX

An early breakfast followed by a lunch of two Slim Jims and a Coke on the road to Champagne weren't going to get it done for a growing boy such as myself. Nothing along the way back appealed to me and the Plainsman I ate at the anonymous diner encouraged repeat business.

Quieter than expected at seven in the evening until I remembered people up before the sun have eaten and gone home by now. Laurie was waiting tables, apparently solo. I took the same seat I had for breakfast and scanned the menu.

Laurie smiled when she saw me. Walked over and assumed the same stereotypical waitress pose she'd tried before. Even pretended to snap gum she wasn't chewing. "What can I getcha?"

"Are you the only person who works here?"

"There's a cook in the kitchen. Bus boy's around somewhere. Probably out back trying to get high."

"No other waitresses?"

She shrugged. "It's vacation season and I'm the new kid filling in. I work doubles at least twice a week. It's good money for a summer job."

"Not much of a summer, though."

"I know, right?" She blew the same strand of hair from between her eyes. "It's okay. I make up for it on spring break." Gave what she might have considered to be a knowing wink.

She had customers waiting, so I cut to the chase. "I'll have the liver, and I want to have to look for it under the pile of onions. Mashed potatoes with brown gravy and corn on the cob."

"Rolls or biscuits?"

"Rolls."

"Anything to drink?"

"You serve Coke or Pepsi?"

"Pepsi."

"Lemonade?" She nodded. "Iced tea?" Another affirmation. "Bring me an Arnold Palmer."

"You one of those Coke snobs?"

“I have no use for a cola that doesn’t clear my sinuses.”

Laurie went about her business. I opened the semi-weekly local paper and read about:

A flower show.

How to enter something in the county fair (4-H members could do it through the club).

Cheerleader tryouts.

Fireman’s carnival, week after next in the field behind the Public Safety Building.

The American Legion baseball team was kicking ass and taking names. (Lundy didn’t have its own post. Their kids played for the next town over.)

Resurfacing Main Street. Parking restrictions would be removed from side streets while work was underway.

A local woman had her first novel published by a small press: *Death in the Day Lilies*.

The whole paper was eight pages, at least three of which were ads.

I worked in Chicago and lived in the suburbs, but I grew up in the semi-rural part of a small city. Spent parts of each summer at my great uncle’s farm. I knew small towns weren’t as idyllic as some liked to portray them. People’s problems are everywhere and, irony of ironies, privacy does not increase as population density decreases. Still, I’d see stars tonight and need to stay alert for animals crossing the road. Lundy was much more similar to my origin story than where I lived and worked now. The resemblance almost made me nostalgic. Almost.

Laurie brought my Arnold Palmer. Waited for me to give it a good stir and take a sip. “How is it?”

I made the *faux* chewing motion wine tasters sometimes affect. “A little light on the lemonade, but good.” She reached for the glass. “No, it’s fine. Half the fun of an Arnold Palmer is how no two are exactly the same.”

Laurie looked around the room. Whatever had been left of the rush was gone. “I’m kind of surprised to see you here again.”

“You didn’t think I liked my Plainsman?”

“You liked it all right. I almost didn’t send the plate back to be washed. It’s just that most of the people who eat here are either local or on their way somewhere else.”

“You may have to get used to me if dinner’s as good as breakfast. I expect I’ll be around a few days.”

“Really? I mean, I’m happy to see you and all, but no one comes here for vacation and if you were visiting family you’d be eating with them. Are you here for work?”

“Yep. I’m working.”

“What do you do? Sorry. That’s rude. We don’t get a lot of people from out of town and it’s easy to get carried away.” A cloud crossed her face. “You’re not here to buy up some farms, are you?”

“Calm down. It’s nothing like that.” I pretended to check the room. “I don’t like this to get around because people will be coming out of the woodwork with suggestions, but I’m scouting locations for a movie.”

Not the first time I’d used that pretext. Movies bring money into small towns without permanently disrupting the way of life. People were also more likely to talk to me if they saw themselves as civic boosters instead of gossips or snitches. It also never hurts when someone thinks they might score a part as an extra.

“Shut up! What kind of movie?”

A good detective is a gifted improviser. Or bullshitter. “Western. Principal photography will take place in Monument Valley, but we need a place to stand in for where the hero grew up before he went to Utah to chase savages and desperadoes.”

“That would be so cool. I can show you some places if you want me to. I know everywhere around here.”

“I may take you up on that. Right now I’m driving around trying to get a feel of the place.”

“Find anything you think you can use?”

I didn’t want to go too far down this rabbit hole. Liberal arts major, Laurie might have taken some film courses and I’d be out of my depth in a hurry. “It doesn’t really work that way. I’m just the scout. Mostly my job is to take pictures and notes so the producer and director can pick the locations they want.”

A bell rang. “Sounds like your liver is ready. I’ll be right back.”

The food was just as I’d ordered: no exposed liver under a pile of onions. I cut in and took a bite. “Outstanding. My compliments to the chef.”

“I’ll keep that to myself.”

“Why? It’s very good.”

“Herm Steinkeller’s the cook today. I know exactly what he’d say.” Huskied up her voice. “It’s liver for Christ’s sake. Put some flour on it, drop it on the grill, and don’t burn it. How hard is that?” Cleared her throat. “Herm doesn’t take compliments well.”

Laurie kept her head on a swivel to track the four other customers. Looked like an opportunity for me to get some local information without seeming too eager. “That meat packing plant I saw on the way in. Is it the only business in town? Except for the shops along the main drag here, I mean.”

“That’s about it. There are some contractors who do work on the farms when they need it, but most of them are based in Normal. Walmart’s the other side of 55, so, yeah. The packing plant is about it.”

“Are the people who run the plant local?”

“I think the guy who owns it is. At least I hear his name around town. I don’t know that much about it, away at school most of the time like I am.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. It’s just, only business in town, sometimes they like to throw their weight around. Are the people who work there from Lundy?”

“I can’t say how many, but some, sure. I have no idea how many people actually work there. It’s a little off the beaten track.” Her face clouded. “That big ugly building won’t mess up our chances to be in the movie, will it?”

I shook my head as I swallowed. “They could shoot a scene damn near in the parking lot and no one would know they weren’t looking at a farm in the 1870s. It’s all camera angles and editing.”

“That’s good.”

“Does the place have much of a presence in town?”

“What do you mean by presence?”

“Do they sponsor a Little League team? Ads in the football programs? Contribute to the county fair or anything like that?”

“I don’t remember ever seeing anything. Course, they do their business out of town mostly, so there’s not much reason for them to advertise locally.” A finger tapped her chin. “Now that you got me thinking about it, I’m not even sure there’s a sign on the fence saying what’s in there. It’s the kind of thing everyone around knows.”

“So it’s been here as long as you can remember?”

“Oh, yeah. It’s always been here to me. Gotta run.”

I hadn’t expected her to know much about the plant. I asked more to establish I liked to talk and was curious about the town than to learn anything. Future questions would seem less pointed if she had the idea I was a nosy bullshitter.

Laurie came by to chat as her duties permitted. We talked about the town and its history. She knew little or nothing about local politics or crime or the police or anything that might be of use to me. No disappointment. I remembered how checked out of local events I was when in college. She probably knew more about the situation in Lundy than I had about Penns River, and she was a lot easier to get along with than I’d been at her age.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The diner didn't serve alcohol and a couple of beers would help me sleep. I didn't keep beer around the house anymore and wouldn't buy any for the motel room because people who drink alone are alcoholics and I had enough problems as it was. Rusty's Lounge was only a small detour on my way to bed.

The inside would be right at home in a relatively decent local hotel. The bartender wore a white dress shirt, no tie, with striped garters. The tables were two- and four-seaters with candles, the ambient light forgiving without creating a trip and fall hazard. Several couples shared tables. The bar was about half full, with a two-to-one ratio of men to women.

No seats where I'd have room on both sides, so I slid in between a man on my left and a woman on my right, both already engaged in conversation with members of the opposite sex. I ordered a Leinenkugel's draft and looked for a television set. The Cubs were on, but I watched it, anyway.

I'd sucked the foam off my second beer when the man talking to the woman on my right excused himself to go to the john. She moved away to make room for him just as I shifted forward to dislodge a knot in my boxers. We bumped. Her fresh drink spilled, but my shirt and pants kept most of it from ending up on the floor.

We went through the standard ritual of mutual apologies. I volunteered to make things right. "My drink is intact. Let me replace yours. It's only fair." Continued before she got the wrong idea. "You're here with someone, and I'm only going to finish this before heading out."

Her shields came down. I waved to the bartender, a guy who looked like he'd been here a while and still hadn't got used to the idea of having to wear shirt garters. He brought her drink and I paid about half what I would expect to in Chicago.

The woman nodded in my direction. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

"My pleasure. I'm clumsy enough to make sure people don't mind too much if it happens again, but not so clumsy it'll bankrupt me."

She gave as much of a laugh as that deserved. Middle thirties was my guess. Average build with dark hair pulled away from her face and down to her shoulders. She had a quick and happy smile, but the fatigue in her eyes implied she'd seen enough of nights and bars like this.

Her companion returned, passing behind me to get to his seat. She said, "And now it's my turn" and adjusted her stool to stand. I made a show of giving her as much room as space allowed. She smiled and nodded in appreciation and went on her way.

I resumed my seat in time to see the man she was with jerk away from her glass. I pinned his other hand to the bar. "What did you put in her drink?"

His face gave him away. "What the hell are you talking about?"

I waved for the bartender. "Do me a favor. Keep this glass safe behind the bar and call the police."

Took him only a couple of seconds to put it together. Eyed the other man with disgust and reached for the glass. Romeo darted his free hand to spill everything across the bar.

"Oops." He half smiled.

I let go of his hand. Grabbed a handful of hair and slammed his face into the bar.

He turned toward me. Said, "Asshole." Not the response I had in mind, so I did it again. Harder. Liquid sloshed from both our glasses. He put a hand to his face and stayed down. Blood dribbled from his nose to the bar.

The bartender engaged. "Enough of that or I'll call the police."

I raised my hands shoulder height, palms out. "Call them, anyway. It might be nice to have this jagov on file in case something like this comes up again." The barman hesitated until I told him I would if he didn't.

It happened so quickly no one else noticed until a woman three seats down looked over and saw Bleeding Man's face. That prompted the inevitable gasp and pointing but no general tumult.

The bartender handed Bleeding Man a towel as the woman returned. She ran the last few steps. "What happened?"

I kept my voice low and even. "He put something in your drink."

"Like hell I did. He wants to take you home himself."

I raised an eyebrow. "So I...what? Broke your nose and called the police? How's that supposed to work?"

The woman looked from me to him as if trying to decide which of us had evolved a spinal column. Started to speak, pulled it back. Glared at a spot between the bartender and me. “Sometimes I wonder why I don’t just have the damn thing sewn shut.” People made room on her way out.

Then I made another mistake. I waited for the cops. Again.

The uniform arrived ten minutes later. He could have passed for Detective Eastman’s cousin. Might have been, for all I knew. Square head, stocky body, hair cut tight and right. Name tag read “Harris.” Ignored everyone except the bartender. “Was it you called us, Ace?”

Ace nodded toward Bleeding Man. Jerked a thumb my direction. “This one says he saw the one that’s bleeding put something in a woman’s drink. Asked me to hold the drink and call you. The other one knocked it over before I could and this one,” thumb toward me again, “slammed his face into the bar.”

“Twice,” Bleeding Man said through the towel.

Harris turned to me. “What’s your story?”

“What Ace said. Woman he’d been talking to went to the bathroom. He put something in her drink. I caught him.”

“I didn’t put no fucking pill in her drink.”

“I didn’t say it was a pill.”

Harris spoke to Ace. “Did it look to you like he knocked the drink over on purpose?”

“I’m no mind reader, but he had to reach across his body to do it, so, yeah. It sure looked deliberate.”

Bleeding Man said, “This SOB had my hand pinned to the bar. I was trying to get it loose and the drink got spilled. That’s all that happened, and I defy either of these pieces of shit to show different.”

Harris asked for my version. I’d already been here too long. “Look, Officer Harris, we both know there’s no case without the drink. I only asked Ace here to call you so there’d be a record in case this guy was involved in anything like this again. That’s all.”

Harris sized me up throughout my speech. “What’s your name, Ace?”

Took me a second to realize he called everyone “Ace” and I owed the bartender an apology. “Nick Forte.”

Harris’s face hardened. “You the PI come by the house this morning? Talked to Eastman?”

“I am.”

“Where you from?”

“Bolingbrook.”

“Where’s that? Chicago?”

“Closer to Naperville.”

“You make a habit of telling cops up that way how to do their jobs? Or breaking people’s noses for no good reason?”

“I can’t say I make a habit of it. And, to be fair, whether I had reason to break this nose is in the eye of the beholder.” Never looked in Bleeding Man’s direction.

Harris spoke to the bartender, whatever his name was. “Where’s the woman?”

“She left.”

“You know her?”

“Not by name. I’ve seen her in here a few times.”

“She the kind to go home with someone she just met?”

I stepped in before the bartender could reply. “What does that have to do with him putting something in her drink?”

Harris looked at me as if I were infringing on his oxygen. “We don’t know that for sure.”

“Not after he went to some lengths to make sure the drink couldn’t be tested.”

“Looks to me like it’s not just detectives’ jobs you think you know better. The injured party here, if there is one, is the gentleman with the broken nose. You want to press charges, Ace?”

Again I got there first. “Not if he’s smart he doesn’t. He files, I’ll demand a trial and make sure why I did it comes up in court. Might put quite a crimp in his sex life.”

Bleeding Man told me to go fuck myself and that he saw more ass than a toilet seat, displaying a level of banter that gave me insight into why he needed roofies to get laid. Asked Harris why he allowed me to talk like that. “Ain’t that slander or something?”

Harris continued to glare at me. His voice made it clear he didn’t think any more highly of Ace—er, Bleeding Man—than I did. “You’d have to sue for that. I doubt this is the kind of thing you want on a court record, true or not.”

“Goddamnit, he can’t just break my nose because he *says* he saw me do something I didn’t do.”

“Do you want to press charges or not?”

Bleeding Man threw me as filthy a look as is possible through a bloody towel. “Fuck him. He’s not worth the trouble.” Exactly what I expected him to say.

Harris tapped my arm. “Let’s you and me go outside and talk.”

“Glad to.” I tossed a twenty on the bar. Spoke to the Bartender Formerly Known as Ace. “For the drinks and your trouble.”

He nodded. “I’ll remember this guy.”

I said, “Thanks.”

Bleeding Man said, “Fuck you, too.”

In the parking lot, Harris led me to his patrol unit. Took a quick look to be sure no one was listening. “You’ve caused more trouble today than this town sees in a month. What’s your problem?”

“Exactly what trouble have I caused? Seriously. I asked Detective Eastman professional questions in a professional manner. In there,” I pointed over my shoulder toward Rusty’s, “I saw that guy drop something into a woman’s drink. We can argue about my reaction, but him fucking with her drink was the precipitating incident.”

“He says no.”

“Who has reason to lie? He’d be looking at a serious charge, maybe even attempted rape, if you found anything in that drink. My only reason would be as an excuse to break a stranger’s nose, which would require me coming all the way back down here to defend myself.”

“If it breaks your balls so much to spend time with us hicks, why not just leave now?”

I did well by my standards. “I grew up in the country. Not quite this rural, but I did spend time each summer on a farm that would rival anything you have here. I’m the guy who takes offense when arrogant assholes run down working people. And here you are, perpetuating the stereotype of the isolated country boy and his latent inferiority complex by assuming anyone who passes through here from someplace bigger—which means just about everywhere—is looking down on you.

“Sure, I came to town to ask a favor. I was willing to provide consideration, too. Your department doesn’t want to help me, that’s fine. It’s

an ongoing investigation. I get that. You want to break my balls, I can't stop you trying. Just don't expect me to roll over. Just like I wouldn't expect you to."

Harris's expression never changed. "You done?"

"Yeah."

He nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. "I'm only ever going to see you one more time." Held up a finger so I wouldn't misunderstand. "Once." Spun on his heel and got into the car.

Swell.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pissing off literally half the Lundy Police Department in one twelve-hour period was no mean feat, even for me, so I kept a lower profile the next day. I'd learned nothing to implicate the meat packing plant in anything more distasteful than scrapple, but I had too much respect for Marian Bradshaw's instincts to ignore what she'd told me. I found a convenience store—Smitty's—for tea and donuts and came back to the room to poke around on the internet.

Central Illinois Processing was founded by Cyrus Oberkfell, whose family roots extended back past the incorporation of the town in 1868. The Oberkfell family did well and became sufficiently diversified not to be wiped out when the market crashed in 1929.

The economic effect on his neighbors, especially on livestock breeders, disturbed Oberkfell. Local farmers needed someone not beholden to anyone with deeper pockets, which included everyone who owned a meat packing facility. Oberkfell liquidated much of what remained of the family fortune to start Central Illinois Processing in 1934. His goal was to create an alternative for local livestock farmers and employment for people who desperately needed it.

CIP scraped by on a break-even basis for several years. Oberkfell sold the family home to move into something smaller in both 1937 and 1938, both times using the proceeds to help make payroll.

Hideki Tojo and Adolph Hitler saved the business. Armies run on their stomachs and within six months of Pearl Harbor Central Illinois Processing was running three shifts. Getting the company through the Depression tested Oberkfell's mettle and honed his skills. Once the war made him solvent again he had no trouble setting things up to run well into the future.

Cy died in his office in 1953. His heir, William, lacked Dad's vision but was a competent manager and ran things until he retired in 1979. His son, Cyrus Oberkfell II, had no interest in being associated with such an unfashionable industry and sold out at what appeared to be the first opportunity.

Two interesting things came to light. The first, which I discovered because I can't resist going down any rabbit hole research presents, was that Cy Two was so put off by the meat processing industry he used to tell his snooty rich friends he made his fortune in timber, which suggested the following conversation:

Friend: There are no forests in Illinois.

Cy Two: See how good we were?

The other interesting thing I learned was that a current co-owner was one Kenneth Dowd of Lundy, Illinois, who, as fate or luck or karma would have it, was the same person who threatened Evelyn Bower with a gun after a traffic accident.

Now I knew who had the juice to stymie the investigation and where he got it.

The logical next step would be to talk to the woman Dowd rear-ended. Unfortunately, I didn't have her name, the make or model of her car—not even the color—and Evelyn Bower only took down Dowd's license tag.

I could visit every body shop in Lundy and the surrounding towns; how many could there be? What would I ask them? "Repaired any rear ends the past couple of weeks?" Then what?

Without knowing where the woman was from, I had no idea where to start. She might have had the damage looked at in Chicago or St. Louis for all I knew. Going at it from that direction would be like looking for a needle in a box car full of pine straw.

Talking to Evelyn Bower might shake something loose, especially if her husband hadn't told me everything, which I was sure he hadn't. Bower made it clear I was to stay away from her, but a good faith effort to find him at home when I knew he wasn't there would get around that. No telling what Evelyn might be willing to talk about if I caught her unaware.

That would require a trip to Lake City, a three-hour drive. I'd already pissed away a decent part of the afternoon. Traffic to get past Chicago would be a bastard; the morning donuts had worn off. I didn't want anyone in town to recognize me, so the diner was out. I remembered a highway sign, one of those Food/Gas/Lodging/Camping/Attractions jobs mentioning a Culver's an exit or two north on I-55. I packed the laptop and hit the road.

I thought of Culver's more as family restaurants with counter service than fast food. I placed my order and deployed my laptop and notebook in a booth out of the way to await delivery.

Kenneth Dowd was listed in CIP's corporate records as a co-owner; the other was WestLake Holding LLC.

I learned long ago never to accept a holding company at face value. They're perfectly legal and there are good business reasons for having them. They're also excellent ways to hide who actually owns something. It was always worth the time to see where the links led, even if only to eliminate them as something to worry about.

WestLake was one of those holding companies that didn't do anything except own other companies, the twenty-first-century dream of making money without adding value to a product. Tracking them through the web was a lot like digging up an ant colony: vaguely interesting, but it didn't teach me anything I needed to know.

Lunch finished, I went to the counter for ice cream. Culver's burgers are great, but their frozen custard is second only to a local joint I used to haunt growing up in Pennsylvania.

I took my three scoops of chocolate in a cup back to the booth. The WestLake website was still up, so I poked around to see what I might stumble onto while not doing anything to detract from enjoying my dessert.

Bad decision. The general manager and vice president of Business Development and Acquisitions for WestLake Holdings LLC was Donald Bower.

So much for paying attention to my custard.

Coincidence never crossed my mind. Sure, they happen. I was at a meeting to pitch the now-extinct agency's services to a potential client when we got to bullshit. Turned out we grew up not a quarter of a mile apart; even rode the same school bus. She was a couple of years older and we didn't know each other then, but had mutual acquaintances. Helped me land the business.

So I was no stranger to serendipity; I had yet to come across one in an investigation.

They almost had to know each other. The VP of Biz Dev and Acquisitions was sure to at least be familiar with the principals of companies WestLake owned pieces of. Even if Dowd and Bower were

golfing buddies, this wasn't the sort of thing that would come up in casual conversation, especially if Dowd was sweeping it under the rug. However close the men might be, it was possible Evelyn Bower didn't know Dowd.

I still had to wonder why Bower went to such lengths to leave out any mention of his interests in Lundy.

Clients withhold potentially valuable information all the time, especially when asking for work off the books. It was entirely possible—plausible, even—Bower knew nothing about Dowd's involvement. Given how I felt about coincidence, I thought it more likely Bower just didn't want *me* to know of any connection, though how he thought I wouldn't find out was beyond me. He either underestimated my skills or was playing an angle I hadn't thought of.

Bower told me his wife had their grandchildren in the car but never said why she was in Lundy. Visiting a son or daughter seemed logical. No conversation ever began, "Please, Grandma, can we smell the rendering plant? Please please please."

So the kids must live in Lundy, or damn close. That raised another question: why was a scion of the Bower family living in Lundy? Even such an ardent defender of rural life as myself acknowledged no one moved from a place like Lake City to a place like Lundy.

Except for a job.

I dug deeper into the website. A Bower wasn't likely to take a job as a meat packer; he or she would have a position of some responsibility. Found nothing on the CIP website. Corporate filings with the state mentioned no one named Bower. I was about to give up when it occurred to me a married daughter might not have kept the family name.

All this passed through my mind driving back from Culver's. I'd been a detective long enough not to run after every shiny new lead. What to do next—in this case figure out a possible daughter's married name—and how to do it required time for thoughts to coalesce without squeezing them into a predetermined shape. Sleeping on a dilemma never hurt unless the bedroom was on fire.

I read a James D.F. Hannah novel and realized I was hungry ten minutes before Arby's closed. I ate my roast beef and curly fries in the room while watching SportsCenter. Fell asleep before all the detritus was disposed of.

CHAPTER NINE

When I awoke the next morning, I had one thing clear in my mind:

Donald Bower's daughter worked in the offices of Central Illinois Processing.

How sure was I? Sure as I'd been Charlize Theron wouldn't climb into bed next to me while I slept.

Or I wouldn't have locked the door.

CIP corporate occupied a cracker box that looked as if it could be the original building. Different shades of brick along two sides implied additions. I parked in the lot and walked through the front door like I knew what I was doing.

Inside was nothing fancy. Everything was functional, clean, bright, and well-maintained. The original plaster had been replaced by drywall painted a happy shade of yellow, surprisingly cheery for a company that did nothing except make hog carcasses disappear.

The nameplate on the receptionist's desk read "Ethel Richardson." Early middle age with brown hair almost ready for a touchup. She had hazel eyes, fair skin, and long fingers adorned with only a simple wedding band and engagement ring combination. Probably a little heavier than she would have liked, but that was only because she was a woman and always thought she was too heavy.

She smiled as I approached. Asked what she could do for me.

Today's plan was to make Jim Rockford seem high-strung. "Good morning, Ms. Richardson. My name is Nick Forte. I'm a private investigator from Chicago and can prove it." Handed her my license.

An Illinois PI ticket looks a lot like a driver's license at first glance. Ms. Richardson appeared never to have seen one before. Examined it like an artifact from Tut's tomb. Today's lunchroom conversation would be interesting.

She handed back the license. Reluctantly, I thought. "You sure are. How can I help you? Oh, and please. It's Mrs. Richardson." She had the voice of an apprentice grandma.

I gave my apologies. She waved off everything as an inconsequential faux pas, though apparently not so inconsequential as to escape correction. “I’m looking for a woman who has some money coming to her. Seems her grandmother passed and left her an appreciable sum. Not enough to retire and buy an island, but plenty for a new car or maybe a down payment on a house.”

“And you think she works here?”

“All I know for sure is that she *doesn't*.” Mrs. Richardson brows kitted together. “We’ve reached the point of looking for college acquaintances. Someone works here we believe was a sorority sister of the woman we need to find. We hope she might be able to point us in the right direction.”

“Who would you like to talk to?”

I looked at my feet for a second. “I’m not sure. Her name in college was Bower, but it may have changed if she got married.”

Mrs. Richardson perked up. “You’re looking for Madison Garner. Her maiden name was Bower.”

I didn’t need to fake a smile. “That sounds like her. Is she in?”

“Let’s see.” Phone in hand, Mrs. Richardson paused. “Who is it you want to see her about?”

I made an apologetic face. “Sorry, I can’t say. We have to keep things like this close to the vest. You know how it is. Word gets out she has money coming and old friends start popping out of the woodwork.”

“I understand completely.” Mrs. Richardson dialed a three-digit extension. “Madison? It’s Ethel Richardson. There’s a man here who wants to talk with you about someone you might have gone to school with.” Turned away and shielded the mouthpiece with her hand. “He’s a private investigator. From Chicago.” Mrs. Richardson listened. “He says it’s confidential and he can only discuss it with you.” Another pause. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Richardson hung up. “She’ll be right out. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water?”

I said cold water would be nice. She went into a room behind and to her left. Returned with the standard half-liter bottle of Sam’s Club filtered water. I thanked her and was unscrewing the cap when I saw a woman come down the hall.

Madison Garner was as nondescript as a person can be and still be recognized by her immediate family. Average height. Average build. Straight brown hair. Brown eyes. A light tan showed she spent time outdoors, but not too much. Diamond wedding and engagement rings, diamond buds in her ears. A small watch rode her left wrist, an unobtrusive bracelet the right. Twenty feet away she smiled, and everything changed. Madison Garner's smile could light the United Center.

She extended a hand. "We don't often get private investigators here. Come to think of it, I don't remember ever meeting one before. Have you, Ethel?" Mrs. Richardson had not. "What can I do for you—I'm sorry. I didn't get your name."

"Forte. Nick Forte." Not the same cachet as "Bond. James Bond," but he had better marketing people.

We shook. "Madison Garner." I thought I'd done a good job with the poker face until she said, "Baseball fan, are you?" I nodded and let out the smile I'd been trying to suppress. "What can I say? It's not a name I would've chosen, but it came attached to the man I fell in love with."

"It can't bother you too much. You could've stuck with Bower."

"No, I couldn't." Said it quick enough I knew there was backstory. "What can I do for you, Mr. Forte?"

I took her by the elbow, turned away from Mrs. Richardson. "My instructions are to keep this as confidential as possible. Is there somewhere we can speak privately?"

"We can talk in my office. I see Ethel got you some water. Is there anything else you'd like? There was excellent Danish in the break room a little while ago."

My interest in anything Danish began and ended with Connie Nielsen. "No, thank you. I'm all set. Lead on."

Ethel Richardson looked disappointed as we passed. I consoled myself with the knowledge that the mystery could only enhance the story she'd tell in the break room.

Madison Garner's office was what I expected. Neat. Nondescript. Classic mid-management. The furniture was nothing special, but I noticed she sat in a Steelcase Leap chair, so money had been spent. The visitors chair, alas, was not Steelcase. Scrunching my ass around trying to get comfortable, I would have been happy with IKEA.

Madison waited for me to get as settled as I was going to. “Mrs. Richardson said you were looking for someone I went to school with. Was it at Northwestern or in Lake City?”

“Mrs. Garner, that was what we in the private eye business call a pretext. I’m working for your father.”

Her face clouded. I hurried on before she had time to consider calling security. “Nothing to do with you. I’m trying to verify some facts about a traffic accident your mother witnessed here in Lundy a few weeks ago.”

Air whooshed from Madison’s lungs as she relaxed. I went on. “Your father is...displeased with the lack of progress on the police investigation and their unwillingness to talk to him. He asked me to look into it. Did your mother say anything to you that day?”

“Did she ever. She was so worked up we asked her to stay the night.”

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about what she said?”

“Didn’t you talk to her?”

“Your father said she was too upset. He claimed to be worried she might have PTSD.”

Madison’s laughter was genuine. “That’s what he told you? Honest to God?” I nodded. “That’s rich. My mother is a force of nature. I’m pretty sure she would’ve taken care of Kenny *and* his gun both if she didn’t have the kids with her.”

“She knew who he was?”

“Of course she knew. They’ve had dinner together quite a few times. My father’s company owns half of the packing operation. That’s how I got the job here. My father shoved me down Kenny Dowd’s throat just to show he could.”

She must have read my mind. “I planned to leave even quicker than you’re probably thinking but I met Jim working here.” I raised an eyebrow. “Yes, my husband’s name is James Garner. It’s who he’s named after.” Opened her hands. “No one gets to pick their loves or their parents.”

We shared a chuckle as I circled back. “Why would Dowd threaten your mother with a gun if he knew who she was? More to the point, who she was married to?”

“She thinks he was too drunk to recognize her. At least not until it was too late.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why do you think your father wouldn’t let me talk to her? Your mother, I mean.”

“Control. My father has to be in charge all the time. *He* was hiring you, so *he* had to be the one to talk to you and decide how much you needed to know.

She cocked her head in thought. The hint of a smile crossed her lips. “Let me guess. He met you at the door, walked you to the boat, and took you out on the lake. You never even saw the inside of the main house.”

I liked Madison Bower Garner already. “Right on all counts.”

“Did he give you the story about wanting to get out of cell range?”

I couldn’t help smiling. “You’re on a roll.”

“That’s bullshit. I’m sure he took you out far enough so you could see for yourself there were no bars, but the real reason you were on the boat was so Mom couldn’t intrude. The only way he can control her is to exclude her.”

I noticed Madison always referred to her mother as “Mom”; Donald was always “my father.” Never “Dad” or “Daddy.” It was almost like he was a beater car she’d been gifted and could find no elegant way to get rid of.

“You think that’s all it was?” I asked. “Control?”

She shrugged. “There’s rarely only one thing going on in his eternal game of three-dimensional checkers. Don’t rule out the idea there were things he didn’t want you to know.”

It was nice to hear I wasn’t being even more paranoid than usual. “So your mother knew the man and told you?”

“Swore me to secrecy. Could cause grave consequences here at work if word got out Kenny Dowd was driving drunk and brandishing a weapon.”

“You’re telling me.”

No acrimony in her voice when she said, “Fuck Kenny Dowd. He’s as big an asshole as my father. They deserve whatever trouble they can stir up for each other.” She picked up on my expression. “Jim already has a new job and I have interviews scheduled. This used to be a nice place to work.”

“What happened?”

“What always happens to nice places to work? Someone at the top decided he needed more money. Covid was tough on the packing industry,

but if a company was positioned to take advantage of slowdowns at other plants...well, there was money to be made.”

“Did CIP do well during the pandemic?”

“There was an adjustment, but yeah. We made out well in the end.”

We chatted another ten minutes about matters that were interesting but not particularly relevant. I thanked her for her time, and she gave me another of those United Center smiles. Shook my hand and wished me luck.

I stopped as I was about to open her office door. “Can I ask one more favor? You might think it’s a lot.”

“You can ask anything you want. Just don’t be disappointed if I don’t agree to do it.”

“Can you keep this conversation between us? Your father’s my client, but something here doesn’t add up.”

“You have until at least Thanksgiving.”

“What’s special about Thanksgiving? Apart from the obvious, I mean.”

“That’s the next time my father and I are likely to speak. This is the end of July, so you have plenty of time. Call me if you need more. I’ll push him back until Christmas. My pleasure.”

CHAPTER TEN

I spent the rest of the day walking around town talking to people. I used the location scout pretext if anyone asked; only needed it a couple of times. I'd lived and worked in and near Chicago for years, but my small-town cred was still strong. No one took me for a big city prick talking down to rural folk. I'd start a conversation or do something to encourage one. Then we'd bullshit. Simple as that.

I learned the townspeople were aware of CIP and liked that it provided jobs and paid taxes. That was all. Its physical presence couldn't be ignored but no one had anything more to say, except for a couple who mentioned the smell when they drove past it.

I would love to have learned where the CIP line workers drank. There is no better way to get the feel of a population than to check out their bars, buy a few drinks, and listen. Make an innocuous comment to steer the conversation. The problem was all the people I wanted to talk to were working and no one I spoke with knew where they hung out. Trying all the local watering holes until I got lucky was inefficient, but also my best bet.

First I needed a shower and fresh clothes. Hot as the day had been, one beer in an air-conditioned bar could put me to sleep, and I'd need to have a few to make people comfortable enough to open up. I decided to go back to the motel to freshen up and catch a short nap before making the rounds.

Stopped by Smitty's for cold drinks and snacks to take back to the room. No one there except the clerk, named "Amit" if his name tag was correct. He nodded as I entered. Didn't say anything.

No Clark Bars—as usual—nor any large Tootsie Rolls. Both are hard to find these days, more evidence of the International Conspiracy to Piss Me Off. My diet rules said I could only buy candy if the store had whatever was in my mind when I entered the store; Clark Bars and Tootsie Rolls had permanent exemptions. Everyone carries M&Ms, so they and Hershey bars were my defaults. I picked up a share-sized bag and a couple of zero sugar cherry Cokes, as well as a real one in case I felt celebratory later.

Walking toward the counter I caught motion out of the corner of my eye. Took a closer look. Nothing. Turned toward the check stand and saw Amit trying to look nonchalant while sweating like a snake was wrapped around his leg, eyes big as quarters.

No weapon on me; a gun would have blown my cover as a location scout. I'm a nosy bastard by profession and nature, so I turned again to where I thought I'd seen motion and Amit was pretending not to look.

More nothing.

Amit wasn't a loud noise away from heart failure because nothing was wrong. None of my business, but the store's vibe was weird enough for me to recall the best lesson my field training officer taught me during my days as a rookie: if something arouses your curiosity, take another look.

Despite his best efforts, Amit had aroused my curiosity. Or maybe because of them.

I set down my snacks and stepped into the hallway leading to the restrooms in time to see the men's room door close. I walked to it and gave a listen. Furtive movement. No knob on the door, just a push plate, so I kicked it open and saw a man trying to crawl through a window above the sink.

He was a small man, but the window wasn't the size of a standard dog door. I strode over and grabbed his ankles. "Hold on there, buddy. What's going on?"

He froze. A second later his head and neck went through the open window like I'd hit him with a cattle prod. That didn't make the opening any larger or his shoulders any narrower.

"Hey!" I dragged him off the sink. On the ground he tried to get around me but the wall, sink, and toilet stall left no maneuvering room. He drew back, terror on his face.

A Latino in his mid-twenties. No more than five-seven and 130. Dark brown eyes and black hair cut as if a bowl had been on his head. I held my hands in as placating a position as I could muster. "Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Por favor. No me hagas daño."

My Spanish was an adventure. I showed him my palms. "*Quieto. Yo quiero, uh, ayudarse.*"

I must have got enough right for him to relax half a notch. His eyes still darted over my shoulder.

I pointed to myself as a visual cue in case I botched the Spanish. “*Me llamo Nick Forte. Que es su nombre?*”

“*Me llamo Guillermo Sanchez.*”

I extended my right hand and smiled. “Guillermo, my pleasure.”

He took my hand tentatively. Relaxed noticeably when I didn’t try to jerk him toward me.

“*Por que usted...*” I mimed running. Pointed to the window.

“*Tenia miedo.*”

I didn’t know that one. *Scared shitless* seemed reasonable, based on his posture and disposition. “*Habla inglés, Guillermo?*”

He shook his head.

It was impossible to work as an investigator in Chicago and not speak at least some Spanish; mine was weaker than it should have been. I usually had advance notice when I’d need some and either researched what to say or brought a translator.

I gave it my best shot. “*Con permiso. Yo tengo Espanol pequeño. Yo quiero ayudarse. A donde está su casa?*” Which I hoped apologized for my meager Spanish, told him I wanted to help, and asked where he lived.

“*No tengo casa.*” He didn’t have a house.

“*A donde...*” I put my hands together and placed them against my cheek to, I hoped, designate sleep.

“*El cuartel.*”

Another one I didn’t know. “*A donde está su trabajar?*”

“*Trabajo en la planta de carne.*”

He worked at the meat plant.

For the next fifteen minutes I used what Spanish I had, he answered the best he could, but mostly we played charades. Things were moving along when the men’s room door opened behind me. I spoke over my shoulder without turning my body. “This one’s full. Use the ladies’ room.” The door closed. Guillermo and I went back to work.

I needed someone who spoke Spanish to be sure, but as near as I could understand, Guillermo and about forty other undocumented aliens worked nights at the processing plant. They came in after dark and left

before first light. To the best of my ability to ask and understand the answer, they weren't being paid.

I gestured for him to stand. "*Arriba, por favor. Vamos a mi, uh, hotel.*"

"*Tienes un hotel?*"

I was about to try to explain when I remembered "hotel" is the same in both languages. "*Si. Ven aca conmigo.*" Something occurred to me, if I had enough Spanish for Guillermo to understand. "*Quieres comer?*" Moved my hands toward my mouth as if eating.

He didn't need to say anything for me to know he was famished. Then his head sank. "*No tengo dinero para comer.*"

I could handle that. "*Yo tengo dinero para usted, uh, comé.*"

"*No, no. No puedo pedir que.*"

Not sure what *puedo pedir que* meant but I understood *no* well enough. Guillermo was no charity case. I'd have to persuade him. "*Con permiso. Quiero ayudarse.*" He wavered. "*Para mi. Por favor.*"

Hunger won out over pride. I felt bad to put him in that position until I remembered it wasn't me who put him there; I was only trying to help. Someone else would have to answer for his current condition.

I motioned for him to stay put while I checked the store. A man bought cigarettes and walked out. No one else I could see other than Amit. I collected my pop and candy and took them to the counter.

Amit didn't know whether to shit or charge his phone. I laid my purchases on the counter. "I'll take these and a case of water." Pointed to a shrink-wrapped bundle of two dozen near the door.

Amit rang up the order with one eye on me and one aimed toward the restrooms, almost as scared as Guillermo. "He's fine," I said. "I'm going to get him something to eat, then call a person I know who can help."

Amit relaxed so hard he fumbled my change. I took a fifty from my wallet. Pointed down the hall. "This is yours if you promise you didn't see either of us today."

I didn't know what to make of Amit's expression until he spoke. "I know you do not mean to, but you are insulting me. I too am an immigrant. I was trying to think of what I could do to help that man when you came in. He is illegal, correct?" I didn't let on one way or another. "I am proud to help you to help him. I will tell no one you were here."

I put away the fifty. Extended a hand, which Amit did not hesitate to shake. “Thank you.” It’s a throwaway phrase we often use without thinking. Not this time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Marisol Eisenberg was the director of *Tu Lugar Seguro*, roughly translated to “Your Safe Place.” TLS assisted aliens, documented or not, with everything from immigration and tax law to finding work, a place to live, or a church.

Husband Sam, with pages of human rights work on his resume, started *Tu Lugar Seguro* in the hope of overcoming Marisol’s mother’s resistance to her only daughter marrying not just an Anglo, but a Jew. Signing papers and making promises weren’t good enough; they married without Mama’s blessing. The ten hours a week Sam worked pro bono for TLS had worn Señora Lopez down to where Sam was welcome at Sunday dinner. Reading the New Testament to her—in Spanish—*might* get him a seat at the Christmas table.

I called Marisol while Guillermo inhaled a double quarter pounder with cheese and bacon, large fries, and a large Coke. A package of cookies, a bag of M&Ms, and another Coke stood ready to make the supreme sacrifice.

My call hit the rare daily double: Marisol was in her office and available. Neither of us much cared for small talk under the most relaxed of circumstances, so I got perfunctory updates on Sam and the kids; she asked about Caroline. Segued directly to why I called her “today of all days. I have another call in fifteen minutes.”

“I met a gentleman today in Lundy named Guillermo Sanchez.”

“Where’s Lundy?”

“You know where Normal is?”

“Of course I know where Normal is. Don’t let my Spanish fool you. I was born here.”

“If you think of where Normal is, you’re close enough for Lundy.”

“Farm country, then.” I sensed wheels starting to turn.

“Right, though the big business in Lundy is a pork processing plant on the outskirts of town. I came across Mr. Sanchez in a convenience store scared half to death. I got him calmed down and fed, but something stinks

here, and my Spanish isn't good enough to get to the bottom of it. I was hoping you could translate for me."

"Right now? Over the phone?"

"Bringing him to you kills the rest of my day on what might be no more than a matter of my faulty Spanish."

"Saying your Spanish is faulty is pretty high praise." A sound came across I knew was Marisol tapping a pen or pencil against her front teeth. "He's okay with this?"

"I'll hand him my phone and you can ask him yourself. If you're both cool with it, I'll put this end on speaker."

"Where will you be while I talk to him?"

"I'll go in the bathroom and shut the door if it makes you feel better. Run some water if you want me to. Just send him to get me when you're done, however you decide."

I handed the phone to Guillermo. He wiped grease from his lips. Looked hopefully at the M&Ms. I nodded and gestured for him to take them. He looked like he might weep. "*Muchas gracias, Señor Forte.*"

"*De nada.*" I pointed to him and made the phone sign with my thumb and pinkie alongside my face. Indicated myself, then the bathroom. He nodded and I left.

I brushed my teeth and washed my face while thinking of what was going on in the other room. Guillermo was no more than twenty-five, if that. I couldn't help but like the kid and had already started thinking of him as Willie.

About ready to try to pee when he knocked on the door and opened it. "*Señor Forte, Señora Eisenberg, uh, ella dice para ti que, uh, get his ass in here. Está bien?*"

I laughed. Marisol was a character. "*Si, muy bien. Vamos a la otro, uh, shit. Let's go in the other room.*" Made a shooing motion to direct him.

I retrieved the phone. "You're both okay with doing this? I don't want either of you to feel pressured."

"I canceled the other call. Something is going on here and I'm not familiar enough with the situation to ask the right questions. Go ahead and put us on speaker."

I pressed the button and placed the phone on the table between Willie and myself. We all traded comments to make sure everyone could hear and

be heard.

I started. "Ask him where he's from."

She did. "Fresnillo."

Never heard of it. "Where's Fresnillo?"

Marisol didn't have to ask. "It's about seven hundred miles south of El Paso. Worst place in Mexico."

"Worst in what way?"

"Have you ever been to San Jose, California?"

"Seen hockey games on TV. Know some people who've been there."

"Does it seem like a nice place?"

"I've never heard anything against it except real estate prices and traffic."

Marisol kept close at hand any fact that might be of use to her. "San Jose averages thirty murders a year, give or take. Fresnillo has about the same population and averages fifty. A week."

I knew better than to argue. "Jesus Christ. No wonder he left."

"Ya think? What else do you want to know?"

Horrific as Willie's life might have been in Mexico, my concerns were closer to home. "Ask him how he got here. I don't need all the details. Just how he got from the border to Lundy."

She spoke. He spoke. "His parents gave him a thousand pesos in Fresnillo. He walked and hitchhiked his way to Juarez."

"How much is that American?"

I heard keys tapping. "Right now it's about fifty dollars."

"What did he do in Juarez?"

She spoke. He spoke. "He swam the Rio Grande with half a dozen others. On this side they met a man with a ladder to get them over the fence. After that they were on their own."

"How much did that cost him?"

Another exchange. "Everything. The man wanted a hundred dollars but he took whatever someone had."

"How did he get from there to here?"

This answer took a while. Marisol asked a couple of what I assumed were clarifying questions along the way.

She spoke hesitantly at first. "He found a place where day laborers gathered. About the third day a man asked if he was interested in regular

work up north.”

“Was this guy an Anglo?”

Marisol asked. I didn’t need her to translate the answer. “*Mexicano.*” At least we didn’t have a monopoly on trafficking.

Marisol went on. “Guillermo didn’t trust the man, but he thought the farther north he got, the safer he’d be.”

“How did they bring him here?”

She asked. He answered. She sighed. “In some kind of truck. Sounds like a standard box truck anyone can rent for moving except it had a—I don’t know. A false wall, maybe? Anyone who opened the back saw stacks of legitimate merchandise. He and the others were behind a partition out of sight.”

I got the story that way over the next half hour. Six men shared a compartment large enough to sit side by side but not lie down. Provisions were jars of peanut butter, snack bars, and a few jugs of water. A slop bucket and a hole in the floor about six inches in diameter served for sanitation. Another six-inch hole in the roof for ventilation.

The compartment was sealed once the men were situated. The rest of the cargo loaded, the truck drove through one night and well into the next, stopping only for gas and for the drivers to eat and use the bathroom.

The destination was what Marisol described as a barracks-like dormitory with pallets thrown onto rough-hewn bunks. There was a propane stove for cooking and heating. Six nights a week, well after dark, a bus came to take them to the processing plant and return them before sunrise.

No one was paid.

My first impulse was to write off much of it to exaggeration. Not that I thought Willie was making it up, but what he’d been through made some hyperbole understandable.

Except, watching and listening to him, I never got that impression.

I minored in history at Northwestern. Read several accounts of World War II plus *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and *The Nightmare Years*. I knew about the Trail of Tears and blankets infected with smallpox and that the attempted extermination of the buffalo was part of a plan for Indian genocide. I understood there was no bottom to man’s ability—and willingness—to inflict suffering on others and that Americans were no better—or worse—than anyone else.

Until that moment it had all been an abstraction. Something that happened years ago and far away to no one I knew. It had little relevance in the world as I experienced it. As Willie spoke and Marisol translated, I found myself facing the unavoidable fact that these things were happening right here, right now, and to someone I now knew and had already begun to like.

“Ask him if he can show me this barracks.”

“Why?”

“I need to know where it is.”

“You can’t take him anywhere near there. It’s not safe. Bring him here and we’ll protect him while this gets sorted out.”

“I’ll disguise him. No one will know who he is cruising by at sixty miles an hour.”

“It’s not going to be on the main road like a rest stop, you know.”

“I just need him to get me close. If it’s up a dirt road, he can point and I’ll check it out later. I have to put eyes on this place if I’m going to gather evidence I can take to an authority.”

“Just call the police.”

“I have reason to believe the local police are in on it.”

“Call the feds.”

“One of two things will happen if I do that. Either they’ll raid the joint, deport all the workers, and fine the owners, or they’ll launch an investigation that takes at least a year, probably more, before they’re ready to make arrests. If anyone catches wise in the meantime, they’ll disappear the workers god knows where. Even if the feds do keep it under wraps and something comes of it, they’ll still deport the workers. Those poor bastards are damned if I do and damned if I don’t, and the longer they stay there the greater the chances something bad will happen. Is that what you want?”

“You know I don’t, but what’s your plan?”

Good question. “Under construction. I need more information about the plant, and this barracks I just found out about. The plant I’ve seen. Only Willie can tell me where this other place is.”

I hurried on before she could interrupt. “I’ll stash him here overnight. Tomorrow he’ll show me where they’re living, if I’m lucky. I’ll bring him to you no later than day after tomorrow, whether I find the place or not. Fair enough?”

I knew it wasn't. Not that Marisol had a lot of options. "Day after tomorrow. By noon. Promise me."

"I promise." And I meant it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I didn't like the idea of potentially exposing Willie any more than Marisol did, but he was the only person available who knew where the barracks was. I knew he couldn't find it from where we were, but he might have a pretty good idea of the bus's route from the packing plant. My biggest concern was he wouldn't recognize any landmarks, since they were always transported in darkness. Google Maps came to mind, but I didn't know what the building looked like, or how long it had been there, or if it was visible from above.

While Google wasn't likely to be of much help in finding the place, I could use it to refine my Spanish. I spent ten minutes translating what I wanted Willie to do, then laid it out for him.

He wasn't crazy about the idea. I waited for the torrent of Spanish to subside, then tried to calm him. I didn't need to understand his words to catch his meaning. He was terrified.

Using Google to translate was a tedious process. I had no doubt what I was getting was less accurate than what Marisol could provide but she wasn't an option, strong as her feelings were against the whole idea. So we took our time.

I explained how I'd keep him from being seen. Ball cap, sunglasses. One of my shirts, even though it would fit him like a muumuu. He could slump in the passenger seat or sit in the middle of the back seat. Wherever he felt most comfortable.

He wavered but remained unwilling. I played dirty. His anxiety grew as he watched me negotiate with Google about how to say what I wanted.

"Tus amigos donde trabajas necesito tu ayuda." Your friends where you work need your help. *"Tuviste buena suerte encontrándome. Ahora quiero ayudarlos pero necesito que me ayudes para que pueda ayudarlos."* It was your good luck that you found me. I want to help them, but I need your help to do it.

Or something like that.

I hoped his conscience would bring him around; mine was kicking my ass. The safe thing to do—the smart thing—was to drive him to Chicago

and let Marisol handle it. I could come back here and shake trees to my heart's content. How much worse I might make things for those still stuck was a crap shoot either way.

Whether taking Willie to Marisol was right or smart, I never did well stepping back to see how things played out. My successes were not without collateral damage, but it was rare that waiting for something to happen bore fruit unless it involved court action or a loan application. My personality and conscience were better able to accept errors of commission than omission.

Not trusting my resolve to hold overnight, I decided to take advantage of the remaining July daylight. I disguised Willie as promised, went outside and took a good look. Saw no one and hustled him into the car. Drove a circuitous route to the plant, hoping he'd recognize a landmark.

No joy.

I pulled over and asked him which way the bus turned when it came out of the plant. Five minutes of tortured translation later I figured out he either didn't know, or there was no consistent route.

The driveway ended in a T; the bus had to turn one way or the other. With a fifty-fifty chance of being right, I continued along the direction we were already going to see if anything struck Willie as familiar. Five miles later, nothing had.

With no better options, I drove past the plant going the other way. Willie still didn't recognize anything and about had a stroke every time a car passed. I didn't want to give the poor guy an aneurism, so I called it a day as the sun slipped behind the horizon.

I was hungry, so Willie must be, but too bashful to say so. Nowhere in Lundy was safe for him, so I drove us to the Culver's where I'd eaten lunch the other day. Ordered him the biggest burger they had and switched myself over to chicken fingers.

I didn't say much while we ate. Willie had had enough excitement for one day. He needed to decompress more than I needed to probe for information he probably didn't have.

I watched him sneak looks at me as he ate. He'd lower his eye and mumble "*Muchas gracias.*" I'd reply with "*De nada*" and we'd resume what grew into companionable silence.

I used the time to come up with Plan B. I didn't know where the barracks was, but the plant's location wasn't a secret. The night workers always left before sunrise. Ergo, if I staked the plant out early enough, I should be able to follow the bus to the barracks. Three a.m. should be early enough.

Willie finished eating. Full and comfortable and in the company of someone he trusted for the first time in I had no idea how long, he was getting sleepy. I could take him back to the motel, but he deserved a treat.

I'm no expert in international relations, but I know not everyplace in Mexico is poverty-stricken and terrorized by *narcotraficantes*. There's a middle class. Indoor plumbing. Electricity. Color television. Even freezers. But I was willing to bet Fresno had no Culver's frozen custard.

I used Google Translate to learn Willie's favorite flavor and got us both triple scoops of chocolate in cups. The look on his face after the first bite showed me what he must have looked like as a small child. That smile told me everything we'd gone through that day was worth it.

I stopped at Smitty's for supplies on the way back to the room. Parked around the corner from the motel office and got a second room so I wouldn't disturb Willie's sleep with my early comings and goings. I figured I'd be back by six, take a quick nap, and still have him in Marisol's hands before noon.

* * *

I got up at 2:15. Showered, changed clothes, on the road by 2:45. Pulled over where I could see the plant exit and not likely be seen myself. Hung a handkerchief off the driver-side mirror to pass for a disabled vehicle. Anyone stopped to offer help, I'd tell them roadside assistance was on the way.

A nice night compared to the heat of the past few days. I settled in with a bag of jerky, a Hershey bar, two bottles of green Gatorade, and the good Celestron binoculars. As ready as I'd ever be by 3:20.

A man opened the gate in the plant's fence at 4:35. Within a minute an old-style school bus rolled through and stopped on my side while the man re-fastened the gate. He got in and the bus pulled onto the road going away from me.

I untied the handkerchief and followed at a discreet distance. With no traffic at this hour, the bus's running lights made him as easy to spot as LeBron James in a preschool. The driver and his companion weren't likely to worry about a tail unless Willie's escape had spooked them.

If it did, their driving didn't reflect it. Steady speed, no detours that I noticed. Eventually turned off onto a dirt road and stopped a few hundred yards up the way. I pulled out the binoculars and watched people get out of the bus and go into a building.

Nothing else for me to do here. I'd reconnoiter the compound tomorrow night after everyone had left for the plant. Made a quick U-turn and set the motel's address into the GPS. Forced the gadget do a few recalculations as I deviated from the route to make sure no one followed me. Got back to the motel at 6:01, satisfied I'd traveled alone.

I needn't have worried about a tail. Everyone in town who might have an interest in my activities was waiting in my room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There were four of them. One in the desk chair, one in the reading chair, two on the edge of the bed. Three in uniform and Eastman in plainclothes. Lundy's finest. Looked like the whole department was here.

Officer Harris looked to the one perched in the desk chair. A solidly put-together man with steel-gray hair and a spreading waist. A single star adorned each collar point on his khaki shirt. He nodded and Harris spoke.

"You don't seem to take suggestions well. I told you the other night at Rusty's it would be a good idea to get out of town and you're still here. Did you think I was kidding?"

I closed the door behind me. Eased my back against it to create space and keep everyone in front of me. "What you said was you'd see me again, and I never doubted it. I just didn't expect a house call. Or your friends." I nodded toward my other acquaintance. "Detective Eastman."

Eastman returned the acknowledgement. Asked where I'd been.

"Driving calms my mind when I can't sleep. How long have you been waiting?"

"Forty-five minutes or so."

"You must've just missed me."

The uniform who was neither Harris nor the chief said, "Uh-uh. I drove past at three and your car wasn't here."

Stupid. I should have fessed up to leaving when I did. Catching me in the lie gave them an edge. As if they didn't hold all the cards to start with.

The chief rose from the bed. Walked over to me. "You mind if I take a look at your investigator's license?"

"Not at all. Wallet's in my left hip pocket." He nodded and I took it out. Handed him both my driver's and P.I. licenses.

This close I could see the chief's name was Meadows. He studied my credentials like they were the Dead Sea Scrolls. Spoke in a polite, modulated tone. "State of Illinois says you're a certified private investigator, so you can legally snoop into other people's business. You're also a pain in the ass and a lying sack of shit, so your visit is over. We even packed up for you." Pointed to my suitcase and laptop bag. "We did *not*

search anything. We did not boot your computer. My word on that. All we did was take whatever looked like it might belong to you and put it into one of those bags so you wouldn't have to. Midwestern nice and all that."

There were several ways I could fuck this up. I took a few seconds deciding which I found most appealing. "What if I don't want to go?"

This did not seem to have occurred to him.

I went on. "I like it here. You have a great diner and the people I've talked to have been nice enough to more than make up for tonight's lack of hospitality. Another couple of days should be all I need to complete my business and head on up the road."

Harris and the one whose name I didn't get stepped forward, fists clenched. Chief Meadows gave a minute shake of the head. "There's not going to be any trouble. You can walk out or we can take you. Either way, in a few minutes you and your possessions will be on the road."

This was not a worst-case scenario. I now knew for sure which side the police were on, how united they were, and what to expect from them. That was worth some inconvenience.

No point resisting at four-to-one against. Normally I'd admit defeat, leave, and make an alternative plan. Tonight wasn't normal: I had Willie stashed two doors down. Assuming they'd escort me out of town, coming back for him might be tricky.

"Okay, Chief, I get the point. Arguing isn't going to do anything except maybe piss you off and that's not going to help either of us. How about you let me go to that diner one more time? Get me one of those good Plainsman breakfasts before I hit the road. You still get what you want and I save a little face."

The chief smiled like he knew something I didn't. I'd seen enough of them over the years to know they weren't often right.

He spoke while I was still making up my mind how to handle it. "We already took care of your little brown friend up the way there. Don't worry. We didn't hurt him. He is undocumented, though, and we can't have that sort running around causing who knows what kind of trouble."

I guess this was one of those times where the smiler actually did know something I didn't.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I drove north on I-55 dreading the talk I was about to have with Marisol Eisenberg like it was an unanesthetized colonoscopy. Everything she'd warned me about had come to pass; I couldn't deliver on the only thing I'd promised.

She looked happy to see me until she noticed I was alone. Came out from behind her desk. Extended a hand as if to shake, then gripped it tight without the traditional motion. "Let's hear it."

This was no time to play cute. I told her everything I'd done, everything Willie and I talked about, everything I knew that I didn't know the last time we spoke. Her face hardened as I went, though she didn't interrupt.

I finished and braced myself for a lecture. What she did was worse. Went back behind her desk. Took her seat. Crossed one knee over the other and looked toward me. Not at me. Pursed her lips. Dangled one foot. Then in a calm, neutral voice, she said, "What are you going to do now?"

Not *I warned you about this* or *Why didn't you listen to me?* Or, my favorite when I found myself in her position, *Gee, why didn't I think of that?* She asked what I intended next as if my fucking up had been a foregone conclusion and she had an unrealistic hope of getting ahead of the next one.

"I'm not walking away."

"I didn't think you were. That's why I asked what's next."

I hadn't spent the time driving to Chicago wool gathering. What I presented to Marisol as Plan B was closer to Plan H. "I need more background and intel. I went to Lundy Monday morning to look into sloppy police work on a hit-and-run with no injuries. Now I know there's a lot more going on. How much more is what I need to find out before I go running off half-cocked again."

Marisol could have busted my *huevos* for jacking the situation up as badly as I had. She decided to work with me. "Do you think what you found out about the meat packing plant has anything to do with what sent you there originally?"

“I’d like to say no, but a town that small where my client *and* the drunk driver are connected through the case *and* the town’s primary business? With the police covering for both? I don’t see any way they *aren’t* connected.”

“I don’t disagree. What’s next?”

“I need to get more detailed information on Bower, Dowd, WestLake, and Central Illinois Processing. I’ll have to push some buttons and I’ll need to find links and weaknesses to know which buttons to push.”

“Or you could go to the police. Not the locals, obviously, but the Illinois State Police or the FBI.”

We’d been over this before. I tried not to be dismissive but couldn’t help wagging my head. “ISP has political issues with Lundy. They’re going to want more than I can give them right now if I expect them to do anything. I have a contact there, though, and they could become my bail-out plan.”

“Not the FBI?”

“The first thing the FBI would do is debate jurisdiction. Then they’d call ICE. There’s a Mexican connection, so maybe DEA gets consulted. While the Bureau was making up its mind how to handle the investigation, ICE would deport everyone who wasn’t a native English speaker and leave nothing to investigate. My first priority is to get the workers out, but I want to extract a pound of flesh from the bastards responsible while I’m at it.”

Marisol tapped a pencil against her teeth. “The police—feds, whoever—have the law to protect them. You don’t.”

“These sons of bitches are operating so far outside the law we can’t depend on it for justice.”

Marisol was quiet a long time. I had to lean in to hear what she said next. “What do you consider justice? Legal, documented status for the workers? Fast tracking them? Finding jobs that actually pay them? I know what I want to happen. What about you?”

My turn to be quiet for a while. “You and I don’t have anything like the same background. We look at things from different angles. You’re a social worker and community activist. I have a law enforcement perspective. To me, justice means locking up those responsible while getting the victims out of harm’s way. Whatever happens after that is beyond my area of expertise.”

Marisol rubbed her lower lip with a thumb as I spoke. Pinned the lip behind her top teeth. “There’s a lot in what you said I’d like to argue with, but you’re not wrong. How best to take care of the people held there is not a matter for law enforcement. We’re dealing with two distinct problems and there’s no single, clean solution. I think you’re beginning to see some of the frustrations I deal with every day.”

I started nodding halfway through. “That’s what I’m talking about. To me, right now, justice is getting those workers into your hands while dropping the hammer on the people who think they’re getting away with it.”

Neither of us wanted to go next. We sat in awkward but friendly silence until I noted we both had plenty to do and should get to it. I was out of my chair and turning for the door when Marisol spoke.

“Why do you care so much? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining, and I don’t mean to imply you’re not a good person. What I think you’re talking about doing goes way beyond anything I’d ever dream of asking. If it’s because you’re feeling guilty about losing Guillermo, this won’t bring him back.”

My hands gripped the back of the chair as I stared at the seat. “I was always small as a kid. The town where I grew up didn’t have a preschool or kindergarten program and I guess I passed a test, so they enrolled me in first grade when I was five, and I was small for a five-year-old. I’m not faulting my parents, they meant well, but there I was, the youngest kid in the class, noticeably smaller than just about everyone else, and it was my first experience with that many other people. I was so shy I peed myself once because I was too bashful to raise my hand to ask to go to the bathroom. That made the taunting I was already getting even worse.”

I could count the number of people I’d told this to before without opening my fist. “In high school I grew nine inches in a year and a half. Filled out in my early twenties. Was in the service and worked as a cop so I learned how to carry myself. People don’t mess with me anymore.”

I exhaled through my nose for several seconds. “It left a mark, though. I’m not proud of this, but now I’ll go out of my way to bully anyone I catch bullying someone else. I want him to know what it feels like to be at another person’s mercy feeling powerless.

“All I know for sure is that I screwed Willie. Nothing I can do about that now, and don’t think it doesn’t break my balls to admit it. What I can

do is try to help the people who are still there. Maybe the bosses put Willie back to work and he'll come out with the rest." I saw Marisol's expression. "I doubt it, too, but that's all I can control."

"I get that. I do. But how do you plan to do it?"

A small smile grew as I spoke. "I have a couple of things in mind, but I think everyone is better off if you don't know what they are."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mention the name Timothy Alston Satterwhite around the South Side of Chicago—still the baddest part of town—and you’ll either get yawns or see people perk up at the idea of a new victim. Mention Goose to the same audience and even the worst will find somewhere else to be. Let them know that Goose *is* Timothy Alston Satterwhite and they’ll apologize for even considering robbing him or anyone close to him. Oh, and here’s fifty bucks. Give Goose my best.

He’d be six feet tall if he stood on a phone book. Weight a buck-fifty or so. Dressed neatly but working class and wore his hair cut close to the scalp a la Jason Statham. You could walk past a thousand like him and not notice, but you’d give the sidewalk to Goose. Menace rose from him like heat waves off a parking lot even when he smiled. Depending on the circumstances, especially when he smiled.

Goose earned his living collecting sums owed for which no paperwork existed. He hurt people only if he had to, and he no longer had to very often. When he did it was because the object of his attention was new in town, or to the business, or for some reason was not aware of Goose’s reputation. Said clueless individual then became part of that reputation.

Enforcement was also on his menu. He never accepted a contract but, if a situation broke the wrong way, it wouldn’t be Goose’s next of kin visiting Elmo’s Tombstones While You Wait.

He adopted me several years ago after I interrupted a pimp beating hell out of a working girl one bitter cold night in my uniform patrol days. I gave the pimp a little of his own and locked his ass up. Draped my heavy coat over the girl’s freezing shoulders and called for EMTs to check her out. Goose knew this because he’d been on his way to kill the pimp—the hooker was Goose’s sister—when he saw me resolve the situation. Since then he had a gift for knowing when I needed backup. Saved my life twice. At least.

I found him eating an early lunch at Harold’s Chicken Shack on East 35th Street. We nodded to each other as I walked to the counter to order a dozen wings and a Coke.

A couple of hard case wanna-bes gave me the stink eye while I waited for my food. I made a point of moving between them to get napkins; sufficient jostling ensued to let me know they were on board to give my clueless white ass an education in respect. Then I sat at Goose's table. He licked grease from his fingers, and we exchanged fist bumps. The hard boys disappeared with all the commotion of melting snow.

Goose slurped Dr. Pepper through a straw. "How's life in the fast-paced world of suburban computer checks? Catch any viruses? Carpal tunnel?"

I arrayed my meal. "You know, it's not as bad as I thought it would be."

"I call bullshit."

"How can you call BS on something as plainspoken as that?"

"Because that your go-to line for anything you don't like. Ten below zero, snot freezing your nose hairs together? You say, 'It's not as bad as I thought it would be.' Summertime, hundred and ten in the shade, balls hanging down around your knees? 'It's not as bad as I thought it would be.' Could be a knife sticking out your head and you'd say, 'It's not as bad as I thought it would be.' If you could talk at all."

"That's why they call me Mr. Silver Lining."

"No one call you that except you."

"I am not a slave to the opinions of others." Goose snorted into the straw. The bubbles in his drink resonated inside the cup. "It's nice to get up when I want, make some tea, and dick around on the computer for the day. Do some laundry. Maybe a few household chores. I work a regular schedule, don't have to go out in the heat or cold, and I never worry about some asshole sticking a knife in my head."

"Boring as a motherfucker, though. Ain't it?"

"Maybe not as a motherfucker, but yeah. Sometimes. Or it would be if computer checks were all I did."

"We allowed to talk about your underground bidness out here in the world? Or do we need to lower the Cone of Silence and shit?"

I looked around the restaurant. A line had formed at the counter. The seating area about three-quarters full. No one sat at the tables next to ours. "I doubt anyone in here is looking to report me to the licensing board or the

IRS. Especially now that they know I can carry on polite conversations with you.”

“That a racial slur on account of you the only one here not a person of color?”

“Since I started spending time with you, it’s not unusual for me to be the only white guy in a room.”

“How that make you feel?”

We were breaking balls, but this question deserved a thoughtful answer. “Since I’m usually with you in those situations, I don’t feel one way or the other about it. But yeah, it has given me an appreciation of what it’s like to be the different guy.”

Goose earned his living as a thug but he was, at heart, a thoughtful and occasionally even kind person. He’d shown me a lot about race relations without preaching or bitching. He would have been a good teacher had his formative years been different.

He sucked air from the bottom of his cup. “So what bring you down this way to be the obviously different guy?”

“Can’t I just want to have lunch with my friend?”

“I’d be more likely to say yes if you ever did it before.” I gave him a look. A smile broke out on his face. “A’ight, a’ight. I guess you do it pretty regular. Once a month or so, I reckon.”

“Thank you.”

“So why today?”

“I was on this side of town and figured I’d give it a shot. Harold’s is your Thursday place often as not.”

“I need to start changing up. Man in my line of work can’t be too predictable. How are things in suburbia?”

I broke apart the bones of a flat and gnawed the meat from them. “The usual. The underground shit might have something of more interest to you.”

This was slippery ground. I never asked Goose for help. We kept in touch and he had a knack for knowing when to volunteer. Today I was going right up to the line of asking a favor. I wasn’t comfortable about it.

He seemed to sense my reluctance. Reached across the table to poach a fry. “Interesting in what way?”

“You have any thoughts on slavery?”

Goose sat motionless as the furniture. Only his lips moved. “You know I have very definite ideas about slavery. What are we talking about, specifically?”

I set a wing back on my plate. “I have good reason to believe a meat packing operation down Normal way has undocs penned up and is working them after hours without pay. No proof, but a strong suspicion.”

“What’s a undoc?”

“Undocumented immigrant.”

Goose took a second to absorb the new information. “Defined penned up.”

“They stay in what looks like a barracks. Double-wide or something. Seem to be locked in until it’s time to go to work. At least that’s what I think.”

“Mexes?”

I nodded. “Does it matter?”

“No. Curious is all. What you plan to do about it?”

“I haven’t decided. Right now I have other business there.”

“One of those off-the-books jobs?” I sipped Coke and nodded. “You do have *some* idea about what you want to do. Right?”

“I want to bring them to an organization here in town that can help them.”

“And you don’t think knocking on the front door and aksing ‘Can I set your Mexkins free?’ gonna get it done.”

“That is correct.”

Another brief silence. “May I assume that you believe physical violence will be required to perpetrate this noble act?”

“You may.”

Goose worked a piece of chicken from between his teeth with a toothpick. “I usually get top dollar when my talent for mayhem is requested. But, since you a friend and this a noble cause and shit and I gots nothing else going on and I suspect I may get to fuck with some crackers, keep me on your short list of people to call should you decide to move forward with this project.”

“Spoken in a very businesslike manner.”

“I’m getting too old to earn a living breaking fingers and shit. Not to mention, all the fingers I already broke, my services no longer in demand

like they used to be. Now a potential employer just mention my name and money magically appear. Motherfuckers don't even kick me back no royalty. I want to run things like a bidness, I need to be more professional. Vocabulary the easy part."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

First thing on the agenda when I got home was to catch Marian Bradshaw up on my experiences in Lundy. She listened until I finished with the local constabulary's invitation for me to leave earlier that morning.

"I can't say I'm surprised. Running you out of town seems a bit extreme, though. Counterproductive, too, if I know anything about you. Which I do. Are you aware you're all over Google?"

"Half of what's there isn't true but, to be honest, half of what I've done isn't in there, either."

"Seven men?"

Shit. She had been checking. No point making excuses now. "That part is accurate. I've heard numbers as high as eleven."

The line went silent. Then, "I have friends who might be able to help you, but not if they're worried about walking into the OK Corral."

"It won't be my doing if it is."

"All I'm saying is not to let yourself be provoked into doing something foolish."

"Rest easy, Marian. I do foolish things with my eyes focused and my mind relaxed. No provocation necessary."

I didn't tell her about Willie or what he'd said to me about the packing plant. That might be enough to mobilize ISP, given the hard-on they already had for Lundy PD, but I didn't want to give Dowd and Bower a chance to close the operation if they got wind on an investigation ramping up. I'd have something ISP could sink their teeth into soon enough.

Next on my agenda was to call the local newspaper, the *Lundy Reporter*. Editor Sean Karlsson answered my general questions as if he worked for the chamber of commerce. Which I suppose he did, indirectly. He extolled the benefits Lundy and its surrounding towns derived from having such a good corporate resident as Central Illinois Processing. I learned CIP contributed to help Lundy over a threshold for matching federal funds to resurface Main Street and supplied the lion's share of the money for new bleachers at the high school football field. Karlsson pointed me to

the paper's website for more examples of the company's much appreciated largesse.

Karlsson was much less forthcoming about anything that might be unverified, undocumented, or, as he put it, "gossip." This was surprising. Journalists typically love to dish, hoping I'd uncover something meaty they could use.

My check of the *Reporter's* ownership turned up no one involved in this investigation, so that wasn't why Karlsson wouldn't show any leg. After dancing around for a few minutes, I thanked him and lied about how helpful he'd been. We were about to hang up, with his shields hopefully coming down, when I pulled a telephonic Columbo.

"One more thing, and if you don't know right off the top of your head never mind, but who would you say the major advertisers are for the *Reporter*? I could go through a bunch of old issues, but that would be a snapshot more than a good survey."

Karlsson named half a dozen businesses. I thanked him again and ended the call. Looked up the companies he told me about on the internet. By the time I broke to cut the grass I knew all the major advertisers Karlsson mentioned had connections to Central Illinois Processing.

One was owned outright.

Another was part of a partnership.

One principal owner had several contracts with CIP.

Two had outstanding loans guaranteed by WestLake as part of a "Good Neighbor" program.

No one at the *Reporter* was likely to say anything bad about CIP even if it dumped truckfuls of offal in the town drinking water.

This was not necessarily bad news. At the very least, I was now aware not to trust the *Reporter* any more than the police. I also knew anything I told Karlsson would get back to the CIP offices, which could be used to my advantage.

I'm sneaky that way.

* * *

I think of cutting the grass as meditation with a power tool. It requires paying attention, which jumpstarts the mind, but not so much concentration

you can't think about other things. (Unless you're my neighbor, who treats his lawn like it's the eighteenth green at Butler National.) I found no reason Donald Bower's money couldn't be used to help the workers in Lundy. The trick was to get information only he had without pissing him off so much he didn't pay me.

I finished the yard work and made supper—fish and chips in the air fryer—before driving to Lake City. I arrived unannounced for two reasons:

1. I didn't want Bower to have time to prepare.
2. I hoped he might not be home and I could talk to Evelyn.

Best-laid plans and that. Bower opened the door ten seconds after I rang the bell. He wore a golf shirt with the Medinah Country Club crest on the left breast over loose-fitting khaki slacks that looked as if they cost more than my dental implants. Of course, boat shoes with no socks. He looked as surprised as if he'd seen me make a hole-in-one on the Golf Channel.

"Forte? You should've called. I'm not home in the evening all that often. What are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by with a quick progress report and maybe verify a few things. You have a minute?"

He looked around the entryway as if someone might be there with his schedule. "I guess so. We'll take the boat. Keep us away from—"

"Cell phones. How about we just ignore them for the next ten, fifteen minutes? Maybe even turn them off. I don't have time for a cruise right now."

"I can't just turn off my phone. The people I work with need to be able to reach me."

"But they can get along if you're on the lake and out of range."

"I'm allowed to have a personal life."

"Which is what this is. Part of your personal life. Unless there's a business connection you haven't told me about."

He wasn't finished trying to piss higher up the tree. "I was thinking of taking the boat out, anyway. Another ten minutes and you might have missed me."

"Then I'll be quick so you can be on your way." Cut off his interruption. "I need to tell you what I know and get back to work on your case."

I had him over a small barrel. He'd asked for progress reports. Here I was with one; he couldn't very well tell me he'd only take it on the water. Could he?

"All right. Make it quick." Apparently not.

"Your hit-and-run driver, the man with the gun, is named Kenneth Dowd. He's a big shot in the packing plant there. Do you know him?"

I was more disappointed than surprised at his answer. "Kenneth Dowd? Never heard of him. Should I have?"

Madison Garner told me straight out her father knew everything about Kenneth Dowd, including his involvement in the hit-and-run. For Bower not to think I'd discover this implied he considered me hired muscle rather than a professional investigator who would follow the evidence wherever it led.

Dumbass.

I said, "I only bring it up because Dowd's a wheel at CIP and WestLake owns about half of it. I wondered if your paths had crossed."

Bower's calm exterior was betrayed by eyes that held a mixture of confusion and something else. It might have been the realization he didn't have as much control over this situation as he'd assumed.

He tried to brush it off. "Do you have any idea how many companies WestLake owns a piece of? I doubt I could name them all off the top of my head, let alone who their owners were."

"Then you have little interaction with CIP or their operations in Lundy."

"They run their business how they run it. As long as the financials look good, we give them a free hand. Just as we would for any other entity in which we hold an interest." He couldn't help asking. "Why do you want to know?"

The bullshit he was shoveling had already ruined my shoes. I could save my watch if I got out quick. "Nothing major. Lundy police asked me to leave town this morning. Insisted, actually. I hadn't done anything to provoke such behavior, so I assumed Dowd had enough juice to pull some strings."

"You're finished, then?"

I shook my head. "I didn't have a lot of options this morning. Discretion was in order. I'm better prepared now."

Bower could pick up a phone before I was out of Lake City and I'd be in deep *mierda*. I knew he wouldn't. Making the call would tip Dowd to the fact Bower was fucking with him. There were a lot of unknowns in this case. Bower's unwillingness to show himself wasn't one of them.

Like most who think they're the smartest person in the room, Bower didn't know when to shut up. "One horse town, is it? Those places drive me crazy. I try to spend as little time in them as possible. Probably why I don't know this Dowd fellow."

I laid my next comment out there as casual as complimenting his haircut. "I guess you don't see your grandchildren much." He shot me a look no employee of the month ever saw. In for a penny, I said, "You told me that was why Evelyn was in Lundy that day. Visiting the grandkids. Right?"

Bower took the edge off his glare. His voice remained tight. "Right. They usually come up here. When I go down it's on weekends and holidays. Off-work time. Are we finished? I'd like to take the boat out even if you don't." Came out like *especially if you don't*.

"That's all for now," I said, though I had one more question in my pocket. I saved it until we reached the door. "How's Mrs. Bower holding up?"

The question threw him a little. "She's fine. Why?"

"Just wondering. You said she might have PTSD when I was here last time. Too shook up to talk to me."

"Right. She's doing much better. Not home now. Card night. Or movies. Some woman thing." An affair, I hoped.

Bower hadn't told me anything I didn't already know, which was fine. It was hard to believe he knew nothing about what went on after hours in that pork plant, and to know anything meant he was involved. He owed a lot of people, and I intended to collect on behalf of everyone.

Lucky for me I knew a guy who was used to dealing with people unwilling to meet their unwritten obligations.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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I slept in the next morning. Ran errands. Worked through part of the pile of pending background checks. Ate a nice lunch at Portillo's in Lombard. Home for more billable work before I packed up the car and left for Lundy ahead of the worst of the traffic.

I didn't want to announce my presence any more than necessary. Stayed at a motel one exit up the highway. Didn't make a reservation in case the clerk was in the wrong person's pocket. I still went to the anonymous diner for supper, because who the fuck are these guys to tell me where I can or can't eat?

The supper rush had passed and I had the place mostly to myself. Took a table out of the flow of what traffic there was and opened a menu. Not hiding, but also not advertising my presence.

I didn't see Laurie until I was already seated. She talked to another waitress, an older woman who looked as if she might be an original employee regardless of when the joint had opened. They looked my direction. The other woman nodded and went about her business.

Laurie came to my table and assumed the position, invisible gum snapping, pencil at the ready. "What'll it be? More liver?"

"How do you fry the chicken?"

She pointed a thumb at herself. "*I* don't fry the chicken at all, which is why we're still in business. This isn't going to be like the egg question you asked the other day, is it?"

"This is legit. Does the cook put the breaded pieces in a deep fryer or a skillet?"

She turned as if going to find out. Stopped before she was all the way around. "Deep fryer. I've never seen them cook anything like you described in a skillet."

"Then I'll have the meat loaf dinner with rolls instead of biscuits."

She spoke as she wrote. "Got any questions about how they cook the meat loaf?"

"Are there different ways?"

“Beats me. I didn’t know there were different ways to fry chicken. Another Arnold Palmer?”

She returned a minute later with my drink, which had slightly more lemonade than before. “Haven’t seen you around for a few days. You’re not cheating on me, are you?”

I feigned dismay. “Me? Never. I’m a one waitress man. At least as long as I’m in town. Some business took me away for a bit is all.”

“For the movie?”

Oh, yeah. The movie. “I needed to look at a few places further south. Cairo, Urbandale. Around there. Cape Girardeau.”

“Ewww. Missouri?”

“I came back, didn’t I? Obviously not too much of a Missouri stench on me, or you would’ve noticed it sooner.”

Laurie made a show of sniffing the air. “I guess you must’ve just passed through. What brings you back? Not that I’m not glad to see you.”

“The director wants me to look closer at a few things, so I’ll be in and out. I like my job, but it can be a pain in the ass, depending on who I’m working for. This guy, every time I send a report he wants something different. He’s all ‘I know I didn’t tell you what I wanted, but this isn’t it.’ I’ll be glad when this picture’s over.”

“Can I ask who the director is?”

“Sure.”

Took her a beat to catch on. “Oh, I see. Classified, is it?”

“No, not really.” I just needed a few seconds to come up with a name. “You’ve heard of Ron Howard?”

Her eyes got big. “Shut *up*. *Everyone’s* heard of Ron Howard.”

“And highly regarded and well-loved he is across the industry. The guy I’m working for is Frank Howard. Got his start in commercials and worked his way up to music videos. This is his first movie.” Almost said “second movie.” Pulled it back when the specter of Laurie searching IMDb flashed before my eyes.

“Bummer. What does he want you to look at again?”

Lucky for me Willie and I had covered a lot of ground searching for the barracks. “There’s a little bit of a hill a couple of miles,” stared out the window as if orienting myself, “east of here they might be able to use. They also want shots of the packing plant. I know, it’s about sixty years not old

enough. You'd be amazed what they can do with false fronts and computer graphics." This location scout business got easier all the time. Even I was starting to believe some of this bullshit.

"Wow. There's more to this than I thought." A brief hesitation. "They wouldn't have need for a sturdily built farm girl, would they? Even as an extra?"

I almost felt bad for leading her on until I remembered I told her I was scouting locations, not talent. It wasn't like I asked her back to my room for an "audition." Put on a face I hoped implied regret. "I have no say in casting. They have people who don't do anything but that. I'll add a note to my report, but I can't remember the last time they listened to me about an actor since I tipped them to Fred Savage after I saw him eating at Lou Malnati's."

"Who's Fred Savage?"

How young was this girl? Clearly Laurie's parents didn't love her as much as I loved Caroline. I made a mental note to see if *The Wonder Years* was streaming anywhere.

The bell announced my meal. Laurie returned with a plate of meat loaf and mashed potatoes covered in gravy, corn on the cob that might have come from across the street that morning, and two dinner rolls with pats of butter on a smaller dish. I was salivating before she finished setting me up.

"Thank you. This smells great." She waited for me to try the meat loaf. It was as good as it smelled, at least as good as the liver. "Would it be all right to compliment Herm, or is meat loaf also beneath flattery?"

"Herm's off tonight. Edith's back there. She'll be thrilled." Laurie lingered like she had something more to say until I looked up with food in my mouth and a question in my eyes. "This is going to sound stupid, but you're not from around here, are you?"

"You mean was I born in Illinois? No. Western Pennsylvania."

"I thought you didn't sound, I don't know, midwestern. Your As aren't flat enough, and your other vowels sound, I don't know, funny. No offense."

"None taken. My accent has lessened over the years, but it's still noticeable. Comes right back if I'm home more than a day or so."

"Which makes me wonder how you knew so much about Southern the other day."

I was going to have to be more careful what I said around Laurie. “I went to college at Northwestern and never moved back, so I’ve lived in Illinois longer than Pennsylvania by now.”

Then she got what she believed was my life story around serving other customers. Told her I had a degree in music from Northwestern, played in an Army band, and taught school because the best lies are based in truth. I did not mention my time spent as a cop and never got close to the words “private” or “investigator.” I talked about meeting theater people while playing in a pit orchestra and one thing led to another, which led me into the movie business. It was artfully done, if I do say so myself.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There are two things all private investigators need to know:

1. Get a business card from everyone you meet.
2. It's amazing what you can get away with if you look like you know what you're doing and carry a clipboard.

Roscoe Brown worked in Human Resources for the Illinois Department of Agriculture. We met when I did background work for his organization. Roscoe was a friendly and cheerful man whose business card did not bear his likeness, which was a big plus for me, as he bore a striking resemblance to Shaquille O'Neal, but a foot and a half shorter.

I approached the security station like I expected people to do what I asked but I wasn't going to be a dick about it. "Good morning. I'm Roscoe Brown from IDA." Showed him the card. "I need someone to escort me around the building."

The guard didn't pay enough attention to the card to ask why someone from HR wanted a tour. I had a story ready if he had. "What's this about?"

"Surprise inspection."

He shuffled papers. "I don't see anything about no inspection here."

"Wouldn't be much of a surprise if you knew we were coming."

The guard didn't like that. Couldn't argue with it, either. "Wally Schacte usually goes with the inspectors, but he's off this week."

"Anyone who knows their way around the plant will do." I averted my eyes as if embarrassed to have to say what came next, hoping to appeal to the dislike of government I sensed from the guard. "This isn't a typical inspection. We're branching into a little of what OSHA does, but at the state level. I need someone to give me a tour so I can see nobody has missing fingers or mangled hands and I'll be on my way."

The guard picked up a phone handset, hesitated, then punched in three numbers. Spoke for ten seconds, listened, then thanked whoever was on the other end and hung up. "Betty Wiley will be right down."

I thanked him and made way for a man wearing a suit who I hoped didn't work for the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Three minutes later a

not unattractive woman in her early forties who wasn't nearly as hot as she thought she was came through the double doors that led into the main building.

She extended her hand while still several steps away. "Mr. Brown?"

Her hand was bony and a little cool. "Ms. Wiley?"

"Please, call me Betty."

"In that case, please call me Roscoe." Already friends.

Betty put on a frown. "Understand, Wally Schacte usually goes around with the inspectors. I may not be able to answer all your questions."

"Don't worry about it. I just need you to take me through the facility so I can look for safety violations. I don't need to examine the work area." Saw her expression. "We have inspectors who specialize in that. My job is to make sure the other areas are up to code."

Betty's face clouded. "I don't understand. If you're not going to check the actual working conditions, what are you looking for?"

"Simple stuff. Trip and fall hazards. Handrails secured to the walls of staircases. General air quality. Exposed asbestos. Suitable number of handicapped toilet stalls. Those kinds of things. So long as you know where everything is, we'll be fine."

That perked her up. She led me toward the doors she'd come through. "What would you like to see first?"

"Doesn't matter. Probably the best thing would be to circumnavigate the building. Don't leave anything out. The sequence isn't important." I lowered my voice conspiratorially. "Tell the truth, this is such a new program I'm not exactly sure what I'm looking for. Checking off boxes on a form, mostly."

Betty reached for the clipboard. "May I see what you need to check off?"

I pulled the clipboard away. The "form" was a printed version of what I provided clients when doing background checks. "Sorry. The one thing I know I'm not supposed to do is to let anyone see what I'm looking for. You know, so they won't be tempted to steer me away from potential violations." I made a face calculated to be somewhere between apologetic and disgusted. "I don't know whose idea this was. It's way too cloak and dagger for my taste."

“Government,” she said, as if it explained everything. “You have no idea the regulations we have to put up with.”

“Actually, I do.” Confused her again. “I work for the people who write them.” Betty blushed. I winked to show her I had no hard feelings. “Lead on.”

We walked the halls. I pretended to look closely at things like worn stair treads or damaged corners, potentially loose floor tiles, and light fixtures; Betty did her best to figure out what the hell was going on without being too obvious about it.

The first thing of real interest to me was the employees’ locker room. I counted the lockers without being obvious about it while asking innocuous questions. “How many people work here?” “How many shifts?” “How are breaks handled?” Whatever I could think of that would sound relevant, whether I cared about it or not.

I made a point of buying a can of Mountain Dew from the machine in the break room to “make sure the employees get their money’s worth.” Said it with another wink—that was my move today—and offered to buy her one. She declined. I made a note on my “form” to figure out what the hell it was with this town and Pepsi products.

The administrative offices were my next high value target. The office staff here—people like Betty and the elusive Wally Schacte—handled onsite administration: schedules, shipping and receiving, maintenance, and close support for the line workers.

It surprised me to find Central Illinois Processing still used cardboard timecards with the employees’ names printed on them. The cards looked exactly like those at my summer supermarket job when I was in college twenty-five years ago, except these had the employees’ names and numbers pre-printed at the top of the card. Took me aback until it occurred to me this was as efficient and cost-effective a system as an operation like this needed.

I tapped the card rack. “Are all the employees hourly?”

“Just those on the production line and the maintenance workers. Security guards. Those of us who work in offices are salaried.”

“How many shifts?”

“Just the one.”

I nodded. Jotted a note. “How many employees did you say you have?”

“Altogether?”

“In this building.”

“About a hundred.”

“And how many of those on the production floor?”

“I’d guess eighty or so in the cutting room. Wally would know better.”

I made a note. “That’s close enough.” I counted the rows and columns of cards in their slots. Did a rough calculation, as not every slot was filled. About seventy-two to seventy-five timecards. Close to a hundred lockers. Everything looked right.

Unless you knew another shift came in after hours.

I continued to take meaningless notes while asking mostly meaningless questions. “Mostly meaningless” because every so often I’d slip in something for background that could be useful later. “What’s a typical workday?”

“Seven thirty to four, five days a week. Our busy periods are before Christmas and Easter when everyone wants hams. Then we add a couple of hours of overtime for a week or so. Sometimes a half day on Saturday. All at time and a half, of course.”

I nodded as if that was worth noting, appalled that she felt the need to mention it.

I wasted about an hour of Betty’s day altogether. Peeked into the work area as we passed but didn’t notice anything I hadn’t already seen on YouTube videos. Declined another invitation to go in. The last thing I needed was to encounter someone who knew what an inspector was supposed to do.

By the time Betty walked me through the double doors to return my guest badge to security, I knew

1. There was no acknowledgement of more than one shift of workers.
2. There were only enough timecards and lockers for that one shift.

I thanked Betty more than she might have thought necessary. She’d been gracious and friendly as I gathered information that might put her and her friends out of their jobs. My conscience bothered me until I remembered it was the people at the top of the food chain, those who set the events in motion, who bore that responsibility.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I knew where Kenneth Dowd lived and could have staked out his house. An earlier drive-by taught me I'd stick out in his neighborhood like horse shit on the breakfast buffet, so I went downtown where I at least had a chance to blend in while I waited.

I killed time in a coffee shop/ice cream parlor/candy store across the street from the main Central Illinois Processing offices. Nursed a chocolate milkshake, read a James Crumley novel (*Bordersnakes*), and made polite conversation with a thirty-ish woman accompanied by two toddlers. The kids ate small dishes of ice cream while Mom sipped an iced decaf latte. She and I talked about kids and the weather and then more about kids. No subtext. No cleverly disguised sexual innuendoes. Two people chatting, one of whom needed to talk to another adult right now more than anything, including oxygen.

The moppets finished their treats, which meant they once again required Mom's full attention. I held the door so she could clutch one small hand in each of hers. They were still exiting when a man got into Kenneth Dowd's car and drove away.

No problem following him; he had no reason to watch for a tail and had the juice not to have to worry about it. He stopped at Rusty's Lounge for the better part of an hour while I waited in the parking lot. I thought about going in but wanted to talk without potential eavesdroppers or interruptions.

From Rusty's he drove straight home, arriving at 6:23. I guessed that put dinner at either six thirty or seven, so I went to the anonymous diner for a quick bite. Laurie wasn't working so I grabbed a BLT and was back in front of Dowd's house by 7:40. The garage door was open; his car was inside.

An attractive woman in her late thirties struggling to look early thirties answered the door. Five-seven or -eight with a frame and hips that implied "model" and an upper body that screamed "implants." She had shoulder-length black hair and round brown eyes that didn't mind looking

right at me. Her tan was even, and her skin was a few years away from showing the dryness such coloring always led to, but it was coming.

She spoke with the authority of a woman accustomed to getting her way with men. “Can I help you?”

“Mrs. Dowd?”

“Yes.”

“Is Mr. Dowd at home? Mr. Kenneth Dowd?”

She ran her eyes up and down me. Not suggestively. More like assessing which brush-off technique to use. “And you are...”

“Nick Forte. I’m a private investigator.”

I made a business card and my license appear as if out of thin air, a move I’d practiced until Ricky Jay would have been proud. She ignored the card, took the license. Examined it as if she’d be able to spot a phony. Gave back the license and palmed the card. “What’s this about?”

I showed my best *aw, shucks* smile. “Sorry, ma’am. This is for Mr. Dowd only.”

“A confidential matter, is it? Like in the movies.”

“Something like that.”

“All right, then, Mr., uh,” another look at my card, “Forte. Come in and wait here.” She walked away like she knew when a man was checking out her ass, because they all did.

Dowd appeared a couple of minutes later dressed in a sport shirt hanging outside khaki shorts. Expensive sneakers with no socks. He had a round sunburned face with receding blond hair mostly gone gray. Built like an athlete whose activity level had waned before his appetite. My guess was the most exercise he got nowadays was eighteen holes riding a cart and a cardio workout once or twice a week with the missus or whoever else might be available.

He extended a hand. “A private eye, eh? Don’t know that I’ve ever met one before.”

We shook. His grip tightened when he sensed I wasn’t impressed with his initial effort.

I asked if he’d ever been served with court papers. “Hasn’t everyone?”

“Then you’ve probably met a PI. They just didn’t advertise the fact.”

“You’re not here to serve me, are you?” He laughed self-consciously. “I guess you would’ve done that already.” Saw my lack of reaction. “Why did you? Advertise the fact, I mean.”

“I have no reason to keep it a secret. Is there somewhere we can talk?”

“Right here won’t do?” His voice suggested a joke. His eyes were dead serious.

I looked around the entryway. The kitchen was straight ahead with an upward-leading stairwell on the left side of the hallway. What appeared to be a den was on my immediate right, a sitting room on the left. It wasn’t like we lacked places to do this. “Here’s fine if you don’t mind anyone interrupting or overhearing.”

“It’s only the wife and me at home.” A few seconds’ reflection, then he gestured toward the room on my right. “Let’s go in here. You want a drink?”

“Are you having one?”

“Damn right I am. Private eye drops in out of the blue to discuss a ‘confidential matter’?” Made air quotes on “confidential matter.” “I think I might need one.”

“A Coke would be great. Cherry if you have it. If not, iced tea or cold water is fine.”

Dowd seemed disappointed. “I hope you don’t expect me to settle for a soft drink after the day I’ve had.”

“This is your house. Drink what you want.”

“Recovering, are you?”

I shook my head. “I still have a lot of work to do tonight. Thanks for the offer.”

Dowd returned a few minutes later with a can of cherry Coke in a Fighting Illini coozie and a highball glass of what looked like good bourbon and two ice cubes. Looked at me over his glass with a bemused expression. Didn’t speak until I’d taken a sip. “We could make small talk about what it’s like to be a private investigator, but you said you have things to do. What do you want to talk to me about?”

I’d made up my mind to keep this meeting as conversational as possible without coming across as a supplicant. “You were involved in a

traffic accident a few weeks ago. You were drunk and brandished a weapon when a witness tried to intervene.”

A smile flickered before he took another sip to cover it. A man who’d endured his share of shakedowns. “What about it?”

“Did you really think Evelyn Bower wouldn’t recognize you? Or were you too drunk to know it was her?”

Dowd wagged a finger my direction. “You’re the guy who was causing trouble around here a couple of days ago. Pestering the police and beating up some guy in Rusty’s.”

“We could debate whether ‘pestering’ and ‘beating up’ are the right descriptions, but I was in both those places and did have interactions that could be uncharitably described that way.”

He liked that answer. Sat deeper in the chair and swirled his glass in small circles. “Wouldn’t say shit if you had a mouthful, would you?”

“I have my moments.”

Dowd sipped his drink. “Donnie Bower put you up to this.” Not a question.

“‘Put me up to it’ makes it sound like he persuaded me to do him a favor.”

“You’re not doing him a favor?”

“He can call it what he wants. I call it working.”

“He’s paying you, then.” I nodded. “How much?” I smiled, lips together. Dowd made a brief show of disappointment. “All right, then. What’s he paying you to do?”

I paused to give the impression I had to decide how much to tell. “He never said, not exactly. My instructions are to come down here and find out why the police haven’t done anything. Nothing more. He doesn’t strike me as the sort to act out of idle curiosity. He wants something. I just don’t know what. Yet.”

Dowd seemed amused. “Believe you me he wants something. Where’d you meet with him? WestLake?”

“His home.”

“He take you out on that goddamned boat? I’ll bet he did, that sumbitch. If he chased tail the whole lake would smell like cheap perfume and pussy.”

The comment surprised me a little. “He’s not a womanizer?”

“Donnie? Hell no. Two things get him off: money and acting like a swinging dick.” Dowd took another sip. “You said he wants something. You’re right. He wants me out so his half-assed holding company can take over our whole operation.”

“The company not making enough money?” I knew it was, even without the illegal night shift.

“We’re making good money. Here’s the thing about Donnie: too much is never enough. The government could give him everything he needs to print genuine currency—ink, paper, a press—and he’d complain the machine wasn’t fast enough.”

Dowd’s drink was almost gone. His eyes narrowed. “Why are you talking to me?”

“I found out Bower lied to me.”

“Sure he did. That cocksucker would lie about the time of day just to stay in practice. What’d he tell you?”

“He sent me into a potentially dangerous situation without all the information I asked for. Information he had.”

“What did he leave out?”

“He pretended not to know it was you, for starters. Half the job was to find out who you were. The other half was to see why the local police wouldn’t return his calls.”

“Why would he do that? Ask you to find out who, I mean.”

“So he could stir the shit and not get any on him. Anything that went bad would land on me.”

Dowd swirled ice around the empty glass. “What are you going to do?”

“Tell him it was you and the police are burying it because you told them to. Then I’m going to collect my fee and never see him again.”

“What makes you think I have enough juice to do that? Or even if I had the juice that I’d do it.”

“You’re saying you don’t? And didn’t?”

He smiled. It was a good one. Kenneth Dowd would be an easy man to like if you didn’t know as much as I did about him. “Of course I do. And did. I was just being humble. It’s one of my more admirable qualities. A better question might be why are you telling me all this?”

I pretended to act cagey again. “I don’t like Bower. You’ve never done me any dirt. I’m giving you fair warning in case something comes down.”

“I appreciate that. I do. What will you do if he wants you to follow up somehow?”

“Depends on what he asks and how much he’s willing to pay. Mostly the willing to pay part. Keep one thing in mind: you’re not blameless here, nor are you the aggrieved party. He pays me to break your balls, I’ll do it. Within reason.”

Dowd showed teeth with this smile. “We could get along, you and me. You got a card I can have?”

I handed him one. He gave it a cursory look and put it in his pocket. “You have a problem coming out in the country here if I have work for you?”

“Depends on if it’s worth my while to come.”

“If I call it will be. I have a reputation for knowing where every dollar goes, but that doesn’t mean I’m tight. Anything else I can do for you?”

I wasn’t aware he’d done anything at all for me yet. “I did what I came here for.”

Dowd rose. Walked me to the door. “When do you report back to Donnie?”

“Not for another couple of days. Let him think he’s getting more for his money.”

Dowd still beamed that salesman’s smile. “Like I said, I do appreciate the heads up. Have a nice evening.” He didn’t offer his hand and closed the door before I was off the porch.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I noticed the tail three blocks from Dowd's house. Silver Mercedes a year or two old. The driver was no professional. Helen Keller would have known she was being followed.

Fun had been in short supply so I took the Benz on a tour of Lundy and the surrounding environs. Never too fast or tricky enough to risk losing it, but the fact it stayed with me confirmed the driver wanted to know where I was going.

I had planned to stop at Smitty's for snacks but didn't know the tail's intent and didn't want anything to happen where my options might be limited. I wound my way back to the motel and parked directly in front of my door. Took my time going in so there would be no doubt which room was mine.

I locked up, took off my jacket, and sat in the corner reading chair. Turned on the lamp and laid my gun on the small table next to me.

The knock came ten minutes later. I held the gun along my leg, finger outside the trigger guard. Took an angle looking through the peep hole on the thousand-to-one chance whoever was out there might shoot through it. No motion, so I took a better look.

Mrs. Kenneth Dowd.

I opened the door far enough for her to have to turn sideways to pass through. Locked it behind her. "I can't say you're the *last* person I expected to see here tonight, but you're close. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

She hadn't done much to improve her appearance since I saw her at the house; she hadn't needed to. Still, care had been taken. Fresh lipstick, rouge touch-up, stray hairs disciplined. She wanted something and she wanted it bad enough to make an effort.

"You came to see my husband a little while ago?"

"You know I did. You let me in."

She responded like someone who wasn't used to having their balls broken. "Can we sit?"

I opened my arms to indicate her options: reading chair, desk chair, bed. "Take your pick."

She chose the bed. Sat on it as primly as someone like her could manage but leaned forward enough to give me a good look down the front of her blouse, which I appreciated. Flattery would be the way to play this one.

I turned the desk chair around so I could face her. “You were about to tell me what I could do for you.”

“Actually, you were about to tell me why you wanted to see my husband.”

“That was what you asked. I never said I’d tell you.” She shot me a look. “Like I said at the house, it’s confidential. You want to know, ask him.”

“I wouldn’t waste my time asking my husband for a glass of water if I was on fire.”

“The honeymoon’s over?”

Her snort surprised me. She didn’t look like a snorter. “I expect to be served with divorce papers any day now.”

I made sure she saw me take a full inventory. “If he is divorcing you, it’s not because you got old and fat.”

“Compared to what I think he has lined up to replace me, that may be exactly the way he’d put it.”

Ah. Time to trade for a newer model. I wondered how long this one’s run had been. “I’m sorry to hear that. Divorce is always sad, even when it’s necessary.”

“Do you think this one is necessary?”

“If he’s using the reasoning you say he is, then no.”

She stood. Paced as much as the small room allowed. “It infuriates me that I let that fat pig sweat all over me, use me however he wanted, and now he thinks I’m going to let him just walk away.”

“Divorce him first.”

“I wouldn’t get a penny.”

“Pre-nup?”

“Yes.” She stepped closer to the chair until her breasts were inches away from my nose. I knew where this was going, so I kept my cool. The Big Fella also sensed an opportunity and started his pre-game stretching. Forty-plus years and this is all the better I had him trained. The last time I

was with a woman his performance had been minor league, at best. There's no justice.

What I wanted from Mrs. Kenneth Dowd wasn't between her legs. "What do you want me to do?"

She straightened to show she wasn't wearing a bra and her nipples were hard behind the sheer blouse. Then she leaned in and kissed me. I felt her tongue on my mouth and let it in. She placed her hands on my face and lowered herself onto my lap, her breasts brushing my cheek. Settled herself and gently rocked her hips against my erection, now desperately looking for the emergency zipper release.

We kept that up for a few minutes. I let her do most of the work. Contributed the occasional grope, to which she responded with the expected porn star moan.

She came up for air slowly to avoid the bends. Dropped her voice into what she must have considered the phone sex operator register. "Will you help me?"

"I need to understand the situation first. You're afraid he's going to trade you in for someone younger and prettier?"

"Younger for sure." Reached between her legs to slide her hand along my cock. "You don't seem to think attraction is a problem."

"Let me rephrase that. He's looking for something with less mileage on it. At least in his estimation."

Her eyes flickered to suggest she wasn't crazy about my analogies, but she wasn't quite ready to throw the off switch on seduction mode. "Ummm..."

"I don't understand why you're so upset. Isn't that how you got the job in the first place?"

She launched herself off my lap like it was spring loaded. "It was *nothing* like that! He was already divorced when we met."

The Big Fella had finally got the message the barn door would remain closed and stopped fussing. "What attracted you to him?"

That took her by surprise. "What do you mean?"

"You were, what? Mid-twenties? He must've been pushing fifty. Probably already getting heavy, the way you described the bliss of your marital bed. What drew you to him? Besides his wallet?"

She was completely off-balance now. “He was different then. He was ___”

“Different how?”

“He was funny. Sweet, I guess. He can be quite charming when he wants to be.”

“And that was enough to attract you to a man twice your age. You must’ve been hot as Vegas in July back then. Why settle?”

She seemed to tell me despite knowing better. “I’d lost two jobs since I got out of college. I couldn’t pay my loans, I was behind on my rent, and they were threatening to repossess my car. I knew he’d take care of all of that, so I said yes when he asked. I was under duress.”

“I’d leave the duress business out of any divorce paperwork. Did you sleep with him before you agreed to marry him?”

“What difference does that make?”

“I’m curious if you knew what it would be like.”

She didn’t want to prolong this conversation, but was committed to convincing me of her blamelessness and couldn’t help herself. “Yes, we slept together. What’s your point?”

“My point is you already knew he was a sweaty pig in bed. Right?” She didn’t deny it. “So what it comes down to is you slept with him for his money. There’s a name for women who do that and it’s not trophy wife.”

She tried to scratch my face. I grabbed her wrist mid-swing and brought her arm down. She tried the other hand with the same result. Now my arms were crossed, so I stood and shoved her gently onto the bed.

“You’re an attractive woman. Under the right circumstances we’d already be working up a sweat. You’ll do fine after the divorce regardless of how generous the settlement is. But what you were doing here was just another transaction for you, and I have higher standards.”

I opened the door. “Good night, Mrs. Dowd. Good luck with the divorce.”

What she said to me on her way out was something I would have been proud to have thought of.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was good things didn't work out with Mrs. Dowd. I needed time to rest and prepare for the night's field trip. I laid everything I'd need on the bed: black long-sleeve T-shirt, black gloves, black tactical pants, black sneakers, socks (black), gun, holster, extra magazines, knife, lock picks, cell phone, penlight, night vision goggles, and a small carryall. Two snack bars, because a boy's gotta eat. Set an alarm for 11:30 and lay on the empty side of the bed for a few hours' sleep.

I didn't expect to sleep much, and I didn't. Willie gave me a good idea what to expect, which encouraged my mind to skip ahead to next steps when I should have been focusing on the task at hand, which was not without risk. I might have dozed for a total of forty-five minutes when my cell woke me.

Took a quick shower, dressed, and equipped myself. Triple-checked everything I'd take with me. Turned off the lights and peeked out the window. No activity. Nothing is more suspicious than someone trying to look inconspicuous, and nothing shouts "inconspicuous" louder than a man dressed all in black putting a carryall into the trunk of a car after midnight. I cracked the room door open and stuck out my head for a better look. Still quiet. I walked to the car like I belonged there and drove away.

Zero traffic that time of night. I killed the headlights half a mile from the turnoff and idled past. No activity here, either. Not even security illumination, nor did I see towers where motion sensitive lights might be stationed. This operation wasn't just under the radar; it damn near required sonar.

I parked half a mile away where the road shoulder widened. Used the handkerchief gag again to deter any potential good Samaritans and walked back to the access road.

The absence of lighting put the possibility of booby traps in mind. No one cleared a way for the bus the other night, so I gambled the access path was clear. Put on the goggles as I started up the path.

Everything looked how I expected. Two double-wides backed up to within ten or twelve feet of each other. Corrugated metal with no visible

roof closed the gap. A large tank sat on a low platform close to the ass end of the nearest trailer; no door there. Its partner on the other side was secured with a padlock.

Closer inspection showed it to be a Master Lock hidden shackle model, which couldn't be opened with bolt cutters. Fine by me. I hadn't planned on cutting off the lock. I needed to get in and out with no one being any the wiser. The Master is a good lock, but pickable with a little patience, and I was all about the patience that night, even after dropping a pick.

People tell me I'm a hard man. My first thought on hearing a tale of misfortune is "What are you going to do about it?" I reserve sympathy for children, the handicapped, and people old enough they shouldn't have to deal with that question anymore. The supply is limited. Someone really has to have it stuck to them for me to feel other than neutral.

What I saw in that trailer broke my heart.

Willie had not exaggerated. If anything, he undersold. Most of the interior walls had been ripped out to create a dormitory-like sleeping area. The beds were double decks of rough lumber with pallets on them that looked right out of a World War II POW movie. The kitchen appeared intact, if poorly appointed. The bathroom contained only a toilet and small sink. The room stank of sweat and shit and urine. The heat was oppressive even at this hour.

An opening cut into the far end of the trailer was covered with what appeared to be oilcloth. I pulled it back and found what resembled a dog run about ten feet long and as wide as the trailer, enclosed by the corrugated metal walls I noticed outside. I gave the metal a push and found no give to it. The area was open to the sky, which must have been a treat in winter. A chicken wire "ceiling" dissuaded thoughts of escape, as if the sharp top of the metal wall and eight-foot drop to the other side weren't enough. A primitive shower stood in one corner next to a large tub I assumed was for laundry.

I walked through the dog run—no better way to describe it—and opened the door into the other trailer to see a mirror image of what I'd already passed through. The only difference I noticed was an extra bunk along the far wall where there was no door.

Not knowing how much time I had, I confined my search to the first trailer. Saw nothing like a furnace; the stove must have provided heat in

winter. The small refrigerator wasn't cold and held only cans and jars. Floor fans at either end for ventilation. Neither was running now; the air was stifling even at three in the morning. Had to be a bastard around three in the afternoon.

I'm a professional snoop. People's privacy went only as far as the task at hand in my profession. I executed search warrants as a cop and opened more drawers than an Ethan Allen quality control inspector since I went private. Tonight I felt as if I was violating something sacred as I looked through what passed for personal effects in that trailer. Beside each bunk were two banker's boxes that held what appeared to be all the earthly possessions of the men (and women?) who lived here. Most were family photos. Children's drawings. Bibles and small statues of saints. A T-shirt or two. The random pair of jeans. I had no idea how often supplies were replenished. Must have been like Red Cross day in the POW camp this place kept reminding me of.

Bare bulbs suspended from the ceiling with reflectors above them were the only light sources. No clocks. A small shrine to the Virgin Mary occupied a corner of the kitchen.

What little fresh air I felt came through screened vents in the ceiling. I pulled a bunk over so I could peek through and found vent covers six inches above the opening. Air could pass through, but nothing else. Acrylic shields swung up to cover the vent in cold weather.

I photographed it all. After saving about fifty images I returned everything to where it had been and let myself out. Made sure the lock was in the same position I found it. Walked back to my car with my head on a swivel, alert to anything that might be a threat, or possibly useful when I came back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

This time it was five guys in civilian clothes waiting for me in my room. One in each chair, one in the hallway that led to the bathroom, one leaning against the wall nearest the door, and one stretched out on the bed with his hands behind his head like he was watching a ball game Sunday afternoon.

The one on the bed took charge. "Shut the door."

Running wasn't an option. I closed the door and positioned myself with my back to the corner.

Jefe sat up on the edge of the bed. A big man with a round, hard belly. His hair had receded back even with his ears to leave his forehead with a pronounced hat line. His hands were rough and callused. He wore a denim shirt outside his jeans over a gray tee. "You were told to stay out of Lundy."

We wouldn't be talking if they'd come to kill me. I was about to catch a beating sure as the sun was coming up over Indianapolis about now. The trick was not to provoke them and still hide the fact my sphincter was up around my Adam's apple. "I'm not in Lundy."

Jefe laughed. Said, "Pete" and the one nearest the door hit me under the floating ribs like he wanted to see his fist come out the other side.

No point pretending it didn't hurt. Best I could hope for was to let on I'd seen worse and wasn't about to roll up in a ball and cry for mommy.

They gave me all the time I needed to be able to speak. I put as much resonance into my voice as I could. "We're all working men. I know you're just doing your job here. So was I, and I'm about finished. Came back to get my stuff and go home. How about you rough me up a little so you can tell your boss you did and we'll call it even?"

Jefe smiled again. I appreciate a good-natured heavy. "The only part about that you got right was when you said you were finished."

"I said about finished."

Jefe shook his head. "Trust me. You're altogether finished."

A gnawing doubt grew in the back of my mind. Maybe in Lundy they did bullshit with people they were about to kill. I'd been wrong before.

"You won't respect me if I roll over too easy."

Someone had to say it. "We don't respect you now, asshole."

Jefe stood. "Let's go outside."

Deal breaker. Whatever was going to happen had to happen here, where there was a chance someone might notice. "Uh-uh. Say your piece, do what you're gonna do, and we'll go our separate ways. I'm not leaving with you."

Jefe nodded. His colleagues each took a step my direction. I drew the .45 from its holster at the small of my back. "Here's my counteroffer: you five go outside and hit the fucking road. I see you're gone, I'll load up the car and drive home."

Jefe shook his head maybe half an inch in each direction. Said, "Boys" and the other four had guns in their hands faster than a teenage girl can whip out a cell phone.

This had to become personal for someone other than myself. I thumbed the .45 to full cock. Took a step toward the boss. Leveled the old Army Colt square between his eyes. "I can't take everybody, but I can take you. How sure are you I won't kill you with a reflex even if they get me with a head shot?"

He must have been pretty sure. I only had time to hear the sap swish through the air on its way to the back of my head before it dropped me through a hole in the floor I hadn't seen before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE.

I don't know how long they beat on me, the party already in progress when I came around from the sapping. The best course seemed to be to accept it as a painfully bad dream and see what shook out.

Kicks, mostly, which made sense, me being already on the floor. I felt a pointed toe across my cheek then heard, as if from the next room, "Stay away from his head, goddammit! We can't afford to kill him." I could endure anything up to and including a ruptured spleen if they were afraid to kill me. I chose to consider the beating one more THING I had no control over and rode it out.

They eventually got tired. Threw me in the back seat of my car with the delicacy of a potato delivery to Five Guys. I decided that was as good a time as any to get some sleep. An extended ass kicking is an exhausting experience, even if your participation is passive.

Seemed like I no sooner closed my eyes than I was dragged out of the car and stuffed into the front seat. Something that smelled like cheap whiskey splashed my face. The car door slammed and I realized I was behind the wheel. Tried to reach the door handle but that was way too much work. Sat back into as comfortable a position as I could manage and resumed my nap.

I awoke to a voice I sort of recognized saying things that might have been, "He's not drunk, he's hurt." Then I was rearranged again, this time with considerably more delicacy, until I found myself laid out with my knees bent, which seemed as good a time as any to go back to sleep.

A few minutes later someone called my name. Hands tried to move me. I was as comfortable as I'd been in recent memory and resisted. Not too much. I didn't have a lot of resistance in me.

The constant interruptions to my slumber had grown old and I decided to become a more active participant in my life. Gently at first. "Goddammit! What the fuck is going on here? Can't you bastards see I'm sleeping?"

A voice I knew said, "I'm trying to get you out of the car and into your room so I can see how bad you're hurt but you're too big for me to

drag out of there without hurting you worse. You could cooperate a little, you know.”

I opened one eye, against my better judgment. Laurie. “Where am I?”
“In the back seat of your car.”

I sat up as if the headliner was covered with concertina wire. Looked down the length of my body. Sure enough, I was in the back seat of my car. I straightened my legs, even slower than the head raising. “Where’s the car?”

“At your motel.”

I put my feet on the ground and sat up at the same pace the Rocky Mountains rose from the primordial sea. Focused as well as I could on the building in front of me in the rising sun. Laurie was right again. “Where’d you find me?”

“In your car parked right outside the diner. People thought you were passed out drunk.”

“How’d you know which motel?”

A pause. “I found the key in your pants.”

“How did you know what room?”

“I don’t. That’s another reason I need your help.”

Lucky for me she’d parked only about twenty feet from my door. I don’t think I could have walked much farther, even with her supporting me. It required a woman with her frame to move a half-dead weight of 210 pounds that far, prop me up while she opened the door, then turn me around so I fell into the bed on my back.

Laurie set right to work. Took off my shoes and socks and belt to thwart any suicide attempt. Then she tried to pull my shirt over my head.

“Ow! Goddamn, Laurie. That hurts.”

“I need to see how bad you’re injured.”

“Would you know?”

“I was a nursing major my freshman year.”

I thought of asking why she switched to liberal arts. Decided I didn’t want to know and let her sit me up and remove my shirt. She gasped when she saw me. Maybe she quit nursing because she failed Dispassionate Responses 101.

Her dismay didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already suspect. “That good, huh?”

“I should’ve taken you to the emergency room like I wanted to.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“You said no.”

I lay back. Nestled my head into the pillow. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“You don’t remember?”

“Talking to you? Not a word.” I scrunched my body around on the bed to get an idea of how miserable it would be. Number 6 on the Forte Pain Scale: hurt like a bastard. “I’ll be fine. The guy in charge knew what he was doing.”

“What happened?”

I told her from the time I found my unexpected visitors in the room. Nothing of my earlier activities.

Laurie took my left hand in hers. “Your fingers look all right. I guess they’d be the easiest things to break.”

“I underestimated that guy. He knew enough not to take what I cared about most.”

“What do you mean?”

It didn’t hurt to smile, so I did. “I know a guy. High-end burglar from L.A. He says the trick to stealing from people is not to take the one thing that truly matters to them. You can steal art or jewelry or cash, but don’t take Granddad’s watch or Grandma’s wedding ring, no matter how valuable they might be. Insurance will take care of everything else but people will hound you to the ends of the earth to take vengeance for something irreplaceable.”

Laurie scanned my torso again. Shook her head. “I’m getting the idea you’re not really a movie location scout.”

“I know a guy who is. Give him suggestions once in a while. That’s how I knew enough to establish the pretext. Sorry about lying to you.”

“What *do* you do for a living?”

“I’m a professional investigator.”

Her eyes got round. “You’re a private eye?”

“It’s not as glamorous as it looks.” Opened my hands to indicate the battered mess where only a few hours before had rested a musculature Tom Brady would have been proud of.

“I guess not.” She was pensive for a few seconds. “What did you mean when you said they didn’t take what you cared about most?”

“Bruises and soreness and a little blood in my urine are the cost of doing business sometimes. Everyone understands that. Bones take weeks or months to heal. They do that, deny me a chance to earn a living, they run the risk of me taking it personal and coming after them.”

“Would you?”

“Let’s just say I am not without recourse in such circumstances.”

The shock of seeing my bruises had worn off but Laurie kept staring at my left shoulder. She wasn’t likely to ask if she hadn’t already; she also couldn’t draw her attention away. I bailed her out. “It’s a bullet wound.”

“What is?”

“What you’re staring at on my shoulder.”

She blushed all the way into her waitress uniform. “I’m so sorry. It’s none of my business.”

“And your parents raised you right not to ask. It’s okay. I’m stuck with it permanent now.”

Given permission, she focused on the network of surgical scars that surrounded the pucker. “What about all the stitches?”

“As any major league pitcher can tell you, the human shoulder is a complex and delicate mechanism. Take a bullet there and you got all kinds of problems.”

The silence lengthened uncomfortably. This was deeper water than she’d expected. “Why did he shoot you?”

“I shot his partner.”

She stepped off a ledge into water up to her neck. “And after?”

“I shot him.”

“Did they, uh…” Her voice trickled off to nothing.

I nodded. “Both of them. Don’t get the wrong idea. I shot the first guy half a second before he would’ve shot me. The other one *did* shoot me. I won’t tolerate that kind of behavior.”

A barrier came between us as Laurie mistook my unvarnished honesty for glibness. She stood, uncertainty covering her face. “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“I’m fine. Thank you for rescuing me. I feel better already.”

She stepped away, still facing me. “I should get back to work. Can I use your bathroom?”

“After what you’ve done for me? You can use anything I own or rent.”

I heard the door close, then quiet. The toilet flushed and the water for the sink came on and ran longer than it takes to scrub for surgery.

She came out composed, though with a changed demeanor. There was no way it couldn’t be. Went directly to the door. “You’ll be all right, then?”

“You planning on walking to work?” Laurie looked confused. “You drove here in my car, right?” She pursed her lips in an *oh shit* posture. “Take it. I’ll swing by after I get some rest.”

“How will you get to town?”

“You have taxis, right? Uber? Stagecoaches?”

“I’ll come back for you.”

I waved her off. “You’ve done enough already. Go.”

Her hand was on the knob when she looked back. *Are you sure* was written all over her face.

“Go on, go. I don’t know how safe it is for you to be seen with me.”
That did the trick.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I found a position on the bed less uncomfortable than the others. Asleep for what seemed like five minutes when a knock woke me. I poured myself off the mattress and lurched for the door. Picked up my gun on the way. “Who is it?”

“Candygram for Mongo.” Goose. Walked in looking more chipper than a human being had a right to in my current state.

I closed the door. “What are you doing here?”

“Heard you ain’t got but two favorites in your phone contacts. Didn’t know should I feel flattered or sorry for you, so I came down to sort it out.”

Took me a few seconds to put it together. “Laurie.”

“She seem like a very nice young lady. Told me what happened and I suggested she get as far away from you as possible. Said you okay but you carry collateral damage around like that dust cloud follow Pig Pen in the old Charlie Brown cartoons.” Stroked his chin. “I don’t think she know who that is. I see she did have the good sense to clear out.”

I dragged myself to the bed. “What time is it?”

“Bout nine thirty.”

“A.m. or p.m.?”

“Motherfucker, you just saw me outside. Was the sun up? Don’t *be* trying to make me feel sorry for you.”

“You must’ve hauled ass to get here so quick. I’m flattered.”

“Be either this or make a collection for Moe Klein. He still owe me for the last time, so fuck him. Let the man see how *he* like waiting to get paid.”

“How much did Laurie tell you?”

“Just that you got your ass kicked—again—and might need some help. When she said me and Caroline the only two in your favorites list, I come down to see who’s first.”

“She is.”

“As she should be.”

I asked him to get me a Coke from the refrigerator and to help himself to whatever he wanted except my virtue, which he said wasn’t worth taking.

Retrieved two Cokes, handed me one. We drank in silence while I felt the familiar sensations in my throat, stomach, and sinuses and decided I'd live after all. Even better, I wanted to. Fuck the Pepsi Generation.

Then I told Goose everything. Not the everything I would have told the police or my client. Everything everything. He sat placid as a frozen lake and drank his Coke. No questions. No comments. Occasionally he'd tap a finger against the sweating can.

I finished and he took a long pull. Tossed the can into the wastebasket from fifteen feet. I'd only ever seen him miss twice in all the years I'd known him. Both times I moved the basket.

He made a satisfied face and leaned back into the reading chair. "You think they picked you up during the recon mission?"

I shook my head while I swallowed. "They would've taken me right there in case I wasn't coming back here. Fewer potential witnesses, too. I think Dowd's having his wife tailed and she led them here."

"On purpose?"

"No. She probably came to ask me for dirt she could use in a divorce. Maybe a booty call if I was up for it. He's more serious about dumping her than she thinks if he already has a tail on her."

"Probably?"

"We didn't hit it off."

"So you think he's the one had you tuned up?"

"No one else knew I was back in town."

"Which might mean this had nothing to do with the illegals at the packing plant and everything to do with him thinking you might have her oil on your piston."

"I wonder if he might've seen it as a twofer, making me pay for coming back to town *and* warning me away from the old lady. Then it occurred to me he had no way to know it was me she was coming to see." Finished my Coke, tossed it toward the can. Miss. "He liked it when I told him I planned to make Bower's life miserable. Wouldn't make sense for him to have me beat half to death."

"Unless he ain't believe you."

I held a hand under my face. "Who wouldn't believe me? I mean, look at me."

Goose did, up and down. “Can’t say who believe you, but someone sure as shit don’t like you.” He opened the refrigerator. Retrieved a can. Looked to me. I nodded and he took out another. Tossed it underhand gently as dangling a string in front of a kitten. “Don’t making Bower’s life miserable fuck up Dowd’s action, too? I mean, they’s both involved in this slave labor bidness, right?”

“So far as Dowd knows I’m only looking into the traffic accident.”

“Unless Bower told him.”

“That’s what he thinks too.”

“Far as you know.”

“Who could’ve told him different?”

Goose gestured toward my lumpy carcass. “People don’t catch a beating like that without better reason than a fender bender.” Hurried on before I could interrupt. “That brandishing be bullshit. Dowd—he the one did that, right?—has the suction to bury that.”

I’d found a position comfortable enough to let me think and took advantage of it. Goose gave me a little time. Not too much.

He said, “Look at it this way. What are the odds that you getting beat a coincidence? Nothing to do with the other you been poking at.”

“You know how I feel about coincidences.”

“Exactly.” He let that settle a bit. “I don’t suppose you plan to take this lying down much longer.”

“You supposed the hell out of that.”

“What the plan?”

“All I have so far is the objective.”

“Which is?”

“Get the poor bastards in those trailers out of there and someplace safe. Or at least safer. Then I’m coming back here and causing as much trouble as I can.”

“Any plan how to do either yet?”

“The plan kind of depends on how much of an adventure you’re up for.”

Goose steepled his fingers. Rolled back his head to look at the ceiling. A smile grew like sunrise sneaking over the horizon. “You aware of my strong feelings about anything even resemble slavery.”

“We spoke about that the other day.”

“You gonna make it ugly for these motherfuckers?”

“Ugly as one man can. Twice as ugly if you’ll help me.”

“Ugly squared what I have in mind.”

“I’m good with that. I also intend to fuck up Dowd’s divorce and screw with Bower personally.”

“After he pay you, though.”

I swept my hands along my body to display the bruises. “I look like some kind of amateur to you?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The drive to Bolingbrook took three hours. Almost exactly a hundred miles from the motel to my house, all but the last few on interstates. No traffic to speak of. I stopped twice to pee—not as much blood as I’d feared—and another four times to stretch my back and legs. I parked in the garage, left everything except my gun in the car, and went to bed.

Afternoon Nick was very happy last year Nick installed a hot tub with the money he made finding out who leaked proprietary information from Stan Wallace’s company. Nothing extravagant—I wasn’t having my harem over for weekly pool orgies—but big enough for a six-foot-plus man to stretch out. Stayed in until I started to overheat, then went into the kitchen and made a half gallon of lemonade. (Half a cup of lemon juice, three-eighths of a cup of sugar, fill the glass bottle with cold water, and shake the shit out of it.) Poured myself a large Tervis full with cracked ice and put the rest in the refrigerator.

Relaxed and in a much better state of mind than when I arrived home, I went to my favorite reading chair to figure out exactly what the fuck I was going to do to those miserable cocksuckers in Lundy. Everything was on the table except first-degree murder. Second-degree as a last resort. Manslaughter was not out of the question.

Didn’t take me long to doze off, which was fine. I do much of my best thinking in that twilight state between sleep and wakefulness. Woke up and made three pieces of toast and microwaved two bags of shit on a shingle. Drank another glass of lemonade. Cleaned up the dishes, poured myself another drink, and lay on the living room couch to watch baseball.

The Cubs were playing the Pirates, but I was in the mood for major league baseball, so I switched over to Turner Classic Movies. Caught the last hour of *Ride the High Country* with Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea. In bed by ten, slept till eight. Only got up twice to pee. Hardly any blood the second time.

Next morning saw another turn in the hot tub followed by breakfast: bagel with cream cheese, three scrambled eggs, and Irish breakfast tea. Farted around until the traffic monster shifted time zones and drove to

Marisol Eisenberg's office to buy her lunch from Medici's on 57th: Caesar salad for her, steak sandwich for me because I refuse to dishonor the sacrifices of my ancestors who died so I could live at the top of the food chain.

We arrayed our meals and took a bite to get things rolling. Marisol said, "You look a little stiff. Rough night?"

"Slept like a baby." Sipped my iced tea. "Night before was *una perra*, though."

She shook her head at my alleged Spanish. "And you're still walking like that?"

"I wouldn't even have been here twenty-four hours ago."

"What happened?"

"No offense, but it's better if you don't know." Marisol looked like she might say something. I spoke before she had a chance. "I need a favor."

"If I can."

"I went back to Lundy."

She turned her head and snorted. Marisol didn't look any more like a snorter than Dowd's wife, but I'd seen her do it enough it didn't faze me anymore. "I knew it the minute I saw your walking dead impression. Couldn't leave it alone, could you?"

"I owe Willie."

"He's long gone by now."

She said it so matter-of-factly I felt like I'd let down people who hadn't come north yet. "You're probably right. But those responsible have to know this shit can't be free."

"How do you plan to make them pay?"

"You don't want to know."

"You must want me to know something or you wouldn't have brought me lunch."

I swallowed a bite. Good sandwich. Would have been better if I ate it hot, but I was the supplicant here. "Tomorrow morning, early, a busload of immigrants is going to appear on your doorstep. I'll do what I can to prevent any hot pursuit but you're going to want to get them elsewhere quickly. People *will* come looking, most likely feds."

"When you say a busload, how many do you mean?"

“Forty. Fifty. Somewhere in there.” Her brow furrowed. “Too many all at once?”

“It’s a lot, but you’re giving me a day to get ready. I’ll have people here who know what needs to be done.”

“Which is?”

Marisol smiled. Her teeth were white as fresh snow in sunlight. “It’s probably better if you don’t know.”

I winked at her. “One more thing. Do you have any reporters friendly to the cause?”

“There are a few we give quotes and background to. Why?”

“Pick one you trust and owe a favor, or would like them to owe you. Tell them to be in Lundy tomorrow morning. I guarantee a story.”

* * *

I arrived at The Aviary—what I called Goose’s house—at five minutes before one. An attractive bordering on beautiful Black woman in her middle thirties answered the door. “You must be Nick.”

“I am. And you are?”

“Leaving. Please tell Tim the casserole is cooling but he’ll need to put it in the refrigerator before he leaves.”

“Will do.”

I held the door for her. Stepped inside and saw Goose coming down the stairs rolling his shoulders. “You got a plan?”

“Don’t forget to put the casserole in the refrigerator.”

He turned toward the kitchen. “Let’s do it now and get busy.”

“It’s still too hot.” Goose cocked his head, confused. “Your lady friend told me on her way out.”

“I paid a lot of money for that twenty-seven-cubic-foot motherfucker with Wi-Fi and satellite radio and shit. Let it do a little work for a change.”

“Satellite radio?”

“Why not? It ain’t like it need Wi-Fi or Bluetooth neither. It’s a refrigerator. It keep shit cold, I’m happy. Every so often I want it to *make* shit cold. This one a those times.” Took the casserole from the counter.

“Hold this.”

The casserole was definitely too hot for the refrigerator. Almost too hot to hold. “Who was that who answered the door?”

Goose’s head was in the refrigerator as he rearranged food. “That Angela. She a cooking fool.”

“Seemed like a nice girl. Didn’t look all that happy to see me.”

“Do anyone? ’Cept Caroline? Maybe?” Goose held out his hands for the casserole. Slid the dish in and let the door close on its own to make sure it didn’t catch on anything. “Got a plan yet?”

I told him. He listened to the entire presentation, just as before. His eyes drifted across the ceiling as he digested what I told him and considered possibilities. He had the courtesy not to laugh. “I say this, Forte: you brings your party with you. Let’s go to the armory and see what might be useful.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Goose drove, as my car was too well-known in Lundy. Much as I loved the Accord, his Mercedes E-class could do 120 on the highway. You never know when that might come in handy.

We checked into the Normal Holiday Inn Express (no pun intended), figuring:

- Normal was the opposite direction from Chicago; no one would think to look for us there if we had to run or lay low.
- The rooms had inside doors so no one could see which was ours from outside.
- Booked the room in Goose's name in case my friends in Lundy had a contact here who might alert to mine.

Not that I'm paranoid.

We carried everything into the room. Goose prepped for the big event while I drove to Kenneth Dowd's house in Lundy, not worried about anyone recognizing me in the Benz.

I went early enough for Dowd not to be home. Assuming his wife was under surveillance, I parked in the driveway close to the house and kept my face shielded without being obvious. Rang the bell and stood closer to the door than polite society would approve.

Erin Dowd—she never did tell me her name but I'm one researching son of a bitch—didn't recognize me right away. I overcame my hurt feelings and crowded her back inside. "Get away from the door. You don't want to be seen talking to me."

She moved into the vestibule. I handed her a small accordion folder. "Give this to your lawyer and you'll get everything you want if he—she—plays his cards right. Or hers. Either way, get this to them as soon as possible. Today would be best."

"I—I don't have a lawyer yet."

"Get one. As soon as I leave, if possible. The shelf life of some of what's in here is limited."

She unwrapped the band from the file. I stayed her hand and replaced the elastic. "Let the lawyer do it. Things are about to happen you want no

knowledge of unless you're okay with being charged as a co-conspirator. They can't compel you to testify against your husband, but he can't prevent you doing it, either. The lawyer will know best how to handle what's in there."

Confusion covered her face and flooded her posture. "I don't understand. What's going to happen?"

"You'll know more than you want to after the story breaks. Get to a lawyer and cover yourself while you can."

I removed my hand from hers. She reclaimed it. Brought it closer to her body. Her tone became similar to our previous meeting. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

"Probably not, but I'll bet you can think of other ways to show me." She wasn't quite sure how to take that. "Let's get one thing straight, Mrs. Dowd."

"Please. It's Erin."

Wow. She really was grateful. "Mrs. Dowd, I don't like you. Haven't since you approached me the other night."

She took it well. "Then why are you helping me?"

"Because while I think your conduct is unsavory, your husband's is evil. I plan to ruin his business and his life. Consider yourself a collateral beneficiary."

I stopped short of the door. "By the way, I wasn't here today, but don't ever deny you came to see me the other night."

"Why not?"

"Because you were followed."

"No, I wasn't."

"Trust me, you were. I have the bruises to prove it. Hubby may be farther along in his upgrade plan than you think."

* * *

I found Goose lying on one of the beds with the pillows from both supporting his head. *Aerial America* was playing on the Smithsonian Channel. I nodded toward the television. "Where are they today?"

"Pennsylvania. Did you know the first oil well drilled in Pennsylvania?"

It wasn't often I knew an arcane fact that Goose didn't. "Titusville, to be precise." Scratched my head to feign thought. "Eighteen fifty-nine, if memory serves."

Goose stared at me as if I'd had a Mohawk shaved into my head while I was gone. "You see this one already?"

"I grew up not a hundred miles from Titusville. Learned all about it in Pennsylvania history class. I used to be able to tell you who drilled the damn thing."

"Edwin Drake." Learning my newfound omniscience had a mundane explanation killed Goose's interest. Returned his attention to the television, now showing the Little League World Series parks in Williamsport. "What time we leaving?"

"Sun should be up about a quarter to six. They'll want everything buttoned up by then. We probably ought to get there no later than four to set up."

"Let's make it three thirty. Leave here around three."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Close as we gets, anyway." He threw a pillow over to my bed. Turned off the television and closed his eyes. Asleep before I had a chance to lie down.

It wasn't that easy for me. All the things that could go wrong, things I hadn't anticipated, the risks involved, all buzzed through my mind like flies on bad meat. I managed to doze off around midnight only to feel Goose's gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Time to go." I looked at the clock. Two thirty.

I dressed as I had for my prior visit, except this time I included extra magazines for the .45. I was clipping the holster to my belt when I heard a distinctive clicking sound. Looked across the beds to see Goose thumbing shells into a Mossberg shotgun. An AR-15 lay on the bed next to three magazines. The butt of his Python in its shoulder holster extended from his windbreaker.

Goose loaded the long guns and ammunition into a carryall while I held it open. "I'm hoping we don't have anything like this much trouble."

Goose kept working. "You know what Woodrow Call say?"

We'd seen *Lonesome Dove* more times than we could remember, at least two of them together. "Better to have it and not need it than need it and

not have it.”

Goose zippered shut the bag. “That is correct.” Scanned the room to make sure we weren’t leaving anything. “Let’s show these crackers how folk respond to slavery in the twenty-first century.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

In position at 3:17. Goose parked behind the trailers where the Benz wouldn't be seen as the bus drove in. We found spots near the entry door and watched the road for headlights.

Goose sipped water from a liter bottle. "Two guys, right?"

"That's all I saw. A driver and a guard. The guard carries a shotgun and, I assume, a sidearm. The driver probably comes heavy, too. Busload of guys like they have, guard gets antsy, he'd want backup."

Goose kept his attention on the road. "You want to take them before or after they unload the bus?"

"Let the workers get inside. We'll make our move before the guard can lock up. Last thing I want is for something to go sideways and catch these poor bastards in the crossfire."

"Driver stay on the bus?"

"He did when I saw them before."

Goose nodded. "We split up. You take the guard from right here and I'll go around and handle the driver." Indicated his route with a finger.

A still night. Even the crickets didn't sound like they wanted to draw attention to themselves.

Goose still focused on the road. "Plenty of time for them to call for help, anything slows us up. Also a problem of how to get the drop on the driver."

"I'm open to suggestions."

Goose moved only his eyes searching the surrounding area. "Over there. On the right. The tarp?"

"I see it."

Goose breathed to speak. Spat in the dirt instead. "Never mind. The driver see me coming in."

My turn to look around. "What if you hid around back of the other trailer? The headlights will be angled the other direction and the driver will have his attention on the guard in case he needs help. Come in real sneaky-like and take the driver at the same time I grab the guard."

"How do we coordinate?"

“Last worker goes in, we take them both.”

Goose swallowed water. “I like it better if we take them when everyone except the guard still on the bus. Put guns on them when the guard get off. Then all we has to do is tie up the two bad guys and book for Chicago.”

“I see two problems.”

“That why we talking. Looking for problems before they come looking for us.”

“First, your way makes us hide too close to where the bus stops. No way they don’t see us on their way in.”

Goose took a hard look. “True dat. What else?”

What I was about to say shouldn’t matter from an operational standpoint. I must be getting soft. “Everything these guys own is either on their person or in cardboard boxes next to their bunks. I want them to be able to take their little bit of stuff, and that’ll be quicker and easier if they’re already inside.”

Goose flicked his eyes my direction. “You want to let them get their shit? Risky.”

“How so?”

“Time consuming.”

“Not so much if they’re already inside.”

Goose’s lips pursed. “We do it your way.”

“End of discussion?”

“Discussion time over.” He pointed up the dirt road. “Here they come.”

* * *

All I saw were the moving headlights as I listened to the bus rumble over the cattle guard that spanned the little creek near the county road, then the crunching of gravel under the tires. The bus parked thirty feet from the entry door and the guard was off before the springs stopped rocking. I recognized him from the crew that gave me the beating. He’d been standing nearest the bathroom.

He was within five feet of the door and no one had come off the bus when it occurred to me Goose’s way might have been better after all. The

chances of sending a telepathic message to convey my change of heart were slim. I held my position.

The guard unlocked the entry door. Opened it and made a sound as the rank air inside rushed out. Called to the driver, "All right. Send them over."

The bus door opened and the workers started out. What appeared to be newer recruits walked with some attitude, eyes staring lasers through the guard as they approached. A few were emaciated. One was helped along the way. I wondered what his job at the plant had been and how long he'd be able to keep it. I didn't want to think about what might happen when he couldn't do it anymore. Hard as I looked, I didn't see Willie.

The guard counted them off as they crossed the threshold. Movement in my peripheral vision showed Goose going for the bus as the last worker stepped onto the stairs leading up to the trailer door.

I stepped forward and pressed the muzzle of the .45 against the guard's right mastoid. "Do not move. Let the keys fall from your hand." Thumbed the hammer to full cock to show I meant business.

His sudden stiffness didn't concern me. That was a natural reaction to having a large-caliber firearm pressed against your head. What his bowels and bladder did were up to them. "I already have an excuse to hurt you. Don't give me a reason. Now drop the keys. I want to hear them hit the stairs."

The keys clattered against the wood. I took two steps back to create space. "Lay the shotgun on the ground. Do it so slow you'll wonder if you're moving." This did not appear to be his first rodeo. He did exactly as I asked.

"Any other weapons on you?"

"A knife in my boot."

"Take it out verrrrry slowly. Hold it up by the blade so I can see." He did. "Let it fall." The knife clinked against the wooden steps before thudding to the ground.

Goose's voice from the bus: "We all set in here."

"Bring your guy over so we can truss them up together."

"You heard the man." Footsteps came down the bus stairs. "Where you want him?"

“Up the side there ten or fifteen feet so they’ll be out of the way but still easy to keep an eye on.” Said to the guard, “Go where he goes.”

The guard spoke out of the corner of his mouth. “You have no idea how big a mistake you’re making.” His voice was higher pitched than I expected. The accent was local.

“If only I had a nickel for every time someone in your situation told me that. Yet here I am. Move.”

I turned the corner in time to hear Goose speak to the driver. “You *are* familiar with the position, right? You seen cop shows.”

The driver leaned against the trailer and spread his feet. He seemed scared. I told the guard to do the same. He duplicated the action but not the emotion. “I told them we should’ve killed you when we had the chance.”

I pushed my foot against his ass, launching him into the trailer wall. “Another of my favorite hits.”

Goose had zip ties already in hand. Pointed behind me. I turned, gun already coming up, to see a couple of workers peeking around the corner. “*Volver adentro! Ahora!*” must have been close enough. They went back inside.

Goose had both men cuffed and seated with their backs to the trailer. The driver was over his initial shock. Showed us what a hard case he was by providing a steady commentary about how much trouble we were in now that he couldn’t do anything but talk. Goose tired of his act first. Planted a foot on the guy’s crotch and leaned in. Not too hard, but he had the man’s full attention. “It’s a hot night. Don’t make me gag you.”

I said, “Especially since we didn’t bring any. I’d have to borrow a shirt one of the guys in the trailer has been wearing all night.”

The driver hadn’t finished being badass. “Go fuck yourself.”

I spoke to the guard. “You’ve been around enough to know we could do this a lot rougher.” He nodded. “You also know we don’t have to keep it up.” Another nod. “And that we wouldn’t gag just one of you.”

He turned his head toward the driver. “Shut the fuck up, Dave.”

I winked at the guard. “I knew you were a pro.”

He jerked his head toward Dave. “He’s not even a good driver.”

“Fuck you, too, Herm.”

Goose and I stepped a judicious distance away. I said, “Your Spanish is better than mine. How about you go inside and tell them what’s going on

while I keep an eye on things out here where everyone speaks English.”

“I would if I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“What’s going on.”

Deep sigh. “Let them each take their box of personal stuff and get on the bus. We also need to identify three guys. One who can drive the bus, one who can read a map, and one who speaks passable English in case they get lost. I’d give them my phone, but I might need it and I forgot to get a burner.”

“We could lead them.”

Goose’s suggestion had merit. I considered options. “Let’s split the difference and wait here half an hour. If the coast is clear, we’ll haul ass, catch them, and lead them in.”

Goose nodded and went into the trailer. The undercurrent of concerned voices stopped. I could hear him speaking, not what he said.

The guard had accepted his predicament and kept a civil tone. “What happens to us?”

“How far is it down that road into town?”

“Five miles. Six, maybe.”

“Everything goes hunky-dory here, we’ll cut you loose after the workers get a decent head start. You can walk back.” Saw his expression. “I’ll hang onto your phones.”

“I spent a lot of money on that iPhone.”

“The cops are going to keep it as evidence, anyway. What I’ve seen around here, that phone is a cellular crime scene.”

Footsteps behind me as the first workers came out. Goose was fifth in line, making shooing motions with his hands and calling *vamos* and *sigue moviendote*, which I took to be Spanish for *get the lead out*. Took one guy by the arm and led him to the driver’s seat. Handed a map to another, my printed directions to a third. The workers kept moving and helping each other.

Behind me the driver said something I couldn’t make out. The guard spoke loud and clear. “Open your mouth again and I swear to Christ I’ll put your dumb ass in the hospital when this is over.”

With the driver and guard under control, Goose and I helped the stragglers get their stuff on the bus. I was helping the final few up the stairs

when the engine started. Boosted the last man up and followed him in when Goose spoke.

“We got a problem.” I stared at him. I didn’t need “problem” in my vocabulary. “They got nothing like enough gas to get there.”

“How far can they go?”

“Depend on the mileage a piece of shit like this get. Can’t be more than a gallon or two in there.”

I stared at the gauge as if trying to move the needle with my mind. “All right.” Blew air from my cheeks. “Lead the bus to that truck stop at the entrance to the interstate and gas them up. I’m good for it. Get them on their way, then hoot your boot back here. All goes well, I’ll be bullshitting with our captives.”

““Hoot your boot’?”

“I use it wrong?”

“You used one right for a change. I may have to re-evaluate our whole relationship. You sure there no place closer for gas?”

“There’s a local joint up the county road going that way but I doubt it’s open this early. Even if it is, the last thing you want is for some local to notice and tell the bad guys you went that-a-way.”

Goose processed it. “And if all go well you be here j-holin’ when I gets back.”

““J-holin’?”

Goose showed all his teeth. “Talking. Bullshitting. See? You ain’t know all the secret words yet.”

The shit I put up with. “Yes, if all goes well we’ll be sitting here j-holing.”

“What if all doesn’t go well?”

“Then I’ll be your rear guard. Leave me the shotgun and Bushmaster.”

“Best get them now.” Goose pointed toward the road. “Company comin’.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Three sets of headlights approached along the road from Lundy, moving fast. Flat as the terrain was, I could see them from a ways off. They'd still be here in a minute.

Goose crunched the Benz to a stop for me to grab the weapons out of the trunk, then threw gravel behind him pulling out. It was cross country to the road that led to the interstate, but flat enough for the bus to manage. If the approaching cars figured out what was going on, they'd bypass the compound and cut him off. I had to make sure they didn't.

The bus's gears ground. I hollered for the driver to kill the lights and pointed after Goose. Whoever was coming had to cross a single lane bridge that spanned the creek to enter the compound. If they skipped the bridge, it meant they were going straight and would catch the bus in a matter of minutes. In that case the best I could do was run to try to support Goose, knowing he had fled or was dead by the time I'd get there.

The ground was flat but not a pool table. I picked what passed for a low spot and lay prone, the rifle charged and ready. Let the lead vehicle reach the bridge and opened fire into what I hoped was the radiator. An AR-15 is .223 caliber and not capable of stopping a vehicle bigger than a bicycle. I hoped the release of steam and sound of lead striking metal would give the driver pause, which would create a bottleneck on the bridge while everyone figured out what was going on. That was best case.

The car stopped, but on my side of the bridge. The next car in line pulled around him and started in my general direction. I fired three times and hit a headlight, which pissed me off no end. At this distance and lack of ambient light the headlights worked more to my advantage than theirs. Sure enough, not five seconds later, all three sets of lights went dark.

No moon, overcast hid the stars; the sky was dark as tar. Any time I sensed motion I'd send a few rounds toward it, which I hoped would slow them while they looked for me. I'd settle for that right now, measuring success in fractions of seconds as I was.

They had motorized transportation and I didn't. They also knew the ground better. Play their cards right and they could flank me before I knew

what they were up to. I needed to fall back, but I couldn't afford to show a silhouette.

I let go a couple rounds and slung the Mossberg over my shoulder to duck-walk toward the trailers. The bus driver yelled about what I was doing. I shot twice into the trailer he was in front of. Too high to risk hitting him, low enough to send a message. The rounds made a merry racket passing through the thin metal exterior walls and shut him up right quick.

I was fifty yards from the trailers what sounded like handguns fired behind me. No rounds went whizzing past so I stood a little straighter to make better time.

I took a position on the other side of the propane tank, in line with the trailers. The access road lay before me, a cornfield behind. The corn wasn't quite as high as an elephant's eye, but it would conceal me if I had to move. And if they didn't bring dogs. I checked the map in my head. If I picked the right route, I could stay in the corn until I was close to the little gas station down the road and wait for Goose there if I had to.

The driver realized I lost sight of him when I went past the tank. "Come on you pussies! He's over there! It's just one guy, goddamnit!"

The guard joined in. "He's behind the tank! He's behind the tank!"

Not exactly, but close enough that I pulled away, staying low as I could. I still hadn't heard anything that sounded like a rifle. My best bet for the time being was to keep them back and me out of range.

Car doors opened. I heard voices, couldn't make out the words. Car doors closed. Tires moved along the hardpan and gravel path that led to the trailers.

Then I heard the last thing I wanted: "Spread out." I had no idea how many were coming for me on foot. If the cars went around the trailers to cut me off from the cornfield they could wait for the sun to come up and catch me on open ground badly outnumbered.

I fell back of the propane tank to get a line of sight. Risky if a round hit it, but I was gambling they wouldn't want to set it off any more than I wanted them to. What little I saw suggested tentativeness. While the cornfield was my obvious escape route, they didn't know what I had in mind to do next and had to be careful not to spread out too much and let me slip through.

My decision to fish or cut bait was made for me when I saw the red and blue flashing lights coming down the county road at speed. I couldn't engage in a shootout with cops, even those bent as badly as Lundy's. It was cornfield or bust.

Shots on my right, in case I didn't have enough to worry about. The volume increased but nothing came my way. Too soon for it to be Goose, I hoped against hope the crew coming for me had been confused into shooting at each other.

Any car behind the trailers had a line of sight on my route to the corn. I needed a diversion. The five-hundred-gallon propane tank stood next to the trailer nearest me. I knew a gunshot would puncture the skin, but that would cause the gas to vent, not explode. An explosion needed a flame applied to the escaping gas.

A spark, maybe. Like what might result from a bullet striking metal.

I'd expose my position for sure if it didn't work. Might blow myself up even if it did. No idea how full the tank was, and not much more of the explosive properties I might unleash. What experience I had with propane explosions came from watching firefighters put out the resulting flames. Even that was enough to make me try to think of another way, desperation being the mother of invention.

Yelling and a scream of pain in front and to my right decided it. I sighted the .45 on the tank, as one of its rounds would pack the most punch. Hunkered down as far as I could into a little swale. Rechecked the aiming point, braced the gun butt into the ground to hold it steady. Then I pushed my face into the dirt and pulled the trigger fast as I could.

The plan had been to empty the magazine. The third round set off an explosion so spectacular I saw white light even with my eyes closed tight and face pressed to the dirt. The heat was more intense than anything I'd ever felt. The back of my neck was burned before the sound of the explosion died. Shrapnel plugged the ground all around me. I looked up and saw flaming debris from the near trailer cartwheeling across the sky as small fires broke out in the grass where flaming pieces landed. A hot piece of metal landed on my back. Didn't cut me, but did burn a hole through my shirt and singed the skin.

Yelling and screaming everywhere now. Raised my head for an assessment and caught sight of the men we'd cuffed next to the entry trailer

rolling desperately into more open ground as the fire moved toward them.

My night vision ruined, I oriented myself and ran for the cornfield. Didn't bother with evasion; they'd see me or they wouldn't. What I needed most was for the police to revert from criminals to first responders and get busy securing the scene for the fire department.

No shots chased me into the corn. The stalks were higher than I was tall; I still didn't want to rustle them. Only a matter of time before the posse recovered from the shock and awe of the explosion. They'd make a quick check, see I wasn't there, and the corn was my most likely escape route.

I moved at what the Army called a range walk deeper into the field. Sent Goose a text to meet me at the little gas station that didn't open until six. Used my phone's GPS to find the way. Technology is a wonderful thing, Elon Musk notwithstanding.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Luck favors the stout of heart and the foolhardy. Trusting the GPS and staying well into the field, I peeked between stalks at the filling station fifty yards ahead. Found a spot where I could see and stepped back into the corn to wait.

Typical impromptu rendezvous procedure was for whoever had the car to drive to the meeting place, then slow to give the man on foot a chance to show himself. If he didn't, keep going and come back ten minutes later. Repeat until successful or there was good reason to believe the other man wasn't coming. Goose once made seven passes without giving up on me.

I'd been waiting fifteen minutes when I saw the Mercedes slow in front of the station. I stepped into view before the car stopped and trotted over. The trunk popped open and I stashed the long guns; kept the .45 on me. Slammed the trunk shut and slid into the passenger seat.

I closed the door and fastened the seat belt. "Took your time getting here."

"You didn't seem to be in a hurry. This my fourth go round."

"I had business to attend to. Let's get the fuck out of here before it attends to us."

Goose put the car in gear. Drove no more than fifty feet before stopping and moving the shifter to park. "I think maybe you better drive."

I should have noticed sooner. Goose was sweating like he'd been the one to run a few miles through the cornfield. His voice lacked its usual late-night FM disk jockey timbre. "What's wrong?"

The pain in his voice was obvious now that I was paying attention. "I got back right before the tank blew. Got into a little firefight. You need to drive home."

He *had* been the distraction that allowed me to make my escape. I'd left him behind. Having no way to know that at the time didn't make me feel better.

A pickup truck pulled in and drove behind the station as I walked around the front of the car. Probably no immediate threat, but he'd identify

the Benz if someone came asking. Might even make a call himself if he sensed anything wrong.

I opened the driver's door and Goose slumped out like a bag of wet laundry. I caught him before he hit the ground. My hands and forearms came away covered in blood. "Jesus Christ, Goose. Where are you hit?"

"Down low. Hurt like a motherfucker."

Goose *never* said he was in pain. He'd make jokes after the fact, telling the story, laughing it off. For him to mention it in real time told me this was my show now.

I used one hand to hold him upright while reaching around to open the back door. Maneuvered him out as gently as possible and laid him across the back seat. Climbed in front and felt the slick yet sticky blood seep through my pants. Put the car in drive and the pedal to the floor.

He'd never make it home. Not even to my house, which was forty-five minutes closer. That much blood lost, he needed a hospital right now. I flew up the county road faster than anyone had a right to, the pursuit driving training I'd had as a cop kicking in with the adrenaline surge.

I left the ramp onto I-55 doing ninety and picked up speed from there. Saw a blue hospital sign and drifted to the right. The exit's speed limit was thirty-five; I came off it at sixty. Almost lost the back end but those Germans know how to make a car handle.

The hospital arrow at the end of the ramp pointed left. I ignored the stop sign at the intersection and hit the gas coming out of the turn. Eased off two miles up the road when the hospital came into view so Goose wouldn't fly off the seat when I hit the brakes. Still going fast enough to squeal tires at the emergency entrance. Put the car in park and ran through the automatic doors. Grabbed the first person I saw. "I need a gurney right away!"

ER nurses are champs. I had to have shocked the woman, running in like I did, frantic and covered in blood. All she said was "Where?" I pointed and she ran for the car, calling out orders as she went.

* * *

The doctors only talked to me because I brought Goose in and was the conscious person with relevant knowledge. Patient confidentiality. I didn't

have contact information for any of Goose's relatives. His cell phone was locked; I didn't have the password.

The one piece of good news was finding a health insurance card in his wallet. (Thanks, Obama.) The intake nurse glommed onto that like a starving dog on a porterhouse. I talked another nurse into letting me fool with Goose's phone to see if I could unlock it.

I'd been at it ten minutes when the cop came in. A patch on his uniform identified him as Pontiac PD. A voice as deep as Lake Michigan and resonant as timpani asked if I was the person who brought in Timothy Satterwhite.

"I am."

The cop took out a notebook and pen. "Tell me what happened."

I tried to look like I was halfway in shock, not having had a chance to get together with Goose on our statements. If he lived long enough to give one. "He's gut shot. Lost a lot of blood."

The cop gave me the face that comment deserved. "Any idea *how* he came to be that way? You can skip saying anything that sounds like 'Someone shot him.' I'm looking for more specific information."

"Sorry, Officer..." I read his name tag. Had to look up to do it. "Coffin." Goose was in the next room losing enough blood to paint a barn and the cop they sent was named Coffin. Christ. "No offense, Officer Coffin, but the person I need to talk to is Sergeant Bergin of the Illinois State Police. His number's in my phone. If you can raise him, say Marian Bradshaw told me he was the go-to person for information about Lundy. He'll know what that means."

Coffin made sure I saw how patient he was being. "What's your name?"

"Nick Forte."

"Well, Nick Forte, I don't know how they do things where you come from, but down here you don't get to pick which cop you'll talk to. Especially not when you're involved with a man who might be bleeding out not twenty feet from here."

"Not to be argumentative, but I *do* get to pick my cop this time." Coffin sent me a look that implied I might get to tell my story at the station cuffed to a table. "Bergin has context you don't. I'll demand a lawyer if you try to question me. I'll waive Miranda for him and, since this is your

jurisdiction, I imagine he'll let you sit in while he talks to me. What'll it be?"

Coffin pointed to my chair. "I'll be right back. Don't even get up to stretch your legs."

He returned fifteen minutes later. His body language was no friendlier, though his expression showed a new level of interest. "You're lucky. Bergin works out of the Pontiac barracks. Should be here in half an hour."

"You mind if I get something to eat? It's been a long night."

"Cafeteria's around a couple of bends. Follow me or you'll never find it. I could use some coffee myself."

A man came in as Coffin and I ate breakfast. Stocky, short blond hair, calm demeanor. Wore a sport coat over an off-white shirt and blue tie with a handcuff tie pin. Walked directly to our table and offered a hand to Coffin. "Sergeant Bergin, ISP." They shook hands and exchanged cop pleasantries while I waited like the nonentity I was.

Still speaking to Coffin, Bergin inclined his head my direction. "This Forte?"

"That's him."

"You mind if I talk to him outside?"

"My chief says I'm to remind you this is our case until we either ask for help or you have a superseding investigation. Until then you talk to him in front of me."

Bergin looked at me for the first time. Spoke to Coffin. "You said on the phone he threatened to lawyer up if you were in the interview."

My turn. "What I said was—and a good morning to you, too, Sergeant Bergin—that I'd waive if I could tell my story to you. I have no objection to Officer Coffin's presence so long as you get the story straight from me. I suspect you know things about what I'm going to tell you that he doesn't. Besides, nothing germane happened in his jurisdiction."

Bergin and Coffin exchanged glances. Coffin shrugged. Bergin looked around the cafeteria. "I need coffee."

Coffin asked if he'd eaten yet. Bergin had not. "The cinnamon rolls are good." Bergin glared. Coffin made an apologetic face. "I just had two. They're good."

I sensed an opportunity. "He's right, Sergeant. I had two myself."

Bergin went to the counter. Coffin glared at me. “You better not fuck me on this, Forte. I don’t know what I can do about it once you leave town, but I’ll think of something.”

“Don’t worry yourself. The man maybe bleeding to death upstairs is the best friend I ever had. I want this to go badly for the people responsible.”

Bergin returned carrying a tray with a large coffee and two cinnamon rolls. “There’s only one left. Either of you wants it, you better go now.”

Coffin and I were good. Bergin mixed sugar and creamer into his coffee. Stirred. Tasted. Added half a milliliter more creamer. Stirred. Tasted. He had all the time in the world.

I’d seen this routine before. Used it myself. He wasn’t breaking my balls—well, he *was* breaking my balls, but not just to do it. Much of a cop’s job is to get people to say things the subject would be better off if the police didn’t know. One of the best ways to do that was through building anxiety. One of the best ways to build anxiety was to make people wait and worry about what came next. I wondered how long it would take him to figure out I’d seen too many of these for it to work on me.

Satisfied with his coffee, Bergin took another sip, sat back, and clasped his hands across his midsection. “Okay, Mr. Forte. Marian Bradshaw’s word carries a lot of weight with me, and she says you’re good people and I can trust you. Now how about you tell me exactly what the fuck is going on here?”

I gave him the *Dragnet* version: just the facts. I didn’t say why I was in Lundy, just that I came across Willie and tried to help. How I was run out of town by the local cops and came back to try to do something for the captive workers.

Coffin grew pale as I told the story. Bergin showed no effect. Took no notes and asked no questions. The notes and questions would come. I’d be telling this story all day.

Bergin’s cinnamon rolls and coffee were gone by the time I finished. He excused himself to get more coffee. Brought it back and went through the same ritual as before, including the extra dollop of creamer after the first sip.

Satisfied, he opened his notebook and took out a pen. “What you’re telling me is that your solution to this problem was to kidnap the people you

claim were being held against their will.”

“At no time did we compel anyone to come with us. All we did was load them on the bus and send them on their way.”

“You did steal the bus, though.”

“I don’t want to come across like some dick lawyer, but I thought of it as requisitioning the bus under exigent circumstances.”

Bergin might have smiled, though it was so small and fleeting I wouldn’t testify to it. “This isn’t football. There’s no such thing as offsetting penalties. Grand theft auto isn’t canceled out by...what exactly are you charging? And who?”

Both good questions. “Let’s start with false imprisonment and violation of multiple labor laws. Slavery is what it was.”

“And by whom?”

I’d given enough depositions and court testimony to know to answer as narrowly as possible. “Central Illinois Packing et al, I suppose. Not everyone who works there is involved, but there are others who don’t work there who are. Involved, I mean.”

Coffin asked if he could get more coffee. Bergin seemed surprised. “You can come and go as you please. You’re not the witness here. I’ll send you my report when it’s done if you have someplace you need to be.”

Turned to me. “You can get more too, Forte. *You* have to come straight back, though.”

I took Bergin’s comment to mean he wanted some alone time. I followed Coffin to the beverage area even though I’d already had all the tea I could handle for one day. Tried to make conversation. Coffin shook his head. “I don’t want Bergin to think you said anything he’d want to hear.”

Bergin was texting when we got back. Whatever messages he’d exchanged did not amuse him. “Why didn’t you call us before you took it upon yourself to wreck the place? I’m assuming the propane explosion was collateral damage from your, uh, rescue mission.”

“You would’ve had to open an investigation. The locals wouldn’t cooperate and anything you did would’ve tipped those responsible and they’d shut down the operation. No telling what would’ve happened to the workers in those trailers. Their welfare was my primary concern.”

Bergin’s phone buzzed. He read a text and replied. Sat quietly for thirty seconds until the phone buzzed again. Read the new message,

responded, then set the phone aside.

“I should bring you in. More accurately, since all this bullshit happened in Lundy, I should turn you over to them.” He left that to ripen while I internally debated strategies for getting away if he was serious. Going into custody in Lundy would be a one-way trip.

Bergin hadn't finished. “What I'm going to do is get your contact information. How far do you live from Pontiac?”

“Hour and a half or so.”

“You can go, subject to recall within two hours.”

“Monday through Friday? My daughter stays with me on alternate weekends.”

“I'm doing you a favor, asshole. I should sweat you a while in the box but apparently things are getting hairy in Lundy and it's all hands on deck. Agree to the two-hour recall or you're cooling your heels in the district office until I feel like working you into my busy schedule.”

I agreed and left before he could change his mind. Almost to the door that led back to where I'd been waiting for Goose when Bergin called to me. I turned and he pointed toward the exit door. “Visiting hours are over. Get the fuck out.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

I drove straight home, parked the Mercedes in my garage. Showered, changed clothes, and drove my Accord to Portillo's on Illinois 53 to gather my thoughts over an Italian beef. As fortified as I was going to get considering all the sleep I didn't have, I drove into town to see Marisol Eisenberg.

I found her outside her private office directing traffic like Patton on his way to Bastogne. I knew better than to interrupt. Made sure she saw me and stood out of the way to wait.

She pointed a finger at me. Said, "YOU!" followed by a stream of Spanish I couldn't keep up with but sounded in no way complimentary. "*Pon tu culo en mi oficina! Ahora!*" It didn't take Benecio del Toro to know I was to get my ass into her office. Now. I left the door open.

Marisol paused on the threshold to give more orders, then came in and closed the door. Made a point of ignoring me as she crossed behind her desk. Took a seat. Sipped from a bottle of water. Still not looking at me. "At least tell me you were sure no one was in the trailers before you blew them up."

She was a potential witness if anyone tracked the workers this far. "Blew up which trailers?"

Her mouth started to form more Spanish invective before the penny dropped. "*Ya veo*. Why are you here, then?"

"I heard you had a load of undocumented dropped on you this morning. Came by to see if I could be any help."

Marisol lowered her head to hide the smile she couldn't stifle. "Much as I appreciate your generous offer, I think we can handle it from here. You've done enough."

"Just by asking?"

"*Sí*. Just by asking."

We traded silent smiles. I asked how her morning had gone.

"Thank God you told me to be ready. Did you count the men on that bus?" I had not. "Forty-seven. I don't know what we would've done if they showed up here unannounced. As it was this morning was like a phone tree,

lawyers calling lawyers calling lawyers. Everyone is represented and somewhere safe now.”

“Already?” Marisol looked smug as a cat living on a canary farm. “What about the bus? It could be a problem for you if they trace it here.”

“A bus?” She pretended to think. Snapped her fingers. “I did hear something about a bus. I have no idea what happened to it. Should I ask around?”

“No reason to. It’s stolen, er, probably stolen, but I doubt the owners want to be associated with it, all things considered.”

Marisol sipped from the bottle. “I understand why you can’t talk. I’m confused about why you came to me yesterday. Grateful, but confused.”

An image of Goose on the hospital gurney passed through my mind. “I had no idea everything would turn to shit as badly as it did. I’m still not sure how it happened. If all had gone well I would’ve been happy to let those involved know it was me what did them. Now?” I opened my hands.

“Was anyone hurt?”

“I could only know that if I was there.”

“However you found out, I’m glad you told me. These men owe you. All but a few were in pretty bad shape. Malnourished, dehydrated. They told me a couple died this summer.”

“I’m glad they got out. What happens to them now?”

“They’re all different. Some have good cases for asylum. Some don’t.” Marisol looked at her desktop. Avoided my eyes. “I assume it would help the case against the meat packers if someone would testify. That’s a lot to ask of a person who’s here without legal authority.”

“Burn that bridge when you get to it. The state police already have a good—I mean I hear the state police already have a good witness willing to testify. By the time it comes to trial—if it even comes to trial—they may just need to cherry pick a guy or two. Those can be men whose asylum cases are in good shape.”

She wasn’t sold. “It’s still risky. Even if a witness has asylum, they can still mess with him.”

“Then don’t let them testify. The important thing is that they got out. Worry about the trials later. Besides, justice takes many forms.” A thought came to mind. “Was anyone on the bus named Guillermo Sanchez?”

Raymond Chandler once wrote there was nothing sadder than a sad Mexican. In that moment, Marisol Eisenberg was the saddest Mexican I'd ever seen. "We asked. No one saw him after the day he got out." She must have seen my posture sag. "Forty-seven out of forty-eight. You did well. Better than anyone could've hoped."

All but one. But the one was the man I knew. The one who had the nerve to walk away and made the rescue of the other forty-seven possible. The one I'd placed in more jeopardy than he'd already been in.

Marisol's voice was soft as snow falling on bare skin. "Don't. You didn't force him to do anything."

"He was afraid. I guilted him into it."

"But you did *not* force him." Marisol waited for my face to show acknowledgement. "He knew the risks and took them anyway. He must have thought it was worth it to help his friends. Conscience is a powerful thing." She opened her hands, searching for words. "Maybe he got lucky and they sent him home." My expression stopped her. "I've seen stranger things happen."

It said a lot about the situation that sending him back to Fresnillo, the most dangerous city in one of the most dangerous countries in the world, was the best-case scenario. Men who'd bring a refugee here to work for no wages weren't the kind to spend money to send a disgruntled employee home safe and sound.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The volunteer on duty at the hospital was a woman in her sixties. She wore a pink blouse with a brooch that looked like some kind of bird. Her hair was steel gray and cut short. My request for Goose's room number disturbed her.

"I'm sorry, sir. We have no one here named Timothy Satterwhite."

My stomach dropped damn near out my ass. "He came into the ER early this morning seriously injured." A hopeful thought. "Maybe he was transferred?"

The woman tapped keys. Clicked a mouse. "I'm sorry, sir. I see no record of him."

No idea what to do next, I called Bergin. "The hospital has no record of Tim Satterwhite ever being here."

"I thought it would be a good idea to stash him as a John Doe except John Doe would be too obvious. Ask for Duncan Keith."

"The hockey player?"

"Not in St. James he isn't."

Nice. "I appreciate you taking the time. Any news since I left this morning?"

"Nothing yet, not that I should tell you if there was. Calm down. I know there'd be no case without you. I'm willing to dish out a few morsels the general public and media won't get but don't push your luck. I can't afford to taint you as a witness."

"Trust me, I want to be as far away from this as possible."

"Tomorrow, day after at the latest, a task force of ISP and federal agents will descend on Lundy like a hailstorm. Damage is expected, possibly severe. Keep that to yourself and maybe I'll share more as we go along."

"That's all I care to know right now. Thanks, Sergeant. I appreciate all of this."

"We'll see how you feel after the attorney general's people get a hold of you."

"I am at their disposal."

“Good. Ten o’clock tomorrow in my office. Don’t be late.”

Getting in to see Duncan Keith was no problem until I got to the nurse’s station. An attractive woman in her thirties wearing flowered scrubs, her dirty blond hair pulled into a ponytail, intercepted me on my way into Goose’s room. “Are you Mr. Keith’s friend? The one who brought him in?”

“I am.”

She asked as if she already knew the answer: “Are you family?” she said to the person Caroline had dubbed the World’s Whitest White Man.

“I’m as close as it gets for the time being. State police are trying to crack his phone to get contact information for next of kin.”

The nurse guided me by the elbow to a waiting alcove down the hall. “I’m not supposed to tell you this but he would’ve died if you didn’t get him here as fast as you did.”

No way was this good news. I let her tell it. “He had a stroke in the operating room. He lived, but there’s damage.”

“What kind of damage?”

“His speech is affected and his right side is paralyzed. We expect at least some of that to come back but we don’t know how much. Every case is different.”

“Can I see him?”

“Please do. He might be sleeping and he doesn’t look so hot, but I think he’d enjoy the company. If he’s awake. All I ask is that you not stay too long and don’t excite him. If he’s asleep, let him be.”

I promised I’d behave, and she walked me back to Goose’s room. I thanked her and she went about her business while I stood where Goose couldn’t see me to prepare myself.

Tim Satterwhite was a proud man who drew confidence from his physical competence. Being gut shot was bad enough. Potentially permanent disability was a different matter altogether. Things we’d always been able to say to each other might not be cool today.

I dry washed my face, took a deep breath, and stepped into the room. Almost stepped out before he noticed me. Goose had more tubes in him than a toothpaste factory. His dark skin couldn’t be pale but managed to look ashen. The right side of his face drooped from brow to chin. I approached from his left so I could talk to the good side.

He showed recognition, so I figured it was okay to talk. “I’ve seen you look better.”

Goose rolled his head to get a better look at me. “That because you drive like some old white church lady with arthritis. I bet you didn’t even do one-twenty on the way here.” His speech wasn’t as bad as I’d feared, though his usually outstanding diction was rough around the edges and he sounded a little drunk.

“The best I saw when I wasn’t too scared to look was one-seventeen.”

“I don’t want to sound like I don’t appreciate it.”

I took his left hand in mine and we squeezed. “What happened? Last I saw was when you left with the bus.”

“I got the Mexes on their way and came back for you. Fore I forgets, you owe me two-sixty-two thirteen.”

“Two hundred sixty-two dollars and thirteen cents? You weren’t sending them to Canada.”

“What kind of mileage do a school bus get?”

“I have no idea.”

“Me neither. I didn’t want them running out along the way. Figured, all the trouble we were going to, you didn’t either.”

“No worries. I’m good for it.” More to the point, Donald Bower was. “So what happened next?”

“I’ze pulling in that back way when I saw a car going around back of the trailer. Busted a few caps that direction and they shot back. Then the tank blew and I saw the po-lice lights so I invoked Plan B and left for the rendezvous.”

“When were you hit?”

“Some cracker hit me with a Hail Mary getting in the car. In the back, no less. Motherfucker.”

“Christ, Goose. I’m sorry. If I’d had any idea—”

“We both knew the drill going in. I been lucky so many times I was due for some unluck.”

“How do you feel?”

“It’s not as bad as I thought it would be.” The left side of his mouth smiled. “This morphine drip and convenient little button help a lot. Tired mostly. No feeling in my right side.”

“The nurse says that’ll come back.” A lie in the service of a greater good.

“Might not come back all the way, though. That could put a crimp in my income. Can’t thug worth shit with half my limbs not working.”

“There’s straight work, you know.”

Goose sent me the dirtiest look one side of a morphine-dulled face could manage. “With my resume?”

“Can’t your boy Ramirez hook you up with a new identity? Be a lawyer if you want. Specialize in gray areas.” Goose was not impressed. “You could work for me.”

“What doing?”

“Caroline’s been after me to get an above ground pool. I’d need someone to skim the leaves and check the pH. Things like that.”

“You want me to be the pool boy? All I done for you and I can’t even be a house nigger?”

“You’d have to work your way up, your resume being what it is.”

“I always knew you a closet racist.”

“Be fair. I never tried to hide it.”

“True dat.” We sat without speaking for a minute or two. Put me in mind of Woodrow Call waiting for Gus to die in *Lonesome Dove*. Forced it out of my mind.

Goose interrupted my reverie. “You call my people?”

“The state police are still trying to unlock your phone. I don’t know the password.”

“MartinLutherKing. All one word, capital M, capital L, capital K.” My eyebrows arched. “Remind me not to hurt no one I don’t have to.”

“I’ll let them know. Want me to call your aunt in Chicago?”

“And my gram in Louisiana, too.”

“I didn’t know you had people in Louisiana.”

“Gram went down to help some cousins after Katrina and stayed.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

He pressed the morphine button. “I don’t want to seem ungrateful...”

“But you’d like me to take my white ass down the road.”

“Exactly how I woulda said it.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow. Can I bring you anything?”

“Nothing come to mind. A book, maybe. You know what I like. Call before you come. I’ll tell the nurse, I think of anything else.”

At the door I turned. “I suppose it’s too late to matter, but how bad will it jam you up once the cops unlock that phone?”

“Not at all. Everything in it backed up and I got a hacker buddy to write some code that dumps all the incriminating shit after three wrong passwords. All they’ll get is friends and family and animal pictures and shit.”

I chuckled. Shook my head. Timothy Alston Satterwhite didn’t miss much.

The nurse sent an inquisitive glance as I passed. I shrugged and gave a tentative thumbs-up and walked to the elevator.

It wasn’t my problem—my fault but not my problem—but I couldn’t help wondering how Goose would come out of this. People would test him; that was the game. His reputation covered what he might have lost to age; bullet wounds were the cost of doing business. A stroke was different. He’d have to rebuild his street cred almost from scratch once that got out.

Halfway to my car I saw Detective Eastman from Lundy on his way in. I changed direction to intercept. Took hold of his forearm. “Turn around and go back to Lundy.”

Eastman tried to push past me. I whipped him around and into the brick wall. Jacked him up on his tiptoes. “I’ll say this once: you’re Satterwhite’s new bodyguard. Anything happens to him, I don’t care who does it, I’m coming for you.”

“Is that a threat? I’m a sworn officer of the law, asshole.”

“Are you still? After the shit show in Lundy this morning I’m guessing your badge has the life expectancy of a bottle of milk in a hot car.”

We eye fucked each other until I let him down. He shouldered his way free. Straightened his sport coat and walked toward his car.

I had Bergin on the line before Eastman opened his car door. “I ran into Detective Eastman from Lundy on my way out of the hospital.”

“What was he doing?”

“Going in.”

A sharp intake of breath on Bergin’s end. “What happened?”

“I cut him off before he made the door. Read him the riot act and he left, but I don’t know for how long.”

“Where are you now?”

“In front of the hospital.”

“Can you stay awhile?”

“As long as you need me to.”

“I’ll scramble a trooper to stand guard and set up shifts for the time being. Just because you ran Eastman off this time doesn’t mean Satterwhite’s clear. All I need from you is to keep an eye on him until the first watch gets there.”

“Thanks. Eastman gave me some shit about threatening a police officer, so I didn’t push too hard.”

“Don’t worry about that. ISP took over all law enforcement in Lundy about half an hour ago. Every cop in town is suspended until further notice.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I was hungry and already most of the way to Lundy. My history of never combining the words “good” and “idea” in the same sentence gave me no reason not to get one more meal at the anonymous diner.

Pulled off the interstate an exit early to drive past the scene of last night’s festivities. The back door Goose and the bus took on their way out was blocked with crime scene tape. Two state troopers ignored me as they leaned against their shops, reflective shades brilliant in the setting sun.

The same scenario at the turnoff to the little bridge where I’d tried to delay the posse. These troopers looked up when I pulled my car to the side of the road. Straightened and stepped away from each other when I got out of the car. Their right hands hung relaxed at their sides, index fingertips grazing the butts of their Glocks as I walked across the road toward them, my palms open and facing forward.

Burned-out hulks rested where the trailers had been. A handful of forensics guys packed their gear as the shadows lengthened.

I stood on the yellow median stripes. “Good afternoon.”

The troopers nodded. I couldn’t see their eyes behind the sunglasses, but I knew they only paid me enough attention to make sure my hands stayed still and empty while they scanned everywhere else. The taller one spoke. “State your business.”

“Is Sergeant Bergin in there?”

“Do you have something for him?”

“Nothing special. I was passing by and thought I’d say hello.”

“Who should I say asked for him?”

I pursed my lips. Gave a quick head shake. “I’ll call him later.”

Took me a second to realize what was missing. “No TV people?”

“They left half an hour ago.”

“I bet that broke your hearts.” Neither trooper commented. I went back to my car and drove away.

The anonymous diner was busier than usual for that time of day, what with two tables of state cops and at least half a dozen media-looking types crowding the regulars. Laurie saw me and spoke to another waitress, who

came over as soon as I took a seat. Early fifties. Had one of those faces where it's easy to guess what she looked like as a child. Her dye job was recent and overdone. More standoffish than what I was used to from Lundy citizens. I wondered how much Laurie said about why she didn't want to wait on me.

I ordered a club sandwich, onion rings, and a cherry Coke. I like to read when I eat alone, but I'd left the Crumley novel on the coffee table in my living room and had no interest in the Lundy paper. I sat quietly and stilled my mind, grateful for a few minutes with nothing to do and no place to be.

An energy the diner didn't have before hummed like a high-voltage line. As I could have guessed, the residents were abuzz about that morning's events and the evolving aftermath. Shock and disbelief were the prevailing sentiments. Fear about what would happen to the town's leading employer ran close behind, followed by anger stoked by that fear.

Also as expected, rumors were rampant. My favorite was how the government was covering up a terrorist attack. Lundy was no one's idea of a high-visibility target. I'd bet even most Illinois officials couldn't find it on a map if you gave them the longitude and latitude.

Of course, there were those who blamed the victims. Never mind they were slaves and lived under conditions the SS would have approved of. At least some pushed back. One woman said she heard they weren't being paid and if that was true she was glad they escaped. The man with her, presumably her husband, said that was why the country was messed up, people thinking like her while these illegals roamed the countryside causing God knew how much damage. Not to mention they took jobs away from Americans who needed them, ignoring that the number of Americans—Mexicans, Germans, Filipinos, Dutch, Colombians, Indians, Pakistanis, Afghans, or Eskimos—who'd stand in line to work for literally nothing would fit into his coffee cup.

I kept to myself. Ate my sandwich and onion rings. Took a refill of my cherry Coke. Wiped my lips and left a generous tip before walking to the counter to pay the check. Picked up a few peppermint patties from the jar there.

Situating my change, I found Laurie standing next to me. "That was you, wasn't it? Last night. The fire."

“I couldn’t say so if it was.”

“Herm Steinkeller was burned in that fire.”

“The cook who doesn’t take compliments?” She nodded. “Is he all right?”

“Sounds like he will be.” She paused, deciding whether to go on. When she spoke she sounded like a prosecutor making closing remarks. “He had to roll away from the fire. Someone tied his hands and feet. He could’ve died.”

“I’m glad he’s all right.” Mostly true, considering the beating ol’ Herm had helped to give me. “A question that comes to mind is what he was doing in the midst of criminal activity in the middle of nowhere during the dead of night?”

“A man’s allowed to be where he wants. It’s still that much of a free country.”

“They were slaves out there, Laurie. They had a ten-foot square area to get fresh air if they went out in shifts.”

“I thought you weren’t there.”

“I didn’t say I was *never* there. Just not last night. I know what was going on.”

“Then you should’ve told the police.”

“The local police already knew.”

She turned to face me directly. “Who are you? Really?”

“I told you before. I’m a private investigator. By the way, I never got a chance to thank you for all you did after I got beat up.”

“Why did you lie about working for the movies?”

“I didn’t want anyone to know I was a P.I.”

“What were you doing here?”

“I wouldn’t be much of a *private* investigator if I told you that.”

Laurie turned to go. I reached for her but drew back before I made contact. She stopped anyway. “I think I was dropped where I was so the police could pick me up for public drunkenness. That would not have gone well for me.” Took a beat to decide, said it anyway. “There’s a decent chance you saved my life. I can’t thank you enough.”

Her eyes got big and her jaw dropped. “I – I – I don’t know where you got your ideas about our local cops. I know a couple of them. They’re good people.”

“That must be why they’re not cops anymore.” That surprised her. “You didn’t hear? The entire force is suspended. The state police are taking over for now.”

Her eyes darted to where the cops had been sitting. I spoke while she was still absorbing the new information. “I really would like to show my appreciation for your help.”

“Then leave me alone. I don’t need someone like you in my life.”

Fair enough. “Do you have a favorite charity?”

She stared at me like I’d asked for naked pictures. Turned on her heel and went back to work.

Walking to the car I made a mental note to send a check to *The Daily Egyptian*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Donald Bower insisted we meet on his boat again, which was fine with me. He made the same small talk motoring out of cell range. Hard to say if he didn't remember what he'd told me earlier or just enjoyed hearing himself say it. At least he spared me another visit to the shrine belowdecks.

He wasn't quite the same as before. The swagger seemed forced and exaggerated. The "hail fellow well met" attitude struck me as being as much for his benefit as mine. I ignored it. No need to rub his nose in anything, even after he paid me. Justice doesn't work that way at this level.

He killed the engine and let the big boat drift. I understood why a person would like this. The water lapping against the hull. The gentle rocking and swaying was better than any hammock. The limitless sky open for contemplation and peace. I suspected Bower looked at these things as symbols of what a swinging dick he was; nothing else mattered to him. I did my best to keep that from diminishing my appreciation of the lake's glories.

I shaded my eyes against the setting sun to look at him directly. "I agreed to the boat ride because it's a nice night and I didn't feel like arguing. We both know why I'm here. This could've been done in your driveway."

Bower showed me the stereotypical manila envelope folded over and secured with a rubber band. "That's a lot of cash money. Had to do it in multiple transactions or reports would have to be filed."

"I had every confidence you'd find a way."

His smile showed an almost criminal level of self-satisfaction. "I managed."

Bower extended the envelope toward me. Pulled it back when I reached to accept it. "Don't I get a report?"

"Kenneth Dowd was the driver in the hit-and-run your wife witnessed. The police didn't do anything about it because they were in his pocket. That's no longer a problem."

Bower said, "Why not?" and I almost choked over his artificial disingenuousness. "He has more urgent uses for his money, and they're not

cops anymore. Not to mention his wife is about to clean him out in their divorce. You got full value.”

I assumed a posture that made it clear I expected to be paid and returned to shore. I didn’t reach for the envelope, which was good; he didn’t offer it. “I expected something in writing.”

“You mean like the contract we never signed?”

Bower looked over the lake like what he was about to ask was an insignificant afterthought. “The explosion down there the other day. You have anything to do with that?”

I used to be a cop. I can stone face with the best of them.

“Not going to say another word, are you?”

“I’ll say ‘thank you’ after you pay me.”

He wristed the envelope to hit my chest with some velocity. I pinned it there, then slid it into an inside pocket.

Bower said, “You’re not going to count it?”

“You didn’t short me.”

“You’re that sure?”

“You are.” His eyebrows arched. “No one knows better than you how long the swim home is.”

* * *

I ate a nice Mexican dinner in a family-owned place off Illinois 43. It seemed appropriate. I was hungry and the food was good, but I didn’t enjoy it as much as it deserved. I could come back under more favorable circumstances but that would mean returning to Lake City, which I planned never to do.

WestLake Holdings was well insulated from the Lundy catastrophe, which meant Bower was, too. What happened there could turn out to be a good thing for him in the long run. WestLake was positioned to assume full control of the packing plant once the legal issues sorted themselves out; Bower’s fingerprints weren’t on anything criminal. Profits would fall with the plant run on the level, but there’s always another angle for those willing to look.

I drove to a hardware store half an hour before closing and paid cash for two five-gallon plastic gas cans. A few miles away I filled my tank and

both cans, also in cash. Left the car in the park that butted up against Bower's property, took the gas cans from the trunk, and hiked through the woods.

Bower's house sat about a hundred yards from the edge of the trees; the boathouse not quite that far, on a different angle. I lingered behind the tree line until all the lights were out in the big house, then another hour.

Satisfied everyone was asleep, I carried the gas cans to the boathouse. Entered the cipher lock Bower hadn't bothered to shield from me. Closed the door behind and set the cans on the dock.

On the boat I went below and retrieved the plaque Bower won for the CYC's Christmas decorations. Individual trips to carry out the models of *Jefes* one through three. Took everything to an outbuilding used to store landscaping supplies. The toughest part of the whole operation was picking the lock that held the door shut.

I "hid" the plaque and models inside, where they wouldn't be too obvious but also not that hard to get to. Closed the door and refastened the lock.

In the boathouse I sloshed the contents of one gas can liberally around *Jefe IV*. Above and below, on the carpets and upholstery. The bridge. Wiped clean the empty can and held it under water until it sank.

I then walked halfway to the forest and opened the other can. Laid down a stream of gas on the grass while walking back to the boathouse, which now reeked of fumes. Spread what was left in the can around the boat and sank the container with its partner. Wiped anything I might have touched and locked the door behind me.

Halfway to the woods I stopped to look around the Bower estate; "yard" was too common a description. Wondered what it cost him without bothering to do any calculations.

I lit a kitchen match and dropped it on the trail of gasoline. Heard the *whoosh* and felt the heat of the igniting fumes as the boathouse went up behind me. The fire lit my path through the trees. I didn't look back.

As Robert Redford said in *The Sting*, it wasn't enough. But it would do.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“How much longer?”

Not exactly *are we there yet?* but Caroline knew better.

I did a quick calculation. “In this traffic, about two hours. You have to go to the bathroom?”

“Not yet, but I’m starving.”

A weekend at the Wisconsin Dells is always great fun so long as I don’t think ahead to the drive home. We were at Culver’s for late breakfast/early lunch/not brunch at eleven; stopped again for custard midafternoon. Hotter than a bastard, we worked in as much outdoor recreation as we could without requiring hospitalization for fluids. Now we were in traffic purgatory, tired, hungry, still floating on the weekend’s high.

I flashed through previous trips. “There’s a Love’s just before the Illinois line. It’s a big one with a food court and easy to get off and on the highway. Will that do?”

“Is it the one with the A&W?”

“I think so.”

“Let’s go there.”

The stop was at least twenty minutes away. Caroline fell asleep after five. It breaks my balls no end to be in stop-and-go traffic on any highway where signs routinely remind me the speed limit is seventy. I resolved not to let that ruin what had been a perfect weekend to cap off a week that turned out better than I could have hoped.

Sergeant Bergin called Friday morning to request my presence “at your earliest convenience next week,” which is cop-speak for *first thing Monday morning*. An assistant attorney general would be there. Bergin let slip he was on his way to execute search warrants on the packing plant, its offices, and Kenneth Dowd’s home.

Dowd and three others were under arrest on nickel-and-dime charges. The judge released them on their own recognizance after collecting their passports and receiving written pledges they would not leave town. The mayor—who was *Shocked! Shocked!* to learn of the goings-on at the plant—fired the entire police department after being one of those arraigned with

Dowd. The union filed a grievance, the mayor was forced to resign, and what the new mayor wanted more than anything was not to be mayor anymore. Hilarity was on the horizon.

Donald Bower was arrested for arson and insurance fraud after police found valuable mementoes from his boat hidden in an outbuilding on the property. Bower's affection for the items was well known; an anonymous source tipped the arson investigator what to look for and where. The burner phone cost me sixty bucks at Best Buy. I paid for it with one of the hundreds Bower gave me.

Goose made steady improvement. The tubes were out and his speech was improving. He could squeeze a ball, wiggle the toes on his right foot, and stand with assistance. No walking yet but the doctors were hopeful.

I got hold of his family, some of whom would be waiting when I took him home next week. The Mercedes was already at Goose's preferred detailer. They took the job gratis because he was such a good customer, and they were afraid of what might happen if he felt they overcharged him. I gave them what they estimated it might cost a normal person, also out of Bower's envelope. With luck I'd break even by the time I finished making things right.

The pumps at Love's were backed up all the way to the service road. Tables in the food court were almost all full and people waited for orders to be called, but nothing like the lines outside and in the convenience store. I ordered two hot dogs, fries, and a large root beer at A&W. Caroline wanted a slice of pizza from the place next door, but asked me to get her a root beer. This was our go-to Love's because the food court allowed everyone to get what they wanted. It was the Alice's Restaurant of truck stops.

I first saw him standing under the "employees only" sign near the exit to the truck service bays. Early twenties, a little under average height, short blond hair. Caroline was unaware of him, focused as she was on a three-way text conversation with her friends Maria and Arielle.

The next time the kid caught my attention he was half as far away, standing where the food court opened into the convenience store. I only noticed him this time because I recognized him, and he was the only Love's employee on the floor. His name was Jimmy, and he was definitely looking our direction.

I'm an old-school father with an only child. A daughter, no less. My primary purpose in life was to make sure no one messed with her. Everything else—work, food, clothing, mortgage payments, staying out of prison—comes after. Jimmy hadn't done anything wrong, but the Dadar had activated.

All fathers think their daughters are beautiful; I had empirical evidence. If the steady stream of boys circling the periphery of her life looking for an in wasn't enough, I once overheard another kid in the band describe her to a friend as the “archetype of virginal beauty.” (What can I say? Magnet school.)

The next time I caught sight of Jimmy he stood three feet behind Caroline, checking her out with rapt attention. I sidled over, using my best stealth technique. He never saw me coming until I leaned in close and spoke in my most quietly menacing voice. “She's thirteen years old.”

Jimmy evaporated faster than a snowflake in a microwave..
I still got it.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chris Rhatigan, founder of All Due Respect Books and editor of this book for making *Off the Books* better than how he received it, as he always does. Beyond his expertise and taste, Chris has a quality that should never be underestimated by any author: he gets me, and I trust his advice implicitly.

The Private Eye Writers of America for providing not only constant inspiration to do better, but for keeping alive and thriving this uniquely American genre.

All my peers and betters who inspire me daily with their talent and tireless tenacity.

My readers, especially those who reach out through social media and e-mail. Writing can be a lonely occupation. You have no idea how important your appreciation and encouragement are toward getting me to sit down every day and get a little closer to the end.

The Sole Heir™, without whom there would be no Caroline. I love you, Rachel.

Last but not least, The Beloved Spouse™ who, in addition to being the visual creative team that came up with the unified cover scheme for the new Forte editions, is also my valued first listener, confidant, sounding board, and is willing to either kick my ass or kiss it, depending on what she thinks is needed. She is rarely wrong.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dana King is the author of fifteen books, including six Nick Forte private eye novels, two of which – *A Small Sacrifice* and *The Man in the Window* – received Shamus Award nominations from the Private Eye Writers of America; eight Penns River police procedurals; and a standalone novel titled *Wild Bill*, which is not a Western. His short fiction appears in numerous anthologies and web sites. He is a frequent panelist at conferences and reads at Noirs at Bars from New York to North Carolina. You can learn more about him at <https://danakingauthor.com>.