



**THE STUFF  
THAT DREAMS  
ARE MADE OF**

**A NICK FORTE NOVEL**

**BY**

**DANA KING**

THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF

A Nick Forte Mystery

By

Dana King

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

Copyright © 2014 by Dana King

All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1505301427

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No book, even a work of fiction, is written in a vacuum. The author draws upon all experience, memory, and interactions with others when creating his fictional world. There are a few individuals and groups who stand out:

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

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

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

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

Declan Burke, who talked me out of quitting.

John McFetridge, who thought publishing the early Forte books might be a good idea.

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

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

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

*To Rachel, without whom Caroline wouldn't exist*

THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF

## PROLOGUE

### The Good Samaritan

Wind off the lake insinuated Chicago February into my down jacket. A damp cold I knew would nestle between my muscles and bones so not even a hot shower would get it out. My ears and forehead burned with numbness before I walked a block.

I heard footsteps, maybe someone running, as I passed an alley near 35<sup>th</sup> and Prairie. Nothing special about that. Someone is always running away from something in that neighborhood. I stopped when I heard what might have been a muffled scream. Six years away from The Job didn't negate the training. *Satisfy your curiosity. If something attracts your attention enough for a second look, look at it a third time.* Of course, they assume you're armed and have access to backup when they tell you that.

The alley was two shades brighter than a mine shaft. I sensed motion more than saw it, and couldn't even do that well enough to know what was going on until a random sentence drifted out.

"Give it up, bitch." Never a good sign.

I stayed on the balls of my feet and eased along the wall opposite the sound and motion. I stumbled over a trash can and drew no more attention than a passing cloud.

There were three of them. The young white guy in the middle probably not as good-looking as he'd been ten minutes before. A black guy the size of three linebackers held him by the hair while a smaller one whose face I couldn't see administered an efficient beating. Blood covered the lower part of the guest of honor's face and whatever sounds had attracted my attention were reduced to whimpers. The other two didn't seem hurt at all. Go figure.

The big one had to go first. I needed surprise to take him and I couldn't get much closer without being seen. I eased in as far as I dared and picked up what looked like a piece of a car's exhaust system, about two feet long with some heft to it. It would do.

I kicked a trash can against a wall to make as much noise as I could. Both bruisers looked my way and I stepped up and clubbed the big one

across the shoulders with his back still partially turned. It was like hitting a steel door. My club bent under the impact. He sagged and I bashed his midsection on the way down. I heard the air run out of him and nailed him once more in the belly to keep him down. He vomited straight into the air. I turned to look for his buddy.

I didn't have to look far. He stood right behind the piece of shit .32 revolver pointed at my nose, so close I smelled the gun oil.

I kept my hands out from my sides so he wouldn't think I might go for a gun. I had a .45 under my left arm I could have left at home for all the good it did me. I hadn't wanted to raise the stakes by introducing a gun. All I'd done was to check to the dealer, who held cards.

His face went out of focus as my eyes locked onto the little gun with the bore the size of a basketball. He was short, no more than five-six, with greasy dark bangs a foot long. Hispanic—or Asian—hard to tell in the dark. A few teeth short of a full set. Not what I hoped for as the last thing I'd ever see.

“Tough guy, huh?” Edge to his voice, high on something, maybe adrenaline. “Suckered Marcel and now you're a bad motherfucker. Let's see who's bad now.”

He put his thumb on the hammer and I grabbed the cylinder in a thoughtless reflex, something else ingrained from six years as a cop. I hoped he'd spent some money on the gun. A cheap one might have enough play to fire even if I held the cylinder.

Things started to turn and I squeezed tighter, trying to bend the metal, knowing I couldn't and at the same time knowing that if I didn't I'd never regret it. I felt the cylinder trying to move as he put pressure on the trigger. After three seconds that seemed like minutes I knew I had him, moved the gun away from my face and twisted it in his hand until he let go. He turned to run but I grabbed him by the collar and pulled back to trip him over my extended leg. I caught him on the way down and spun him into the nearest wall, then put him away with as hard a combination as I've ever thrown.

With Jeff out of the game I turned my attention back to Mutt, propped on one arm cleaning vomit off of his face. I found the gun and let him see me cock it. He raised the hand he wasn't leaning on and shook his head.

The third member of the party unfolded himself from the wall looking like he'd witnessed the parting of the Red Sea. “That was incredible, man, I



mean you just came out of nowhere. I've never seen anything like it, dude, you are The Man, you are The...Fucking...Man!"

He seemed familiar, like the friend of a friend you met once, years ago. Took his shoulder in my hand and positioned him to catch some stray light. His nose covered a third of his face, left eye swollen shut. Blood and mucous dripped onto his black leather jacket. "Do I know you?"

"Dude, I'm Frankie Calabra! You know, Danny D'Ambero from *Deep Cover* on TV? I came down here to do some research for the show and these two dudes tried to rip me off. You're gonna be famous, man!"

Swell.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Handsome Woman

There was a time when Sheila O'Donoghue would have been described as a handsome woman. She guarded the vestiges of the beauty she must once have considered her birthright the way a drunk protects his last bottle of gin.

Her methods were paying off. I couldn't guess how many hours on the Stair Master kept her legs in the condition she managed to show at every opportunity. Her eyes were aquamarine and barely possible to avoid staring at. She had a disconcerting habit of making eye contact without looking at me straight on, always showing a slight left profile. Must have been her good side.

She sat in the chair across the desk not looking any more comfortable than anyone else who sat there. It wasn't a bad chair. Getting comfortable shouldn't be a problem. Maybe it was me. Good thing I'm not insecure.

"Are you familiar with the name Russell Arbuthnot?" she asked in a resonant voice that must have given great phone.

"No, sorry. Are you familiar with the name Larry Conway?"

"No."

"Then we're even."

I got a hard look for a few seconds before a smile snuck up on her. She let it have its way and I got a tease of what she must have looked like twenty years ago. Anyone would fight to keep looks like that.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was businesslike to the point of coldness, wasn't it? May we start over?"

"No apology necessary. I understand no one really wants to come here to see me, so I don't pay much mind to first impressions. I didn't help matters by being a smartass. Now that we really are even, why don't you tell me why you're here?"

She smiled a mouthful of even white teeth and relaxed her posture. "Thank you. I suppose I am a little nervous. I'm a theatrical agent. Russell Arbuthnot is one of my clients. I thought a man in your profession would be familiar with his one-man show. It opens at the Goodman Theater the day after tomorrow."

“Now that you mention it, it does ring a bell. Isn’t he doing that Maltese falcon show? What’s it called—*The Black Bird*? Is that him?”

“Yes. He lives in Chicago. The Goodman performances are the beginning of a national tour.”

“I read good things about it. I’ve been meaning to get tickets for next week.”

“Would backstage passes be all right? Of course you’d be working, but you’d see every performance.” She sat forward, smoothing the skirt of her suit, directing my attention to her legs while letting me pretend I had a choice about it.

“What’s the gig?”

“Threats have been made.” She waited for eye contact before continuing. “Nothing specific. Some notes and a couple of phone calls.”

“Death threats?”

“As I said, they’re very vague. ‘Don’t sleep too soundly’ was one. ‘I want what’s mine.’ Things like that.”

“Do you know of anyone with reason to hurt him?”

She shifted in the chair and I saw exactly how well the suit that matched her eyes fit her. Sheila O’Donoghue didn’t just throw on any old thing when she left the house. “Russell has quite a taste for women, and his position and charm allow him to indulge himself regularly. He is not always as discrete as he might be.”

“Anyone in particular?”

“I’m his agent. We’re close, but I’m not privy to his extracurricular trysts.” Her tone left it open whether she disapproved of the trysts or of not knowing the details.

“Have you seen any of the notes?”

“No. Russell destroyed them as soon as he read them.”

“Why? They could be useful to the police.”

“He doesn’t take the threats seriously.”

“He took them seriously enough to tell you.”

“We’ve been together for over twenty years. There’s very little either of us doesn’t know about the other.”

“Except for his extracurricular trysts.” She gave me the look I should have expected. Some day I’ll learn to think of that before I say whatever it

is I shouldn't have said to prompt that reaction. "You took the threats seriously enough to come to me. Why?"

"Because I'm worried, and because I know Russell wants me to." I gestured with my hand for her to continue. "Russell's self-image won't let him show any concern over something like this, even if he has some. By telling me, he's tacitly admitting he's worried enough to allow something to be done."

I didn't answer right away and made myself look away from her eyes. My attention wound up on her knees, crossed demurely enough to deny purpose, even if we both knew better.

"What do you want done?"

"I want you to make sure no one carries out any threats until Russell leaves for his national tour in two weeks."

"Then what?"

"We're making arrangements with a national firm to provide security while he travels. We want someone local until then."

"Why me? I'm just a one-man operation. A firm that could handle him on tour could just as easily do it locally."

"You don't want the job?"

"I didn't say that. I'm curious what you think I can offer that they can't? I can't give him twenty-four by seven protection. I have to sleep and go to the bathroom once in a while."

"Russell isn't comfortable with the idea of a bodyguard. I'm hoping you'll hit it off and get him used to having someone with him every waking minute. That should make everything more bearable for the four months he'll be on the road."

"What makes you think we'll bond?"

She smiled without separating her lips. The victory of showing yet another man he had underestimated her filled her eyes. "Your background as a musician should make you better able to deal with an artistic temperament. At least that's what I'm hoping." My previous life as a musician is not common knowledge, for obvious reasons.

"He wants a pansy for a bodyguard?"

She sent me a more intense look. Her eyes were going to be a problem, as well as she knew how to use them. "Your adventure with Frankie Calabria was hardly the work of a pansy."

“Ah,” I said, like it meant something. We played coy for a few seconds. She let me go first.

“He’s on the road for four months. Then what?”

“Then nothing, I hope. The threats can’t last forever.”

“Depends on whether you’re dealing with a crank or someone with an obsession.”

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic about this.”

“I don’t like to disappoint clients. I’m not sure I can deliver what you’re looking for.”

“Would ten thousand dollars make you any more sure?”

It took considerable self-control to keep from sitting up too quickly and breaking a knee on the desk. “For two weeks’ work?” I don’t like doing protection. It’s as tedious as a stakeout and you have to put up with the subject, but my fifteen minutes of fame from saving Frankie Calabria were over and bills had to be paid. Five grand a week relieves a lot of tedium.

“Yes.” She showed the same smile, but less of it. The full treatment would have looked smug. “I asked around and then talked to Russell. We think you’d be uniquely suited to ease his discomfort about having what he refers to as a ‘strong-arm man’ at his side.”

“Is that another fruity musician reference? You don’t think I can do strong-arm?”

This smile showed teeth. “Not at all. From where I sit, you seem admirably suited for it.” A lesser man would have blushed.

“When do I start?”

“You have to meet Russell first.”

“When and where?”

“Right now, at his home.” She stood and pretended to smooth her skirt again. That appeared to be her move, the way Michael Jordan liked to go right. When she turned for the door I saw a small lift scar under her jaw on the side she kept turned away. “He has a condo on Michigan Avenue near the theater. We’re expected.”

Confidence is an attractive trait in a woman. I gave Sharon a few calls to return, some reports to file, and the usual instructions bosses leave with secretaries. Then Sheila and I left to meet my new client and his ten thousand dollars.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Fat Man

Russell Arbuthnot was well past heavy-set, if less than morbidly obese. His chest expanded from his shoulders to well below his waist, creating an impression of a light bulb with legs. His position and charm must have been considerable for him to be involved in any love triangles.

Arbuthnot lived in the penthouse of a newly-renovated high rise between Adams and Jackson, south of the Santa Fe Building. The top few floors had been converted from offices and given their own entrance and elevators so the swells who lived there wouldn't have to brush elbows with the stiff working in the offices below. Grant Park spread out through a picture window across from the entry door, Buckingham Fountain visible to my right, if I stood at the perfect angle. No crowds or kids playing around it today; even the sculptures seemed to huddle together. Farther out, Lake Michigan was frozen hard as an auditor's heart.

Arbuthnot stood near a fireplace wearing an old-style smoking jacket. He let me see the pose for a few seconds, then made a production of summoning his consciousness from whatever Muse held it before he acknowledged me. His patrician smile showed his comfort with the common folk, and more than a little condescension. He presented three fingers as a handshake and offered me a brandy. I passed. It was ten o'clock in the morning.

"Nicholas Forte, Professional Investigator," he read from the card with "Nick" printed on it I handed him. His voice had a legato quality, with enough resonance to reach the back of any theater. "I can't say I've ever had the pleasure of meeting a professional investigator. Do sit down."

"There's a first time for everything." I sat in a wing chair upholstered with velvet. The room looked like an English baron's study in a movie that would receive critical acclaim and no audience. "I understand you're not comfortable with the idea of a strong-arm man." I tossed a quick wink in Sheila's direction on "strong-arm."

A laugh burbled up through his bulk like lava through a volcano. “I hope you didn’t take that comment too seriously.” He took some time positioning himself in his chair. A man his size couldn’t just sit in it. Arrangements had to be made. “I was merely trying to convey to Sheila my—how shall I put this?—uncertainty about a man in my position being accompanied by someone who looked like a well-dressed thug. I apologize if that’s blunt, sir, but there it is.”

I held my arms away from my sides. “As you can see, ‘well-dressed’ doesn’t apply. You’ll have to make up your own mind about the rest.”

“Yes, well, I see you have your own look, yes, you do, sir. Sheila attempted to put my mind at ease about your thuggishness by telling me you were once a professional musician. Is that true?”

“Yes. BA from Northwestern, free-lanced around Chicago. Three years in an Army band.”

“And that led you to becoming a professional investigator?”

“That led me to becoming a cop.” That answer never satisfied anyone, Arbuthnot no exception. “I wasn’t good enough to play at the level I wanted to work at, so I got into teaching. Two years on the South Side made me sick of being the only unarmed person in the building, so I became a cop.”

“But you left.”

“Musicians don’t deal well with regimentation.”

“I see. Yes, I really do see your point.” He looked at Sheila, then gave me a once-over. “You may not have the personality of a strong-arm man, Mr. Forte, but you certainly have the build for it.”

“Six-foot-one, two hundred pounds of solid muscle.” I left out the fifteen pounds of other stuff hitching a ride at the time. “I use silverware when I eat and sometimes go entire days without assaulting anyone. I know not to split an infinitive and I can manage not to end a sentence with a preposition if I concentrate. I’ll spend as much time with you as is humanly possible and I’ll get help if your demands are greater than my ability to meet them. I can provide references. What else can I tell you?”

Sheila O’Donoghue’s face was aghast that anyone would speak like that to Russell Arbuthnot. Her body language implied she thought such a person might have an undercarriage that bore investigation. This job was going to be a struggle for her.

Arbuthnot looked at me like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. He gave up before the pause became uncomfortable.

“Yes, sir, you’ll do splendidly, that you will. I deal with so many actors and flesh peddlers that it’s rare for me to be able to take a man at his word.” Sheila flushed lightly at “flesh peddlers.” “I was waiting to see if your façade cracked at all after your little speech. You understand, of course.”

“Of course. People lie to me more often than not. It’s an occupational hazard.”

“Then we understand each other perfectly. Won’t you please come with me so I can show you the cause of all this turmoil?”

He raised himself from his chair without block or tackle. He walked with surprising fluidity, if glacially, on legs that didn’t look substantial enough to support him.

An enormous bed, at least king-sized, dominated the room we entered, the mattress a good three feet off the floor. I wondered how Arbuthnot hefted himself into the rack at night until I saw the small step stool partially hidden by the comforter. There was a mirror in the ceiling directly over the bed. Jesus Christ.

The bed faced a mantel with a discretely lighted recess eighteen inches high and a foot wide. Inside the alcove stood a black statuette of a bird about a foot tall.

Holy shit.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Black Bird

“There it is, in the flesh, so to speak. The Maltese falcon. Sidney Greenstreet never dreamt of a bird so valuable.”

The bird glared into the room. A dull black, like unbuffed shoes, it drew all light and attention. No more than a piece of whatever it was made of, shaped to look like something that never existed, but a slice of living history if you were someone who cared about that sort of thing. Its aura hung over the three of us like crepe. I couldn’t guess how many times



Sheila O'Donoghue must have seen the statue, and she couldn't take her eyes off it.

"Are you a devotee of motion pictures, Mr. Forte?" Arbuthnot's accent shifted so little I might not have noticed if accents weren't a hobby of mine.

"Yes, I am, and since you're about to ask me, *The Maltese Falcon* is one of my favorites. How did you come into this one?"

"This one, sir?" He turned toward me, the scorn obvious in his voice. "This is *the* falcon, sir, the one Bogart and Greenstreet unwrapped, the one Walter Huston carried into to Spade's office. This is the Maltese falcon, Mr. Forte, make no mistake."

"I heard they made three. Didn't they use them all?"

"You know more than you let on, my friend. Good. Shooting schedules were such that time could not be wasted if another bird had to be obtained, so supernumeraries were needed. Three birds were produced, should any accident befall the primary. There has been much dispute over the whereabouts of the others, but rest assured this is the falcon that millions of eyes have seen for over sixty years."

That story and six bucks would buy a *venti* frappu-something at Starbucks. The conviction in his voice and manner were still unnerving. I caught myself looking at the bird again, its blank eyes suddenly more riveting than Sheila O'Donoghue's aquamarines.

Arbuthnot's voice broke my reverie.

"Mr. Forte, have you any idea of the bird's worth?" I shook my head. "Well, sir, if I told you, you'd think me a liar. In fact, if I reduced it by half, you'd think the same. I'd like to tell you a story, but I must know more about you first."

"Ask away."

"But only if you'll share a drink with me. I insist. I'm going to have another and I don't like to talk to a man who won't drink with me."

Ten thirty-five. What the hell, it was five o'clock somewhere. "Okay, I'll have whatever you're having."

"Very good, yes, sir, very good." He made a one-act play out of pouring whatever was in the bottle on the mantel. I let him pour me as much as he wanted. I knew where the scene was going.

Arbuthnot handed me a half-full snifter before reseating himself. He swirled the liquid around his glass and took a short drink. Sheila

O'Donoghue might have been in Malta for all the attention he paid her.

"I like drinking with a man who doesn't say 'when'," he said when he was good and ready. "A man who has to watch how much he drinks isn't to be trusted. Cigar, sir?"

"No, thank you."

It took him at least a minute to get the cigar burning to his satisfaction. He sat back and took a long, satisfying puff, projecting the image of having completed an extraordinary sexual experience. He picked up the conversation where I knew he would.

"Are you a close-mouthed man, Mr. Forte?"

"No, I like to talk." Arbuthnot was willing to pay me ten grand for two weeks of walking around beside him. If he wanted to play Sidney Greenstreet, I could be Bogart.

"Splendid. I like to talk with a man who likes to talk. A close-mouthed man never knows how much to talk when he must." He wasn't getting it word for word, but close enough. "You haven't touched your drink. Is it not to your liking?"

"I have to be careful, don't I? How do I know you didn't slip me a mickey and Wilmer's behind that door waiting to kick me in the head?"

His throaty burble of a laugh would sound nasty in different circumstances. "Yes, indeed, you'll do very well, if I do say. You're quite the character, Mr. Forte. Take that from a man who is quite a character himself and knows a kindred spirit when he sees one." His laughter subsided in a steady slope, punctuated by minor aftershocks. "Now, sir, shall I tell you a story?"

"It's not going to be the one about the knights and the king of Spain, is it?"

"No, sir, it's not, but I dare say it's an even better story because it's true. I swear to you on my children every word I am about to speak is true."

"How many children do you have?"

More laughter. "To my knowledge, none. But I am not so old that I can't still have hopes, am I?"

I arched my eyebrows in a noncommittal gesture. "I take it I have the gig?"

"Why, yes, I think that should be clear by now. Would you care to shake hands on it?" He moved as though he might get out of the chair; we both

knew better. I leaned out of mine far enough to grip his fingers again.

“There will have to be some paperwork, and some kind of retainer to make everything legal, but this will do for story purposes,” I said.

“Very good, sir. Sheila, please make out a check for Mr. Forte,” he said without looking at her. “Will one thousand dollars do for a retainer?”

“Admirably,” I said.

“Excellent,” he said. “Sheila, I daresay you’ve heard this story many times, you may as well run along for Mr. Forte’s check.” She got up and left the room without a word. Her expression never changed, maybe a hint of red on her cheeks.

“Are you comfortable, Mr. Forte?” Arbuthnot said.

“I’m all ears.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Falcon’s Tale

“You already know there were originally three falcons. Two are of no significance, but this one was actually used in the film. This is the bird Humphrey Bogart tore from the parcel and Sidney Greenstreet nicked with his pen knife. Look closely, you can see the scratches from here.”

A few scrapes on the bird’s feet looked to be painted over.

“Well, sir, as you may know, there was not the value placed on memorabilia in those days as there is today. John Huston took a liking to the son of one of the property masters, a Japanese youth named Akiro. Akiro took the bird – ”

“Huston didn’t want the bird for himself? It was his first directing job.”

A frown creased Arbuthnot’s face for a second, a dimple disappearing behind a jowl that ran almost to his eye. He pulled his good humor together and went on.

“You do know your stuff, sir. Yes, it was Huston’s first picture, but, as I said, memorabilia was not in vogue at the time, and the young John Huston was not a sentimental man. The boy expressed an interest in the bird, and

Huston gave it to him. It was simple as that.” He paused to savor the cigar, going on only when satisfied I didn’t have another question.

“Akiro’s family was interned after Pearl Harbor and the bird was lost to them when one of the officials tasked with locking them up noticed it among the boy’s possessions. The man had seen the film several times and thought the falcon would make a good conversation piece. He kept it on his mantel for several years until the novelty wore off and he gave it to an aspiring actress as part of a seduction.

“The girl used it to prove her alleged bona fides as an industry insider. I believe she was able to parlay it onto a few B picture roles. She moved in with a producer who said he’d make her a star. She left the statue behind when their relationship broke off over a younger, prettier girl.”

I watched his lips while he spoke, hoping to look like I was hanging on every word. No matter his story had as much truth as the one in the movie. I had fun watching him spin it.

“The producer combined the uses of the bird’s previous owners. He would show it to new girls in town to prove how well-connected he was. They would leverage their bodies for his dubious support, he would grow tired of each of them in turn, and then bring it out of the closet to entice his next paramour.”

Arbuthnot couldn’t keep himself from making it a speech even though we were no more than four feet apart. His voice filled the room without overt projection, much the way a television announcer speaks louder than necessary with a microphone a foot from his mouth.

“The producer died in 1957 and the statue was sold as part of the estate to a woman with more money than taste who thought it looked *kitschy*.” He said the word as though it passed through his mouth wrapped in mucous. “The stupid cow kept it like a knick-knack with an eclectic assortment of junk until word of it came to an executive at Warner Brothers. He’d worked on the original picture as a gofer, and his star had risen consistently from that point forward. The bird had a certain nostalgic appeal to him, and he bought it from her. This would have been around 1962 or ’63.”

His tale wound through the executive to a rock musician, a drug dealer, and finally a memorabilia *aficionado* who actually understood the true value of the falcon. “Neville Taylor-Smythe finally accorded the falcon its

due. It was from him I learned of its existence when I was performing in San Francisco.”

“How did you wind up with it?” I asked.

“Neville had a passion for anything to do with the theater, and I have become somewhat of a theatrical artifact myself, if I may be permitted to say so. We became fast friends. Neville died without heirs, and was gracious enough to give the statue to me when he became aware his health was failing, to save problems with the probate court.”

How very thoughtful and convenient of old Neville. No one Arbuthnot mentioned could claim anything like clear title to the statue, let alone vouch for its authenticity. The bird staring through us had as much chance of being the one true falcon as I had of being descended from the Romanov family.

Arbuthnot’s belief in its provenance radiated from him like heat waves off an asphalt parking lot. He had no doubt about the authenticity of his statue, and I didn’t care. Real or not, he was paying me to protect him, and probably it, too. People with too much money have all kinds of ideas.

The story had taken over twenty minutes in its telling, Arbuthnot stopping a time or three to come up for air, sip his drink, or draw on the cigar. Finished, he sat back and pulled an oversized handkerchief from his pocket to wipe the sheen of sweat from his face and forehead. He took a healthy swig of his brandy before speaking again.

“Well, sir, isn’t that quite the story? All of it true. I dare say that no one could make up such a tale as the truth of the Maltese falcon.”

“I dare say.” I raised my glass to him and drank a miniscule toast. Company policy forbids a pre-noon buzz. I could nurse this snifter of brandy for three weeks at the rate I was going. “Now, at the risk of sounding mercenary, why am I here?”

“Why, sir? To protect me, and the falcon. You know of the threats. That’s why you’re here.”

“Let’s talk about the threats. When did they start?”

“About two weeks ago, I should say.” His tone diminished in resonance and the rhythm of his speech lost its flourish. “One day in the post I received a note telling me that my time was at hand.”

“Do you have the note?”

“No. I threw it away immediately.”

“Why?”

“Disgusting, macabre thing it was.” His shudder shook the chair. “I wanted it away from me as quickly as possible.”

“Didn’t it occur to you there might be some use for it?”

“Use? Of what use could it be?”

I tried to keep the sarcasm out of my voice and succeeded pretty well, by my standards. “To the police, maybe. What you had there is called a clue. The police are pretty good at putting them together and finding things out. Such as who was threatening you, for instance.”

If the sarcasm leaked through to Arbuthnot, it didn’t show. “It never occurred to me to go to the police at the time. I assumed I was dealing with a crank. I threw away the note and didn’t think of it again.”

“Until the next one came.”

“Yes, quite. Until the next one.” His tone lost exuberance with each exchange, and the accent was slipping. “That was about five days later. It was in the form of a greeting card. Sheila says it was probably made on a computer. The one after that was four days later, then three, then two...”

“And now they’re coming every day. How many days in a row?”

“Two. Today will be the third.”

“Assuming one comes today.”

“Yes, but I am sure one will arrive in the afternoon’s post.”

“Why so sure?”

“It’s the pattern, isn’t it? Steadily decreasing until they come daily. Now they will come every day.”

“Or maybe they’re done threatening. The next number in your steadily decreasing pattern is zero.”

Arbuthnot leaned forward in his chair as much as his bulk would allow. “So you think they’ve stopped?”

“Why should they? You haven’t done anything about them. May I see one of the recent ones?”

A voice that seemed too small to be his said, “I haven’t any, I’m afraid. I’ve been destroying them as soon as I got them.” He sounded like he was telling me the dog ate them.

“You threw them *all* away? Even when they started coming closer together? Even after you decided to hire personal protection? What were you thinking?”

That got some color back into his cheeks and voice. “Look here, sir, let’s not forget who is employed by whom. You are being paid very well, very well indeed, and I’ll not be spoken to in that manner by an – an – ”

“An employee?”

He leaned back so quickly I thought the chair might go over. “No, please, you misunderstand me. I meant no insult. I –”

“No insult taken. You’re absolutely right: an employee is what I am. Let’s get one thing straight early on. I may be an employee, but I’m not like the maid or your dresser. You’re paying me good money because you’re afraid. Assuming what you’re telling me is true, you should be afraid.” He started to interrupt but I kept talking and he gave it up. “You didn’t keep any proof, so I have to assume things. You’re paying me to protect you from physical violence, which means my ass is on the line, too. Your money buys that, but the risks I may have to take buy me some insubordination. Are you all right with that?”

The look on his face told me he wasn’t, but he knew to keep it to himself. “Okay,” I said. “What I’m getting at is, maybe he’s tired of threatening you. Maybe it’s time to either leave you alone or get to work. We have to assume it’s the latter.”

“Why?” The struggle to recover his bearings had begun, but had a ways to go. His eyes darted about as if small birds were loose in the room.

I shook my head. “Because if we do that and we’re wrong, you’re just out ten grand. If we assume he’s finished and we’re wrong, you save the money but aren’t around to spend it.”

“Very well, sir. What do you—I should say what do *we*—propose to do about it?” Any insecurity had disappeared, a passing shower in the sunshine of his persona. I couldn’t tell how much of it was an act. He did this for a living. Underestimating his ability would be as dumb as his misunderstanding my ability to protect him, even from his own stupidity.

“First, who would have motive to do you harm, possibly even kill you?”

“I am an actor, sir. I am not a criminal, nor am I a politician or businessman who might inspire jealousy or revenge over a promise reneged. I am beloved of my audience.”

“And how about the significant others of your conquests? Are you beloved of them, too?” Sheila walked into the room just as I said it. I swore I heard her jaw hit the floor.

“My conquests?” He didn’t quite manage to look indignant before producing a smug smile. “I see my Sheila briefed you in more detail than I expected.” He flashed her a look I couldn’t read and she blushed all the way to her artfully displayed *décolletage*. “Yes, I will admit to having well-developed tastes in the fairer sex, and I have not been reluctant to avail myself of the ample opportunities good fortune has placed before me.”

We’d be there all day if he started riffing on his sexual prowess. “So maybe you stuck it somewhere you shouldn’t and some hubby got the red ass.”

His smile was as self-satisfied as I had ever seen. “My good man, I have been responsible for many cases of the red ass, as you so plainly put it, but, I assure you, it has never been the husband I have so afflicted.” Sheila made a quick exit without being too careful about how hard she closed the door.

I did a quick calculation and decided my bank balance could tolerate him for two weeks, pig or not. “Any husbands, boyfriends, fathers, ever make threats before? Even if they haven’t, can you think of any who might?”

He started to answer, then checked his watch so dramatically someone in the back row of Soldier Field could see what he was doing. “Oh, I say, I must get dressed, it’s nearly time for my daily constitutional. We can continue this conversation in the car.” He paused while he rose, the exertion too much for him to talk and get to his feet at the same time. “Sheila! Will you please tell Jorge to get the car ready? I’ll need him in twenty minutes. That’s a good girl.”

He was gone without another word, his tiny legs scuttling him across the room quicker than I would have thought possible. Sheila didn’t come back. I stretched out in my chair and toasted the falcon, staring with eternal vigilance into the almost empty room. “You have to work with him every day, huh? Well, then, I guess I can stand him for two weeks.”

I finished my drink. It was three minutes till noon.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Cold Comfort



Jorge was a Mexican with more oil in his hair than Alaska. The gold in his left front tooth caught the sun whenever he smiled, which was often. His eyes betrayed him. Raymond Chandler once wrote there was nothing sadder than the eyes of a sad Mexican. He must have known Jorge's grandfather.

He waited at the curb when Arbuthnot and I exited the building, the rear door of the Lincoln Town Car already open. Arbuthnot squeezed in back; I sat beside Jorge. Arbuthnot didn't like it; I would be harder to regale in the front seat. I got over it. I was there for protection, not to bond with him.

We drove to a small gated community across the street from the Halsted-Clybourne-North Avenue triangle. An enclave within the block with its own little street pattern weaving between about twenty brick buildings. Each building had a small driveway and built-in garage. Steps led up past the garages to the front doors. The buildings were neat, but too new to be elegant.

I got out and held open the rear door. The car groaned with what sounded like relief as Arbuthnot removed himself. He leaned in, said a few words to Jorge, closed his door. Jorge reached over, closed mine, and drove away.

"He'll be back in ninety minutes," Arbuthnot said. "His mother lives in Wicker Park, and he uses this time to pay her occasional visits. He appreciates that I give him not only an opportunity to see her, but an excuse to cut short his stay."

"What are we doing while Jorge visits Mom?"

Arbuthnot paused on the step he was ascending before answering. I would be surprised if he could talk and climb stairs at the same time.

"Mr. Forte, I am sure you have determined that I am a man of keen appetites. Among my appetites is an appreciation of the finer aspects of the fairer sex. I find that my performances suffer if I do not indulge this need regularly. My acting, as well." I think he chuckled. I didn't hear a thing, but his chins bounced. "The lovely Amber takes quite good care of me in this regard. She has certain, shall we say, talents, that maintain my virility at a healthy peak. You may indulge yourself when I am finished, if you like. My treat."

Russell Arbuthnot's sloppy seconds were right behind rectal surgery on my bucket list. "Thanks. I'll wait out here."

He had started up, now paused again, using the conversation as an excuse to take a breather. “Are you sure? Jorge won’t be back for some time, and it’s devilishly cold out here. You would be far more comfortable in Amber’s living room.”

“Unless you think Amber’s going to take a run at you, I’m better off out here. I’m more likely to see anyone who might be laying for you.” That was true, in its way. A better reason was my lack of stomach for hearing any trace of what went on in Amber’s office. I couldn’t bear it if he was a screamer.

He looked at me, a question clearly unasked on his lips. Then he shrugged and made his way to the summit to plant his flag in Mount Amber.

I didn’t see anyone inside as the door opened and closed. It took me all of two minutes to appreciate my situation. The wind blew straight out of the north, which was, of course, the direction in which Amber’s building faced. It didn’t waste time making me cold, numbing my forehead as quickly as if a blind dentist stuck me there with a shot of Novocain.

After ten minutes I realized I should have checked out the interior at least long enough to pee. I shifted my weight from foot to foot to hold it as best I could, but I’d never make an hour and a half in this cold. Knocking on Amber’s door never entered my mind.

I walked around her building and found hedges butting up against the fence that separated the property from Clybourne Street. No one could see me from the street, and if someone happened to look out from any of the nearby homes all they’d see was a man leaning into a shrub. There wouldn’t be much question about what the man was doing, but I wouldn’t be putting on a show.

I could see through the hedges onto Clybourne enough to notice a Thunderbird standing at the curb with the motor running no more than twenty feet away. This one looked cherry, though Ford had stopped making them ten years ago. The man behind the wheel didn’t do anything to draw attention to himself, but I couldn’t think of a reason for him to be there. Amber’s block was fenced in. Across the street was Cubs Care Park, and not even Cubs fans were goofy enough to be over there today.

I finished my business and zipped up before backing away so I wouldn’t disturb the hedges. I couldn’t get a look at the license plate without being seen and I didn’t want to show myself to the man in the T-Bird. Paranoia is

a side effect of being a detective. I'd been one long enough to know that being paranoid doesn't mean I'm wrong.

I walked back around the far side of Amber's place and found a spot that kept me somewhat out of the wind and still afforded a view of her driveway and front stairs. I couldn't see the car from there, but I didn't see it leave, either. Jorge came back an hour later with a smile on his face and a cup of Seven-Eleven coffee.

"You didn't look like a man who would wait inside while the boss did his business," he said, handing me the coffee. "I'll stay and we can wait together in the car tomorrow if you like."

"Tomorrow?" I cradled the cup in my hands to warm them before I dared to drink any. I hated coffee, but Jorge was on my Christmas card list for bringing me this one.

"*Si*. The boss, he comes here just about every day. I don't think Amber works on Sundays, so sometimes he has delivery." He smiled again. "Like he says, he is a man of great appetites."

Jorge was impossible not to like. "I see that. Thank you, Jorge. You are a true humanitarian." I sipped some of the coffee. It tasted like recycled motor oil, as expected. "How long have you worked for Arbuthnot?" I said, more to make conversation than anything else.

"Long time now, off and on. I work regular for a limousine service. They rent me out to Mr. A when he's in town."

"Do you like working for him?"

"It's okay, I guess. The hours are strange, but I don't have to wait around for him much. When I take him someplace he's usually there a long time, so I can do what I want, he don't care. Like when I take him to the theater. I know after I drop him off, I don't have to be back until eleven. It keeps my evenings pretty free, but I'm still on the clock." His speech had no accent, but the inflections and cadence of Spanish were evident.

"Ever see anyone give him a hard time when you take him somewhere?"

"No, but I don't go in where he goes. I hold the door and he gets out. I stay or go, then I hold the door so he can get back in. I don't see what he does after he gets out." He nodded toward Amber's door and smiled. "I don't think I want to."

I couldn't argue with that. "How about between the car and the street? Ever see or hear of anyone hassling him?"

Jorge's smile faded for a few seconds while he thought about it. "No, I don't think so. See, the boss, he don't go places where people aren't gonna like him. He tries to keep everything all friendly, no bad vibes, you know what I mean?"

I knew. Arbuthnot would go where he was in the spotlight and everyone he dealt with would be his audience. I'd known him for three hours, plenty of time to figure that out.

Jorge and I spent another fifteen minutes wondering when spring training started and if the White Sox would ever be good two years in a row. I got enough cream and sugar in the coffee to make it palatable while Jorge ran the heater. I had feeling in my feet by the time Amber's front door opened, caught a glimpse of blond hair over Arbuthnot's shoulder before the door closed.

Arbuthnot lumbered down the stairs with the aplomb of an arthritic walrus. I told Jorge to stay where he was and opened the door for myself. His face lit up when he saw me.

"Ah! Mr. Forte, I hope it wasn't too cold out here for you. You must let Amber warm you up sometime. I guarantee you won't be disappointed."

"Thanks, but I think the cold parts are somewhat outside of Amber's expertise."

"She could surprise you there – oh, yes, I see what you mean. Yes, I do see what you mean." He cradled his chin in his hand in a thinking pose.

"She might still surprise you, sir. Amber has many talents. Even I have yet to explore them all."

I closed the door before he could go any further. Lunch approached and no one's stomach is that strong.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Real World

An hour and a half with Amber sated only one of Arbuthnot's appetites. Jorge took us straight to Cyrano's on Wells for what I supposed was lunch. We got there around two-thirty, after the midday rush and too early for the dinner crowd, so the staff had nothing better to do than faun over Arbuthnot.

The attention seemed to be as vital to his sustenance as the meal, not that he scrimped on what he ate. He blew through seven courses as quickly as anyone who would refer to himself without irony as a gentleman could manage, maintaining a conversation with his adoring public all the time. My lunch was French onion soup and a small salad. I prefer food over cuisine.

After Cyrano's it was time for Arbuthnot's nap. Jorge dropped us off at 4:30 with assurances he would be back at 6:30 sharp to take us to the Goodman for the technical rehearsal. I escorted Arbuthnot as far as his door, my services not being required for him to sleep. I drove to the office to take care of some loose ends, since Arbuthnot would have a virtual monopoly on my time for the next two weeks.

I'd been parking my car at Tony's garage on South Dearborn since I took the office in the Rowe Building. We knew everything there was to know about each other, except for Tony's last name. Male bonding doesn't require that level of intimacy.

Tony had the blandest physical appearance imaginable. Average height and weight, brown eyes, hair of moderate length. He'd been divorced four times and every time the soon-to-be-ex-Mrs. Tony had to ask her lawyer which one was him.

The windows of the shack Tony and his assistant Joey used as an office were frozen over. They'd been working out of what I referred to as The Outhouse ever since his original garage was damaged by a car bomb meant for me. Tony came out ahead on the insurance settlement and the new place would be ready by early May. That knowledge and the little space heater he had in The Outhouse were cold comfort to him now.

"You got some nerve, getting us out here in cold like this." Tony didn't believe in sentiment or customer service.

"You only think you're cold. I spent an hour and a half standing outside waiting for my new client to finish with a hooker."

"Hi, Nick." Joey had come up from the back of the lot, attaching the key in his hand to a numbered tag. His IQ held somewhere between room and body temperature, but once he learned something he never forgot it. He had the sweet disposition of someone not fully aware of the world around him, and everyone was grateful. Once he caught a guy trying to boost a car from the garage and chased him to all the way Dearborn Station Mall. Joey put

the thief out with one punch and carried him back to the garage over his shoulder. The crook weighed well over two hundred pounds. “What’s a hooker?”

The question was a toss-up: he wasn’t looking at either of us. I lateraled to Tony. “You tell him, you’re his father. In the practical sense, of course.”

He gave me a dirty look without turning his head. He knew Joey wouldn’t let go until he had an answer.

“Okay, kid, a hooker is, like, you know, a whore. A prostitute.” No light bulb appeared over Joey’s head. “You know, someone you go to bed with.”

Joey’s look of concentration was of Rubik’s Cube intensity. “You mean a girlfriend? Like a wife?”

I couldn’t resist. “Not like a wife, no matter what Tony says about any of his. There’s a different name for that.”

“Kiss my ass.”

This wasn’t helping Joey. “So more like a girlfriend?” he asked me.

Tony stepped back. “Okay, genius, he’s all yours.”

Wonderful. I didn’t know what kind of sexual experience Joey had, and I was in no mood to teach him about the birds and the bees. “Sort of, I mean she’ll do things with you a girlfriend might do.”

“But not a wife,” Tony said under his breath.

“You mean like go to the movies?” Joey asked.

“I guess she would, but that’s what you pay her for. You go to see a hooker to do the things you might do with a girlfriend after the movie, but without the movie.”

“Sex, Joey, sex,” Tony cut in. He turned in my direction. “Jesus Christ, you’re the biggest prude I ever saw.”

“Really?” Joey said. “She had sex with you for money?”

“No, not with me,” I said. “But that’s how she makes money, men pay her to have sex with them,”

The fascination of this new concept took over his face. “You mean she’ll do whatever you want?”

“Depends on the girl and how much money you have.”

“What if I had twenty bucks?”

“The one today wouldn’t say hello for twenty dollars. She might let you ride in the same elevator for fifty.”

Now he was really confused. I didn't have the heart to tell him Amber probably made more in an hour than he made in a week.

Joey was quiet while Tony and I made our usual disparaging comments about each other and our respective ex-wives. I was on Dearborn Street walking toward my office when Joey finally got up the nerve to ask me the question he must have been holding onto all along.

"Hey, Nick, did you ever?"

"Did I ever what?"

"You know, pay for sex."

Miracle of miracles, Tony bailed me out. "You always pay for sex, kid," he said. "It's just not supposed to be a cash transaction."

Sharon had the key in her hand to lock up when I got there. She held the door and stepped aside while I walked into the office.

"Well, look who's here," she said. "Just when I thought you'd developed an interest in older women." The dimple in her left cheek reached out and gave me a smile of its own, like the regular smile wouldn't stop a truck.

"Behave. I'll admit, if I wanted to better appreciate the charms of older women, she'd be as good a place as any to start. Until then, see if you can pull your mind out of the gutter long enough to write up a contract and put this check someplace safe until you can take it to the bank."

Her green eyes scanned the check and my contract notes. "Five thousand dollars for two weeks? Nice work, boss."

"Read closer. The five grand is per week. It's a two week gig."

"Now I'm impressed, and you know it takes a lot to impress me."

"No one knows better. Not only can I actually pay you this week, but I can score a couple of comps to his show so you can impress that new boyfriend with what a big shot you work for."

She sealed the check in an envelope and locked it in her desk before answering. "Maybe I'll impress one of the boys. Barry and I broke up last night."

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't have made a joke of it if I knew you broke up with him. What happened?"

"He's a jerk." For a few seconds I thought that might say it all. "He's very possessive. I was something to show off on his arm, like a watch."

"You at least have to give him credit for good taste." Sharon could wear a burlap potato sack and draw a crowd in a monastery.

“Everything had to be what he wanted. Where he wanted to go, what he wanted to do, what he wanted me to wear. It got old in a hurry.”

“I guess it would. I know you better than to think you’d stand for that.”

“Then he got all pissy when I told him, but even that was just about him. It was like, ‘You can’t leave me. I can leave you, but you can’t leave me’. Does that make sense?”

“Sure, based on the description you just gave. He give you any trouble?”

“Not really. I thought he might, but then I reminded him of what a tough guy I worked for and all I had to do was snap my fingers and you’d take care of it.” She gave me The Smile again.

I laughed. “Did you really tell him that? Not that isn’t true, but is that what you said?”

“Not in so many words. It was a pretty good fight, and he actually said something like he wasn’t going to just walk away. Then I said something about not being as defenseless as he thought.” She had her own P.I. license and a permit to carry the .32 she often carried in her purse. She was less defenseless than a lot of people thought.

“You sure you’re all right with this?”

She nodded. “He likes to play the big man, but he’s just a grown-up bully. By the way, how would you know about treating someone like a possession? You’re not like that.”

“I’m an expert. I was married to someone like that.”

She slapped my upper arm. “Be nice. She hasn’t moved Caroline away yet. You don’t want to jinx it. What’s the word on that?”

“They’re still here. Diane’s playing it close to the vest, but I got a hint or two from Caroline that maybe they won’t move after all. I hope to hell it’s true, if she’s letting bits out to Caroline. It would be shitty to get the kid’s hopes up, then move after all.”

Sharon pursed her lips and shook her head. “Diane’s a good mother. You two have your differences, but you know Caroline comes first with her. I’m getting a good feeling about this.” She looked at her watch. “Damn, I have to go. The boys are home tonight and I want to spend some time with them.”

“Then get going.” I made shooing motions with the backs of my hands. “And I’ll get three tickets, but not for a school night. Then you can show the men who matter most to you what a big shot you work for.”



She turned and gave me a wink as she went out the door. Her skirt disappeared around the corner and left me alone with a thousand dollars in her desk and the idea of her perfume. Funny how she found the only scent in the world I didn't seem to be allergic to.

There was an impressive stack of paperwork on my desk. Finding an excuse not to do it would take considerable effort. I thought it might be too much to ask when Goose walked in and saved me.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Goose

Timothy Alston Satterwhite's description could never do him justice. Fine with him. Justice was not his friend.

Five-foot-ten-ish, muscular in a wiry way. Shaved head with a precise, short, goatee. Favored leather jackets of suitable warmth for the season. Describe how he looked and he'd pass for Don Cheadle playing a cool college professor, the one who taught Creative Writing and dabbled in black activism. See him in person and menace wafted off him like heat from a radiator.

He and Sharon had an arrangement. He'd enter her office, raise an eyebrow. If I was available, she'd nod and he'd walk in. If I was out—or couldn't be interrupted—she'd shake her head and he'd leave. He wouldn't come in absent that tacit invitation, even if he saw me sitting alone. He never waited in her office. Not a word would be exchanged.

Sharon didn't mind. She didn't know what to make of Tim—Goose to most. I could call him either, thanks to a courtesy I'd paid his sister years ago, before I'd ever heard of Goose Satterwhite. Sharon qualified because she was a woman. Her attractiveness had nothing to do with it. Goose treated women better than most feminists.

He slipped in with a loose-jointed agility he probably woke up with. Sat in the visitor's chair only he ever got comfortable in. His leather duster hung open and brushed the floor as he took a disinterested inventory of the premises.

“Windows been washed since last time.” Reedy voice for someone who used to earn a living hurting people. He made most of his money on reputation now.

“In September,” I said. “Been a while.”

“You know I only comes by when my spidey sense tell me you might need help.” No argument from me. “I’m wondering if you might need any with this new bodyguarding thing you got.”

“How do you know about that already?”

Goose smiled, one dead canine in a wall of white. “You ever know me not to know something going on with you before I show up? Ain’t like you ever tell me shit.”

“No. Really,” I said. “To be here by now, you had to know about this job before I even had a chance to tell Sharon. I’m not mad, just curious.”

“What make a good cop, Forte?” Pronounced it “Foe-tay.”

“Smarts. A willingness to work. Good listener. Ability to put up with bullshit.”

“Sources, man. You told me yourself, a cop’s only as good as his snitches.”

“You have snitches?”

He shook his head, putting on offended. “A snitch want something. People beg to tell me shit.”

“Who was it? The driver or the doorman?”

Another head shake, more disappointed than offended. “You know I ain’t say. Weren’t neither of them, anyway.” Putting on The Street today. In the mood, Goose was as articulate as Nelson Mandela. He could play either extreme, or any point in between, according to his situation or whim. “I know people who know people who know at least one of them, though. Word do get out.”

“What do these people who know people who know...what do you know about the job?” It wouldn’t surprise me if Goose had more reliable information on Arbuthnot than I did.

“What I know is you gets to hang with actor types more all the time lately since you saved that candelabra dude. You moving up in the world, meeting a higher class of undesirable. Be a good idea for me to make my availability known and shit. You know, case someone has to step in front of

Scarlett Johansen, or something like. Or maybe the bidness you too good for now fall off the table where I can pick it up.”

“Business slow?”

“Nigger, please. This Chicago. Bidness never slow in my line of work. I need some variety, is all. The word out about me on my side of town. I show up, people give me money they don’t even owe. ‘Here you go, Mr. Satterwhite. My, that a fine coat you wearing. Can I get you a beverage?’ Last time I had to exert myself when some dude used my name in vain. Told people I’d be around when we didn’t have no such arrangement. Then he didn’t think he needed to cut me in, using my name to get paid in the first place.” Goose shook his head. “I talked him out of it. I don’t think he’ll do it again. Be a while fore anyone else try, either.” Goose never hurt anyone worse than he had to; our definitions of “had to” sometimes differed.

“I’ll level with you,” I said. “Right now it looks like all I have to do is to hang with him when he’s out and about. It gets to be anything else, or if they want more of a presence, I’ll let you know. You mind being photographed?”

“As a general rule. Never a good idea to provoke anyone’s memory in my line of work.”

“There’s a risk of that. The guy’s an actor. He needs publicity the way you and I need air.”

“I couldn’t lay back?”

“Sure. I wanted you to know there’s a risk, is all.”

“I’ll burn that bridge when I gets to it.” He stood, buttoned his coat. “Maybe you get lucky, strike up an acquaintance with some starlet with a thing for dangerous men.”

“It’s a one man show.”

Goose ducked his head and snickered. “You got the same luck of that L’il Abner motherfucker, with the cloud over his head.” Goose read at least two books a week. With his knowledge of American culture he’d have Alex Trebek working as his houseboy if he ever got on *Jeopardy*.

“At least they’re paying me well.”

“There’s more to life than money, yo.” He walked to the door, stopped at the threshold. “I’ll be around if you need me.”

“How will I get a hold of you?” I’d never called Goose in my life, had no contact information for hm.

Another of his smiles. “When did you ever need to call for me to know when you needs me?” Walked out chuckling to himself. Something about me broke Goose up.

I collected messages, returned a few calls, and made a heroic effort to ignore the pile of reports Sharon had re-centered on my desk, as well as three messages from a local TV news producer who wanted to do a feature on the man who saved Frankie Calabria. I called Diane before I left to ask if I could fudge Caroline’s visitation schedule for a couple of weeks. She fussed, I could tell her heart wasn’t in it. Maybe Sharon was right about the move.

I made it back to Arbuthnot’s with ten minutes to spare. Jorge was waiting.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Practice Makes Perfect

Jorge volunteered to stay with the car while I went upstairs. I found Arbuthnot waiting next to a blue Anvil case strapped to a luggage carrier. He toddled out the door before I had it completely open.

“Would you be so kind as to bring the falcon?” he said without waiting to see if I would be so kind or not.

It took more than a gentle tug to get the carrier rolling. I let it rest in an upright position in the elevator. “What’s the dingus made of?” I asked, showing polite interest more than trying to learn anything.

“It is ceramic primarily, with a certain amount of lead to give it heft. The film was depicting something that would have been made largely of gold. The prop needed a certain *gravitas* to fill the role.”

“It’s definitely got *gravitas*. I’d hate to have to carry it far without the cart.”

Arbuthnot didn’t answer. He was distant, much less effusive than before. I didn’t know if something had happened or if he was getting into character.

I didn't push it. I'd had a week's worth of Russell Arbuthnot already.

Jorge had the door open, the trunk lid already up. I deposited the falcon and made sure the trunk latch locked. The bird, the case, and the carrier together were even heavier than I expected from pulling them. Jorge smiled at me, his gold tooth catching the street light. I gave him a lopsided smirk.

"Now I know why you were willing to wait in the cold," I said.

"I'm just a simple driver, but I ain't as stupid as I look."

No one spoke during the short drive to the Goodman. I almost struck up a conversation with Jorge, but the quiet of the big car was like a fourth passenger to whom we all deferred. We got out of the car with the zest of pallbearers at an elephant's funeral.

I had Arbuthnot's door all the way open before he made any move to leave, let alone acknowledge me. The beatific expression on his face never wavered, even when he had to double clutch to boost himself out of the car. He went by me wordlessly and walked through the stage door without so much as a nod in either direction. I stayed on his heels with my head on a swivel and heard the car's trunk close behind me. I'm sure I only imagined hearing Jorge grunt as he lugged the falcon to the curb.

The hallways to Arbuthnot's dressing room contained the usual theater types. Good evening, Mr. Arbuthnot, break a leg, it's an honor to work with you. Arbuthnot paid them no more mind than an aircraft carrier notices the water.

He closed the dressing room door in my face. I hesitated, my hand on the knob. It was bad practice to let him go into an unknown room without at least looking inside for bogeymen, but I had no desire to see a response to any disturbance to his Nirvana-like state. A layman might think I was standing in the hall with my thumb up my ass, but I was listening for telltale sounds my keen private ear might make something of. Gunshots. Screams. Otherwise innocuous noises mean a lot to someone with my training and experience.

Jorge wheeled the falcon and its case up the hall. "Nice work," he said, standing the carrier upright. "You were in here with him before I even had a chance to open the trunk."

"He who hesitates is lost," I said.

"This time. Twenty dollars says you carry it more than I do before he leaves town."

“You’re on.” I nodded towards Arbuthnot’s dressing room. “What’s up with the trance? Is he getting into character?”

“Something like that. He says he is, but he doesn’t do it every time. I think you’re getting the full treatment. Sometimes for a matinee we come here straight from his *puta* and he walks in and does the show.”

“So everything he does is a performance.”

“Pretty much. I think being him is a hard job. Not even he can do it every day.”

“How do you put up with him?”

“It’s okay. I drive for all kinds of people. It could be worse.”

I was about to ask how when a stagehand came by and knocked on the dressing room door. “Five minutes, Mr. Arbuthnot.” A sound I took to be acknowledgement came from the other side.

Jorge and I shot the breeze about the virtues of working for people with too much money until the stagehand came back. This time he opened the door as soon as he knocked and said to the room in general, “It’s time, Mr. Arbuthnot.”

Sounds unique to Arbuthnot’s efforts to rise grated into the hall. He came to the door fully made up, looked at me without acknowledgement, then turned to the stagehand. “You will bring the falcon.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Arbuthnot, right behind you, and I’ll have it on the table, right on its mark.” Arbuthnot accepted that as his due and headed down the corridor as fast as his spindly legs could move him. I followed at a discrete distance, close enough to be available if someone tried to drop a stage weight on him.

Everyone gave Arbuthnot a wide berth while he readied himself in the wings. The hand got help placing the bird on a table near the center of the stage, then wheeled the empty case out of sight. Lights came on somewhere above and put the falcon in the midst of a shaft of light so well-defined it was difficult to determine whether the light shone down on the statue or up from it.

The curtain rose to the virtually empty hall, the falcon alone in its cone of light on a dark stage. A brief audiotape of Bogart and Greenstreet speaking from the movie played, then silence. Arbuthnot entered from stage left with none of the choppiness his walk usually conveyed. I knew right

away it wasn't him anymore. He had transformed himself into the heir of Casper Gutman.

I enjoyed the show, even though I missed some of the special effects from my spot in the wings. The rehearsal stopped several times while technical details were sorted out. Arbuthnot bore the interruptions with his idea of tolerance. His comments were polite and patient, allowing his tone and diction to do the heavy lifting of conveying the superhuman effort required for a man of his station to endure such fools.

He stayed long enough afterward to ensure the director flayed everyone for not meeting the star's standards, then summoned me with a turn of his head. A stagehand had already loaded the falcon into its carrier and I caddied it, staying two steps behind Arbuthnot in the narrow hallway. I wanted to be sure to hit the street before he did and he made it easy for me, stopping short of the door to allow me to open it for him. It was an automatic door.

No one spoke on the way back to his home, his aura of his self-satisfaction squeezing all the air out of the car. I winked at Jorge as I lifted the falcon out of the trunk and let him hold the door for Arbuthnot. I had to go upstairs; Jorge didn't. I might as well take it out of the trunk if I was going to have to drag it with me.

Arbuthnot opened the door and turned on the lights before standing aside and directing me in the proper placement of the falcon in its *faux* aviary. He walked me to the door without a sound, then extended three sausage-like fingers.

"Thank you for your services today, Mr. Forte. I shall be ready for you at ten o'clock in the morning." We did what passed for shaking hands and I stepped into the hall. The door didn't hit my ass on my way out, but I felt the breeze.

Russell Arbuthnot had received his required daily adoration. Tomorrow he'd be sucking it out of me like marrow from a bone.

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Ink-stained Wretch

I went to the office early to clean up the paperwork I'd managed to avoid twice the previous day. Voice mail had one message.

"I always knew you were a publicity-grubbing whore deep down. Check out Abby Dershowitz's column in today's paper."

The voice belonged to Phil Chandler, principal crime writer of the *Sun-Times*, where Abby Dershowitz wrote the "dish" column. I had appeared in Phil's column more times than I could remember, sometimes even under my own name. Dershowitz's column would be new for me. I wasn't looking forward to it.

"Russell Arbuthnot, whose one-man show, *The Black Bird*, opens tomorrow night at the Goodman Theater, has hired local private investigator Nick Forte to provide security during the show's two week run. Forte, no shirker of the media limelight himself, shot a man dead on Dearborn Street a year ago and 'saved' actor Frankie Calabra from a lack of publicity last month. Our sources tell us Forte is being paid fifteen thousand dollars for the two weeks, which comes out to about ten dollars per pound per week to keep the turnstiles moving."

Wonderful. Now shooting a man before he could shoot me and playing Good Samaritan to keep Calabra from becoming a spiral-sliced ham equated to hogging the spotlight. It also gave me a bad feeling that she got everything right except the fee. Phil answered my call on the first ring.

"I knew it would be you. No one else I talk to is ever up this early."

"What are you doing up? I thought you and the old lady were working things out."

"We are. That's why I'm not home. The less we see of each other, the better we both like it."

There was a perverse logic at work there. "What's the deal with the Dershowitz column? She didn't get it from me."

Phil's laugh turned into a cough, then a choke, and concluded with what sounded like mild retching. "She? Some detective you are. Abner Dershowitz has been writing that column for fifteen years."

"Abner? What about the picture in the paper?"

"Meet me at the Billy Goat in half an hour." He hung up. Phil had learned more than how to write about crime in his twenty-plus years at the *Sun-Times*. Getting information without buying him something was like



getting a free court appearance from a lawyer. At least Phil was a cheap date.

Phil already had a spot in line when I got there. Hair prematurely gray, prematurely thinning, he was the oldest forty-year old man I'd ever seen. He stood with his head slightly bowed, looking as if he had just heaved, or was about to. I bought him enough cholesterol to constrict a horse and got a cup of tea for myself.

"Okay, spill," I said. "If Dershowitz is a guy, whose picture is that over his column?"

"Some broad who works at the paper. Abby Dershowitz is a little guy in his sixties who wears a vest every day and would wear a hat with a Press ticket in it if they'd let him."

"Why the charade?"

"It's a gossip column. Everyone knows women are the best gossips."

"That's sexist."

"File a complaint. I'm a crime reporter. I deal with the world as it is, not as it should be."

"Fine. Tell me how it is."

He ran a piece of toast through his over-easy egg. "Ticket sales are slow for Arbuthnot's show. His window may be closing, and there are big commitments around the country. No one can afford for the show to tank."

"That explains a lot. He wouldn't have the threatening notes to show me if he never got any. It also explains why he's willing to pay me so much for what should be a bullshit job."

"Absolutely. Fifteen grand is cheap for this kind of pub."

I blew on my tea. It was hot enough to soften the stirrer. "Cheaper than you think. He's really only paying me ten."

"No wonder you're pissed."

"Damn right. I might be willing to be a publicity-seeking whore for fifteen grand." I tried the tea. My tongue went numb. "Do me a favor and see if you can get Abner to lay off the 'shooting a man dead on Dearborn Street' stuff, okay? That shit gets back to Diane and I think I've just about got her talked out of moving Caroline out of the state."

"Sorry, buddy. I'll talk to him, but you shouldn't complain too much. Clipping Tommy Licati not only got your name out there, but got Arbuthnot even more bang for the buck." Phil sucked down the last of his coffee and

reached for a cigarette. He gestured and a busboy brought him a refill. Being Phil Chandler had its perks. “Having a notorious bodyguard is much more attention-getting than the garden variety. Saving that actor last month put you over the top.”

He was right. I’m an idiot. I’d actually believed Sheila O’Donoghue’s story about the virtues of an artistic temperament. Sucker.

Phil interrupted my reverie. “I know what you’re thinking. At least you’re a well-paid sucker. You almost got killed twice on that case last year and hardly got anything for it. This milk run evens it out.”

It did, in a way. I still wished I didn’t know about the publicity angle. Professional investigators don’t actually have to investigate anything to earn their money. I’ve worked cases, especially divorces, where just signing the contract was enough to get what my client wanted or needed. This was different, and it made Arbuthnot that much easier to dislike, not that he needed any help.

“I know. I wish he’d told me, that’s all. I could have played along, maybe farmed out some of it and taken a cut, if all he really needs is someone to sit beside him and look tough. Hell, he should have gone to Sonny Ng for that. No one looks tougher than him.” Sonny was a lieutenant on the Chicago Police Department and a friend to both of us.

Phil shook his head like a teacher with an exceptionally slow child. “Grasshopper, you have so much to learn. You can’t farm this out, and you *will* have your picture taken. Arbuthnot didn’t hire you so he could be photographed with someone else holding his hand. You’re his boy now. You might as well get used to it.”

He was right again, damn it. “This does present me with an interesting problem,” I said.

“Interesting how?”

“Normally my job would be to keep myself in a position where I could see anything that might be a threat without drawing much attention to myself. Having a certain amount of attention on me may be more in line with what he hired me to do.”

“There you go. I knew the whore in you would come out sooner or later.”

I held my cup of tea at my lips while I glared at him. “I didn’t say I was going to do it. Since he didn’t let me in on the secret, maybe I’ll have a little

fun and make sure I keep out of the line of any photo ops.”

“Can you do that and still do the job?”

“What’s the job? Protect him from a nonexistent stalker, or serve as cheap publicity? I can still do one without setting myself up to be a local joke.”

“You can’t bring yourself to take the money and just hang around for a couple of weeks, can you? No wonder you were a lousy musician. Too much work ethic.”

“Someone has to pay for your meals.” I checked my watch. Twenty minutes before starting another exciting day of celebrity stroking. “Time for me to get to work. Let’s see if maybe you can’t find some time in your busy day of busting my stones to actually write something for your real employer.”

Phil slurped down the rest of his coffee as he rose. “You want a free meal of your own?”

“I know it’s not from you. What’s on your mind?”

“Give Abby a call when you’re through with Arbuthnot. He’d love any morsels that fall off the table.”

“These are confidential cases I take, you know. I’m not at liberty to discuss what he does in his spare time.” If only Phil knew how Arbuthnot spent his days. “Besides, I’ve seen Arbuthnot eat. Nothing falls off the table.”

“Abby won’t want much, just something he can call inside stuff. You can give him a list of where Arbuthnot goes in a day. Nothing confidential there, but no one ever follows him around to put it together.”

“All right, I’ll give him a call after Arbuthnot blows town, *if*—he downplays the ‘trigger-happy PI’ angle.”

“I’ll talk to him, but he won’t like it.”

“We all do things we don’t like, Phil. It’s part of that ‘living in the world that is, not as we’d like it to be’ business.”

His expression told me he got my point. We shook hands at the door and I was off to live in my part of “the world that is” for another day.

CHAPTER TEN  
Another Day, Another Dollar

My hand stopped pre-knock at Arbuthnot's door when I heard voices from inside the apartment. An argument, Arbuthnot and a woman. I hadn't yet decided what kind of entrance to make when Sheila O'Donoghue almost ran me over on her way out.

"Mr. Forte!" she said when I took her arms and danced us sideways to minimize the impact. She was more solidly put together than I expected. She nodded toward the door. "How much did you hear?"

"Nothing distinguishable," I said, more or less the truth. "Sounded pretty heated, but I'm sure tensions are high, what with the show opening tomorrow night and these threats hanging over his head."

"Yes—uhh—that's right. Everyone is on edge." A different Sheila O'Donoghue than had come to my office. This woman was dressed to perfection, disheveled in every other way. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes had a look 180 degrees removed from the confident sensuality I'd seen the day before.

"Was there another threat?" I asked.

"Another what? No, no, nothing today. This was something else, a more personal matter. I'm sorry you had to hear any of it, really, it doesn't have to do with the threats at all." She looked at me as if waiting for something. A random streamer of hair hung across the right side of her face. "You can let me go now."

"Oh, right. Sorry." I released her and she brushed the wayward hairs into place with her fingers before my hands had time to drop to my sides. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"Me? Yes, I'm fine. Please, you must understand, when two people have worked as closely together for as long as Russell and I have, there are bound to be disagreements."

"No argument from me. You just seemed upset is all. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The faintest hint of flush remained on her cheeks, but her voice and bearing showed whatever emotions she'd carried out of Arbuthnot's

apartment were under control. She took a long second to let her eyes gather my attention.

“No, thank you. I’m fine. You were right, we’re both on edge. It’s just that—no, this isn’t the time for that. You have work to do, I should leave you to it.”

“If you were about to say that Russell can be an ass, I figured that out already.” I held up a hand to cut her off. “It doesn’t matter. I do this for a living, and I’ve worked for much bigger ones than him. Figuratively speaking, of course.”

She failed to stifle a smile. “I’ll leave you with your opinions, and with our employer. You’ll be at the theater for the dress rehearsal tonight?” I nodded. “Good. We can talk there. I should probably catch you up on a few things that may be of interest.”

“I’m always interested in things of interest.” Nick Forte, Master of Repartee. Sheila smiled anyway before turning and walking to the elevator. I caught myself watching her walk away with more than professional interest.

Russell Arbuthnot was making a show of reading something large when I came in. He looked up when I shut the door and laid the book on the stand next to his chair with exaggerated care. “Good morning, sir, and a lovely morning it is, I must say.”

“No new threats?”

“No, sir, none at all, and I slept like a newborn babe. It must be due to my lack of concern now that I have obtained professional help for my little trouble.” He had more than a little trouble getting himself out of the chair. I didn’t offer to help him, but I didn’t laugh at him, either. “Now, my good man, if you will excuse me, it’s high time I got dressed. Jorge will be here with the car at half past eleven. Please make yourself comfortable while I make myself ready.” He toddled into the other room.

The *Sun-Times* lay on the coffee table, open to Abby Dershowitz’s column; Arbuthnot’s idea of subtlety. It only took a minute for me to understand he saw no need for subtlety. Few people require a bodyguard to listen to them take a shower. Arbuthnot had me there early for the same reason he left the paper open.

Having already read the paper, I invested my time alone in a closer examination of Arbuthnot’s digs. The kitchen looked like Pages Ten through

Thirty-five of the Williams-Sonoma catalog: whisks, spatulas, knives, and at least one of everything Cuisinart made. No George Foreman grill. Some people have no class.

I had the idea a Russell Arbuthnot shower might take some time and maybe a whole cake of soap. I drifted into the bedroom and caught myself looking at the mirror in the ceiling with even less adoration than the day before, now that I knew about Amber.

The falcon rested in its alcove, case open on the floor beneath. I looked at it as I crossed slowly in front, then smiled when I realized I'd been looking into its eyes, like they were moving with me. I felt the smooth surface and ran my hand over Sidney Greenstreet's alleged nick.

The damn thing did have an aura. No reason it couldn't be the real deal, though Arbuthnot's story had no more truth than Hammett's original. None of us had been able to take our eyes off it yesterday. An energy—charisma maybe—radiated from the dull, smooth, surface. I remembered having a similar feeling in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, a sensation in the hairs on the back of my neck that told me this was something special, that history happened *here*, great things were done by great men. The statue was history.

I dismissed the idea before it got comfortable. This wasn't the Ark of the Covenant, it was a stage prop. A young Thomas Jefferson didn't write it, and it wasn't the walking stick of an aged Benjamin Franklin. A nameless craftsman made it to look like something that never existed so people who never were could manipulate each other for the amusement of an audience they would never see. It still had my complete attention.

I broke away when the water stopped in the bathroom. On my way to the living room I noticed a gift box on the end of the mantel. It was from Frederick's of Hollywood in Woodfield Mall. There was a gift card on it, taped by one corner. I lifted the other corner to read the inscription. *For Amber, on Opening Night. Russell.* I didn't want to think about which opening was being discussed.

I cruised the bookshelves while Arbuthnot performed his post-shower routine. His library contained the usual fare for an artistic soul: Dickens, Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams, Shakespeare. Some of the books looked as if they might even have been read.

Jorge knocked at 11:30 to the minute. Arbuthnot came out of his bedroom fresh and cute as a baby hippo. Jorge zipped us over to Amber's

place in ten minutes flat and left to see mom. Arbuthnot made another half-hearted offer to share Amber's attentions; I passed again. I had a plan of my own.

I didn't mind being outside this time. Bright sun in a cloudless sky warmed things a few degrees and yesterday's experience had me better prepared. I wore long underwear and a turtleneck sweater under my sport coat and overcoat, with Gore-Tex gloves and a watch cap. I'd have hat hair all day, but it was the only way to protect my damned sinuses from the cold. I also remembered to pee before leaving Arbuthnot's place.

I had a plan for the Thunderbird, too, if it was there again. After a quick look around the front of Amber's place for anything obvious, I moved around back to yesterday's impromptu urinal.

If the T-Bird was there, it wasn't parked in the same place. I maneuvered around the hedges to see as much of the street as I could without exposing myself until I caught a glimpse of it, closer to the YMCA this time. I looked through a small pair of binocs I'd brought and got a great view of a utility pole.

I wanted that license number. Standing on a freezing street one day while Arbuthnot happened to be inside could be coincidence. Two days in a row was a tail. I wasn't taking the threats to Arbuthnot seriously after talking to Phil, but I didn't have an explanation for the Thunderbird. The same need to satisfy my curiosity that led me into Frankie Calabria's alley was bothering me again. I never learn.

The fence was chain link, six feet high. Climbing it didn't require an Airborne Ranger, even in my full winter attire. The trick was finding a place where I could do it and not be seen.

I found what I needed thirty feet down the street. The hedges thinned out under a couple of trees shivering in the freshening wind. No angle to see the tags, but a gap in the hedge gave me room to climb. The trees looked substantial enough to shield me from the driver's view, even in their barren state.

I put the glasses in my pocket and started over. The chain rattled as I climbed up, but not enough to be heard inside a closed car with the motor running. I flipped my feet over the top to ease down the other side and snagged a loose link at the top of the fence, fell ass over watch cap into the street, landing flat on my back.

The Thunderbird started before I could regroup and burned rubber getting into traffic. I rolled into a prone position for a quick look with the glasses, but a truck coming south on Clybourne passed between the car and me. All I got for my effort was a sore tailbone and an enhanced sinus headache.

Jorge found me leaning on the railing of Amber's stairs an hour later. He must have overheard me say something to Arbuthnot about not drinking coffee, because he'd brought me tea. He also had lipstick smeared on his collar. He and Mom must be close.

Arbuthnot came out ten minutes later, chipper as a teenaged boy with a Hustler magazine. Today we shopped, stopping at the Artesian Cellar in the Merchandise Mart for a case of wine before going to Barney's to buy an honest-to-David Niven cravat. The lunchtime adoration was at Rosebud on Rush. There was enough sweetness and light in the air to send a hit man into a diabetic coma, and Arbuthnot made sure everyone knew about me.

We skipped dessert so Arbuthnot could get his nap in before the dress rehearsal. Jorge left us at the curb and I rode up with Arbuthnot. I didn't pay much attention to him while he opened the door and I almost walked into him when he stopped on the threshold. A look of uncomprehending shock covered his face.

The place was a wreck. The maid was going to catch hell for this.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Investigation

A detective named Manko from Property Crimes pulled himself away from starring in a recruiting ad to take the call. A patch of stubble on the left side of his chin had been missed at least twice. The crease in his slacks was no more than six weeks old. If men still wore porkpie hats, he'd have one.

"What did he touch?" Manko nodded toward the couch where Russell Arbuthnot nursed a brandy while chewing the scenery *gratis* for the uniform taking his report.



“Doorknob, what he needed to make his drink. I let him open a few drawers to see if anything was missing.”

Manko played with a little cigar while he spoke; didn't light it. He smelled like the smokers' lounge at an airport. “Good. First thing these fucking victims want to do when they get ripped off is clean up and ruin the scene. Those guys in Violent Crimes don't have this problem,” he said, ignoring the fact he didn't have it here. “No one ever fucks with a stiff, right?”

“You ever work Violent?” I said.

“Me? Nah. I got no interest in that shit.” All those clues and pristine crime scenes must take the challenge out of it. “How long you been working for the fat guy?”

“Since yesterday. It's been an adventure.”

“I'll bet. Any ideas on how it went down?”

“He says he's getting daily threats, some phone, some mail. The threats have been coming closer together and he was afraid something would happen. Looks like it got more personal than he expected.”

“Tell me about these threats.”

I told him what I knew, leaving out my suspicions. I almost held back a few other things on principle until I remembered I had nothing to gain by it. He let me finish before speaking.

“You seen any of these threats?”

“No.”

Manko gave me the look I knew would follow that answer and I ate it. “None of them?” I shook my head. “That strike you as odd?”

“What do you want me to say? My client made it all up, having no evidence that argues either way, and this in front of me?” I indicated the room with a hand.

His left an “it figures” smile stay long enough for me to get the message. “He find anything missing?”

“Nothing obvious.”

“Anything about this scene look funny to you?”

“Funny how?”

“Your boy says he's getting threats, right? So we assume this is more of the same, trying to scare him. Here's my problem.” He pointed the unlit cigar at me. “No damage. The place is a mess, but it's the neatest mess I've

ever seen. Nothing broken, nothing torn, nothing even chipped when it was knocked over. There are scratches on the door lock, but they don't look like pick marks to me."

"You think he did it himself?"

"He was with you all day, right?" I nodded. "So it was someone else with access. Any ideas?"

I had a couple; I wasn't ready to share. He looked like he had some of his own.

"I see the wheels turning," I said. "It wasn't me. I would've been more authentic."

"No, I didn't think it was you." He didn't lie very well for a cop. "You'd've made it look better. This was an amateur, somebody never saw a crime scene in his life. You'd almost think a broad did it, it's so fucking neat."

"Almost" wasn't the word I had in mind. I doubted the cleaning lady would be in on something like this; it would be easy to check. Jorge's lipstick stain eliminated him. Sheila O'Donoghue had a key, and she was pissed at Arbuthnot about something. Manko didn't need to know that.

"I hate these celebrity cases," he said to no one in particular. "It'll be in the papers, people will want it solved, and there's nothing here. The fat boy over there will do everything he can to keep it in the news because his name's attached, right?" He chewed the cigar while he talked, flecks of loose tobacco sticking to his lower lip. "My captain's going to be asking why this isn't closed, my lieutenant's going to be crawling up my ass telling me the captain's busting his balls, and it's going to be a big joke to everyone else. Just what I need."

Manko didn't strike me as someone comfortable with superiors looking over his shoulder. His thorough investigation hadn't required him to move more than five feet since he got there.

"All right, I'm out of here. Hey, Finnegan," he called to the patrol cop taking Arbuthnot's statement. "Wrap up here and get the inventory. I'm going back to the station to start the report." Finnegan nodded with a look like he'd worked with Manko before. Manko turned back to me like he'd forgotten I was there.

"Yeah, Forte. You'll let me know if you find anything out, right?"

“Absolutely.” It’s part of the PI Code to lie to a cop at least three times a week. Doing it to Manko didn’t hurt my conscience a bit.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### The Rehearsal Must Go On

The Goodman’s reputation is international and well-deserved, but the accessories of theater magic didn’t look any better here than in a thousand venues I’d played as a musician. The insoluble dreariness of the wings imposed a stark contrast to the lights that followed Russell Arbuthnot’s every gesture on stage.

Arbuthnot twittered like an old lady from the time the police left until we got him to his dressing room. I would have volunteered to look the other way if Jorge wanted to knock him unconscious during the drive, but nothing bothered Jorge. Regular home cooking had him chilled out.

Sheila took custody in the dressing room. Her attempts to calm Arbuthnot only turned him into a bigger pain in the ass, no mean feat. She watched and fretted from the wings as I came up behind her.

“He’ll be all right,” I said. “I don’t think he’s as high-strung as he puts on.”

“Oh! You startled me.” Her reaction struck me as exaggerated. She laid a hand on my forearm as if to steady herself. “I didn’t see you.” Looked toward Arbuthnot. “This has been an ordeal for him. Having the stalker violate him like this, with the opening tomorrow night. He’s not himself at all.”

“He’s an actor,” I said. “He’s supposed to be someone else.”

This didn’t go over any better than my opening gambit the first day we met. Must be something about theater people.

“I’m happy to see you aren’t unduly concerned about this.” The hand left my arm as my callous insensitivity damaged yet another nascent relationship.

“I was with him all day. I can’t guard him and the apartment. I can arrange for someone to stay there if you want.”

“Russell would never agree to that. He’d feel stifled.”

“He can’t have it both ways.”

“You’re right. It’s just that it’s difficult to know where to draw the line.” Her hand found my arm again. A nice hand, warm and smooth, manicured with jeweler’s precision except for the thumb nail, chewed past the cuticle.

I took a second to decide which way to go. I investigate for a living, went straight for the deep water. “Nothing was taken. At least not that he noticed.”

“So?”

“So why go to all the trouble to break in and not take anything?”

Her answer had the spontaneity of a book on tape. “This person has to be unbalanced. He just wanted to frighten Russell. The whole thing has been calculated to prey on his mind. First the notes, coming closer each time, and now this. I think someone wants to disrupt the performances, possibly the entire tour.”

“Then why not take the falcon? It’s the ultimate disruption.”

“Russell keeps the falcon securely locked at all times.” She hurried on before I could interrupt “It was only out yesterday so he could show it to you.”

“Actually, I was going to say it was out and about all night and this morning before we left.”

“It couldn’t be.”

“It was. I put it there myself last night—at his direction—and did a quick walk-through of the whole place while he was in the shower. The falcon was in its little cubbyhole, just like yesterday. Anyone who got in could have loaded it into the case and wheeled it right out the door.”

“Oh, then. Well, he likes to look at it, says it inspires him. He always locks it up before he leaves.”

Uh-huh. “Where does he lock it?”

“Where? In its case. Where else would he keep it?”

“Where does he keep the case?”

“In the bedroom, where you saw it.”

“So anyone who got in could have rolled it right out of the building, just like I said.”

“If they knew what it was.”

“If they knew what it was?” I gave the sarcasm a beat to sink in. “He keeps the case right under the mantel. I didn’t see anything like a means of securing it, other than locking the apartment. If I wanted to scare Russell Arbuthnot and I saw that Anvil case sitting right under the mantel, I think I’d take a look inside.”

“Who knows why he did or didn’t do anything?” Her speech quickened and gained intensity. “The fact is he didn’t take it.”

“I wonder if having the statue stolen would have had greater publicity value.”

Her fingers tightened on my arm. “What do you mean?”

“The papers got wind of his new bodyguard awful quick. Rumor has it ticket sales aren’t what they might be. Maybe some intrigue would puff them up a little. It can’t be all bad that the break-in will be in the papers in time for the opening.”

“Are you saying we trumped this up?”

“I’m saying he got re-e-e-e-al lucky, that’s all. What happens if the falcon goes missing?”

“He has others.”

“I figured he did, but he treats this one like it had mystical powers. Besides, how many people would pay top dollar to see a falcon just called up from the minor leagues?”

She stepped away and faced me straight on, arms crossed at her breasts. “I don’t think I like your attitude. You’re practically accusing me of fraud to create a publicity stunt. Maybe we should find someone else to protect Russell, someone who will accept the threat as real.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard at five grand a week. The trick is to find someone else with his own built-in pub to share.” That placed my streak of consecutive days without being slapped in jeopardy. “Calm down, Sheila. I’m sorry. It’s not a big deal. Russell’s not the only one who isn’t himself today. Imagine my dismay when I found out you shorted me five thousand dollars.”

Her expression changed to alarm. “Shorted you?”

“The paper said I got fifteen grand.” I winked and put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right. I never really believed your story. I believed your ten thousand dollars.”

“What do you mean?” The same smile that snuck up on her the other day eased its way onto her face. A smile that could probably sustain the right man through several days.

“It was more money than the job was worth, and enough more to make it all right.”

“You *have* seen the movie.”

“More times than I can remember. Read the book, too.” I took my hand away. “You should’ve told me, that’s all.”

“Would you have taken the case?”

“I don’t know, but I would’ve handled that cop better. He thinks I did it, anyway.”

“You mean you would have set up the – ”

“Don’t get carried away. Falsifying evidence—hell, falsifying a crime—is beyond what my license can tolerate. I’m just saying I would have had something ready to tell him in case someone had—unknown to me—perpetrated such a vile act.”

“Do you think he knows?”

“You couldn’t have asked for a better cop. Manko couldn’t find his ass with both hands and a flashlight. It doesn’t pay to get too cute, though. Leave it alone for now. Too much attention wouldn’t be good, either.”

“You’re right. All publicity may be good publicity, but you can get too much of a good thing.” Her string of clichés complete, she lowered her voice a notch. “I’ll make the money right. It’s only fair.”

“The money’s fine. It’s what I agreed to. I need to know what’s going on if I’m going to do the job, that’s all.”

“You’re right. No more holding back.” She took a step toward me. Not touching, well inside my personal space. “And the closer we work, the more effective we’ll be.”

I sensed her looking at me while I watched Arbuthnot. I turned my head to be sure and there they were. Sheila O’Donoghue’s eyes gave me the feeling of looking at something I’d never seen before every time I saw them.

I sidled half a step closer until my right arm brushed her left. “Okay, since we’re going to work closely as a team, what was that between you and Olivier this morning?”

She stepped away; I stifled a smile. “This morning? That was nothing. Artistic differences. These kinds of arguments happen all the time. We’re both very passionate about our work.”

“You’re both very passionate about something. Help me out here. What part of his work were you referring to when you told him to ‘stay away from her’?”

“He’s – ” she started, then caught herself. “All right, it was a personal matter. Well, it’s artistic but touches something very personal in both of us. Me mostly, I suppose. It’s—it’s really not material to what you’re here for.”

I maintained what I hoped was a benign expression. Silence is often the best way to keep someone talking.

Her voice not much louder than the quiet before. “We were lovers, Russell and I, a long time ago. He still enjoys pushing certain buttons, and I haven’t learned how to keep him from doing it.”

This time I waited for her to make eye contact. “That’s going to take some explaining. You’re a striking, refined woman, and it gives me night sweats to think about what you must’ve looked like then.” She might have blushed. I inclined my head toward the stage. “He’s a pile of shit spray-painted gold. What did you ever see in him?”

“He didn’t always look like this, you know. To see him on stage, under the lights, the romance of a live performance was intoxicating. I was still a young girl, just getting used to being around such personalities. Then he started paying attention to me when he could have had any woman he wanted.”

“Obviously he could have any woman he wanted. He got you.”

The compliment went unacknowledged. “He has certain tastes that I was—um—uncomfortable with. He convinced me it was because of my repressed upbringing, that as a man of the world he could expose me to things I would never dream of on my own.” A long pause. “He was right. I was twenty-three, the same age as—it’s an impressionable age for a woman. I told myself the things he asked me to do”—very soft now—“made me do, were what all cultured people did. I didn’t realize until much later how many of his ‘cultured’ activities were aberrations.”

“But you stayed with him.”

“Professionally.”

“Why?”

“You don’t feel it, do you?” She looked at Arbuthnot chewing the scenery fifty feet away as if she were in bed with him. “Charisma, maybe? I’m not sure what to call it. A magnetism. The spark of something unique in him, something no other man has.” She turned to look at me. “You really don’t see it, do you?”

My turn to look his way. “I see a reputation being used to hide a man who belongs in a trailer park, crawling into bed with his daughter twice a week.”

She drew in her breath so hard it startled me into turning toward her. She had stepped back. Her face looked as though I had slapped her.

“No, no, not that. Think what you want about him, but not that. He’s an artist. They’re different. You of all people should understand.” She looked at her wrist, not long enough to read her watch. “I have to go. Please tell Russell to get his rest. I’ll make sure everything is ready for the opening.” She backed away, turning for the door as she spoke. “I’ll see you here tomorrow night. We can talk at the party.” She double-timed to the door before I could answer.

I turned back to the stage. I still didn’t see it. He paid Amber for whatever he did to her. I wondered what Sheila was still paying for.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### A Surprise Ending

I rang for Arbuthnot at nine sharp the next morning. He'd bumped up his appointment with Amber, I assumed to have time to properly deliver her gift and get sufficient rest before the show. I had to admit I was more excited about opening night than I'd expected.

It didn't surprise me when he didn't answer the door after the third ring. When I still didn't hear any movement after the fourth I tried the knob, because that's what professional investigators do to locked doors when no one answers the bell.

The door swung open. The chair where Arbuthnot had dropped his overcoat was turned askew in the middle of the room. The coat lay in a pile on the floor, one sleeve hanging from a chair arm. Not a sound in the apartment.

"Russell?"

Nothing. No shower, no toilet flushing, none of the noises associated with a three hundred pound man. It was so quiet the furnace coming on resonated through the apartment like the closing of a crypt door.

Swell. He wanted to play.

"Russell?" I said a little louder. "This looks suspicious." It looked staged, a ham's impression of realistic disarray. "I'd come right back there to see if you're all right, but I know better than to turn my back on any room I haven't checked out first. I think I'll start in the kitchen."

The kitchen as empty as the living room. A wine glass on the drain board. Dish towel hanging off the edge of the sink. The warm air from a heat vent near the ceiling whistled as it passed my ear, smelling of dust.

"Well, the kitchen's clear," I said loud enough for him to hear me from anywhere in the apartment. Playing out the whole charade would send me into the den next but my enthusiasm diminished by the second. Maybe Amber would do anything for Arbuthnot's money. There's only so much of a whore I'm willing to be.

The bedroom door stood ajar, no more than a foot. I pushed it open the rest of the way and looked inside before entering. Closed curtains made the room more murky than dark, as if something occupied the air between me

and whatever I looked at. I stayed stationary until my eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom.

“Russell? Oh, my, it’s dark in here. That’s always suspicious.”

I walked flat-footed toward the unmade bed. A walk-in closet that doubled as a dressing area cut into the wall adjacent to the bathroom. A sliver of light crawled through the gap at the base of the door.

He was the boss, and fun’s fun, but no way would I walk in there to catch that fat bastard naked just to give him a laugh. I stopped and spoke through the door.

“Okay, Russell, it’s after nine. You don’t want to keep Amber waiting. I’m sure you’ll need a good, long nap after today’s session. Let’s go.”

The furnace shut off. I weighed my options. As usual, discretion lost.

“This is bullshit. Ten grand’s a lot of money, but if you want to play games, hire a clown. I’m too old for this. Now are you coming out or am I leaving?”

Arbuthnot didn’t cough, shuffle his feet, or do any of the hundred things people do when trying to be quiet. He was starting to creep me out.

“All right, you win. I’ll come in, but we need to set some ground rules if I’m going to keep working for you.”

I pushed on the door and it pushed back. Irritated, I gave a shove and it rebounded into my face. I grabbed an edge and leaned on it to force it open. “Goddamn it, Russell – ”

He sat splay-legged on the floor inside the closet, the door against his left foot. His right hand pressed against the floor kept him half erect, too fat to fall all the way over. His skin was gray and the front of his dressing gown had a lot of dark blood on it. His eyes were open, the pupils fixed. He was either several hours dead or a much better actor than I had been giving him credit for.

I put two fingers under a few of his chins. His skin was the same temperature as the surrounding air. Dead people aren’t really cold. They’re just not as warm as you expect.

I stepped back without disturbing anything, turned on a light. No gun in the immediate area or under the bed. I went into the bathroom and looked around, just in case Arbuthnot spelled the killer’s name in blood before crawling into the closet to die. Nothing. Agatha Christie’s detectives get all the luck.

Walking back into the bedroom brought the falcon's alcove into my line of sight. Empty. I scanned the floor for the Anvil case. Not there. I looked along the walls and under the bed. By the time I started checking the closets and other rooms I knew I wouldn't find it. I was right for the first time that day.

I wasted time on another cursory tour to see if anything else was missing; I didn't even know what he owned apart from the falcon. I found myself back in the bedroom looking at the falcon's empty cubbyhole. I knew something else was missing, not why. It could be that half the people in the apartment were dead; the empty cubby where the falcon lived.

Or maybe it was because Amber's gift was gone, too.

Arbuthnot wouldn't have gone out after I left him for the night. I doubted Amber made house calls, or she would have delivered before. Someone either put it away or took it.

I'd already been through every room twice. The gift would be easy to spot in any but a carefully chosen location. I didn't think the cleaning staff would put it anyplace too clever. The box was in the breeze with the falcon.

The gift was almost certainly nasty lingerie, with no connection to Arbuthnot's death or the missing statue I was sharp enough to see. Probably an impulse grab. Or a red herring. It wasn't a general burglary gone bad; nothing else appeared to be missing. Thieves are funny sometimes, though. I worked a case once where the guy crapped on the kitchen table of every house he ripped off. He thought it was hilarious, until we caught him and used his calling card to tie him to twenty-three other jobs.

This wasn't funny at all. Arbuthnot hired me to protect him. Bullshit job or not, he was still entitled to assume I wouldn't let anyone kill him. It wasn't my fault—I wasn't hired to sit up nights with him—still, it looked like hell.

This was Central Area, Sonny Ng's domain. He wouldn't let me play with a homicide. I'd find that goddamned bird, though, and the killer almost certainly had it. I also wanted to deliver Amber's gift. She'd lost a good customer. Whores need consoling, too.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### The Great Detective

“Hell of a bodyguard you are.”

Pat Hanlon bore superficial resemblance to Manko, the Property Crimes dick I had so much fun with the other day. Clothes a little neater, waist a little trimmer, he still looked like he carried his notebook more to mark off the days till retirement than for evidence. There were a lot of people in Stateville with time on their hands to ponder the consequences of that misconception.

I knew he'd draw the assignment. A high profile case in the Central, and there wasn't a finer detective team in Chicago than Pat Hanlon and his partner, Janet Rusiewicz. Hanlon knew it better than anyone, and never passed up an opportunity to steer you to that conclusion.

“I only did it so you could show off for Jan,” I said. “I know you live for it.”

“Don't start,” she said no louder than necessary for me to hear a foot away. Jan and I had been dating casually for over a year. How casual depended on who you asked. My friends made a bigger deal of it than I did. Jan never said much about it at all.

“First things first,” Hanlon said. “What did you touch and what material evidence are you concealing?”

I nodded in Arbuthnot's direction. “I touched him to make sure he was dead. This is my third day here, so my prints are on a lot of stuff. I didn't mess with anything after I found him. I thought I could watch and learn from the master.”

He shot me a look but spared me any witty repartee and made a dismissive gesture with his left hand. “Go on, get out. This is a crime scene; we'll deal with it. Rusiewicz, you can stand him—Christ knows how—take him in the front room and get his statement.”

Jan led me into the living room. A small crowd in the hallway watched the crime scene crew check the door lock for signs of tampering.

“Gee, Jan, are you really going to interrogate me? This could be fun.”

“I warned you before, don't start.” She looked tired. Dark blond hair due for a frosting. Eyes that could melt aluminum when she smiled showed all the warmth of a Motor Vehicles clerk working overtime. “You're nice looking and a great guy, but you are such a jerk sometimes. Let me get your statement so I can get to work.”

This was un-Jan-like to a high degree. “Everything all right? Hanlon getting to be too much for you?”

“Pat’s fine.” Jan one of the few people I knew who liked Hanlon. “You know we get along.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Is that nothing nothing, like for real, there’s nothing wrong? Or is that female nothing, like it’s really something but you’re not going to tell me so I can suffer like it was my fault, even if it wasn’t, before maybe you decide to put me out of my misery, but probably not before you extort some promise out of me, like going to the Art Institute on a weekend even though I didn’t have anything to do with the nothing that was bothering you? One of those?”

She teetered on the brink for a few seconds before the smile broke through. “You are such a hard person to like.”

“You manage, though.”

“I have no idea why.”

“Must be my boyish charm.”

“No.”

“Maybe it’s my legendary sexual prowess.”

Jan cocked her head and fixed me with her “get real” look: lips pursed, creating a dimple on her left cheek, blue eyes tilted upward with the barest of squints. “How much has your sexual prowess gotten around for it to become legendary?”

“Nowhere since I met you. Some of us just have that aura.”

“That’s not the word I’d use, but you have it, all right. Now what happened here?”

I laid the whole thing out for her. Standard practice is to leave out a thing or two when discussing my activities with the police, just to keep in practice. I couldn’t do that with Jan, and Hanlon knew it. He’d killed two birds with the same stone when he sent her to get my statement. I was gone, and he knew I wouldn’t lie to Jan. I concentrated so hard on being conscientious that Amber slipped my mind altogether.

“So you thought the threats were bullshit, even after the break-in yesterday?”

“Yeah, it wouldn’t surprise me if someone messed up the place just for the added publicity value.” That was true. It wouldn’t surprise me at all after my conversation with Sheila O’Donoghue at the theater. Maybe I wanted to beat Hanlon to the killer more than I thought.

“What about now?”

“Him being dead does lend some credence, but I’m not sold. I peeked at the front door while I was waiting for you. The lock looks the same as yesterday, when Manko said it looked like someone tried to make it look like it had been picked. If someone got in that way last night, he was very good. I’d be willing to bet Arbuthnot let the killer in himself.”

“Or the killer had a key.” I nodded agreement. “Who else has keys?”

“Beats me. Maid, probably. His manager might, maybe his driver. I’m not sure.”

“Let’s start with the manager. What’s his name?”

“Sheila O’Donoghue.” Jan paused half a beat before writing it down. I couldn’t resist. “That was awfully sexist of you, assuming his manager would be a man.”

“You never let one go, do you? All right, now that I have *her* name, where can I find her?”

“Right there.” I pointed over Jan’s shoulder to Sheila making her case with the uniform at the door. “Let’s get her. That kid she’s working over can’t be ready for this.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### A Tale of Two Women

He wasn’t. Sheila gave him both barrels and he lost authority with each volley. She saw me just as Jan started to speak to the uniform.

“Nick!” Sheila ran past Jan and locked both arms around one of mine with a hold too firm to be erotic, pressing her body against me too close to be anything else. “My God, it can’t be true. I came over to drop off some publicity shots to be autographed and saw the police. I never imagined why they were here until they weren’t going to let me get off the elevator.” I felt

the heat of her body for a split second before the ice of Jan's glare cut through it.

"Sheila O'Donoghue?" Jan's voice was warm as a shark's eyes. "You're the agent?"

"Yes."

"Will you step over here so I can ask you a few questions, please?" Jan's usual manner was to get people to forget she was a cop. Today she was Joe Friday with curves.

Sheila started in Jan's direction, her arm attached to mine. Jan had none of it. "Alone, please."

I saved everyone a lot of trouble. "Go on, I'll talk to you later. This is routine. She doesn't want me to influence your statement."

"But you won't –"

"Just go. You'll be done in ten minutes."

I didn't know what was bothering Jan; Sheila's greeting wouldn't make her any easier to get along with. Nothing unusual for most women, but Jan rarely invoked the "nothing" rule. It was one of the reasons we were still semi-dating after a year. Time to invest in a beer or three.

I wandered the living room making sure cops saw me not touch anything. What I hoped looked like random steps took me to the bedroom door. I stood on the threshold and watched Hanlon work.

He didn't look like much. A photographer and two techs went over the scene, Hanlon not looking much more involved than I was. He'd point out photographs he wanted, or ask what something was. Most of the time he watched.

"Watched" was the operative word. He moved little and never touched anything, but I had no doubt he *saw* everything. Concentration so complete he seemed to be sucking the scene through his eyes to be imprinted forever on his brain. I knew of detectives who remembered every crime scene they ever worked and could recall minute details twenty years later. Watching Hanlon made me believe he was one.

I tried to absorb the scene like he did, felt Sheila's hand on my elbow. "Is he in there?"

"In the closet."

She slid her arm inside my elbow and moved in close. "What happened?"

“Shot three times.”

“My God, how horrible.”

“I don’t think he suffered, from what I saw of the wounds.”

She turned me to face her. “You found him?”

“When I came for the daily Amber run. I thought he was playing hide and seek until I found him.”

“My God, I can’t imagine...you seem fine.”

“Russell makes twenty-six stiffs for me. I worked some tough beats during a couple of gang wars.”

This shocked her for real. “Twenty-six! How do you cope?”

“It’s like anything else. You get used to it after a while.”

“Are you really that cold?” Her posture became rigid, her arm prepared to turn me loose, not quite yet.

“No. I’m really that practical. How long have you been around the theater? I mean going to performances, working with the people backstage.”

“Over twenty-five years.”

“You can’t tell me the thrill you get is the same as it was twenty-five years ago.”

“But it is. I still feel the hair on my neck stand up every time the lights go on.” Unmistakable intensity in her voice. Even if the thrill had gone, she wanted it to be there.

“Trust me, the hair on the back of my neck stood up when I found Russell. The intensity’s not the same though, is it? It couldn’t be, or you’d be exhausted all the time.”

“True, I suppose, but going to the theater is hardly the same as finding a man dead.”

“I’ve found more dead bodies than I’ve been to theater performances. Don’t misunderstand me. I closed three bars the night I found my first stiff and took the next two days off.”

Her voice changed again. She would have mothered me if there weren’t ten other people there. “I had no idea.”

“I didn’t tell you to make you feel sorry for me. I just didn’t want you to think I didn’t feel anything when I found Russell. Sure I did. That doesn’t mean I stop working.”



“Working? What is there for you to do now? You’ll be paid in full, of course, I’ll see to that.”

“Thanks, but there’s more to it. I was being paid to protect him. My fault or not, I can’t let whoever did this make me look bad without doing something about it. Besides, there must be some insurance money due for the falcon.”

“The falcon’s gone?” Dismay this time. The woman had more vocal inflections than Oprah Winfrey had stretch marks.

“Didn’t I tell you? I’m sorry, I assumed you knew.”

“That must be the motive then.”

“Or a red herring. The falcon will be a bitch to fence. Probably only get pennies on the dollar for it. Doesn’t seem worth facing a death sentence for what it would sell for. If someone wanted Russell dead for another reason, taking the falcon would be a nice piece of misdirection.”

“Is anything else missing?”

“I wouldn’t know. He must have had insurance. His agent should have an inventory.”

We had drifted into the corner farthest away from the bedroom. No traffic near us, Sheila rested her head on my arm and let her weight sag against me. “This is horrible. What will the police do now?”

“They’ll account for everyone’s whereabouts, see if anything else was taken, a lot of routine. You’re probably the person most familiar with him so they’ll talk with you a few more times as things come up.”

“I don’t think that female detective likes me.”

“Jan’s having a bad day, I’m not sure why. Trust me, you’d still rather talk to her than her partner.”

“Jan? Do you know her?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Well.”

Sheila stepped back to look me in the eye. “Very well?”

I kept looking into the corner. There wasn’t anything interesting there, but I didn’t have anyplace better to look. “Very well.”

Sheila stepped in front of me so I’d have to look at her. “Intimately?”

I adjusted my vision downward to make direct eye contact. “That’s none of your business.”

“I see.” She looked at her watch. This time she took the time to read it. “I should get to the theater. Word must be out by now. I’ll have to call Joel, too.”

“Joel?”

“Russell’s publicist. The media may be hounding him already.”

“I’ll check in later and let you know what’s going on.”

“I’ll be at home all evening. I think I may have to get drunk.”

“Not a terrible idea, all things considered.”

She squeezed my arm. “Thank you, Nick. I don’t know what I’d do if you weren’t here.”

“I’ll bet you’d think of something.” I smiled when I said it, but she still looked like she wasn’t sure how to take it. That was fine. I wasn’t sure how I meant it. Sheila O’Donoghue made me think about a lot of things that didn’t often come to mind.

She wasn’t quite out the door when Jan came back. “Too bad about Arbuthnot. Looks like you might have had some fun on this case.” She nodded toward Sheila’s retreating form.

“What *is* wrong with you today?” I turned to face her. “This isn’t like you, Jan. You know me better than to think I’d be fooling around behind your back, or with someone involved in a case.”

She looked like she might want to fight before thinking better of it. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m just on the rag today – ” she raised her right hand, “ – don’t say it, that’s not how I meant it.”

I knew. Jan lived in a man’s world and made the necessary accommodations, which only added to my attraction. She was a great broad, using the term in the most complimentary sense.

“I know. How about we get a beer tonight? We’re both busy now, call me when Sherlock Holmes in there gives you a break. We can talk then.”

“You know, there’s a good reason he can’t stand – ” She smiled, catching herself in time. “Okay. I’ll call you when I’m free.” She had to reach out to catch me before I got too far away. “Wait a minute. What do you mean, ‘we’re’ busy? *You’re* done here. I don’t expect to see you around this case again.”

“Me?” I feigned astonishment. “The homicide’s yours. That statue is a potentially priceless piece of memorabilia. There has to be an insurance

claim due on it. Maybe I can recover some of what his inconsiderate demise cost me in bodyguard fees.”

It’s not possible for a face to show more overt skepticism than hers did. “Uh-huh. You will, of course, let us know if you find anything that might be material to our official homicide investigation.”

“Of course. You know I’m nothing if not a conscientious and civic-minded citizen.”

This time she let me go, after a suitable interval. I didn’t bother saying goodbye to Hanlon. He had his case, I had mine. The two probably intersected. Handing everything to him on a platter would salve a lot of my bruised feelings over letting Russell Arbuthnot get himself chilled.

I looked for Jorge when I got to the street. Neither of the uniforms watching the comings and goings of Arbuthnot’s building had a handle on him. It would be nice to know why he wasn’t there.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch

I doubted I’d find Jorge by roaming the streets, so I drove to the office for some good old-fashioned Twenty-first Century sleuthing. As usual, Joey bounded from the Outhouse before I got all the way out of the car.

“Hi, Nick. Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey, isn’t it?” he said through a smile. Joey always smiled. He was smiling with that thief slung over his shoulder.

“Sure is. Good thing I’m not a brass monkey.” I made the mistake of teaching that phrase to him last winter. Idiomatic speech not one of Joey’s strengths; when he found one he liked he beat to death. Every day below forty since then had been cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey.

Tony was his usual charming self. “Maybe not a brass monkey, but you sure got brass balls. The hell’s wrong with you, making us come out in the cold on a day like this?”

“You say that all the time. I didn’t *make* anyone come out. At least Joey has some concept of customer service.” I tapped one of the icy windows.

“Must be nice and warm inside this igloo you built. The heat wouldn’t come out if you shut the door when you left.”

“Heat? That cheap space heater died yesterday. The ice inside is thicker than what’s out here.”

“Why don’t you walk over to Walgreen’s and get a new one? What are they, twenty bucks?”

“Twenty-eight ninety-five for one worth a damn, and it’s supposed to warm up tomorrow, anyway. It won’t be that bad.” The forecast called for a high of thirty-four, with twenty mile-an-hour winds off the lake.

“I better hustle over to Sports Authority for a bathing suit before they’re all gone,” I said. We could banter like that for twenty minutes on a nice day, but the hairs in my nostrils had started to freeze together. Time to get to work.

Of course Sharon knew all about the loss of our disgusting, but lucrative, client. She also knew better than to ask me about it, smiled without saying anything until she caught my mood. If only I had married a woman with that gift.

“Do me a favor, Sharon. Find out who lives here.” I handed her a slip of pocket notebook paper on which I had Amber’s address. “The only name I have is Amber, and I doubt it’s real. No phone, either. See what you can get for me, okay?”

She let me get seated in my office before following me inside. “Nothing urgent came in, just the usual from that television crew that wants to follow you around for a week. And a phone call from Caroline’s school principal.”

Caroline was my eight year-old daughter. This was my first call from the principal. “Is Caroline all right?”

“Caroline’s fine, or I would have called you right away and you know it.” I deserved that. “That’s all she’d say. The number’s on your desk.”

“How late did she say she’d be there?”

“At least five.”

I looked at my watch. 4:35. “Thanks, Sharon.” I said, picking up the phone. “Let me know about that address.”

I got the principal right away. “This is Mrs. Pelekoudas. Thank you for calling so quickly.”

“Any time. What’s up with Caroline? Is everything all right?”

“She’s fine, nothing happened to her. I should let you know that she’s a pleasure. She’s smart, personable, a real joy to have in the school.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Pelekoudas, but I know you didn’t call to tell me that.”

She hadn’t. Caroline had been involved in some third grade vandalism, marking up some playground equipment with derogatory comments about another girl in the class. Heavy stuff, like “Suzie has bugs.” Suzie did have bugs, but it’s impolitic to make a permanent and public record of it, even in third grade. Especially in third grade. Caroline had already apologized to Suzie; the playground damage remained.

I calculated how much free time Arbuthnot’s demise would create. “Caroline is spending Saturday with me. If the apology’s acceptable, how about if I bring her over to clean all the equipment? Will that make it right by the school?”

“Yes, of course. It’s very nice of you to volunteer to clean it up.”

“I’m not volunteering. I’m just providing transportation and supplies. Caroline’s doing the work.”

“I should point out that the parents of the other girl aren’t being nearly as cooperative. If you’d like to wait until – ”

“What the other parents do about their kid isn’t my concern. I’m not going to yell or scream or holler, but she’ll make everything as close to the way it was as she can.”

Brief silence. “That will be more than good enough. Thank you for being so understanding. I want to stress again that Caroline is in no way a behavior problem. I think this was simply an error in judgment.” She followed up with the usual educator babble before concluding with a reiteration of what a good kid Caroline was, a pleasure to work with, everyone liked her. I already knew all of this, but it was nice to hear it confirmed.

No other messages required my attention. A couple of minutes on the Internet gave me half a dozen Jorge Mendozas to look into. I put the printout in my pocket and called Sheila, who volunteered to order extra General Tso’s chicken if I came over to help her eat it.

Sharon had the answer to my question by the time I was ready to leave.

“Amber’s a renter. The property’s owned by a Kenneth Skupien. Do you want me to call him?”

“See what you can find out about him first. Amber’s an expensive hooker who may or may not be mixed up in this. Skupien might not know what she’s doing in his townhouse. I don’t want to cause any more ripples than I have to.”

“Are you looking for the killer?”

“Why, no, Sharon,” I said in my most insincere voice. “That’s a police matter. I’m looking for the statue. Since I think that’s why he was killed, there’s a good chance my case will be connected to theirs.”

“Who got the case?”

“Who do you think?”

“I knew it would be them. Is this going to cause any problems between you and Jan?”

“I hope not. She was kind of testy when I saw her at the scene. I don’t know what’s up with her.”

“I could make a guess.”

“Don’t start. I get enough of that from Phil Chandler and Ray Jacobs. I’m going to have a beer with her and see what’s what.”

“Where are you going now?”

“To find me a limo driver.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEE

### A Man May Smile and Smile...

The first Jorge Mendoza I found was a Fourteenth District cop. The next one I tried had left town a week ago, as near as I could tell from the *patois* of Spanish, English, and some words I suspected were made up on the spot. Immigration officials seemed to play key roles in the account.

My Jorge lived in a walkup apartment one notch better than a project near the Cicero line. The graffiti and representations on the outside of the building hadn’t come in. The stairwells were as well-lighted as could be expected. The stair treads were hardly worn, the walls freshly painted. A little island in the *barrio*, its clean halls almost able to overcome the atmosphere created by the barred windows.

Jorge opened the door enough to see who it was, admitted me without a second glance. “I thought you would be around sooner or later.”

The door opened into an eat-in kitchen. Something cooked on the stove. Its steam gave the room a cozy humidity. “Police been here yet?” I asked.

“They missed me. They will come back.”

“Any reason to avoid them?”

“Not the reason you are here for.” He smiled, the magic tooth catching stray light through the cooking fog.

“And why am I here?”

“Because *El Cerdo* is dead. You want to know if I killed him.”

“You were a lot more respectful to The Pig the other day.”

“He had me by the balls then. No more.”

“You illegal?”

Jorge chuckled. “Me? No. I have a friend, he would send her back in a minute if he felt like it.”

“Why?”

“Because he was a sick fuck, my friend. How much do you know about him?”

“I had the sick fuck part pegged. How sick I’m still finding out.”

“Please, have a seat.” Jorge pulled a wooden chair away from the table. “Would you like a beer?”

“It’s not Corona, is it?”

He laughed. “No, I know you are not a tourist. *Dos Equis* is all I would offer to you. Besides, I am out of limes.”

“I’m thirsty, my friend. Thanks.”

Jorge took his time getting the glasses. He opened one bottle, set the cap aside and took great care to get the head just right. The other got the same treatment. Getting a bowl and filling it with chips and salsa had its own ritual. Every action got his entire attention, like something important he’d never done before. People have lots of ways to look busy while they decide what—or how much—they want to tell you.

I waited until he had everything where he wanted it and had taken a long swallow of his beer. “Okay, Jorge, how sick a fuck was he?”

He smiled; he always smiled. This one showed none of his tooth. “I will tell you, but you tell no one, okay?”

“I can’t promise that. I’ll try, and I can promise not to tell anyone unless it’s absolutely necessary, but I can’t say so unconditionally.” I used some of my beer. “I’m not looking for illegals, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

He drank most of the rest of his beer. “I have a friend—more than a friend—named Marita. She is a beautiful girl, and we love each other very much.”

I ate some chips and let him talk. This had the earmarks of a story that would tell itself if it got up a head of steam. The salsa was *muy delicioso*.

“That one, the fat one, found out about Marita. I should not have said anything to him, but you know what it’s like when you are in love.”

I tried for a combination of the flat-eyed cop stare and the priest in the confessional. The smell of whatever he had cooking reminded me of lunch time, which was seven hours ago.

“He asked to meet her and I allowed it, like a fool. A few days later he told me how beautiful she was, and how it would amuse him to watch she and I make love. I told him we were not like that and he laughed at me. He said he had a private detective look into Marita’s past and that he knew she was illegal. He said he knew people who would get her sent back to Mexico. I believed him.”

I tried not to sound too prurient. “Did you give him his show?”

“No!” He wasn’t smiling now and the way his hand moved I couldn’t help but look for a knife. “I told him she went away. I was afraid he would have me followed so she has gone to live with a friend. I am very careful when I go to see her. We never go out anymore.”

“You mean like when you would go to see your mother while Arbuthnot visited Amber?”

“You knew?”

“You came back with lipstick on your collar yesterday.” I let him digest the possibilities. “Did you know someone was watching Amber’s place the two days I was there?”

“No.”

“Black Thunderbird, I couldn’t get the plate. He made me the second I tried to get closer. You were gone then, maybe he wasn’t there for you.”

“Maybe he didn’t see me leave.” More a wish than a statement.

“He should have from where he was. I’m wondering now if he was there for Arbuthnot. It seems fishy, I notice someone following us for a couple of days, and now Fatso’s dead. I don’t like coincidences.”

“I thought the threats were fakes.”



“They were. Killers and thieves don’t often send threats. This one seems to have dovetailed with the publicity stunt.”

“Is that not a coincidence?”

I suppressed a laugh. “Yeah, I guess so. Coincidence or not, he’s still dead. The question is, did someone kill him and take the falcon, or did they just want the falcon and had to kill him to get it?”

I was talking to myself more than I Jorge, so it didn’t bother me when he didn’t answer. The silence reminded me of why I was there.

“Why did you stay with him?”

“He told me he would find Marita and send her away if I left.”

“That’s a pretty expensive proposition, even for him. Why would he care?”

“It was something he liked to do, to control people. He knew where you were weak and how to use that against you.”

“But why keep you close?”

“Why does the dog lick his *cojones*? It was important to him, to know he had the power. For him to know I knew what he thought of when he looked at me a certain way. He was a sick man, the world is much better without him. I’m glad he had no children to grow up to be like him.”

“Is that why you killed him?”

Jorge gave me the good smile, so not even the steam in the kitchen kept the gold tooth from shining. “I did not kill him. I’m glad he is dead, but I do not kill people.”

“You said the police missed you. Was that an accident, or did you arrange to miss them?”

“I am not hiding. I did not wish to talk with them today.”

“Why not?”

“Are you always eager to talk to the police?”

“It’s a good idea to get it over with, assuming you’re innocent. They get ideas if they keep having to look for you.”

“I said I did not kill the pig. That’s not the same as being innocent.”

“That’s why you didn’t stick around when all the action started. You had something in the car.”

“Perhaps.”

“I don’t need to know any more than that right now. Just tell me you didn’t have anything to do with killing him, or with stealing the falcon.”

Remember, I'll be back if I find out you lied to me."

"Tonight I will drink a toast to who it was that killed him," Jorge said. "And I will sleep well because it was not me who had to do it." I couldn't look at his smile and imagine he'd lie. That's why he couldn't be trusted.

I gave him a card and told him to call me if he heard anything interesting. He smiled and promised to do so, of course. I couldn't help but like Jorge. They say Bugsy Siegel was charming in his way, too.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### The Neighborhood Watch

There were half a dozen of what liberals refer to as "disenfranchised youths" hanging around my car. Latin Kings, if I read their colors right. The shot caller leaned back against the grill and hood, open jacket exposing a wife beater undershirt in the freezing cold. Just his fingers in the front pockets of his jeans. He carried the calculated posture of someone who wants to seem tough without looking like he's trying. I didn't know how tough he was; his nipples had to be cast iron in that cold.

"Gentlemen." I kept moving, not quite straight toward anyone. "It's a pleasure to meet you, but that's my car. So, if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way."

"We know it's your ride," said the leaner. The glow of the block's lone operating streetlight framed his legs and feet. "We're keeping an eye on it for you. We're like the neighborhood watch." That got a laugh on cue.

"You can prove that, of course."

"Prove it? Like how?"

"Identification, maybe show me a badge or something."

"I don't have to show you any stinking badge." This poor bastard was in the wrong movie. "You went to see Jorge."

"I know. I was there."

"What for?"

"Ask Jorge."

"I'm asking you, Anglo."

"And I'm telling you Jorge is free to share his business with anyone he wants, but I'm not." I wanted to add "beaner" in the worst way, but one against six are only good odds for Clint Eastwood, who was unavailable.

“Now I’m getting in my car and leaving. I’ve got no quarrel with anyone here, but I could, if you asked right.”

He came off the car a little, allowed the light to hit his upper body and face. Irises were almost as dark as his pupils, and big. He’d get any girl he wanted. They’d swoon over those eyes and the knife scars on his face would deter any male competition.

He made sure I got a good look at the face. I tended to think the person to worry about was the one who gave him the scars. Of course, my boy might have shed that guy’s mortal coil for him.

“Okay, you don’t want to talk to us, you probably not going to talk to anyone else.” He turned his head to address his posse. “*Vayamos!* I think I’ll remember you, White Bread.”

He held back while his boys walked past me. All but one went out of their way to bump me or spit at my feet, exaggerating their hood walk, making sure I knew they were bad. The *jefe* waited until they were gone.

It looked like he’d walk right by me until the switchblade appeared, the tip pressed against my windpipe. “I got something for you, *hijo de la puta*. Don’t ever come into the crib of Luis Lopez and hassle his friends. Me and Jorge are down for this hood. I see you talking to him again, I’ll give you something to remember me by every time you shave.” He ran the edge of the blade across the ridge of my left cheek, an inch below the eye. “Think you can remember that? Now get some gone.” His smile wasn’t at all like Jorge’s when he stepped back and folded the blade.

I gave him the cop stare, the one with the dead eyes. He wouldn’t hurt me now. He would have done it already, so his crew could see how hard he was.

He was almost past me when I made my .45 appear as smoothly as he’d produced the switchblade. I thumbed back the hammer and pressed the muzzle tight against the skin under his jaw.

“Okay, Luis, now I have a couple of things for you to remember. First, be God damned sure how good someone is before you call him the son of a whore. Second, never, ever, bring a knife to a gun fight. If I was someone else, your brains would be on that wall right now. *Comprende?*”

It didn’t make any difference to Luis if I pulled the trigger or not. He was a Latin King, a Scary Dude. I didn’t know what went on behind his

empty eyes, but I knew he'd never show fear to anyone. He probably didn't remember what it felt like.

I gave him a few seconds to contemplate the situation, then eased the hammer forward and made the gun disappear as quickly as it had materialized. I extended my right hand.

“No hard feelings? I'm not interested in your business, not today. I don't want any trouble, but I can't afford to run away from any, either. You know how it is. Are we down with the set?”

One corner of his lips twitched in what might have been an embryonic smile. Slid his hand across my palm. I gave him a card, told him to ask Jorge about me, give me a call if he knew anything interesting. I didn't think he did, but it never hurts to advertise.

I saw him talking to his boys as I drove past. I wondered what he was telling them. It was a safe bet I pissed myself somewhere in his story. I took a quick breath through my nose. The Honda smelled like any car that had been closed up all winter. My bladder had come through like a trooper.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### The Plot Thickens

Sheila O'Donoghue lived in a condominium in the ever revitalizing River North area. A nice place—not doorman nice—vagrants wouldn't be tolerated in the gangways. Polished tile floors, walls made of a stone-like material I couldn't identify. Clean, not sterile. Polite echoes of my footfalls followed me through the lobby.

The smell of General Tso's chicken greeted me at the door with Sheila. “I'm so glad you decided to come. I didn't want to be alone all night.”

“We still have work to do,” I felt obligated to say. She wore a silk blouse of indeterminate color in the weak light, Capri slacks with slippers. The Capris showed off an ankle bracelet that reflected enough light to direct the eye.

“Surely we can eat first,” she said. “I'm famished. I haven't eaten since I heard about Russell.”

The inside about what I expected: tasteful and put together with a lot of care, not unlike Sheila. Everything in its place, and its place had received considerable thought. Modern furniture; not ultra-modern. Delivery Chinese already on the coffee table, pillows positioned for us to sit and eat. No trace of cardboard cartons or disposable chopsticks. At least three orders of General Tso's chicken dominated the display. Good thing I hadn't mentioned oysters.

"How did you spend your day?" I asked, making conversation. She couldn't be any hungrier than I was.

"Media, mostly, and business issues with the theater. Joel handles most of the media people, and he's welcome to them. He issued a statement in my name, but they still keep calling me, looking for a personal quote, something different the rest of them won't have."

"And the theater?"

"Theater is an art, but it's also a business. The Goodman has enormous logistical issues, returning ticket money, and they have a vested financial interest. They're distraught over Russell, but the theater must go on, even if the show doesn't."

"Aren't they insured?"

"Of course, but there's really no way to make them whole after something like this. They'll get their expenses back, and probably some of the lost revenues, but there will be other costs and publicity issues to be dealt with. Fortunately it was to be a short run, so they won't be dark for long."

"How are you holding up?"

She took a while to answer. "Well, until I got home. I was busy all day and didn't really have time to think or feel much of anything. The last hour, here alone, too many random thoughts and memories have gotten into my head. I'm so glad you're here."

She touched my hand as I helped myself to some chicken. Hers was warm and the muscles and skin were firm and taut as she slid the pads of her fingers across the back of my hand. I couldn't help but look at her and caught her inspecting me.

The only light in the room came from the gas fireplace flickering across her face. Her eyes still dominated my attention, their color indistinct, the irises almost indistinguishable from the whites in the uncertain light. Money

could buy enough surgery to alter anything made of flesh or bone. Health clubs and personal trainers could keep what was left toned to meet even the most unrealistic expectations. Not one woman in ten million had eyes like hers and she knew it. She looked at me and drew me as close as she wanted. She could do it with any man, whenever she felt like it. The more I saw of her eyes, the less the gesture's sincerity mattered.

She let my hand slide out from under hers. "Now I get to ask some of the questions, Mister Detective. How was your day?"

"I've had better. I know there was nothing I could do about what happened to Russell, but it still bothers me."

"So you've come to understand him better, maybe even like him a little?"

I shook my head. "Nothing I know makes me think he was anything but amoral scum." I held up a forkful of chicken and rice to keep her from interrupting. "We don't need to have this conversation. I know how you felt about him, and I know there were a lot of complicating issues in those feelings. What I thought about him doesn't matter. Someone killed him and I need to know who."

"Won't the police do that?"

I exaggerated my smile. "I'm only looking for the falcon. Since the killer is almost sure to have it, or had it at some point, my investigation and theirs will probably overlap."

"Is that what you told the female detective who's so possessive of you? Do you think she really believes it?"

I used a mouthful of food to buy time. "She knows I can't leave this alone. I'll tell her if I learn anything material, and she'll fill me in on what she thinks I need to know. I do want the falcon, but she knows me well enough not to be fooled into thinking that's all I care about." I took a slow drink of wine. "And 'possessive' isn't a word that comes to mind when I think of Jan Rusiewicz."

"That's because you're a man. A woman would notice her marking her territory in a heartbeat." Eating had stopped. Nothing distracted us from looking at each other. Time for someone to remember I had work to do.

"What can you tell me about Amber?" I said.

"Who?" she said, too quickly.

“Come on, coy isn’t one of your better attitudes. Classy, attractive—mysterious maybe. Not coy. I need to know what you know about her.”

“Is it necessary?”

“He saw her frequently, and I can’t eliminate her as a suspect.”

Sheila started eating. “She can’t have killed him.”

“Why not? She knew him, might have had reason to hate him, and a package with her name on it is missing.”

“A package?”

“I saw it yesterday and it wasn’t there this morning. She would have the best motive for taking it.”

“Why?” A chopstick load of rice hung an inch from her mouth. No wonder she stayed thin. Between how much she loved to talk and her spotless etiquette, she didn’t eat enough to fill a shot glass.

“To remove a connection between her and Russell.”

“But it was no secret he saw her. Jorge knew, you knew, what would taking the gift do? She would have done better to leave it there. If she killed him.”

“Maybe.”

“And what would be her motive for killing him?”

“I don’t know. I’m not saying she did it, just putting together a list of suspects. I’m not far enough along to start eliminating people yet.” I chewed a mouthful of chicken past the point where it needed a swallow to slide down my throat. I washed it down, anyway. Anything to delay the next question. “I need to know about Russell’s sexual—uh, aberrations. As a young man he could persuade women to indulge him. Now he had to pay them. I hate to ask, but maybe he asked for more than even a pro could tolerate.”

Sheila stopped eating. Her eyes drifted downward. “You want to know what he liked to do,” she said without tone.

“No. I need to.”

She took a delicate taste of wine, dabbed at her lips with somber propriety, as if she could undo the memory of what she had done by being more respectable in its telling. She took what seemed like a long time to prepare herself.

“Russell was a very controlling person.” She spoke without hesitation once she started. “He liked his partner to submit, sometimes completely, to

whatever he desired at the moment. To pain, to being watched, to being – shared.”

She wet her lips with the wine. I waited to see if she would continue. When she did, it was clear that avenue of discussion was closed. “I assume that sooner or later you’re going to ask me where I was last night.”

“I have to.” I wiped a dab of grease from my lips and put my napkin on the table.

“Your friend asked me this afternoon.”

“I figured.”

“Are you going to see her and check my story?”

I’d done enough damage for one evening. “I’m sorry, Sheila, but this is my job. I don’t play at it, I work at it. I’m going to find out eventually, so you might as well tell me.” I gathered a few plates and started guiding her toward the front door.

She didn’t hurry organizing the leftovers. “I’m afraid it’s not what you’d call much of an alibi.”

“Just tell me.”

“I came home after the theater. I took a bath and read before I went to bed.”

“Stop anywhere? Talk to anyone?”

She scraped the food off the plates and into the sink without speaking or looking at me.

“Don’t take this personally,” I said. “The police will check as a matter of routine. The first thing they do is eliminate anyone who knew him.”

Sheila stopped scraping and looked at me. “People who knew him? Why?”

“The killer is known to the victim in the vast majority of homicides. Russell was killed far from the door and there was no sign of a struggle, so he probably felt comfortable with the killer in the room. His address book is the best place to start.”

“That’s why your friend kept asking me who could have come to visit last night.”

“That’s right.”

The dishes were in the sink. She turned on the light while I got my coat and closed to intimate distance while I shrugged into it. The brighter light accentuated her irises’ contrast with the pupils.



“You’re not like Russell, are you? You don’t need to control people.”

“Not beyond a certain point. I have to keep things in line, and I have to manipulate people’s responses sometimes to find out what I need to know. I don’t get any satisfaction from it.”

She looked into me well past my comfort level, until I wondered why I hadn’t left yet. “When you described me before, were ‘classy’ and ‘attractive’ the only words that came to mind?”

“No.” My voice wasn’t as resonant as I expected.

“What else?” she whispered.

It would have been easier if she had thrown herself at me. I knew what she needed and couldn’t give it to her, not tonight. Validation, maybe. The knowledge that exposing the darkness of her relationship with Russell, however little, didn’t make her damaged goods in my eyes. It didn’t have to do with me so much as I happened to be the person who had drawn back the curtain.

“I’m working, Sheila.” I cleared my throat louder than I meant to. It was embarrassing as hell. “I can’t get into this.”

“For future reference, then.” Her hands quivered at the back of my neck. Her lips no more than three inches from my left ear. “Seductive, maybe?”

“Definitely.” My voice lost ground again.

Her lips grazed my ear. “Desirable?”

I turned my head an inch and she was in my arms, our lips pressed together. My hands went around her, felt her mold herself to my embrace as her mouth opened. Her confusion was genuine when I forced myself to step away. “Not now.”

“Is it the detective?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. It’s her and it’s not and it’s the case and it’s not. I just know I can’t. Not now.”

“You keep saying that. You won’t always, will you?”

I didn’t answer.

She stepped away and gave me a knowing smile, heartbreaking in its implications. “All right, Mister Detective, go back to work. I’m disappointed, but I’m not easy, no matter what I might seem tonight. I was attracted to you the first time I saw you on television.”

“On television?”

“I saw you on the news the night you rescued Frankie Calabra. I knew what kind of man you were even then. That doesn’t mean I didn’t check you out before I recommended you to Russell. I understand professionalism, too.” Damn Phil Chandler. He thinks he knows everything, and he might. “So I’m not hurt that you’re leaving. Just promise me you’ll come back sometime, just to see what happens. That’s what you do, isn’t it? Find out what happens?”

How come everyone knew all about me except me? Maybe I needed to come back, if only to learn as much about myself as everyone else seemed to know already.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### The History Lesson

The man who waited for me in Sharon’s office the next morning was small, with a slight paunch in the middle of an otherwise trim body. He wore a blue suit with a white shirt and a blue rep tie and combed what was left of his hair to within an inch of its life. If he wasn’t a fed, I was Daffy Duck.

He presented as his own the card of an investigator named Oscar Wallace. He accepted a cup of coffee and made small talk while it brewed and I made myself some tea. He was good at it, much better than I, no major accomplishment. Phil once said my idea of idle chatter was “Nice weather, shut the fuck up.”

Wallace added cream and sugar to his coffee—careful not to spill any—stirred it with economical motions. He rinsed his spoon in my office sink and left it on the side to dry. Then he seated himself in the same chair Sheila O’Donoghue found so uncomfortable and sipped his coffee. He showed no intention to speak.

“Mr. Wallace, it’s a pleasure to meet you, but I make shitty coffee and know you didn’t come here just to drink it. Your card says you’re an investigator and you have ‘retired fed’ written all over you. What do you want?”

Wallace set his cup on my desk with the same deliberate care as everything else he did. He crossed his left ankle over his right knee, looking no more perturbed than a book shelf at my bluntness.

“You’re working on the Russell Arbuthnot case. You were the bodyguard. No offense.” He gestured to cut off any interruption. “You signed on to guard him, not to sleep with him.”

Nothing there for me. I waited for something to respond to while he tried more coffee. He struck me as someone who did everything in his own good time.

“Arbuthnot doesn’t concern me. My interests lie with the falcon statue from his act. It’s missing, isn’t it?”

“Right.”

“Have you seen it?”

“Sure, he had a shrine in his bedroom for it.”

“How close did you get?” Wallace couldn’t have gotten better than a C in his fed “Not Looking Too Interested” class. “Did you handle it?”

“Close enough to see what was supposed to be Sydney Greenstreet’s nick. The only time I handled it was to put it in and take it out of its case. Why?”

“Do you know the story behind that statue?”

“You mean the one about the poor Japanese kid at the studio and the movie executive and the cast of thousands? Sure, he told me.” Wallace shook his head through the second half of my comment. “No? I’m shocked—*shocked!*—to think he’d lie to me.”

Wallace smiled, a tight-lipped gesture more an effort to be polite than to show any genuine amusement.

“Would you care to hear the real story?”

“This isn’t going to be about the Knights Templar and the King of Spain, is it?”

“No, no knights in this story. What would you say if I told you the statue he’s using is no more than three years old?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. I took everything he said with about a three-pound block of salt.”

“To be fair, if I’m right in my theory, Arbuthnot wasn’t lying. He truly thought the dingus – ” Wallace indulged himself another miniscule smile, “ – was from the movie set. The bird you saw wasn’t Arbuthnot’s original. I don’t think even he knew it.”

“You’d better tell me. I don’t want you to explode from holding it back.”

A few teeth peeked out from behind his lips. He might even have chuckled. Oscar Wallace didn't blow his daily allotment of levity in one sitting.

"You're right, I'm a retired federal agent. Treasury Department. I worked mostly on enforcing currency laws. A few years ago I heard a rumor so bizarre it couldn't be discounted. Are you familiar with the Irish Republican Army?"

"Just what everyone sees on the news."

"You may be aware the IRA publicly disavowed all connection with terrorism and violence several years ago. That didn't go over well with some of the more militant members, and a couple of splinter groups formed. One of them called itself the Real IRA. The Realies had a strong fundraising base in Chicago."

I sampled some tea when he paused, not wanting to make his mistake of seeming too eager. "You're saying Arbuthnot had IRA connections?"

"No. The IRA had an Arbuthnot connection." I let him see my confusion. "The Realies' violence made it difficult for the IRA to be taken seriously as a peaceful organization. Sacrifices had to be made."

"Such as?"

"Such as using inside information to expose many of the financial sources and laundering operations used by the Real IRA."

"Kind of like an animal eating its young?"

Wallace had the tone and air of someone with no doubt he would know the answer to any question I asked. "That's how the Realies saw it. They were starving for funds and the Brits were squeezing their usual channels. They needed cash in a hurry. Desperate measures were called for."

"How desperate?"

"The Realies had a local operative named Ian Mallory. Mallory was tight with a member of Russell Arbuthnot's entourage. They worked some minor drug deals, did a little fencing, raised whatever cash they could. They wound up with a tidy sum and no way to get it to Ireland. The Brits had uncovered all the usual routes, and English Customs was stopping anyone who might be trying to smuggle cash into the country."

"How does Arbuthnot figure in?"

"Arbuthnot was about to go on a European tour, including Belfast. Mallory had a replica made of the falcon and lined it with gold. Then they

switched their bird for Arbuthnot's with the help of their inside man."

"The inside man's name wasn't Jorge Mendoza, was it?"

Wallace shared one of his microscopic fed smiles. "You *do* catch on. Arbuthnot used their statue in the act, never knew what was going on. The plan was to switch them back after he was in Ireland and no one would be the wiser."

"One thing. Gold is heavier than hell. A statue that size would weigh a ton."

"If it were solid. We think they just lined the insides with it. The balance was close enough to the original that Arbuthnot never noticed. They even put the nick in it that he was so proud of pointing out."

"I'm guessing the switch back never got made."

"No. Arbuthnot's tour traveled over Europe for six weeks before going to Ireland. Mallory and some other Realies drove into a British roadblock a week before the statue got there. The Realies decided to shoot it out and Mallory was killed."

"And the switch never got made."

"And the switch never got made." The phantom smile again.

"So Arbuthnot still had the gold bird."

"If the story's true. All we have are pieces of rumors."

"Why not go to Arbuthnot and ask him?"

"We did. He threw us out. Threatened a court order. We tried to get a search warrant. The judge said we didn't have probable cause."

"And you just let it go."

"That's right." Wallace gave me his best auditor glare. Thick, rimless glasses distorted his watery blue eyes. "No matter what Lyndon LaRouche and Rush Limbaugh say to their mouth-breathing masses, we don't go around breaking in wherever we please."

"Maybe Arbuthnot knew what was in the bird. Could be a reason for him not letting you test it. Are you sure he didn't take what was in it?"

"Not completely. We've had a casual eye on him since then, and his bank transactions have been monitored. Everything seems normal."

"How much you figure it's worth, the bird with the gold?"

"Half a million, maybe more."

I whistled low and long. "That's very interesting."

"Are you looking for it?"

“Officially, yes.”

“Officially?”

“I want the statue. I also want the killer. It’s even money I find one I’ll have the other.”

He nodded. “You can have the killer. All I want is to see the statue.”

“What’s your interest? You’re private now, aren’t you?”

“The story’s too fantastic to let go as just another urban legend. I’d like to find out if it’s true.”

“Unless Arbuthnot got to it first.”

“I don’t think so. He was psychotic about it. I think he would’ve let us have it if he thought it was fake.”

I stifled most of my smile. “I don’t think so, either. Same reason. All right, Mr. Wallace, I have your number. If I come across the statue, I’ll give you a peek. It’s the least I can do, and I always do the least I can. According to my ex-wife, anyway.”

Wallace took his empty mug to the sink and rinsed it, dried it, and replaced it with the same meticulous care as when he came in. Then he shrugged into his coat and fastened the belt as close to horizontal as was possible without using a level before he shook my hand and left. The feds must have some kind of anal retentive test all field agents have to pass.

I sat for ten minutes after he’d gone. I thought he was full of crap, but something about him wouldn’t let me dismiss the story. Five minutes on the Internet gave me the information I wanted. Sharon tried to trick me to finishing some reports; I was too quick for her. Maybe someday I’ll learn to work on the projects that actually pay me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Thanks for the Memories

Herbert Mendelssohn had an office suite not unlike mine in a building dominated by jewelers on the Unit Block of East Madison. Melted slush puddled on the floor in the lobby. The elevator didn’t smell dirty so much as it smelled like it needed a cleaning.

Mendelssohn's office smelled of dust and forced air heat. A line of sight ran from his office door to his desk. The rest of the two rooms were a maze, its paths defined by boxes and items Mendelssohn must have considered memorabilia, since he advertised himself as a dealer. It seemed an optimistic definition.

Mendelssohn was not an awe-inspiring sight himself. Average height, I guessed; he didn't get up when I entered. Bushy salt-and-pepper hair covered a square head everywhere except on top, where not enough remained for his comb-over to cut the glare off his scalp. The block head sat atop a stocky frame, shirt sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. He looked like a kid built him with Legos.

"Professional Investigator, eh?" he read from my card. "That different from private?"

"Private, too," I said. "Professional is to remind everyone I do this for a living, not just farting around like the Thin Man." I hoped he wouldn't move from behind the desk. I'd never find him in the mess.

"Why would a professional investigator want to see me?" He accorded my card the reverence he thought it deserved by dropping it into a box with at least a hundred others.

"The Maltese falcon. More precisely, Russell Arbuthnot's replica. It's missing, and I'm wondering what it might be worth to an insurance company."

"Arbuthnot's falcon?" He fished my card out of the pile. "Nick Forte. Aren't you the one he hired to –"

"Yeah, I'm him. I'm trying to salvage what I can from this mess by finding the statue."

"How can I help you?"

"What would this thing be worth on the open market?"

"Impossible to say," he said in a tone that implied someone of his ilk might be able to do it, anyway.

"Make an effort. Ballpark is good enough."

"There are too many intangibles to predict with any degree of certainty what the figure would be worth. I know of an authenticated statue from the film getting three hundred thousand dollars at auction."

That wasn't close to what Wallace was talking about, but it was still a nice chunk of change for a useless object. "Three hundred grand? I mean,

this isn't like it's Mark McGwire's sixty-second home run ball from '98 or something. It's a movie prop."

"True, but which prop for which movie? Three were made, but I understand Arbuthnot's has the markings where Sidney Greenstreet cut into it. That makes it the one true falcon to many people."

"So it's worth more than three hundred thousand?"

"Maybe a lot more. Aside from its relevance to the film, it was Russell Arbuthnot's statue. His show's success deepened that statue's luster considerably. Now that someone killed him for it, it could be virtually priceless."

"Priceless or worthless? There's a murder charge hanging over whoever tries to fence it."

"Good point. Authenticity would be hard to prove. If the holder had something to verify its origins, he would be a thief and probably a killer. No documentation, no value, is that what you're thinking?"

"Pretty much."

He smiled like a teacher about to explain a lesson to yet another class of not-too-bright students. "What is anything worth? Why do entertainers and athletes make such unconscionable sums of money? Why does a painting no one looked at twice when the artist was alive increase in value exponentially after his death?" I shrugged. He'd tell me whether I asked or not.

"It's all about perception. Anything is worth what one person is willing to pay for it. Whoever has it only has to find one person with the means and a certain black market mentality." He held up an index finger with the nail missing. "One man. Do you have any idea how many men like that there are in the world today?"

"Still, you're talking a lot of money for something that has to be hidden. Doesn't the kick come from showing it off?"

"It depends. Maybe just knowing you were above the law in some manner justifies your feelings of power. Wouldn't a Saudi prince be willing to show his court and not care if anyone else knew he had it? What about some big shot getting off knowing a man died so he could have it, but still able to sleep at night because it wasn't him who killed the rightful owner?"

"It's sick," I said, only because I knew he was right.



Mendelssohn smiled, this time the teacher appreciating the student as he catches on. “Probably. But you know it happens, don’t you?”

“I do now.”

“That’s why I can’t tell you how much. It’s all about what one man will pay.” He tapped a ballpoint pen against his desk blotter. “You mentioned McGwire’s home run ball. Are you a baseball fan?”

“Yes, why?”

“Remember the contract Alex Rodriguez got when he signed with Texas?”

“About two hundred fifty million over ten years, wasn’t it?”

“No one else bid over two hundred. The Rangers owner overpaid by something like fifty million dollars. Fifty. Million. Dollars. Why would he do that?”

“I never did get that one. What do you think?”

“Because he could, and he wanted everyone to know it.” Mendelssohn spoke with the certainty of someone who had spent his life among people with too much money. “He couldn’t put a decent team on the field with the best player in the game on his roster because he couldn’t afford to pay anybody else good. But *he* got Rodriguez. No one else.”

“This makes sense to you?”

“Hell, no. I just understand it.”

“You make a living off it.”

“Someone has to. You want to know what my dream is, my retirement fantasy? To find a dress—even better, panties—with Bill Clinton’s DNA. I’d walk out of here and let them do whatever they wanted with this pile of junk.” He gestured toward what were until that moment priceless and irreplaceable artifacts.

“Get real.”

“You get real. Someone paid ten thousand—more, now that I think about it—for the bone chips from a pitcher’s arm. Baseball cards go for as much as a quarter of a million and up. There are people who talk about them as investments. Tell me I can’t retire on a sample of Clinton’s jizz.”

Too much information for a country boy. “You can have the spunk. How much for the bird?”

Mendelssohn showed an uneven smile, turned his hands palms up. “If the thief finds the right buyer? Three million, maybe more.”

I hadn't got my head around it before Mendelssohn spoke again.

"Ironic, isn't it?"

"How so?"

"The movie. The Fat Man couldn't begin to place a value on falcon. How many people died chasing it, and for what? A fake. They weren't even dying over the real bird. And here we are, Arbuthnot's dead, and no one can document if what they're buying is real or not. The irony is delicious."

His face made it clear he thought so; I missed it. At least now I knew finding the damn thing was likely to be a lot harder than I'd expected. What people will do to stay out of prison is nothing compared to what they'll do for money.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### The Harlot

Only bare tree limbs stirred in front of Amber's townhouse. The wind blew off the lake colder than my first visit, when I waited outside while Russell Arbuthnot warmed more than his hands.

The Thunderbird was on Clybourne again as I parked in a visitor's space. The tail was either very good or very lucky. I didn't see him on the way to Mendelssohn's, and I couldn't believe he picked me up on the fly. I chose not to deal with him until I saw how active his interest was.

I rang the bell and waited. I thought about ringing again when the door opened three inches, still on the chain. Half of a woman's face filled the gap, far enough back from the early afternoon sunlight to keep me from seeing anything distinguishing.

"What do you want?" it said.

"My name's Nick Forte. I was Russell Arbuthnot's bodyguard."

"I know. If I needed a bodyguard I'd get someone better."

Swell, another critic. "I'm not soliciting. I'm just trying to find out who killed him."

"I thought bodyguards were paid to keep people from getting killed in the first place." The door started to close.

I squeezed my right foot edgewise into the opening. "The police don't know about you and Russell. Yet."

The door stopped before it hurt my foot. Five seconds of silence passed. “What do you want?”

“Ten or fifteen minutes, tops.”

“Most men take longer.”

“Most men don’t freeze their asses off flirting with you. I know a very attractive cop who will be happy to talk with me if you’re too busy.”

“Move your foot so I can open the chain.”

I slid back my foot. The door closed while she undid the chain, then opened. I had to cross the threshold sideways. “I have an appointment in half an hour and I’m not ready yet,” she said.

Shafts of light streamed through louvered blinds to give me a better look at the room and its furnishings than of her. Tasteful, expensive Scandinavian for the most part. Light woods and deep pastels kept things bright without looking washed out.

“Ask your questions. I have work to do.”

She had to be more charming with the paying customers. I’d heard of men going to hookers to be dominated, not to be bitched at.

“I found the body,” I said. “There are a few things about his place the police aren’t aware of yet. They don’t have to be, depending on what I get from you.”

“You want it right here? Should I lean against the wall or just get on my knees? How long will that keep you away from the police?”

“Listen, Amber, or whatever the hell your name is, I’m working here. I don’t cause any more trouble than I have to and I don’t need to extort sex. I know you’re a whore. Try not to be a cunt, okay?”

Her slap drew blood at the left corner of my mouth. Winding up for another when I grabbed her by the wrist. She was slender, not slight; strong for a woman. I held the wrist long and hard enough to make clear how I’d handle future outbursts, then let her go. She turned and walked to a sofa in the living room, perturbed as if I wore a shirt she didn’t like. Wet her lips from a glass of white wine while looking through the window in the opposite wall. It didn’t matter to her if I came in or not.

I sat in a chair across the room, the distance conversational, not threatening. She sipped her wine and looked at me with something short of a glare, allowing me my first good look at all of her. No heels; the impression of her height I had was natural. Ash blond hair pulled tight into

one of those clips fashionable women use. Her suit was tailored to exhibit everything inside and retain plausible deniability. Her legs were toned—not overtly muscular—the flare of her hips led to a jacket pressed tight against her middle before it swelled over her breasts. The jacket showed a trace of a bra containing firm, full breasts that probably didn't need it. A rounder than oval face with high cheekbones and skin smooth as warm cream.

Her eyes made the image greater than the sum of its parts. Turquoise, or blue, or green; hard to say in that light. They glowed with heat, but no warmth. I couldn't not look at her, yet her beauty was too stark, too distant. She was hot as Death Valley on the Fourth of July, and about as inviting.

The silence lasted while we sized each other up. Since I was the one with the questions, I went first. "How long did you know Russell?"

"You mean in the biblical sense?"

"Did you know him any other way?"

"We did more than just fuck, you know."

"I'm sure you took long romantic walks on the beach. The lunchtime sessions were just to keep the relationship fresh."

The heat in her glare went up a notch. "About three months."

"Every day?"

"Not even Russell had that kind of money."

"How did you meet him?"

"I don't remember."

"It was only three months ago."

"I meet a lot of men. It's so hard to keep track of them. If I'm lucky I won't remember you at all in a few hours." Her eyes never lost contact with mine. A stare-down would be childish; looking away would give her the position of superiority. I did the best I could, looking at her nose, or her mouth when she spoke, anything to keep myself looking at her face without being drawn in by her eyes.

"Russell bought you a gift."

"He bought me lots of gifts."

"There's one in particular I'm talking about. It was from Frederick's of Hollywood. He was going to give it to you yesterday."

"He didn't come yesterday. You let his schedule get disrupted."

This was getting old in a hurry. "You didn't come by and get it the night before, did you? It's missing."

“I don’t make house calls, even for Russell. Maybe he put it somewhere.”

“No, it’s gone. He left it in plain sight the other day but it was gone yesterday. I searched his place pretty well.”

“And you thought you’d search here next.” She slid deeper into the sofa and did something with her back. Her skirt slid above the garter belt to expose the skin of her thighs, smooth as her face. Without seeming to move, she canted her hips in such a way to give me one second’s knowledge she wasn’t wearing panties. It was well rehearsed and expertly done.

The gesture was impossible to ignore and she knew it. I had to acknowledge it. “Am I supposed to show you my gun now?” A glimpse of a satisfied smile slid across her face. “Let’s cut to the chase. You don’t have the gift and don’t know anything about it, is that right?”

“That’s right.” She smoothed her skirt into a more appropriate position.

“And you’ve never been to Russell’s home?”

“Never.”

“Do you know anyone who knows him? Someone who might wish to do him harm?”

She looked away for less than a second. “No. I’ve seen his driver and you. That’s it.”

Maybe something in the window caught her attention. Maybe she checked the clock on the wall to see how much time before the next john. Whatever the reason, she looked away on that question.

“I guess I’m done here.” I stood up. “I can find my way out. I know you have work to do.”

She reached the door first. “Are you sure you got everything you came for?” So close I felt her breath on my ear. She slid one hand down the front of my shirt and over my fly. “Mmmm, maybe not *everything* you came for.” She gripped the zipper tab, pulled it downward.

I took her wrist. “It would never work between us. I’m on the clock and you’re not.”

Her hand stayed where it was. “You didn’t come all the way up here to ask about a gift. Don’t you want to know what Russell and I did? Maybe I could show you a few of them.”

“I don’t have what it takes and you know it.”

Her fingers squeezed around me as tightly as she could with my hand on her wrist. “You’re too modest.”

“As far as you’re concerned, I’m impotent and we both know it.” I backed her into the door and took her other hand in mine, guided it to my left hip pocket. “This is the only thing in a man’s pants that interests you. This is what gets you off.” I brought both hands to chest level and moved her aside. “Is that what does it for you when a greasy pig like Arbuthnot is laying on you? Are you thinking, ‘Oooh, baby, that wallet makes the earth move’?”

She flushed all the way to her hairline. “Yes, it does. Now get the fuck out.”

I slid a card inside her bra, not copping a feel but left the back of my hand there a second longer than necessary. “If you think of anything that might interest me, give me a call.”

I didn’t catch all of her reply. Something about a barnyard animal and my parents. She must have thought I was someone else.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### Be Careful What You Ask For

The Thunderbird stayed behind me when I left Amber’s. Seeing him in my mirror not as much fun as before, now that I knew what kind of money was at stake. Wallace and Mendelssohn had given me more to think about, and Amber hadn’t helped my mood any. I needed to accomplish something, which made it time to stop dicking around with this guy.

I led him back to my office, trying to look as oblivious to the situation as I hoped he was. I pulled in front of Tony’s garage and tossed the keys to Joey. Turned my back to the street, said to Tony, “Don’t make it obvious, but there’s a black T-Bird coming down Dearborn, probably slow. You see it?”

Tony rubbed his hands together and looked both ways like a man freezing his ass off. It didn't take much acting.

"Yeah, he's coming now." We stood like that for a few seconds. "Going slow, almost to Dearborn Station."

"Which way is he turning?"

"He's not. He pulled over on the other side of the street."

"What's he doing?"

"Just sitting there."

"Do me a favor. Call me when he does something."

"Will do."

I walked the half block to my office trying not to look at the car without being obvious about it. Sharon had re-stacked the reports I kept avoiding on my desk.

"For me?" I asked her.

"Don't say I never give you anything." She exaggerated her smile to saccharine levels. "You look like you have something on your mind."

"A guy who's supposed to be an expert told me that crummy statue is worth a lot more than I thought. Now I see the tail I noticed when I was babysitting Arbuthnot is still following me. I don't like the combination."

"I'm not crazy about it myself. What are you going to do?"

"Tony's keeping an eye on him. Maybe I'll arrange for a surprise of my own. Put Tony right through when he calls."

Ten minutes later, Tony said, "Your guy's sitting in Kasey's window booth."

"Where's the car?"

He snorted. "Right next to yours. I can have trouble finding the keys if you need."

Kasey's Tavern sat across Dearborn up the block from my building. My office faced the wrong way to see Dearborn, but I could see up and down Federal. No obvious henchmen covered the back door. I told Sharon to lock up and get out if Tony called before I got back and took the elevator to the first floor. Stood in the vestibule long enough to be seen not wearing an overcoat before I walked into Sandmeyer's Bookstore on the ground level.

Sandmeyer's got a lot of business from me, and I was tight with Ron, the usual counter man. He wasn't there when I came in, the counter being

womanned by a grad student who had been working there about three months. She was tall and thin and plain with her hair pulled back into a tight braid that hung three-quarters of the way down her back. She wore loose sweaters and less than form-fitting jeans, but the occasional bump in the sweaters when she turned could give a lonely man pause on a long winter night.

“Hi, Sarah.” I leaned on the counter, Mr. Casual, trying to give the impression to anyone watching I was trying to either find a book or hustle her.

“It’s Rebecca,” she said.

“Damn, sorry.” At least I remembered it was something Biblical. “Is Ron around?”

“He’s at lunch. Can I help you?”

The look she gave me was tolerant more than unfriendly, but not much. Her eyes were cobalt blue and I caught myself looking at them longer than necessary. What was it with women’s eyes this week? Rebecca’s eyes weren’t as distinctive as Sheila O’Donoghue’s, but they were special enough to hold someone where she wanted him. If she wanted to.

“Rebecca, I need a favor. Mind if I disappear into the stacks for a bit, then let myself out through the loading dock?”

“You’re the detective, right? Is this some cops and robbers thing you do?”

“Actually, yes, it is. I need to get out of the building without being seen from across the street.”

She made a conscious effort to create a facial expression telling me I was too high school for words. “Ooh, cloak and dagger. That’s even better. Or is it just a bill collector?”

I wasn’t in the mood. My frustrations had reached the point where someone would have to pay. I wanted it to be the pinhead across the street, but...

“Okay, *Rebecca*,” I said, emphasizing the name, “let me out or don’t. I can always go out through the building service entrance. It works better if I appear to be somewhere, but not if I have to kiss ass to do it.” Effete grad students are not spoken to that way, based on the look on her face. “You know Ron and I are tight. Cut me a break here.”



She chewed her bottom lip in a way that could pass for seductive until I thought of the circumstances and that Jan Rusiewicz did the same thing when thinking. “All right, but I’ll have to tell Ron when he gets back.”

“Fine. Before I go, nod your head a couple of times. Good, now point over that way, like you’re showing me where something is.” She did all of the above with as little conviction as possible. I made a mental note to ask Ron about hiring a drama major next time. “Thanks. Wait a few seconds after I walk away before you disconnect the alarm. You can turn it on again as soon as I’m gone.”

I wandered through the shelves of sports books until Rebecca started for the front of the store. I stayed away from aisles visible through the front window and went out through the loading dock that opened onto Federal Street.

The wind funneled down Federal from the north, passed through my sport coat like ice water through a sieve. I felt the hair in my nostrils freezing together and took what solace I could from knowing I’d walk down Federal with the wind at my back. I’d worry about facing north on Plymouth when the time came.

I walked south to Polk, turned left. Looked away as I jogged past Dearborn, the only place I could be seen from Kasey’s. Walking north on Plymouth was a bitch. The wind dried my lips so fast I licked them before I remembered not to. Every gust of wind made my ass a little redder for the guy sitting nice and toasty in Kasey’s.

Staying to the west side of the street and behind the Dumpsters kept me out of as much wind as possible. I was still freezing when I got to Kasey’s back door. Never locked during business hours, the only way back to the Dumpster and pile of empty kegs. No one said anything when I went in.

I paused behind the pool table to let my eyes accustom themselves to the relative darkness. The place had the universal “bar in the afternoon” smell of dry heat and draft beer. Sandy had the day off from her Medieval Lit classes at Roosevelt, pouring one of Kasey’s twenty drafts for some suit while reminding the one next to him he was married and too old for her besides. She made no indication she saw me.

I waited until my eyes adjusted enough to read the “Absolutely No Dancing, Be Nice or Be Gone” sign behind the bar. Where one might find room to dance in Kasey’s had never been made clear to me. My mark sat

alone at a table in a bay window-looking bump-out to the right of the front door, squeezed between the end of the bar so tight he'd have no way out when I when I stood in the chokepoint. Perfect.

I nodded and winked to Sandy as I passed and she winked back. It's nice to be known and liked by people who know you do weird things once in a while. I paused about halfway down the bar to size up my man.

He was a big son of a bitch. I couldn't tell how tall, his arms filled his leather jacket to the bursting point. Hair cut short but still wavy, moussed and turned up at the collar. The turtleneck sweater looked like it had a beer keg sewn into it. Weightlifter, probably muscle bound. I could take him, if I had to. I always think that. I have scars to prove it.

I took a chair from the table across the aisle from his and set it in his only exit. I straddled the chair, dangling my arms over the back. "Okay, you found me. Now what?"

Someone good would look at me out of the corner of his eye like I was unworthy of his attention and deny whatever I said. He tried to do that, but it lost a lot of effectiveness when he turned, looked straight at me, and his eyes got the size of sushi rolls.

"What're you talking about? Who says I was looking for you?"

"You've been following me off and on for three days. I assumed you wanted me for something."

"I don't know nothing about you being followed. Leave me alone."

"I'm sure there are plenty of things you know nothing about, and following people is definitely one of them. I've been onto you since the other day on Clybourne. Don't play dumb. It comes too natural to you."

"Kiss my ass. I'm just sitting here having a beer." He drained the rest of his glass, in case I hadn't seen him drink any before.

"I watched you follow me all the way from Clybourne just now. What gives?"

The closeness of the chair and table to the end of the bar made it difficult for him to stand. I got up while he struggled, still blocking his way.

"You'd rather talk in my office, that's fine. You know where it is."

"Fuck you. I ain't talking to you nowhere. Get out of my way."

He was up now. I held my ground more to see what he'd do than to keep him there. I didn't want to start anything in Kasey's.

He half-turned and bumped an upper arm and shoulder into my chest. It felt like a pickup truck easing through. I gave ground with token resistance and opened the door for him.

“My office it is. It’s over here.”

“I’m going to my car. Get lost.”

Letting him know I’d made him wouldn’t accomplish anything. Whoever sent him would send someone else, someone better. Any message needed to be delivered now.

He started walking toward Tony’s garage. Joey was there, plenty of help for whatever might happen. The smart thing to do was to brace him at the garage, where I had backup. This was no time to let my frustrations get the better of me and do something rash.

So I did exactly that. Sometimes I just can’t help myself.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### The Marquis of Queensbury is Dead

I hooked the inside of his right elbow with my left hand to spin him part way around. It took some work and I doubt I could have done it if he’d been ready. I cuffed him along the side of his head with my right hand, nothing serious.

“I’d talking to you, Steroid Boy. Nothing’s free. You want to follow me around, it costs.”

He put his hands on my upper arms, lifted me all the way off the ground. He was no more than average height, so when he picked me up I was at least seven inches taller than he was, looking stupid with my feet off the ground. It occurred to me I could be up there a while. Holding me didn’t seem to tax him any more than lifting a toilet seat.

“Nobody puts their hands on me.” He walked me toward the building next to Kasey’s. When he got within five feet he threw me against the wall by extending his arms and opening his hands. I saved my head from cracking the brick wall, but my back slammed flat against it.

It's a lousy feeling to have the wind knocked out of you when you know things are about to happen. I tried to keep moving, avoided most of a body punch that caught me off-balance, knocked me back into the bricks.

I used the wall for leverage and bounced off faster than he expected, catching him with a right to the face. The punch staggered him without hurting him, but I had his attention. A muscle bound, not quick at all. I could handle him if I stayed smart. I'm no boxer, but I've watched myself get beat up enough times to know how it works.

I sidestepped a lunge, flicked a left hand into his nose. He grunted and might have said something. I hit him in the midsection with a solid right hand that might as well have missed for all the effect it had.

He rushed again and I countered with a matador move and a left to the mouth, felt something give. The recoil of my punch moved me back against the building and I realized my mistake too late.

He turned to cut off my space. With room to maneuver I had the advantages of reach and quickness. Now he was too close, pressing me in on the building. I hit him with a right square on the jaw but I couldn't step into it and there was no weight behind the punch. He ignored it and moved in, got his arms around me and squeezed.

Now I had real trouble. I got my left arm loose before he clamped down. I tried to hit him with it, but my ribs were exposed on that side. The butt of my gun pressed between two ribs and I felt soft tissue give way. My head started to ring and blood pounded in my ears as air ran out of me.

Christ, he was strong. His arms the size of my thighs, and I knew I couldn't wrap anyone up with my thighs the way he was doing me. I forced the odd gasp of air and tried to work my right arm free. I might as well have tried chewing it off.

My vision tinted red. The first stages of the panic that comes with being without air were setting in when he leaned in a few inches and spoke, his breath ripe with beer and pickles. "Not like sucker punching someone in an alley, is it, tough guy? No TV star to get you on the news today."

I couldn't see anything behind him. His face less than a foot away was hazy. Only his nose was reachable. I leaned forward and did my damndest to bite it off. He screamed and squeezed harder and I clamped down hard as I could.

Whether it was pain or lack of air I don't know; he broke the bear hug. I stepped back and fought off the urge to vomit. Freezing air burning my lungs. Blood covered his face, bright red in the winter sun, flowing through his fingers as he tried to feel how much nose he had left. I spat as much as I could into the street.

I stepped up before he recovered and boxed his ears, hard. He went down to one knee and I grabbed him by the shoulders of his jacket and ran him head first into the wall.

I had him teed up to do it again when I heard shouting behind me.

“Barry! My God, what are you doing?”

Sharon grabbed my arms from behind. “No, Nick, no, let me, please. You'll kill him and it's not worth it.”

What strength I had focused on the bleeding hulk cowering against the wall. Sharon held me back while I stared dumbfounded at her.

“Who's...Barry?” Getting both words out like running up a sand dune.

“He is.” She pointed to the man struggling to stand against the wall.

“That's the boyfriend I told you about. The one I dumped last week.”

I needed several breaths before answering as little bits of me shifted back into place. “That's the boyfriend? He's been following me for three days now.”

“*He's* been following you?” She turned from me and glared right through him. “Why?”

Barry still on his knees, holding a handkerchief to what used to be his nose. “I told you I wasn't just going to let you go. You said your boss was a real tough guy how he took care of that actor in the alley. I was going to show you who was a man.”

So that was it. Nothing to do with Russell Arbuthnot or the falcon. This dickhead probably didn't even know who Arbuthnot was. I watched Sharon give him a good talking-to and thought a lot of men could be inspired to do stupid things because of her, but this took the cake.

She got him on his feet and he checked out his leather jacket, which would never be worn again. I finally had enough air in me to talk without sounding like *The Godfather*.

“You followed me around looking for a way to set me up? Make yourself look tough? You figured when she saw what a stud hoss you were she'd

come running back to you?”

Not much available on his face to show expression; his eyes admitted everything.

“You dumb bastard. She doesn’t want me. She can do a lot better, and she knows it. *I* know it. But she’s my friend, so if I ever hear of you so much as talking loud to her, I’ll hurt you. Do you understand?”

He only got out the “f” of his answer when I stepped forward with the punch I needed ten minutes ago. A right, and I shifted my weight and got my shoulder behind it like you’re supposed to, landing it square on the soft mushy spot where most people keep their noses. Barry checked out before he hit the sidewalk.

I leaned over with my hands on my knees and took a deep breath. It hurt. And for what? Barry the Body Builder had nothing to do with anything that concerned me, except for causing what I expected would be a few uncomfortable nights.

“Are you Nick Forte?”

I turned my head to see the woman behind the voice. Mousy brown hair more or less pulled back, stray strands charting their own courses around her head. Black, rectangular frames surrounded lenses no more than half an inch thick. A greasy guy holding a video camera stood behind her.

“Who are you?” It hurt to say it.

“Candace Carr, News Nineteen. We’ve been calling you for a week. Looks like we picked the right day to come over.”

Maybe to her it did.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### The News Hound

Candace Carr knew more about me than anyone but me had a right to know. Age, place of birth, education, military service, police resume, and everything that had ever hit the newspapers. She regaled me with the depth of her knowledge while we took the elevator to the third floor. Her

encyclopedic knowledge didn't impress me as much as she planned; I already knew all that stuff.

I managed not to throw up while we walked from the elevator to my office. The cameraman stayed in the street, getting shots of Bleeding Barry for the Five O'clock News. I knew enough about television to realize my chances of missing the evening broadcast were none and less.

"Miss Carr, what can I do for you?" I eased myself into my chair. The creaking of the leather made less noise than my innards.

"Returning my phone calls would have been nice." Her voice had a nasal tone, as if she was holding her nose.

"That's what I should have done, not what I can do now." I started to reach for the mini-fridge for a beer and couldn't do it. My current posture would have to suffice for the time being. The only thing that hurt more than breathing was the time between breaths.

"I could be a lot of help to you. Just meet me half way," she said.

"Help how? By getting my name back in the news? I'm a divorced father with limited visitation privileges as it is. My ex sees any film on what happened today and I'll have to bring the Pope to chaperon if I want to take my kid to the movies."

"You viciously assaulted a defenseless man."

"How much did you see?"

"We pulled up in time to see you ram him into the wall. I think the only usable tape we got was of you cold cocking him."

I pictured noseless Barry and me, with no visible marks. "So you didn't see what happened before he entered the defenseless state you're so concerned about."

"It doesn't matter. Your last punch was obviously excessive. He was beyond the ability to defend himself." It was clear from her looks and personality that Candace Carr's social life did not interfere with her career.

"Ever been in a real fight, Miss Carr? Not an altercation, but an honest to God, you'd better win this or else fight?"

"No." People with the well-defined and superior opinions of a Candace Carr never got into fights at all.

"Okay," I said.

She waited for me to continue, seemed somewhat put out when I didn't. "That's all? Okay? Is this where I get the lecture about adrenaline and how

you can't just turn it off? That's what makes what you did permissible?"

"No."

"No, what? No, it's not permissible?"

"No. No speech."

"I'm not worth explaining it to, is that it?" Christ, this broad was worse than Amber. At least Amber put on a show for me.

"Miss Carr, I am too sore to argue with you. All I want to do right now is go home, take a hot shower, and find out if Ben-Gay is approved for internal use. If you have something to ask me, please do it. If not, please leave me alone. It would hurt my reputation for you to see me cry, and I'm thinking about it."

"How would you like the tape of you punching that man to disappear?" She had my undivided attention; it would be uncool to make it too obvious. I raised my eyebrows to indicate interest, the first thing I'd done in ten minutes that didn't hurt.

"You're looking for Russell Arbuthnot's killer, aren't you?"

"That's a police matter. I'm looking for the falcon."

"Bullshit. You want the killer. It galls you that Arbuthnot got killed on your watch."

"I was off duty."

"You took a lot of money to protect him and made sure it got into all the papers. Now he's dead and you look like an idiot. You want to salvage however much of your reputation can be saved, and we both know it."

"Why does that interest you? You want to follow me around and screw up my chances of getting the falcon recovery fee, too?"

"No." She took off her glasses and leaned forward in a "television interviewer" pose. "Maybe we can help each other."

"How?"

"You'd like what happened outside today to go away, wouldn't you?" I nodded. "It might not hurt for the media coverage to be slanted your way about the Arbuthnot killing, too."

"I'd rather no one remember I had any connection with Russell Arbuthnot, including me."

"That can't be helped now. Any publicity that came from finding his killer—from finding the falcon—could only serve to show what a tenacious investigator you are."



It might, but I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of acknowledging it.  
"What would you get out of it?"

"I want the inside story, and I want it before everyone else. A story like this could get me an on-air job."

I tried to mask my disbelief. Candace Carr had as much chance as getting in front of a camera as she had of living to be three hundred years old unless those queer eye guys were makeover gods in human form.

"I'll live without the flattering pub. What do I have to do for you to give me the tape your boy is probably still shooting downstairs?"

"Just what I said. Tell me what you learn before you tell anyone else."

"There are some things I'll have to tell the police that I may not be able to tell you at all."

"Uh-huh. I'm sure you tell the police everything."

"I tell them enough to be able to keep working with them. Holding back is one thing. Holding out so I can feed the media is something else altogether."

"What do you propose?"

"I'll keep you in the loop on the falcon, and I'll tell you what I can about the homicide. It'll have to be on background, and I may have to ask you to hold some things until the case closes. I'll go on the record for an exclusive right after the fact, and I'm willing to confirm or deny whatever rumors you might pick up in the meantime. Fair enough?"

She chewed the end of her glasses' earpiece. Without them her eyes were cartoonishly small. Squint lines pulled upward at the corners. Her narrow nose came to a decided point. Might have had some mole in her. "Fair, not good. The tape means that much to you?"

"Yeah, it does. It's an awkward time right now as far as custody goes. I'd like to keep the lid on as much as possible."

"All right. I'm not completely without sympathy, you know."

"I can have the tape?"

"When we're through."

"So you're going to blackmail me with it."

Her smile was smug to the point of arrogance. "Blackmail sounds like something from an old Perry Mason rerun. Too Twentieth Century. It's a simple *quid pro quo*. You know, trust, but verify." Like quoting Ronald Reagan wasn't too Twentieth Century for her.

“All right, it’s a deal. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go home and bleed. You don’t want any film of that, do you?”

Her look said she did, but she was good enough to know there’s only so much to be had at one time. She showed her idea of a sympathetic smile and handed me a card. Sharon stood aside to let her pass, pulled the door shut.

“Are you all right?”

The door opening behind her interrupted my answer. A tall man eased Sharon out of the room without touching her or saying a word while a shorter one held open the door, quick and smooth as turning a double play. Had to be cops.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### More Cops

A tall white guy and an average-sized Hispanic—Mexican, from the looks of him—escorted themselves into my office. The big one stood at least six-three, had the saggy-jowled look of someone who’d lost a lot of weight. He hitched his belt three times walking across the room to my desk, no more than ten feet from the door. All the activity ruined the cop stare he worked so hard on.

The Mexican was different. Compact, no more than five-nine, walked into the room with the agile grace of a gymnast. He had the same sad eyes as Jorge Mendoza, but I had to think this one’s eyes were sad for you if you jerked him around.

“You Forte?” the tall one said after they both took seats uninvited.

“Nick Forte, Professional Investigator” was lettered on the glass of the office’s outer door. The desk I sat behind had a name plate reading “Nick Forte.” I moved it to make sure he could see and waited for him to continue.

“MacMurray, Violent Crimes. This is Escobar. You know a couple of Mexicans named Jorge Mendoza and Luis Lopez?”

“I might. I know a lot of Mexicans. Did you know Chicago has the second-largest Mexican population of any city in the world?”

“Don’t get cute. Do you know these two or not?” MacMurray didn’t like me already. Impressive, not a record. Escobar didn’t seem to mind. The

corners of his mouth turned up as if he were smiling to himself and part of it slipped out without his knowledge.

“Yeah, I know them. Why do you want to know?”

“We’ll ask the questions. You give the answers and we’ll get along.”

I turned to face Escobar. “You have any questions? He said ‘we’ but he does all the talking.”

Escobar’s smile got a little more obvious. “I’m picking my spots.”

MacMurray didn’t like being kidded. He stood up halfway and leaned across the desk, hands flat on the blotter, face a foot from mine, talking a lot louder than he needed to. “Pay attention, asshole. Answer the questions and we’ll be on our way.”

I hurt too much for this bullshit. “You might be on your way whether I answer them or not. I get an attitude when cops come into my office like they owned the joint and try to push me around. Keep it up. Maybe I’ll answer your questions, and maybe you can kiss my ass.”

Escobar spoke before his partner made up his mind about coming around the desk. He had the light accent of someone born here and raised in a home where English was the second language. “Mendoza and Lopez are dead. Couple of guys, probably Anglos, shot them both last night.”

“Okay, they’re dead. What brings you here?”

“Both of them had your card in their wallets,” MacMurray said.

“I see. Now you’ll want to know where I was at—I forget, what time did I shoot them?”

“A little before eleven.” MacMurray had locked in. Escobar looked away, stifling another smile.

“I was visiting someone until after ten. Let me know where I killed them and I’ll tell you if I had time to get there.”

Now Escobar didn’t care who knew he was smiling. He had the most perfect, whitest teeth I had ever seen. MacMurray didn’t see any humor in it at all.

“You think it’s funny? Get up, smart ass. Let’s go for a ride. See how funny you think an interrogation room is for a few hours.”

I leaned back in the chair to hide my growing case of red ass. “Think about it, MacMurray. I went down to see Mendoza about a case I’m working. We chatted, I left my card. Lopez braced me on my way out for

coming into his crib without a passport. We worked it out, and I gave him a card. Don't you think I would have taken the cards back if I did them?"

"Why did you see Mendoza?"

"He was the driver for an actor named Russell Arbuthnot that got himself chilled the other day. I was supposed to be Arbuthnot's bodyguard."

"That's a homicide. It's a police matter."

"I wasn't there for the homicide." Lying to MacMurray bothered my conscience not at all. "There was a valuable piece of memorabilia taken. I blew the protection gig, maybe I can salvage it with a recovery fee."

MacMurray fumed. I turned to Escobar. "Sonny Ng in Central will vouch for me. I can pin my whereabouts down until ten-thirty or so. After that you'll have to take my word for it."

"Take it easy, you're not a suspect," Escobar said. "We're running down leads. You know how it is."

I nodded. "Sure I do."

Escobar continued in his lilting style. "Do you have any reason to believe them getting killed has anything to do with what you're working on?"

"It's hard to say. It looked like Lopez was ganged up, and I think Mendoza probably had something going on. Could be a coincidence." Two Anglos clipping them after what Oscar Wallace told me about the IRA had me wondering. I didn't like coincidences any more than these two probably did.

"His place was tossed." Escobar thought on the possibilities a minute. "You got anything else?"

"Sorry. You could have it if I did. I kind of liked Mendoza."

MacMurray was tired of being excluded. "How about that statue? What's it worth?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe as much as three million. Depends on whether the buyer wasn't too fussy about how he got it."

"That kind of money, maybe you figured Mendoza did this actor to get the statue and you did Mendoza and took it for yourself."

I looked at him for what I hoped seemed like a long time before I spoke to his partner. "Take him home, Escobar. I'm already tired of him. You can come back any time. Leave him behind, at least until he finds some clothes that fit him."

MacMurray started to speak. Escobar beat him to it. “Come on, Bill. Let’s go, he’s clean.”

MacMurray stood, reached quickly across the desk and pulled the gun from under my arm. My ribs made me too sore and slow to do anything about it. He ejected the magazine and jacked out the hot round to inspect the barrel.

“Looks all right. Clean, but not like it was cleaned today.”

I had the red ass for real now. I spoke to Escobar, making it obvious I was ignoring his partner. “What were they shot with?”

“The rounds look like nines. We don’t have the reports back yet.”

“Tell Annie Oakley there that’s a forty-five he has in his hand. You know, the Model M1911 that even kids in diapers know is a forty-five. Now get him out of here and remind him on your way back to the station if he ever touches me or any of my stuff without a warrant again I’ll make it my mission in life to see him directing traffic at construction sites.”

MacMurray dropped the gun on my desk. The sight scratched the wood. “Don’t leave town,” he said before turning to go with Escobar.

“Hey, Escobar,” I called before they hit the door. “Tell him if he’s going to steal all his patter from the movies that he should watch better movies.” I couldn’t see Escobar’s face. His head and shoulders shook.

Sharon came in as soon as they’d cleared.

“What did you say to the short cop? He was breaking up.”

“Inside joke. His partner has a personality disorder. He lacks one. What’s up?”

I deflected another apology about Barry’s lack of manners and lied about not being too sore. Then she got the full scoop on the rest of my day, from Oscar Wallace’s fairy tale and Herb Mendelsohn’s pipe dream to Amber’s dubious social skills. She waited until I was finished before she gave me the news that capped off the day perfectly.

“Jan called.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### The Perfect End to the Perfect Day

She could have picked a better time. My insides felt uniform and ordered as dirty clothes in a laundry bag. Sharon heard the strange sounds emanating from my chest while she helped me on with my coat, provoking another profuse apology. A lesser man would have tried to see how sorry she really was.

I managed to get to the Berghof before Jan for a change. I'm obsessive about punctuality, but she always got wherever we were going five minutes before me. If I was ten minutes early, she'd be fifteen minutes early. If something came up and I ran ten minutes late, she'd be five minutes late, but still five minutes ahead of me.

Jan didn't look herself when I glanced up at the blast of cold air that ushered her through the door. Not that she didn't look good standing in the melted snow on the rubber door mat with her weather-induced bangs. I saw her once after she chased a suspect down a fire escape on a rainy night. Soaked to the skin, makeup running down her face, cursing like a drill sergeant because she ripped her new skirt. She held her gun on the evildoer with one hand and her skirt up with the other, cute as a button, if a button would holler to no one in particular to take this sonofabitch off her hands so she could find a goddamn safety pin for her fucking skirt.

Not tonight. The half-hearted replica of her smile wouldn't fool anyone. The kiss almost missed. Even my limited powers of interpersonal perception picked up the alerts.

We got a table and ordered beers. I asked if she was hungry. She wasn't. It looked like an evening where silence would be the better part of valor, so I waited for her to set the direction of the conversation. If there would be any.

The beers came and we tried some and she still hadn't said a word. The waitress asked if we wanted menus. Not a sound. I declined menus, said to Jan, "Do you do this with suspects?"

"Do what?"

"Just sit there looking like you're waiting for them to say something until they do."

She wet her lips with beer. "You're not leaving me hanging on every word yourself." Her tone neutral, to the point of indifference.

"You look like you had a couple of hard days. I'm letting you unwind and decide what you want to talk about."

“In the hopes that I’d want to talk about what I’ve been up to, so you could find out in ten minutes what I spent two days learning.”

“You don’t want to talk about Arbuthnot, we won’t talk about him.” I reached across the table, cradled her hands in mine. “Hey, Jan.” I waited until she looked up. “What’s wrong? Did I do something? Honest to God, if I did something or said something, tell me what it is. This isn’t like you.”

She almost spoke. I almost asked if it had anything to do with how Sheila O’Donoghue had acted before I remembered Jan was like this before Sheila showed up.

The silence went on another minute while Jan slid her thumbs over mine, letting me hold her hands without returning the pressure. What she said wasn’t anything like I expected.

“Patty Adcock died.”

“I’m sorry.” I squeezed her hands for a few seconds.

She looked straight at me for the first time since we sat down. “Do you even know who Patty Adcock is?”

“No, but I’m sorry for you if it’s hitting you this hard.”

She squeezed my hands. “Jesus Christ, you’re frustrating.”

I gave her the half smile. “Jan, please. You know you can call me Nick.”

“Don’t do that. Not tonight.” She squeezed my hands tighter, and not with as much affection. “Put the boyish charm away. Do you want to know about Patty or don’t you?”

“Yes. I want to know.”

“You haven’t asked.”

“I don’t know how much you want to talk about her.”

She released my hands. “This is what drives me crazy. You can be the most insensitive, careless man I know, which says a lot, me working with cops all day. You don’t know when to shut up, and you’re not nearly as funny as you think you are. You’re also the sweetest, kindest man I know. No one has a better heart than you. But sometimes you’re all those things at once. It makes you so goddamned hard to talk to it’s not funny.”

“Okay, I’ll behave. I promise.”

She sighed, shook her head in resignation. “You will, too, won’t you?” Our eye contact exchanged all the answer necessary.

“Patty Adcock was my best friend in college. We were roommates for our last two years. Didn’t see each other much lately, but we kept in touch.

She was the kind of person you wouldn't see for a year and when you finally got back together it was like you just saw her yesterday. You know anyone like that?'

Sure, I did. I was listening to her.

"Patty got cancer about five years ago. Melanoma. She had all the treatments, was in some clinical trial, I think, and she recovered. She was fine for over two years."

The waitress came by, asked if we wanted two more. I nodded. Jan waited until we were alone.

"About six months ago Patty went in for a routine checkup. It was back. The doctors at Michael Reese wanted to set her up in another trial, but the cancer moved too fast. She almost died at Thanksgiving, but they operated and gave her some radiation and she stabilized.

"The bitch was, when they saved her, they screwed up any chance she had for another trial. I guess they need you to be untreated to be admitted into one of those, so they can tell if it's the new treatment that cured you. They signed her death warrant when they saved her."

The waitress dropped off the fresh drinks without a word. I don't think Jan even noticed.

"Patty died the week after her thirty-fifth birthday. She was more of a sister to me than Arlene is. Patty knew what I wanted to do before I did. I don't think we ever had a cross word. I can't remember any good times at Northern that didn't include her."

She stayed quiet for what seemed like a long time. I knew Patty's death wasn't all that bothered her. She'd tell me, or not, in her own time. I sipped my beer and kept my attention on her face, not her eyes.

"I'm thirty-four years old, Nick. I want to get married and have a family, and I have to start thinking about it soon. You're a wonderful guy, you never fail to surprise me how much you care about other people, and how well you treat me. I always look forward to seeing you, but where are we going?"

And so the elephant made its appearance in the room. It had lingered near the door for a year and a half, left alone by both of us until Patty Adcock's death invited it in where we had to acknowledge it.

"I've always tried to be honest with you about that, Jan. You know how I feel about you –"



“No, I don’t. That’s part of the problem. How *do* you feel about me? We get along great, I trust you completely, I know you’d never hurt me. You do everything I’d want someone who loves me to do, but I don’t know if you love me.”

“You know the deal with that. I don’t know if I’ll ever get married again, but I do know I don’t want any more kids. I don’t ever want Caroline to wonder if I love the kids who live with me full-time more than I love her. I know you want more than that. I can’t give it to you. I wish I could, I really do.”

“That’s all? You’re acting like I could leave now and that would be fine with you.”

“No, it wouldn’t. All those things you said about me, I could say about you. I can’t begin to say how much I’d miss you, but my mind is made up, and I know yours is.” I flicked a chip of ice off the rim of my glass and took a swig while I mustered the courage to say what came next. “I always figured I was a placeholder for you. I promised myself I’d show some class when the time came. I hope it’s not tonight, but if it is, I’m not going to try to talk you into staying with me if it’s something you’re going to regret.”

She looked at me with her mouth ajar, as if she wasn’t aware it was open. “I don’t know what to say. I thought you might feel that way, but not that you’d let go so easy.”

“I never said it was easy.”

“But you’ll do it.”

“Jan, look – ”

“No, not tonight. I’m not mad, and I think I know what you’re getting at. Maybe we should talk about this another time. I’m tired, and I’m not in the mood to make life decisions right now.” She left.

I sat there not drinking beer until the waitress figured out I was done and brought the check. I went straight home and to bed, having reached the legal limit for fun in one day. I didn’t want to get into any more trouble, and I wanted to be healthy enough not to scare Caroline in the morning.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## Daddy Duty

An evening of Advil and heating pads had me as chipper as could be expected for my appointment with Caroline's playground equipment. The cold didn't help. It would make anyone stiff and achy; I was already poster child for both. I moved like the Tin Man trying to do yoga.

We had the necessary supplies from the Home Depot on Seventy-fifth Street by nine-thirty. Neither of us spoke during the ride to Kingsley Elementary School. Caroline was in uncharted territory. She required behavior corrections about as often as Al Sharpton addressed the Heritage Foundation. She looked out her window and fidgeted, wondering what came next.

I was *not* in uncharted territory and planned to let her wonder. I had done much worse in my school career, always had the foresight not to leave a written record. Letting her imagination wander through the possibilities of what I had in store would be a far better deterrent than anything I might come up with. Not that she had reason to worry about my reaction; I'd told her we were going to clean the playground equipment. I didn't say how.

The equipment in question was a slide made of wooden stairs, a deck-like structure where kids stood while waiting their turn, and the metal sliding board. I saw the markings on the wooden rails from thirty yards. Caroline's walking pace decreased proportionately to our distance from the slide.

Nothing outrageous had been written. Suzie Wiggins has a big nose. Suzie Wignose. Suzie Wiggins is a dumbbell. I had to smile at that. "Dumbbell" was one of the first words Caroline learned. She heard me use it when I lifted a can of paint from one end of a board without remembering the tools on the other end would cause the board to flip up into my chin, helping me to bite off the end of my tongue. "Dumbbell" wasn't the first word that came to mind—it wasn't in the top ten—the best I could do in front of a toddler on short notice.

"All right, you know the plan." I emptied the Home Depot bag onto the landing. "You put the marks on, you take the marks off."

"All of them?" Her nose had started to run. She didn't seem to be crying, and mine was runny from the cold, too. I ignored it for the time being.

"All of them."

“But I didn’t put all of them here.” Tears bubbled up and her voice broke a little.

“Start with the ones you did, then we’ll see.” I handed her a sanding block. “Here you go.”

She started out with the enthusiasm any eight-year-old would have on a project she wanted no parts of. Not crying, but her nose started running in earnest and I provided a steady supply of Kleenex. After about ten minutes she stopped for a bit.

“What’s up?” I kept my voice friendly. I wasn’t mad, just doing my job.

“I’m cold.”

“Me, too. I wish you’d go a little faster. The sooner you finish, the sooner we can leave.”

Her face showed the disappointment at Ploy One’s failure. She skimmed the sandpaper over Sally’s big nose.

“You’re going to have to rub harder than that, kiddo, if you’re going to be done in time for school on Monday,” I said. “Let me see that.”

I took the block and showed her how to get an edge into the wood. The demonstration went on longer than necessary, removing most of that message. I knew she was cold and I knew the permanent marker had soaked into the soft wood; she’d have a hell of a time getting it out. My plan didn’t include bringing her home with bloody fingers, but a point still had to be made.

We stayed almost an hour. Took a couple of breaks to rest our hands, during which time we discussed the reasons for not defacing public property, especially with derogatory comments about classmates. I learned Suzie Wiggins was someone who picked on Caroline and her co-conspirator, Hannah.

The public shaming had been Hannah’s idea, after Sally called them cow pie eaters. Hannah talked Caroline into being the artist and thought up the phrases herself, except for “dumbbell,” which Caroline took the rap for. Everything she said matched what Mrs. Pelekoudas had told me. I did the usual things, asked how she would feel if it were her name all over the playground, why it was bad to mark up school equipment. Nothing I said was new, except to her.

We let the car warm us for a few minutes before leaving. “We’re never going to have to do this again, right?” I said.

“No, Daddy. I’m sorry.”

“You apologize to Suzie?” She nodded. I already knew she had. “What did she say?”

“She said she was sorry that she was mean to me, too.”

“Okay. I think we’re done here. I’m not mad, Caroline. You made a mistake. Everyone makes them, but I want you to promise me you’ll learn from this and not do it again.”

“You mean not make any more mistakes?”

I smiled. “No, you’ll make more mistakes. Everybody does. I want to know that you learned not to make *this* mistake again.”

“I promise I won’t write mean stuff about people any more.”

“Even if they deserve it?”

“Even if they deserve it,” she said, with less conviction.

I gave a look she may or may not have caught. “How about Fuddruckers for lunch? We haven’t been there for a while.”

“Can I get a brownie?”

“We can pretend it’s Alice’s Restaurant if you want.”

“Huh?” she said. Another cultural reference wasted.

“It’s an old song. You can get whatever you want, at Alice’s Restaurant,” I sang, badly as usual, then kissed her on the forehead. We went to lunch and a movie, then I took her home. Rubbing playground equipment in subfreezing cold didn’t do anything like lessening the pain in my ribs. All I wanted was to go home to a warm bed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### Never a Dull Moment

Okay, maybe that wasn’t *all* I wanted. The route home would take me north on the Stevenson as far as 294, then south to 95<sup>th</sup> Street into town. The car blew past the 294 ramp, compounded its error by missing the Dan Ryan, too. I wondered where the car would take me, my conscious mind having abdicated responsibility for the decision. I quit kidding myself when I passed McCormick Place and took the ramp for Lake Shore Drive.

I parked a block from Sheila O'Donoghue's building. Not much traffic, the theater and dinner crowd only now starting to appear. I waded through several couples leaving her building before I made it all the way in.

Two men stood near the elevators while I did my salmon impression. White males, average height. One had dark hair somewhat longer than the current style. The other a redhead, hands shoved deep into his overcoat pockets. Nothing special about them, but they felt as out of place as cockroaches in an operating room.

They were inside the elevator when I waved for them to hold it. The redhead reached over to press a button and the dark one waved buh-bye with just the fingers of his right hand. They were too old to be so smug about such a sophomoric trick. I pushed the call button and watched the dial mark their progress upward. An elevator came for me as they passed Five. I let it go. Six. Seven. It stopped on Eight. Sheila's floor.

It's a cop thing. Ten mopes could walk by, and a good cop will know—he'll just *know*—which one is dirty. Not every time, but a good cop doesn't get to be a good cop without cultivating that talent. I may have been a shitty husband and a borderline father, but I was a good cop. It didn't matter how many apartments were on the Eighth Floor. I knew the elevator assholes were going to Sheila's as sure as I knew what time Caroline went to bed.

I took my time. No bad situation ever resolves well in too much of a hurry. I caught an elevator with no other passengers and opened my down jacket for quick access to my gun, which was in the night stand by my bed. I didn't usually need it to visit Caroline. I told myself there were a hundred innocent reasons for them to go to her floor, but I knew I was whistling through the cemetery.

No one else in the corridor. I stood with my left ear to the door, trying to will internal sounds into the hallway. I heard Sheila, then a man. No, two men. I couldn't make out words, strained to pick up the undertones of their voices. No one was shouting, Sheila wasn't screaming. It might not even be the two guys I followed.

I'd started to relax when someone raised his voice. Then the unmistakable sound of a slap and a woman's stifled scream. I rapped on the door and spoke to be heard inside.

"Maintenance." I took a step back.

A muffled flurry of activity leaked through the door, no sounds distinctive enough to identify. Someone latched the door chain. I took another step back and hoped I was right. What I planned might not be too pleasant for Sheila.

Her voice said, "Who is it?"

"Maintenance, Ms. O'Donoghue. Water's leaking into the apartment below yours and I need to check under your sink."

My right foot braced against the wall opposite her door. I hoped against hope she'd stand to the side of the door to peek into the hall. Anyone threatening her would tend to be behind the door, so he couldn't be seen from the hallway.

"Can't you come back later?"

"No, ma'am, they got a hell of a mess down there, pardon my language. I need to check it right now."

Voices behind the door; the lock clicked open. I pushed off the wall as soon as I saw daylight between her door and the jamb, ran through it like Brian Urlacher on a blitz.

The door caught Sheila a hard but glancing blow, knocked her to the side. My momentum and the heft of the door pushed the man behind it against the wall on my left. The impact threw the door back for the knob to bury itself in my ribs. I yelled, then slammed it wide open as hard as I could to pin the guy on the other side between the door and the wall.

I stepped in and slammed the door shut. The redhead stood stunned and wavering. I grabbed him by the lapels and drove him head first into the door as hard as I could. He was limp when I let him go.

I pulled the door open again, jammed the inert man between it and the wall. With my free hand I took Sheila by the sleeve and threw her as far into the hallway as I could, told her to get help. I closed the door in her face before she could argue. Someone smarter would have gone into the hall with her and waited for the cavalry. I would have, if I knew for sure there was no fire escape from the back of her apartment.

Red Hair lay in a heap at my feet, animated as a bag of laundry, his gun's barrel showing from under a chair. An automatic, something big I didn't recognize. I picked it up and hefted it, checked for a hot round

The living room ran the depth of the apartment to a balcony. A doorway opened into a bathroom and bedroom immediately to my right, kitchen and

dining area to my left. The other bedroom at the far end of the living room, also on the left.

I was a sitting duck in the small entry vestibule. I moved right, toward the bedroom, which allowed me to see into the kitchen without exposing myself from the living room. It also gave whoever I was looking for time to get ready if I guessed wrong, but I had to move somewhere. To the right exposed me less.

The bathroom was empty, the bedroom too dark to tell. A doorway, no door, led from a short hallway into the bedroom. A walk-in closet between the bedroom door and me, to my left. I couldn't see inside without sticking part of myself in there. I pressed my back flat against the opposite wall and eased past, looking for movement. The light switch was next to the bedroom door. I flipped it up and leveled the gun into the closet. Nothing.

The bedroom had no closets. All the furniture was against the walls. I moved in far enough to see anyone on the far side of the bed. No one there.

He must have been in the back bedroom when I came in or I would have seen him. Now he had his choice of where to position himself while he waited for me to come back through the living room. The entryway I had to use was no more than four feet wide. All it lacked was a neon arrow above it pointing downward while flashing "Shoot Here."

I could wait. He had to go past the same hallway to get to the front door. I could stake it out from this side as well as he could watch for me. That would force a standoff until the police came. My ribs hurt and the exertion of knocking out Red Head made every breath an adventure. Waiting was the thing to do.

Unless there was a fire escape from the balcony. I hadn't noticed one during dinner the pother night, but I don't usually look for alternate means of escape when eating Chinese food. Thai, maybe. I could hunker down in peace if I knew there was no other way out.

The back wall of the bedroom shared the same outside wall as the opening onto the balcony from the living room. I walked around the bed and released the window catch, slid back the glass. A screen kept me from sticking my head outside for a better look. I worked a corner loose and gave it a push, let it fall eight stories.

My boy stood on the balcony, flush against the railing on my side, positioned to shoot me in the back when I checked the other bedroom. He

didn't have time to turn all the way around before I shot him, the borrowed gun's bark resonating off the brick walls across the alley. I couldn't tell where I hit him, or how badly. He shot while slipping backward and missed high; brick fragments creasing the back of my neck. I shot him again. The bullet caught him high and left on his chest. The impact flipped him over the railing like he was standing on a see-saw and Wile E. Coyote dropped a ten thousand pound weight on the raised end.

I leaned out and saw him land flat on his back on the roof of a car parked in the alley. I winced when he hit, but it had to feel better than landing on the street two feet in either direction.

I watched until I saw clouds rising from his breath, ran back the way I came and through the living room to the balcony. There was no fire escape. Sirens were approaching. I looked back to the alley and saw him lying still, breath rising into the ambient light to shroud his face in its own fog. He wasn't going anywhere, so there was no reason for me to.

A glass of wine sat on the coffee table in the living room. I eased myself onto the couch for a taste. I didn't care for it. Must have been the good stuff.

Two uniforms had a hard time bursting through the front door with an unconscious man lying behind it. I watched them struggle while I finished the wine.

"Where's the other one?" the taller cop said when they got in.

I nodded toward the balcony. "He's in the car." I never pass up the chance to use a good line.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### At the Cop Shop

The Violent Crimes squad room looked as if it had been set up in half an hour and could be gone in fifteen minutes. A reception area led to a bullpen the size of a small classroom. File cabinets covered every inch of wall space. Folding tables and chairs lined up end-to-end across the room's shorter dimension, computers facing either way on the tables. The room resembled what the movies pass off as a squad room like a penguin resembles a stork.



Sonny Ng and I stood outside a small interrogation room looking at the rap sheet of the redhead I concussed in Sheila's apartment. His fingerprints matched a couple found at Russell Arbuthnot's place, which should have brought in Jan and Hanlon, who worked for Sonny. They had Sunday off, and Sonny knew they needed it, so he came in. Short and stocky, as much fat as a brick. Sonny didn't say or smile much; pay attention if he did either. He'd killed four people, two of whom thought they had him covered. I'd known him since he was my Field Training Officer.

Sonny flipped through the sheaf of papers. "Says here his name is John Smith."

"No, really? Let me see."

"Right there." He held out the top sheet, thumb under the name. "Goes by Sean McGowan. Looks like an IRA thing."

I did my best to sound indifferent. "IRA? How come?"

"The Brits came down on Clan McGowan. Made them all change their names to Smith."

"You're making this up."

He gave me the best cop stare in the world without turning his head. His eyes were so narrow I wouldn't have seen them move if I wasn't paying attention.

"Guess not." I said.

"I talked with some guy at the Bureau." Riffled through his notes, "Ordway. Counterterrorism, working the IRA."

"So our boy's a terrorist?"

Sonny wagged his hand. "Maybe. He'll work anything that involves muscle. His arrest record reads like Chapter Ten of the penal code." He paused and pulled another sheet from the pile. "I just got this. The bullets they pulled out of Smith's partner match the ones in Jorge Mendoza."

"So Smith shot him?"

"Looks that way."

"Who'd I shoot?"

"No make yet."

"Can he talk?"

"No. He's in bad shape. Falling eight stories onto a car is not FDA-approved treatment for gunshot wounds."

“I should keep up better on that stuff.” I nodded toward the interrogation room. “Mind if I sit in on your chat?”

“Seems only fair. You brought him in.”

Smith sat in a straight-backed chair, left wrist handcuffed to the wall. A dark bruise ran along the line of his left jaw with another over the right eye. The bruise on his forehead was the shape of a doorknob.

Smith didn't look up when we came in. I followed Sonny's lead, which involved reading the entire rap sheet again, pointing out items of interest on occasion to keep Smith wondering. No one spoke. Sonny got the show on the road after about five minutes.

“I'm Lieutenant Ng.” He nodded toward me. “Forte you've already met.”

Smith elevated his head halfway to eye contact. His eyes were blue and bloodshot. “Fuck you,” he said in a definite brogue. “I know my rights, and I don't have to talk to you. I wouldn't talk to a bloody wog even if I had to.”

Sonny's right hand shot straight out from his shoulder. Its rigid heel struck Smith high on the left side of his chest, knocked him out of the chair and against the wall. No one said anything while Smith struggled to get himself and the chair upright while still handcuffed to the wall. He turned to me after he got himself situated.

“You saw what he did. That's police brutality.”

“You're still disoriented from when that doorknob kicked your ass last night. Lieutenant Ng is not a wog, he's a dink. Remember that.” Sonny looked at me with his standard lack of expression; I'd known him long enough to recognize a stifled smile.

“Fuck you, too, then, and your mother.”

“Our boy lacks social skills,” I said to Sonny.

“His antisocial skills are excellent,” Sonny said. “Extortion, armed robbery, menacing, attempted murder, a couple of British charges I'm not sure about, sexual battery – ”

“That's a fucking lie! I never touched that tart. I just went in there to teach her not to be a collaborator.”

Sonny pursed his lips in sarcastic apology. “Says here you made her suck your gun and threatened to pull the trigger. Nothing sexual there.”

Smith uttered his favorite greeting and went silent. Sonny looked at me and I shrugged. He tried again.

“Here’s the deal, Smith – ”

“My name isn’t Smith, it’s McGowan. Smith’s something the English shoved up our arses.”

I looked at Sonny and nodded. “Must be like his slave name. Maybe we should call him Kunta Kinte.”

“Why don’t you take an interest in your mother’s cunt instead? I hear she’s needing it bad since your da went faggot on her.”

My backhand snapped his head back, didn’t quite tip him over. “Only the first one’s free. Remember, I’m the good cop. It won’t pay to piss me off, too.”

He glared, didn’t speak. Holding a criminal’s attention is often easier when one hand is cuffed to the wall.

“I’m only going over this once,” Sonny said. “What happened to the gun you shot Russell Arbuthnot with? It’s not the one we took off you.”

“I don’t know any Russell Arbuthnot.”

“You were in his condo three nights ago.”

“I told you I never heard of him. How could I be in his flat?”

“I’m wondering the same thing. We found your fingerprints.”

“That’s a fucking lie. You’re planting clues to make a case.”

Sonny shook his head and spoke to me. “They go into the guy’s home. Maybe they rough him up first, maybe they just shoot him. They take what they want and leave. Real careful, wear gloves the whole time. John—sorry, Sean—has to pee. Takes off his gloves before he thinks to raise the seat.” Sonny came as close to a smile as he would get in front of a suspect. “Nice set of prints on the underside.” He jerked a thumb toward Smith. “But he wasn’t there.”

“I didn’t kill him.” Sonny had Smith’s full attention now.

“He shot himself? What about the gun?”

“I don’t know what he did or didn’t do. I just know I—we—didn’t kill him. I could have touched that seat a week ago.”

“Uh-uh. Maid cleaned that morning. Yours were the only prints there.”

It took Smith a minute to recover. “I still didn’t kill him.”

“You went in earlier and stole the statue?”

No answer.

At last I had something to contribute. “He couldn’t have. Arbuthnot had the falcon with him while he was out. If they took it, they took it off of

him.”

Sonny nodded. “You took it but he was alive when you left. That right?”

“We didn’t take anything.”

“So you came in just for a piss.”

Smith showed exasperation. “It was already gone.”

My turn. “And Arbuthnot never called the police, so I’m guessing he was already dead when you got there?”

“That’s right.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sonny said under his breath. He opened the door and hollered out into the squad room. “Mendocino. Take this back to his cell.”

“What do you think?” I said after Smith was gone.

“Hell of a coincidence. Robbed and killed before Red comes in for a leak. His partner’s gun didn’t match the slugs in the actor, either.”

“What was Arbuthnot shot with?”

“Thirty-two,” he said without looking at the report.

“Smith had at least a nine.”

“Bren Ten. British gun. Don Johnson used one in *Miami Vice*.” He paused with his hand on the doorknob. “What’re you thinking?”

“They didn’t take the falcon.”

“You believe him?”

“Not much, but that part makes sense. Why go to see Mendoza and Sheila unless they were looking for something?”

“Then who killed Arbuthnot?”

“They still could’ve killed him. They go over, he’s home, he holds out on them, *boom*.”

“Where’s the statue?”

“Beats hell out of me. Sherlock Holmes said that once you’ve eliminated the impossible, whatever remains must be the truth, no matter how improbable. I’m still eliminating stuff.”

Sonny fixed his favorite look on me. “That only leaves about ten billion possibilities. You might want to pick up the pace.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### The Silver-tongued Devil

My cell had a message from Jan, a single sentence that has never preceded a conversation that went well for the recipient: “We need to talk.” We agreed to meet at Portillo’s on Ontario for a couple of Italian beefs.

Jan didn’t look any better than she had in the Berghof Friday night. She never wore much makeup; today she wore none. The bags under her eyes were obvious. She looked everywhere in the room except at me while we made painful small talk until we got our food and were settled.

I tried to take control of the conversation. “What are you doing downtown? I thought it was your day off.”

“What were you doing in Sheila O’Donoghue’s apartment last night?”  
So much for Plan A.

“I shot one guy and beat up another. Even Sonny says it was good work.”

Her tone was harsher than I had ever heard it. “I know *what* you did, Nick. Why were you there in the first place?”

I wished I had a good answer, if only for myself. “Working. Jorge Mendoza was Arbuthnot’s driver. I wanted to know if Sheila knew anything about what happened to him, or why. He was Arbuthnot’s employees. So was I. I wanted to know what I might have in common with someone who just got clipped.”

She didn’t believe me. She didn’t have enough to confront me, but watching her hold her sandwich three inches from her mouth with no obvious interest in eating it implied my position was weak.

“You’re a good man, Nick Forte.” The hands with the sandwich sagged. “I know you’re a wonderful father, I see it in your face when you talk about Caroline. No one loves his child more than you do. We’ve dated for a year and a half and I’ve never met her.” She left time for the implication take root.

“I’ve never felt as safe as I do when I’m with you. You’d never let anything bad happen to me, and if something happened when you weren’t around you wouldn’t rest until it was made right.”

She laid the sandwich into its wrapper. The humid scent of the meat slid into my nostrils like a tasty steam room. She fidgeted with her watch band with her right index finger, the nail broken. “Sometimes when we sleep together I lay awake and listen to you breathe. I feel how warm you are all over and how your hand feels when you lay your arm over me. I know how you feel because everything you do tells me, even if you can’t say the words. I tell myself I don’t need the words because I’m stronger than that, and because I’m a cop. People lie to me all the time—you know how it is, we just assume it after a while—their actions always give them away. What is it you say about what people say and what they do?”

My voice stayed so far back in my throat I wondered if she could hear me. “What people say is important is what they want to think is important. What they do tells you what’s really important to them.”

“I know how important I am to you even if you never say it, just from what you do. I also know that this is all it’s ever going to be if I don’t do something about it right now. I need more.”

“We talked about this the other day. You know my situation.”

She’d been waiting for that answer. “What, about not getting married again so no other kids competed with Caroline? That’s bullshit. Did you ever ask her? Kids love the idea of a little sister or brother. The problem’s not with her, it’s with you.”

I wasn’t about to argue with that. I thought I’d done a better job disguising it. Caroline took turns pestering Diane and me about a sibling. She even used the word “sibling,” which I thought was pretty cool for a eight year-old. It was me who couldn’t bear the thought of a competing child. I had gotten over losing Diane; that was how I was able to love Jan, such as I did. I would never get over losing Caroline. Another child could only divide my attention and affection. What little time I spent with her was my time, and I guarded it with the same intensity as Sheila O’Donoghue protected her looks. I didn’t think of it as excluding Jan, but that was how it played.

She knew I didn’t have anything to say. I chewed my sandwich like I was afraid to swallow, my head positioned to keep her in my field of vision without making eye contact.

“Nick. Nick!” I shifted my glance to look near her eyes. “I love you, and I know you love me. It has to be more than just knowing it now. I want to

love someone who is actually willing to do something about it. You can't do it, can you?"

I couldn't even say it.

Jan sipped her Diet Coke and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. She tidied up her trash, which consisted of a half-full cup of pop and a virtually untouched sandwich. Everything measured and slow, giving me ample opportunity to find a reason for her to stay. She paused after standing, one last chance.

I didn't want her to go; I couldn't stop her. Wouldn't. All she wanted was what I couldn't give. She didn't see that some day she'd realize it hadn't worked, and I didn't want to waste her time when she could be happy with someone else. I couldn't bear the idea of seeing the look of disappointment I'd seen too many times from Diane.

She got tired of waiting and left. She didn't say good-bye.

I finished my food because it was there, not tasting it, chewing by rote. Everything got cleaned up and disposed of with uncharacteristic care. I don't know why; it seemed like the thing to do. I didn't have anything on my mind when I walked into the cold with my coat open and my gloves in my pockets.

Candace Carr stood next to a minivan with "News Nineteen" painted on the side.

"You've had a busy week."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

### It's Good to Have Friends

We sat in my office, the gathering darkness appropriate to my mood. I drank a Molson's that had been in the back of the mini-fridge since God was a little boy. Candace Carr drank bottled water she carried in her bag.

She wore a too-large bulky sweater that stopped short of her butt, which would at least have made it stylish. Her mole-like face glared at me through the fashionably ugly frames as if daring me to start something.

“Friday you begged me to keep a simple assault off the air, and by Saturday night you’d shot a man off of a balcony,” she said. “You got yourself back into the news and ruined my scoop both at the same time. Nice work.”

“Kiss my ass, lady. I didn’t beg you to do anything. You volunteered to hold back the tape because you thought there might be something in it for you. As for last night, do you bother to read police reports, or just the flashy headlines on HuffPo?”

She seemed surprised I came back at her. Television reporters get so used to people sucking up to them they forget they don’t have an inalienable right to a cheery response. “I know you overpowered one man and shot the other before he could shoot you. The cop I spoke to was impressed, even if he did his best to hide it. I didn’t mean for it to sound so confrontational. I do that sometimes.” Sometimes?

She fished around in her big over-the-shoulder bag and dug out a videocassette. “I have something for you.” She dropped the tape on my desk.

I left it where it fell. “Is that what I think it is?” She nodded. “Why?”

“Like I said, it’s no good to me now. Punching a man in the street is small potatoes compared to last night.”

“Here’s something else you said: bullshit. Bouncing Barry off the walls was small potatoes, period. Last night’s episode would let you create a context for it. Why are you giving it back?”

People accustomed to asking questions don’t like to give answers. She responded with the enthusiasm of a teenager explaining why she missed curfew. “I asked around about you. You have friends.”

“Not everything *I* do is career-oriented.”

That one left a mark. She took a second to decide how to proceed. “I deserved that. Can we start over?”

“What do you want?”

“What happened last night?”

We fenced for a while. I didn’t mind telling her what had gone on in Sheila’s apartment. She’d get the police report sooner or later. Giving her some color wouldn’t hurt me with Sonny and might help me with her, though I was smarter than to think she’d share much with me. Television reporters are like heterosexual assholes: things only pass one way.



I had enough after twenty minutes. “I’m going to have to cut this short,” I said. I gestured to the reports Sharon kept returning to my desk. “I have a lot of things to catch up on and I’d trade a winning lottery ticket for a good night’s sleep.”

“You’ll call me?”

“When I know something. You have to give me some room on this.”

“I know.” She got up, started edging toward the door. “I hope I don’t regret this.”

“Your confidence is touching.” She was almost gone when I called her. “Hey, one more thing. Who put in the good word for me?”

“Phil Chandler from the *Sun-Times*. He and my news director are drinking buddies. I think some back scratching is going on. Chandler said I was more likely to get something from you because you wanted to do it than if you had to do it.”

“I’m funny that way sometimes. You know I share with him, too, right?”

She nodded without enthusiasm. “It’s been worked out. We can air at ten what he’ll print the next morning.”

“You don’t like it, though, do you?”

“It’s all right with me.” She was a lousy liar for a TV newswoman. “We still get it out first. It’s one of those teamwork things.”

I had to escort her to the door and lock it behind her before I was sure she wouldn’t try to grill me any more. I then applied my full attention to Sharon’s paperwork for at least three minutes before I pulled out my copies of the reports Sonny had slipped me earlier.

There wasn’t much I didn’t already know. Crime scene photos. A few statements. Preliminary autopsy and pharmacology reports. Arbuthnot had alcohol in his system, but not excessive amounts. A couple of common prescription medications, none related to erectile dysfunction. A few sets of unidentified fingerprints. One set would be Smith’s. Another would be his partner’s. Jorge probably figured in there somewhere. Amber, maybe?

Smith didn’t get the falcon, or Jorge and Luis Lopez would be alive. There’d be no reason for him to see or kill them if he already had it.

Or would there? Wallace told me Jorge was Ian Mallory’s inside man with Arbuthnot. Jorge knew of the IRA connections and might be able to name names. He also knew of the fake—if there was one—and would have had ample opportunity to make a switch of his own.

What if Smith got Arbuthnot's current falcon and it wasn't what he expected? He'd look for the one person who knew what it was, and had access to it. Jorge Mendoza.

So Smith went to see Jorge about the statue. He got it or he didn't. Either way, Jorge wound up dead. Luis Lopez was probably at the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe he heard Jorge getting braced and stood up for his boy. I called Escobar on the off chance he was working on Sunday afternoon. He was due in the morning, I didn't leave a message.

Why would Smith go to Sheila's? Maybe Jorge didn't have the falcon and she was next on the list. Maybe Smith just needed to find out what she knew, in case she had to be eliminated. Could be that's why Jorge got aced, Smith cleaning up a loose end.

I could debate these questions with myself all night. Escobar might be able to shed some light, but he wouldn't be available until morning. Sheila was probably home now. I remembered where she lived.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### Returning to the Scene

Sheila's apartment showed little evidence of the crime scene techs. Both suspects were apprehended at the scene; no need to invest much effort proving they were there. Sheila spent most of last night giving her story to the police. Now I wanted to hear it.

She wore a terrycloth robe; her hair damp. She looked surprised to see me, though she never asked who it was before opening the door.

"I've been calling you all day. Are you all right?" The faint after-shavey smell of gin and tonic floated toward me from the drink in her hand.

"I should be asking you. I hit you with that door pretty hard."

"I'm fine, you just knocked me out of the way." She took hold of my wrist with her free hand and pulled me into the apartment. "They wouldn't let me talk to you. Where did you go?"

"Same church, different pew. Like I told you at Russell's that day, they won't let witnesses discuss their stories. I found out today your two visitors killed Jorge and his friend, and at least one of them was in Arbuthnot's apartment."

She offered me a drink and I admitted I could use a beer. All she had was lite. So it goes.

"Do the police think they're the ones who killed Russell?"

"I didn't say that. Their prints were at the scene, but there are a lot of holes in that theory."

She led me into the living room. A trace of blood showed where John Smith fell after I doored him. "Why would they kill Jorge if they didn't kill Russell?" she said.

"Why did they mess with Jorge at all?"

"Maybe he saw them."

"Then why didn't he go to the police?"

She hesitated. "I think Jorge was involved in some things he'd rather the police didn't know about."

"I'll give you that one. A better question now is why did they come here?"

"I don't know. Didn't they tell the police anything?"

“One can’t talk and one won’t. That’s why I’m asking you. Tell me what happened.”

We were in front of the sofa. Sheila started to sit, her hand still on my wrist, and gave me a funny look when she saw I wasn’t going to sit with her. She covered by picking up a piece of lint before standing upright again. “The police must’ve told you something. I don’t have the heart to go over it again.”

“Try. How’d they get in?”

She looked at me as if I were morphing into someone else. “They said they were reporters. I asked for identification but I couldn’t read it through the peephole. When I cracked open the door they pushed it open.”

“The chain wasn’t broken. It was on when I got here.”

I kept an edge in my voice, playing the bad cop as much as I could without a counterweight. We were too close, the smell of her shampoo too clear, the robe not covering enough of her for me to trust my judgment too far. So I pushed.

When she spoke she was half a step farther away without seeming to move. “I didn’t set the chain. I wasn’t as careful as I should have been.”

“It doesn’t matter, they’re in. Then what?”

“What’s wrong?” She put down her drink. Her face showed hurt and surprise. “The police were more sympathetic than this. I’m the one whose home was invaded and you’re talking to me like I did something wrong.”

“Maybe it’s because I didn’t get a lot of sleep or because I’m having a shitty day. All I know is something stinks. Why did they come here? Where do you figure into this?”

“I assumed they were going to rob me.”

I fought to stay detached, with lessening success. “You assumed? They came in here, held you at gun point, and never said why?”

“They said I had something of theirs and they wanted it back. They didn’t say what it was.”

“It had to be the falcon.”

“It couldn’t be. The falcon was Russell’s. No one else could claim it.”

“You heard his horseshit story. How much did it change every time he told it? No one knows where he got it, and there’s no one to prove anything either way.” I waited for her to make eye contact. “That’s why I don’t like them for killing him. If they wanted the falcon, they’d’ve taken it then.”

“I don’t know. Why is it up to us, anyway? The police have them, they’ll find out. My God, think of what we’ve been through. I didn’t sleep all night, wondering what they might have done if you hadn’t come.”

She’d done her space invader thing again, standing much closer than a minute ago without making me aware of any movement. Faint lines near her eyes and mouth were visible without makeup to hide them. They flowed so well into the contours of her face that an artist would have added them if they weren’t already there. “When you came through that door, it was like an old movie, the hero rescuing the damsel in distress.”

“I don’t know about that.” Not as much substance in my voice as I would have liked. “I almost brained you.”

She put her hand on my forearm like the night in the Goodman, higher this time, almost to the crook of my elbow. “You can play it down if you want, but I know you saved me from something, even if I don’t know what.”

She was tall enough to kiss me without any conscious movement on my part. The left side of her lips caught the right side of mine and pressed against them. We stayed like that a few seconds before I turned my head and my mouth was on hers. She smelled clean—peach, maybe; no, oranges—her lips smooth and soft without any lipstick.

Her mouth opened and we kissed that way in front of the sofa. The sash of her robe fell away and my hands slid inside. Her breath caught when I touched her breasts, nipples growing, the flesh maybe not as firm as twenty years ago. It was the body of a mature woman, not the girl Russell Arbuthnot had seduced and controlled.

She pressed herself against me and my hands went behind her. Small muscles rippled under my fingers. She’d taught me more about physical beauty in a week than I had learned in thirty-nine years.

My right hand slid to her thighs and I lifted her. I carried her into the bedroom from which I’d shot Smith’s as yet unnamed companion, and laid her on the bed, then went back to close the bedroom door. I didn’t want anything to spoil the envelope we were creating.

Her hair obscured the left side of her face when I turned to her, one aquamarine eye watching me with an arresting directness. Her beauty more erotic than any centerfold.

“Why did you come last night?” she said, her voice hoarse.

“For this.” I lowered myself onto her and then I didn’t need the closed door to keep the world at bay.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

### Another Fed

Frank Hatcher waited for me outside of SRO Chicago, on Dearborn between my office in the Rowe Building and his in the Kluczynski Federal Building. Collar pulled up, he stood stiff-armed, punching one gloved hand into the other with his back to the north wind. He pointed out that lunch was on me before we even shook hands, since I called the meeting, chose the location, and only had to walk a block while he’d walked four in single-digit cold.

I met Frank when he came to town protecting the Prez (of the United States, not Lester Young) ten years ago. He’d since moved to Investigations, doing a lot of counterfeiting work. At least an inch taller than me, thinner, almost skinny, in that rangy but powerful way cowboys have. His face lined but handsome; the weathering of his features bestowed character, not fatigue. Hair longer than most feds wore it, combed straight back, its even grayness a metallic sheen in the bright midday sun.

I ordered a turkey burger and onion rings to give Dino behind the counter a chance to remind me of my New Year’s resolution to visit the salad menu from time to time. Hatcher had what he called a “real burger,” cast me a disdainful look when he ordered it.

The usual semi-insulting small talk filled the time needed to get drinks and condiments. We found a table away from most of the traffic, under a television playing a news story about Lindsay Lohan. Why she was still considered news was beyond me.

“Do you have someone in your office named Oscar Wallace?” I asked as Frank took his first bite. He let me wait while he chewed and swallowed, drank his Dr. Pepper.

“Not if I can help it. He used to work in the same building, but I never liked him much. He’s a pain in the ass. I think he’s retired.”

“A pain in the ass how?”

“First you tell me something. How do you know Wallace? I wouldn’t think you ran in the same circles.”

I told Frank about Wallace coming to my office with the falcon story.

“And you believe him?” he asked through a mouthful of fries.

“The story’s too good to be true and too weird to ignore.”

“It’s not as weird as you think. A rumor like that made the rounds a couple of years ago. We checked it out. Looks like the plan was seriously considered but they couldn’t pull it off in time.”

“You’re sure they didn’t go through with it? Wallace had that aura about him, you know, a true believer. That’s why I didn’t discount him out of hand.” I ate an onion ring. It’s not possible anything that good could be bad for you.

“Wallace is an accountant. He had less access to the results of investigations than you do. You pay for lunch, I’ll talk to you.”

“Okay, good enough. Sorry I wasted your time on this.”

“Don’t be. I can always use a free lunch. I’m glad you told me about Wallace, too.”

“How come?”

“First, he’s out of his league, not to mention his jurisdiction. Doesn’t matter if that falcon is stuffed with gold or diamonds; it’s no concern of his. Two, let’s say, just for the sake of argument, that the bird was tricked up. He stands as much chance against the IRA as a snowball in a microwave. He needs a good talking to. A man has got to know his limitations.”

“He’s your boy. I have no interest in him one way or the other.” I finished my burger and wiped my lips and chin. “Thanks, Frank. You ever think of going back into Protection?”

“Christ, no. It’s boring as hell, and they are the most arrogant sons of bitches imaginable. I’m too old for that shit.”

“Arrogant? A federal officer? I’m shocked—*shocked*—to hear such accusations, and from a brother officer, no less.”

He smiled like I always imagined he would when sliding bracelets on someone. “Blow me. Next time I’ll pay for lunch, but you have to walk.”

“It’s only four blocks. You make it sound like you were abandoned with Shackleton at the South Pole.”

“I’m old, I chill easy. Next time, you walk.”

“Fair enough, old timer. See you in July.”

He gave me that look again and we were back on Dearborn Street. He headed north, directly into the wind. Served him right, the whiner.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

### Not the Usual Fish Story

Sharon handed me the message before the door closed behind me. Lily O’Donoghue wanted to see me at the dolphin tank in Shedd Aquarium at three o’clock. Sheila’s daughter.

The aquarium sits on a small peninsula between the Field Museum and Adler Planetarium, a mile and a half from my office. It’s a pleasant walk by the lake on a nice day. Today was neither. The wind had shifted, skimming the lake ice before blowing into my face. It was so cold the moisture in my eyes hurt.

Caroline never tired of this place. I made a point of walking past the rockfish. Caroline started calling him the “ugly fish” when she was about three. I still called him that. She was still young enough to let me get away with it.

The dolphin tank is in a separate building, attached to the main aquarium by a covered walkway, thank God. I was in line to get through when it occurred to me I didn’t know what Lily O’Donoghue looked like. I didn’t worry about it much. When in doubt, make yourself visible and assume the other person knows you.

I cruised the otter habitat and watched a beluga whale squirt water on someone who wasn’t quick enough to pat its nose. At 2:45 I climbed the stairs of the amphitheater in front of the dolphin tank and picked a place away from the sparse school day crowd.

Not much going on. The dolphins and their handlers went through the usual pre-show routine. The trainers set out buckets of fish and the dolphins tried to beg some early treats. At 2:55 the trainers left the tank and the dolphins were alone to do whatever it is captive dolphins do when they’re not in a show. It didn’t appear to be a hell of a lot.



The enormous plate glass wall behind the tank showed a scene from the South Pole. Ridges of ice crushed against each other on the frozen lake to be forced upward. The wind blew snow dust across the irregular surface. Cruise ships and sailboats would be out there in three months, their fluttering flags and sails mimicking the merriment of the passengers. Today the lake looked like Hell frozen over.

A young woman slid onto the bench beside me, making no more noise than the blowing snow outside. I didn't see her coming and I didn't recognize her at first glimpse.

Tall for a woman. Seated, her eyes were on a level with my nose. Blond hair fell almost to her shoulders with a wave too fluid to be anything but natural. Her cable-stitched sweater was long enough for her to sit on and her jeans were snug, not tight. She was pretty—no, she was beautiful—so casually put together it didn't register right away.

“You don't recognize me, do you?”

And then I did. Her eyes had been turquoise in the uneven light of Amber's condo. Here they were aquamarine. Just like her mother's.

“I do now,” All I could come up with as an answer.

I couldn't help but stare. It wasn't her beauty, even though I had a hard time believing anyone could be this good-looking up close. I stared because I hadn't recovered from the shock of sitting a foot away from living proof I was the world's dumbest detective. How could I not have recognized her as Sheila's daughter? Now it was only a question of finding out what Sheila had done with the falcon.

“You really didn't know I was Sheila's daughter?”

“No. I'm an idiot. Two men are dead because I can't see my hand in front of my face.”

“I'm sorry. I should have said something—you know, before. You were right about how I acted. Sometimes it's the only way I can get through the day.”

“Why do you do it? The job, I mean.”

“It's a long story.” She looked toward the lake. The show starting as the MC gave the splash zone speech. Parents listened to it today, not wanting to take wet toddlers into the cold. Lily didn't see it. She looked past the tank to the alien scene beyond the window.

“You don’t have to tell it,” I said. “I do have a few questions I need answers for, though.”

“Let’s do that.”

“First, why are we here? You didn’t ask to meet me just to apologize for being what you clearly are not.”

A smile touched her face and left before it established residency. “No, not really, but I wanted to make sure I did before it slipped my mind.”

“Why here?”

Almost a smile again. “I like it here. My mother used to bring me when I was little. Before things got bad between us. I come sometimes and just hang out.”

“Do you want to talk about your mother?”

The sun disappeared behind a cloud over the lake. Her smile vanished with it. “I’m worried about her. I got scared when I heard about what happened the other night.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

“Not for over a year.” Still watching the lake.

“But you’re worried about her.”

“Yes. I can’t be around her or even talk on the phone without getting a speech. She makes me mental, but I still love her.”

“She knew about you and Arbuthnot.” Lily nodded. “They had a pretty good fight over you the day before he was killed. I thought she was jealous of Amber. I had no idea how much worse it was.”

She nodded again. Her eyes were moist and her top teeth tugged on her lower lip enough to whiten the skin.

We both faced straight ahead, two people watching the dolphins to anyone who saw us. I wanted to turn toward her, make eye contact, let some empathy show through. She spoke before I had the chance.

“My mother was—is—a beautiful woman.”

She paused, as if to decide not only what to say next, but if she should say anything. A nudge seemed appropriate.

“Yes, she is.”

“Have you seen any old pictures of her?”

“No.”

“I have my first picture. We were still in the hospital. She was alone, I was a hard labor, she’d had a few hours’ sleep and no makeup. She could

have been in a movie just as she was. She's still beautiful, but I don't think she can come to grips with not being like she was then."

"She's probably just as beautiful now. It's a different kind of beauty." I surprised myself when I said it. No way would I have thought that two weeks ago.

"Yes, probably. A man your age would see it."

A man my age. Old to Lily, mother and father age. It had yet to occur to her what she'd be like at thirty-nine, just as it had never occurred to me when I was her age. What would I have said to someone who told me I wouldn't be playing trumpet anymore, that I'd find dead bodies and shoot men in the dark for a living?

At least I'd had the opportunity to do what I wanted. I wondered what Lily's dreams had been, what she majored in, where she saw herself as an adult. I doubted it included laying under slugs like Russell Arbuthnot for a living.

"It was about the time she noticed her looks were changing that I started to become a woman." Lily was talking again. I wasn't sure if I had missed anything. "Boys were coming around all the time, men even. Mom chased away a thirty-year-old man when I was fifteen. I was becoming what she used to be, and she couldn't bear it."

"She was jealous?" I assumed all parents wanted their children to live charmed lives.

"Yes."

"She can still have her pick of men. Why would she be jealous of the attention you got?"

"You don't understand. She had no men. Maybe an occasional lover, but no real suitors. She was Russell's, even then, and after a while the word got out and men quit coming around."

"And they were lined up around the block for you."

Lily nodded. "She tried everything, even sent me to an all-girls boarding school in England. The boys were still around when I came home." She pulled at a loose thread on her sleeve. Her fingers were long and slender with spatulate tips. "I had an abortion in college. We had a terrible fight and she called me a whore and worse, said I could have any man I wanted but I wanted them all. That was two years ago. I think we've talked on the phone twice since then."

“That’s how you chose your current occupation?”

“Yes.” She half-turned toward me and I reciprocated. “I guess I showed her.” She sniffed once. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to cry.”

“I didn’t think you were a cryer.”

She looked at her left foot, the one farthest from me. “No. I’m just a whore.”

“Lily, listen to me.” I put a hand on her arm and waited for her to look up. “Never let your job define you. That’s what you do. It’s not who you are.”

As usual, I hadn’t told her anything she didn’t know. The intelligence in her eyes was as unmistakable as the hurt.

“I have to ask you a few questions. It won’t take long, but I need to know.” She nodded. I leaned in closer, partly because of the noise from the dolphin show, partly because I thought it would be easier for her to answer if she could speak softly.

“How did you meet Russell?”

“I’ve always known him. He’s been around since I can remember.”

“I mean as a client.”

“It was a few months ago. I hadn’t heard from him in a long time, then I got a phone call out of the blue. He asked how I was, what was I doing, small talk.”

“What did you tell him?”

“You mean did I tell him I was turning tricks? No.”

“He already knew, didn’t he?”

She nodded without speaking.

“How?”

She shook her head and sniffed, still not crying.

“Did you ever go to his place?”

She mouthed, “no.”

“You didn’t go there the night he was killed?”

“No.”

“Do you know anything about a gift for you the day the show was supposed to open?”

“I knew he had something planned. He said he wanted to celebrate the opening in advance with something special. I thought he was going to – ”

I rushed two fingers to her lips. “I don’t need to know that.” Whores deserve some dignity, too.

She had nothing else for me. I only had to collect the pieces now.

“Thank you, Lily,” I said, touching her hand. “You didn’t have to do this. I know it was hard for you, I appreciate it.”

“Is my mother all right?”

“As well as can be expected. She needs to get this behind her.”

“Will you see her?”

“I’m going there today.”

“Please tell her I asked about her. Tell her I’m worried about her, and I love her.”

“You should tell her yourself.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Sure you can. You came to see me with a lot less to gain. It’ll be hard, but someone has to be an adult and take the first step. I don’t think she’s up to it right now. She needs to know you care about her, and hearing it from me doesn’t count.”

I did what I could to make it sound less like a scolding. Lily probably had a better handle on things than she knew. Her mother was going to need that. Life as she knew it was over for Sheila O’Donoghue. That didn’t have to be a bad thing.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

### Dropping the Other Shoe

The joy on Sheila’s face died when I didn’t kiss her with the enthusiasm she expected. She pulled her head away and Mr. Diplomacy gave it to her straight.

“What did you do with the gun?”

She unwrapped her arms from around me slowly and stepped back.

“What gun?”

“The gun you shot Russell with. I finally got around to speaking with Lily and Amber both.”

She backed into the living room as though being pushed by a slow but heavy wind. Her knees buckled against the wing chair and she sat down hard.

“No. No, I never —”

“Yes, you did. Do you want a drink?” She nodded. I poured her a glass of the wine she’d been drinking when the Irishmen broke in on Saturday. She held the goblet with both hands. I let her have a couple of swallows before I went on.

“I heard you arguing with Russell the other day, remember? You warned him to stay away from her. I thought you were just jealous of Amber. Everything fell into place when I found out Amber was Lily. It’s okay, he deserved it. Based on what I know now, I don’t feel bad about him at all.”

Sheila looked at me like I’d told her something she didn’t know. I waited until I was sure she didn’t have anything to say.

“Arbuthnot found out she was hooking. He was a sadist and kept you close enough to torment for twenty plus years. This sounds like something he’d think was fun.”

Sheila sipped the wine, staring off at an indeterminate point somewhere to my left. She gave no indication of being aware I was in the room.

“You found out. He probably told you himself; that’d be like him, too. Maybe even threw in a few juicy details. You and Lily have been estranged for a long time, but she’s still your daughter. Enough was enough.”

“Yes, it was.” Her voice fragile as a snowflake.

“When did you find out?”

“A couple of weeks ago. I knew something was going on, he always had something going on with a woman. He’d tease me with it, working the disgusting details into his stories as time went on. He said it was to show me what I could have enjoyed if I weren’t such a prude.”

“And then he went too far.”

“I should have killed him as soon as I found out he was with her, but I couldn’t. I pretended it was none of my business, even though — even though it was sick. But when he confronted me with what he was planning to do the next day—what he’d *make* her do, about the gift he’d bought her—I had to stop him.”

“Tell me what you did.”

She couldn't speak, but damned if she'd cry. She bit her lower lip, showing even more of the resemblance to Lily I'd missed until today. That was all that held her together. If she let anything out, everything would come.

I squatted like a catcher in front of her and set the wine glass on the coffee table, gathered her hands and held them. I spoke so she'd have to pay attention to hear me.

"Sheila. Listen to me. I might be able to help you, but I have to know exactly what you did."

She looked at me with what might have been hope. "You'll help me? You said he deserved to die. Will you really help me?"

"Not like that. I'm sorry, I really am. I'll do what I can to get you a good deal. With what I can tell about Russell, what you and Lily can tell – "

"*NO!* Lily can't come into this. Don't you understand? I did this for her, so she wouldn't be ruined like I was. To have her testify, for it to be in the papers, all over the Internet, I can't have that. I won't."

I waited for her to compose herself. "You may not have to. I know a good lawyer. You'll have to plead out to something and do some time, but it doesn't have to go to trial. Her name will never come up if it's done right."

I watched Sheila mull over the options. "How long would I be in jail?"

"You can probably plead to second degree, four to fifteen years. If all goes well, you could be out in a year and a half, maybe two."

"Why do I have to go at all? Can't you help me?"

"No." This avenue had to be closed before traffic started running through it. "You went there to kill him, and you killed him. They'll find you sooner or later, and might make Murder One stick if they feel like it. Turn yourself in and come clean. I don't want to sound corny, but it's time to throw yourself on the mercy of the court."

Her cheeks flushed as if I had slapped her. I went on when I was sure she understood. "Where did you get the gun?"

"It was mine. I've had it for years. I had a notion Russell might try to force himself on me some night."

"Tell me how you did it."

Her voice quiet, the speech measured. "He let me in right away, of course. I told him I'd do anything he wanted if he'd leave Lily alone. I

knew it didn't matter—he'd still do what he wanted with her and then tell me about it—but I wanted him to go into the bedroom.”

“Why?”

“I thought it would be quieter there. I was afraid someone would hear the gun. I also had to know if anyone else was there.”

“Was there?”

“We went into the bedroom and he went into the closet to get something he needed for what he wanted to do, it was a –”

“I don't need to know that part. The police might, but I don't.”

She flushed and that semblance of a smile flickered across her face for a second. “I got the gun out of my purse when he turned his back. Then I followed him into the closet and shot him.”

“How many times?”

“Three, I think.”

I nodded. “Then what?”

“I took the falcon and the gift he'd bought for Lily and left. I put the gift down the trash chute in my building.”

“Where's the gun?”

“I threw it down a storm drain.”

It was time for the Sixty-Four Thousand Dollar question. “Where's the falcon?”

“It's still in the trunk of my car. I was afraid to wrestle it around anywhere someone might see me.”

I couldn't help but smile, ducking my head to hide it from her. A three million dollar artifact had spent the last four days in the trunk of her car.

“What were you going to do with it?”

“I don't know. Throw it away somewhere, maybe.”

“Why'd you take it?”

“To make it look like a robbery. I thought the threat story could be resurrected.”

I shook her hands in mine, rocking in the squat to flex my hams. “Why didn't you come to me? I could have warned him away from her. It was worth a try.”

“I didn't know you then the way I do now. How could I tell you what he was doing to my own daughter?” I understood her better than I wanted to admit.



I rose and stood on my toes to stretch my legs. “Okay, get ready while I call the lawyer. Wear comfortable shoes, no strings. No belt, no jewelry, no keys or money. You won’t have a shower for a while, so you might want to take one.”

“We have to go now?”

“The sooner the better.”

“Can’t we go in the morning? I swear I’ll be here. I have to talk to Lily first. I’m begging you.”

I could have denied her if she’d cried. Crying is cheating and I could move past it. I wasn’t that lucky. “Do you know why she came to see me?” Sheila shook her head. “She was worried about you. She asked how you were, and wanted me to tell you she loved you.”

“What else did she say?”

“Enough. There is one thing I don’t get. Sending her away to that English boarding school. How could you afford that?”

“I couldn’t.” Her voice came from a hollow place deep inside her. “Russell paid for it.”

Her tone and something she said earlier sent something like full-body nausea through me. “Why would he do that?”

“It was part of his control. He’d known her since she was born, always paid special attention to her. He knew it made me uncomfortable. I sent her there to keep her away from him.”

The question stared at me like a rat on a birthday cake. The answer didn’t matter anymore, but I had to ask. “Is Russell her father?”

“I don’t think so.” Now she cried. “I’d left him, I thought I found someone else. The relationship was going badly, partly because I let Russell keep manipulating me. One night he came to me. If there is such a thing as psychological rape, he did it that night. He didn’t use a weapon or any physical force, but he took me against my will just the same. It was only that one time, and I was still seeing the other man. The dates are about right, though.”

“Why didn’t you have them tested? Bad as it might be to find out for sure he was her father, it would have made him stop.”

“No, it wouldn’t!” The cords in her neck stood out and her features became hawk-like. “You still don’t understand! He *liked* the idea she might be his. It was a perversion he hadn’t tried and couldn’t imitate.”

She would have fallen if I hadn't caught her. The sobs came from somewhere she hadn't been in a long time, everything coming up: Russell, Lily, her own complicity. I let her cry it out, must have been ten minutes, and thought about her options. There weren't many.

I eased her to the couch when she quieted enough to move. I sat beside her and held her left hand with my right.

"Nine o'clock tomorrow morning. You can have tonight for Lily."

She took my hand and kissed it, nodding all the time. When she looked up, her eyes were swollen but dry. "I promise I'll be here."

"I'll go to the police and tell them everything—Lily and all—if you aren't."

She stopped kissing me but still held the hand, resting her head against me. "I understand."

"I have to. I'll do everything I can without risking my license. Don't let Russell Arbuthnot hurt either of you any more." She buried her face in my chest, her answer a murmur.

I let myself out. Sheila stood on the balcony in the bitter cold, staring at the building across the alley. I have no idea what she saw.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### Where's Count Basie When You Need Him?

I couldn't go home. It would be cold and dark there. I felt cold and dark enough already.

The snow that threatened all day had started; I could almost count the flakes. Even that small volume obscured all but the nearest buildings in a whitish haze, the individual flakes bright in the gathering twilight while their numbers made the darkness seem even closer.

I parked in the street in front of my office, no heart for bantering with Tony and Joey. Rebecca nodded to me from Sandmeyer's and I gave her some kind of acknowledgment. No one in the elevator, or the third floor hallway. Sharon had gone for the day and I had the office to myself.

I pulled my chair to the side and propped one foot on the sill of the window that looked onto Federal Street. I bought myself a drink from the office bottle and watched the snow hide the sidewalk, looking dry as chalk dust where it fell.

I had a couple of drinks, maybe three; no more than four. The snow came faster and harder. Six inches expected by three in the morning. Plenty of time for the road crews to clean the streets and get everyone to work on time. This was Chicago. Everyone did what they were supposed to. The crews cleared the streets. People went to work. Kids attended school. I would take Sheila O'Donoghue to the police. And they would keep her.

She had to go. My license was the least of what was at stake. There were too many gray areas, too many places where doing the right thing brought the wrong result and the wrong thing got it right. The line had to be drawn somewhere. The world was a better place without Russell Arbuthnot, but shooting him down in cold blood didn't leave me any options. She had to go over for it, just like Bogart couldn't let Mary Astor get away with killing his partner.

Arbuthnot hadn't been my partner; he was barely my species. Still, there have to be standards. Compromise once, that becomes the new standard. Everyone says, "Just this time, then it can go back to how it was." Maybe they even mean it. It never recovers, not all the way.

The second, maybe third, no more than fourth drink went down hard and reminded me how hungry I was. I drove north for no reason except maybe because it was away from home. I stopped at the same Portillo's as the last time I saw Jan, the one on Ontario with the gangster motif. No reason. I was hungry and in no mood to make decisions. An Italian beef was always a good answer.

A couple sat at the table we'd used on Sunday. They were kids, maybe twenty. He fed her french fries and they drank out of each other's Cokes. Dumb stuff, but they were happy. I wondered if Jan would see it the same way I did. I wanted to call her. It was a bad idea and I knew it. I didn't call.

I checked my watch. Ten o'clock. Still too early to go home. I drove up Broadway to the corner of Lawrence and lucked into the bar stool closest to the stage at the Green Mill. People were staying home in droves, the snow piling up on the streets and sidewalks. Dirty icebergs had already formed along the curbs.

It was an off night at the Mill. A piano player who thought he was Count Basie tried to maximize his income per note by playing as few as possible. He didn't understand Basie any better than I understand feng shui. Basie wasn't great because he played few notes; he was great because he knew which notes not to play. The empty space was as much music to him as the sounds.

Bad piano player or not, the Green Mill was the place for me tonight. Not alone with my thoughts, but no one would disturb me. The drummer played some cute polyrhythms behind a tenor solo. A couple who would need a cab to get home tried to dance. A blonde with hair as natural as Las Vegas and too much loose cleavage made eye contact when her date went to the can. I responded by buying myself another drink.

I left around two. The snow fell not as hard, the street crews already making progress. The morning commute would be slow, but bearable. Nothing to keep me from being at Sheila's by nine.

I fell into bed at five after three. No messages on my machine. The only mail was for Occupant. I'd give it to him in the morning. I lay on my back, exhausted, in a semi-conscious state that in daylight might have been called a nap: eyes closed, aware of sounds around me. The furnace clicking on, the house settling, a snowplow going by on Francisco.

I like to sleep alone. Tonight I would have paid for someone to just lay there beside me. Not that it mattered. I wasn't sleeping alone. I wasn't sleeping at all.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

### Number Twenty-Seven

I knew something was wrong when Sheila didn't answer her door after the third ring. I knew what when I tried the knob and it opened.

I found her in the bathtub. Rose-tinted water with tendrils of semi-clotted blood drifting from her wrists. The water lay still at the middle of her breasts. Her aquamarine eyes were closed, my sole salvation.

I took my time walking to her, then touched her throat. She was room temperature, the bathroom light reflecting wax-like off her skin, blood already settling in her lower extremities. I passed the back of my hand across her cheek and crouched beside the tub.

Sheila O'Donoghue was the twenty-seventh corpse I had discovered. I remembered them all. The first one was gay, just a kid, twenty-two maybe. His lover found out the victim was screwing around and cut off the kid's johnson, shoved it down his throat to suffocate him. Then he used the same knife to eviscerate the poor bastard for not dying fast enough. The killer was sitting on the couch when Sonny Ng and I got there. Handed us the knife and said, sure, he did it, and the little faggot deserved it. He wanted dick so bad, let him try his own.

A couple of them still came to visit late at night. The three year-old boy I found with cigarette burns on his chest and privates, strap marks everywhere else. Number Eight. The doctor told me there was no medical cause of death. The little guy just gave up. The father got three years for child abuse, served fifteen months.

The schoolteacher was Number Seventeen. Thirty-two years old, plain, single. A few losers high on crank followed her home from the El one night. They forced themselves into her apartment and cut her eyes so she couldn't identify them, then took turns raping her. When they couldn't get it up anymore, they cut her throat in case she'd recognize their voices. When I'm lucky she comes to me looking like the pictures we found in her apartment.

Number Twenty-Seven was different. I knew her, liked her. A week ago I would have laughed at the idea of wanting a woman eleven years older than me. The night before last I made love to her and looked forward to doing it again. Even yesterday when I was a hard ass, I felt more sympathy for her than for the man she'd killed.

And I killed her.

I thought I was doing her a favor, giving her the night. Maybe I did. The engine that drove her life died with Arbuthnot. It was as obvious as her resemblance to Lily. The Great Detective missed them both.

An envelope lay on the toilet lid, marked for the police. Next to the toilet sat the falcon's case, held to its cart by bungee cords. An envelope with my name on it leaned against the rails of the cart.

The stationery was rose-colored, a shade lighter than her bath water. The handwriting firm and somewhat flowery, just as it was on the contract she signed for me to protect Russell Arbuthnot a week ago.

*My Dearest Nick,*

*You of all people will know what to do with this. I wish we had met long ago. You are as different from Russell as any man I have known. If last night meant as much to you as it did to me, please look after Lily for me.*

*I'm sorry I disappointed you,  
Sheila*

I folded the note back into its envelope and put it into an inside coat pocket. Then I rolled the case down to my car and locked it in the trunk.

I made sure there was no trace of the falcon having been there before calling 911. Then I found an extra bed sheet and covered her from the neck down. Fuck the crime scene techs. I wasn't going to let her lay there like an exhibit at Madame Toussaud's.

I had failed her enough already.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

### Easy Come, Easy Go

I was dangling in my office, trying to divine winning lottery numbers from hockey box scores when Oscar Wallace came in. He looked as impressive as the first time I saw him three weeks earlier.

“Mr. Wallace, we meet again.” I gestured toward the uncomfortable visitor's chair. “What can I do for you?”

He sat in the same meticulous manner as before. “You disappointed me, Forte. I didn't get my phone call.”

“Being disappointed with me doesn't make you special. Why was I supposed to call you? Lunch date? Fix you up with a woman maybe?”

Wallace didn't look like he laughed much. Must not have, if even my revered sense of humor couldn't get him going. "The falcon. You promised I could see the falcon when you got your hands on it."

I turned my palms upward and swiveled my chair ninety degrees left, ninety degrees right, then centered. "You see it here? Maybe that's why I didn't call. I knew it wasn't about a woman. Good looking man like yourself wouldn't need any help from me."

"You're not as funny as you think you are."

"No one is."

He chewed on that for a few seconds. "The Arbuthnot killing closed three weeks ago. You found the O'Donoghue woman yourself."

"That doesn't mean I found the falcon."

"Are you saying she'd already disposed of the statue when you found her?" His tone made it clear he'd made up his mind I was bullshitting him.

"I'm not even saying she had it in the first place. What do you want, Wallace? It might not look like it, but I'm a busy man. Lots of stuff going on."

"I want the falcon. You quit looking for it as soon as you found Sheila O'Donoghue's body. She must've had it. What did you do with it?"

"Maybe I just lost interest."

"You're a liar. You quit looking because you found it. Where is it?"

"You got a lot of stones to come into my office and call me a liar. Now get the hell out before I throw you out."

"No, I don't think so." He got a gun into his hand pretty quick for an accountant. Not a big gun; my .45 could eat it for lunch and still have room for ice cream. It would kill me just as dead if he shot me with it in the right place. He looked comfortable standing behind it.

I turned my palms up to show they were empty and leaned over to hit the intercom button on the phone. "Sharon?"

"Hang up!" Wallace forced the words from between his teeth .

"Yes?" Sharon said.

"Why don't you go to lunch?"

There was a slight pause. "Maybe because it's ten-thirty in the morning."

I was about to answer when Wallace did something that surpassed even my high standards for amazement: he shot the phone. Pieces of plastic flew everywhere. A small shard nicked my cheek. I guess he meant business.

Wallace started for the door and I shouted at him. “Don’t turn your back on me.” He paused in mid-step. “I can get my gun from the coat rack and shoot your ass off before you ever touch the door knob. Let her go.”

Wallace stopped and pointed the gun at me again. “She’s going to the police. Get her back.”

I shook my head. “She probably is now. She wouldn’t if you hadn’t done something stupid. There are lots of times I want her out of the office, telling her to go to lunch is an inside joke. She wouldn’t have thought twice about it if you didn’t panic.”

Wallace thumbed back the hammer of his gun. “Calm down,” I said. “You couldn’t shoot me now if you wanted to. She saw you come in and she knows who you are.” I didn’t like the way his gun hand became more unsteady as we went along. “You’re in way over your head. There’s more going on here than you know. Walk out now and we’ll chalk the phone up to a misunderstanding.”

“You *do* have it.” The gun hand stabilized, raised the barrel from my chest to my face. I saw inside this one even better than I could in the alley four weeks ago when I stumbled onto Frankie Calabria behind Tapped Out. I hoped it wasn’t becoming a pattern.

“Get up.” He motioned with the gun.

“Will you please stop being so melodramatic? It’s corny, and we’re supposed to be professionals.”

“You’re pretty cocky for someone with a gun on him.”

“Big deal. We already decided you won’t shoot me.”

His voice had an edge I didn’t like. “Maybe I’ll surprise you. This is your last chance.”

“I’m trying to do you a favor. I told you you’re in over your head. Now put down the goddamned gun and walk away. This is *your* last chance.”

I saw his finger tighten on the trigger and I rolled out of the chair, letting it fall away from me. I was too late and I knew it but it was better than watching the bullet come out of the barrel and pass through my eye.

I heard glass break and looked up from the floor. A posed portrait of Caroline and me in her first communion dress that had been on my desk lay on the ground next to me, the glass broken and a small hole through the middle. Now I was pissed.



“It’s in the safe. Thirty-one, nine, one.” He fanned on his first attempt. “Come on, Wallace, you’re trying my patience. Take the damn thing and go before I do something stupid.”

He got the safe open on his third try. He almost put down the gun in his haste to reach in when he saw what was there, remembering me just in time.

It took a minute or so to wrestle the falcon out. It was heavy as hell and he was careful not to let the gun get into a position where he couldn’t use it. He needn’t have worried. He was welcome to it.

After some work he got the bird out of the safe and lifted it to my desk. “So, you lost interest in it,” he said. I shrugged. “You never even checked my story, did you? You have something here that might be worth half a million dollars and you let me walk in and take it.”

“Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t. Either way, it’s not worth getting shot over. The money doesn’t mean that much to me. You owe me for the picture, asshole.”

“Bill me. I can afford it. You’ll have a plausible story for the police when they get here. I know you’ll come up with something better than I stole the statue you stole in the first place. It would raise so many awkward questions about who killed the Mexicans.” He gestured with the gun, pulled a set of handcuffs from his pocket. “Turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

I did. I even webbed my fingers to make it easier to slide the cuffs over them. Imagine my amazement when he sapped me.

## CHAPTER FORTY

### Inter-Departmental Cooperation

Sonny Ng, Frank Hatcher, and another fed named Miles Moseby watched me swap out the ice bag at the back of my head. It hadn’t bled much, not nearly as much as my nose after I did the face plant into the floor. I’d never taken physical abuse in any case like I had since Russell Arbuthnot was killed. Maybe it was me who needed a bodyguard.

None of my visitors spoke until I got situated in my chair and put my feet up on the desk. Sonny Ng started. He liked wasting time even less than he liked talking.

“Think you’ll live, Cowboy?” I inclined my head in as much of a nod as he’d get. “Good.” His expression wasn’t as sure. “Now what the hell is going on here?”

I rolled my eyes toward Hatcher. He caught Sonny up on our meeting at SRO the day I met Lily O’Donoghue.

Sonny looked at Moseby. “Who are you?”

Moseby took a second to rouse himself. Until then he hadn’t shown any more interest in the conversation than the spider in the corner. Big—at least six-three—thick through the body. Skin so black it was almost purple.

“FBI, detailed to Homeland Security.” His voice didn’t match his build, like a ferret channeling through a walrus’s body. “I specialize in the IRA.”

“Any undercover work?” I asked. No one laughed. Hatcher might have smiled, but it disappeared faster than summer love.

“We knew about the golden falcon rumor, of course.” Moseby continued as if I hadn’t spoken, which, of course, I should not have. “We couldn’t verify it, but with what looked like three IRA-related homicides and Oscar Wallace’s earlier visit, it seemed prudent to take action.”

“Action?” Sonny asked.

“A sting.” Moseby’s eyes were huge, whites all around the irises, made to look even bigger by prescription glasses that kept sliding down his nose. “We got a replica off the Internet for a hundred dollars and planted a GPS transponder in it. We let word leak out Forte had it. We expected IRA. Wallace surprised us.”

“He’s lucky it wasn’t the real thing,” Hatcher said. “He’s going to jail, but out in three months if he hadn’t pulled the gun. The Realies would’ve killed him for the genuine article.”

“I told him he was in over his head,” I said. “He had no idea.”

“That was his M.O.,” Hatcher said. “Being in over his head. Wallace was good at what he did. He just didn’t know when to stop.”

“Pick him up yet?” Sonny asked.

Moseby shook his head. “He’s being tailed. The transponder’s working, he can’t do anything without us knowing about it. We want to see if he has

a fence or runs to the Realies to cut his own deal. We'll take him when we're ready."

We made cop small talk for a few minutes before everyone got up to go. Sonny laid back until Hatcher and Moseby were gone.

"You sure you're okay?" he said. "Every time I see you you're beat up."

"I'm fine. I think I'll go home and take a nap, though."

"You don't know anything about the statue?" No one gave cop stares like Sonny.

"Isn't it enough I solved a high-profile case for you and let your cops have the collar? Must there always be more with you?"

He gave me a long look and I thought he might say something until he shrugged on his coat and pulled his gloves from the pockets. "Don't make Wallace's mistake. In case you forgot how these guys play, go visit Mendoza and Lopez. Won't be grass on the graves yet."

"Not me, pal. I'm going home to bed. I have one stop to make and I'm taking the rest of the day off." We shook hands and Sonny went back to work

I made my one stop and went straight home. The stop was at the bank, to take Arbuthnot's falcon out of my safe deposit box.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

### Getting to the Heart of the Matter

I brought the falcon into my house through the garage and took it straight to the basement. Nothing down there except the workbench I used for cleaning my guns and fooling around with trumpet mouthpieces when I felt nostalgic. The rest I kept pristine for the pool table I hoped to put there someday when I could afford a nice full-sized Olhausen, not some seven-foot piece of shit out of the back of a bar.

I opened the case on the floor and hefted the falcon onto the workbench. Stepped back a few feet and looked at it, deciding what to do. Two minutes of staring didn't bring any new insights.

Was Oscar Wallace full of shit? His story was wilder than Arbuthnot's; that didn't mean it wasn't true. Wallace preached Real IRA, and two Realies killed Jorge Mendoza and Luis Lopez. The same two made a run at Sheila. No one could prove what they were after. I doubted it was the secret formula for dying the river green on St. Patrick's Day.

Herb Mendelssohn said the falcon might be worth three million dollars. For what? Because it was – might have been – in a movie? No one knew for sure, not now, with Arbuthnot dead. Maybe the three million was because it belonged to Russell Arbuthnot and it was worth his life to someone. Only I knew that wasn't how it went down. The truth of the story wouldn't affect the price.

The value was in the wallet of the beholder. If someone wanted it bad enough to pay three million dollars, that's what it was worth. A guy who wrote comic books for a living paid almost that much for a baseball. It bothered me someone who wrote comic books had that much disposable income.

What did the Fat Man say in the movie? "This is coin of the realm. With a dollar of this you can buy ten dollars of talk." Something like that. Wallace lost his pension and good name because he thought there was coin of the realm inside this inherently worthless piece of whatever it was. He must have been pretty sure.

I laid the falcon on its side and put a sixteenth-inch bit in my drill, then drilled into the base of the statue like it might explode. Shavings of what looked like lead slid along the augured shaft to fall on the bench. A quarter

of an inch in the resistance changed. The drill slowed, then jammed. I gave it a little more juice and pressed harder. The bit moved in, but the filings were a different color. Not as dull as the lead. Steel, maybe.

Or silver.

I didn't know anything about metallurgy but it didn't take Andrew Carnegie to tell this wasn't lead. I pulled the trigger on the drill and started back in. Another quarter-inch or so and the resistance stopped. I pushed in all the way to the shank. The bird was hollow.

That wasn't at all what I expected. A movie prop would be something inexpensive and easy to make. Plaster, or a casting of something heavy enough to look authentic. No reason to make it in layers.

I scraped the shavings into a small re-sealable bag and put the falcon back into its case. Maybe I didn't know what I had, but I knew how to find out.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

### All That Glitters is Not Gold

Irving Park Road south of O'Hare Airport was home to several industrial parks, most of which were half-deserted. Telling occupied buildings from their empty neighbors could be done in daylight by spotting the occasional rusted sign hanging over a door. At night it could only be done through intuition. Planes departing or arriving O'Hare passed overhead every thirty seconds during peak times, flying so low the rivets around the passenger windows were visible. The whole area was romantic as a mine shaft.

Goose and I were in a small building off the access road that ran by the railroad tracks. Most of the building's interior was vacant. What light there was came from the back left corner to cast erratic shadows through the emptiness. The exterior windows were painted over, letting out as much brightness as London during the Blitz.

Goose was the acquaintance of mine uniquely suited to find a person to do what I had in mind. His fingers were into a lot of things. The police knew who he was, but couldn't prove enough to put him away. The underworld had him on speed dial. Contracting out his services brought him into contact with a lot of people who lived in legal twilight.

That was why I was here. I had a statue of indeterminate composition and value; Goose knew a metallurgist who could tell him what anything was, as well as its approximate value. The guy had a daytime straight business, sent his kids to private school by assaying and melting down valuables too difficult to fence in their original form.

The new friendship got off to a rocky start. "I told you I didn't want him here," the metallurgist said.

"He's with me," was all the argument Goose needed to give.

I shrugged. "You have my name, I have your location. We're about even in exposure. I can't afford for this to get out any more than you can. Let's get it done and I'll be on my way."

The metallurgist managed to give me the stink eye without looking away from Goose. Relatively short, five-seven or -eight, thick through the body. A ruddy complexion had been enhanced through years of drinking to leave a road map of veins on his nose. Already walking away when he said, "Show me what you got" over his shoulder. Pointed to what looked like a large industrial potato peeler on a platform. A three-foot high cylinder with various connections to a control panel on its right, five buttons with a digital readout. The cylinder was mounted on a fulcrum, with a hatch at its base. A large cast iron bowl sat on a mount beneath the door.

"Can we use this thing to make some wings when we're done?" I said, always knowing how to aggravate a situation.

"This is a crucible furnace, state of the art. You quit busting my balls and I'll see what you got. Or you can take it down to Jewelers Row and see what that gets you." He waited to see if any more pearls of wisdom dropped from my lips. "Take it out of the case and set it there." He pointed to a badly-used metal table in front of the furnace. I did as I was told.

Our host dressed himself in a long lab coat-looking thing, with what appeared to be a welder's helmet on his head, visor up. Put a hump on his back and he could have auditioned to be Frankenstein's assistant.

He stopped in his preparations when he saw what I took out of the case. "Yeah. I thought the name was familiar. I seen about you in the paper."

"Fame's a curse. I can't even go to the drugstore for Preparation H without people recognizing me anymore."

Igor didn't laugh. "This thing is hot."

"It won't be when you're through with it."

He took a minute to heft the falcon. His index finger worked along the rough edge of the drill hole until it picked up a splinter. He rolled the small fragment between his thumb and forefinger. “Looks like lead. I hope the hell you didn’t make me miss Survivor for no fucking piece of lead.”

“It’s not all lead,” I said.

He lifted it, had to set it down to get a better hold. “Fucking thing’s heavy.” He cradled the falcon in both hands and got it off the table and over to the furnace, then placed it inside the crucible and made a few moves I couldn’t see. Closed and latched the top when satisfied he had it where he wanted it. He messed with a couple of the knobs and the furnace made a sound like a propane heater coming on.

“Lead melts about six hundred degrees. We’ll heat this bitch up until it melts away and see what’s left.”

No one spoke while the numbers on the digital readout moved evenly up the scale. Goose and I exchanged glances at what sounded like a small explosion from inside the drum. Igor showed his patience with amateurs. “It’s the paint. Burns off all at once.”

Chastened by our ignorance, Goose and I watched the thermometer. Somewhere around six-twenty the increase slowed, almost leveling out for a minute.

“Lead’s starting to melt,” Igor said.

The temperature resumed its climb after a few minutes. Igor pushed a button and the readout stabilized. “Stand back.” He walked to the furnace, lowered his visor and put on a pair of large gloves from the table before unhooking the catch at the base of the furnace. It didn’t take much effort to tip the crucible and pour the molten lead into the cast iron collector.

The lead came out like lava, viscous, glowing almost white, spitting and snapping in the cooler air. The heat poured through the small opening in the crucible with enough of an impact to push Goose and me each back a step, even though we were already well clear. A smell came with the heat, almost sweet, with an oily texture, like I could feel it in my nostrils. I couldn’t have been more impressed if life spontaneously generated in the bowl.

Igor finished draining the crucible and re-did the hatch. He raised the visor and went back to the control panel, leaving the bowl to hiss. “Now we got the lead out,” he said. He might have smiled. “Let’s see what else we got.”

The thermometer rose again. Eight hundred degrees. Nine. A thousand. Twelve-fifty. Fifteen hundred, with no change in the rate. Igor muttered something under his breath when it approached eighteen hundred.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I said silver melts at seventeen-fifty. It should have slowed down there. This ain’t silver.”

At two thousand degrees Igor walked over and shut off the machine. The temperature flattened out, then started to drop, much more slowly than it had risen.

“Gold melts around nineteen-fifty. The furnace is good to thirty-one hundred, but if this is what I think it is, it won’t help us.” He looked at his watch. “This has to cool down before we can do anything with it. You can buy me a beer while we wait.”

I bought him six beers in the suburban equivalent of Tapped Out. Layers of floor crud anchored the bar stools in place. The joint served domestic and imported beer. Old Style was the domestic; Leinenkugel’s the import, all the way from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin.

Igor was no better company drinking than sober, assuming he was sober earlier. He and Goose talked shop and mutual acquaintances, Igor looking at me only when he thought I was paying too much attention or wanted another Old Style.

We got back to his workshop at ten o’clock. The lead had hardened in the bowl, flat and smooth as if it had been cast that way. Igor ignored it to look at the thermometer. Then he opened the top of the crucible and poured a five gallon bucket of water inside, stepping back to avoid an explosion of steam. Checked the thermometer again, waited a few beats, then nodded and opened the hatch.

“Get that thing out of there,” he said, walking away. “It’s still hot, use the gloves.” He gestured toward them with his head.

Getting what was left of the falcon out of the crucible was a bitch. The gloves were cumbersome, the lid’s diameter wasn’t much bigger than my hands, and the statue had to be lifted straight up and out. I finally got the whole thing tilted almost ninety degrees while Goose steadied it, then I slid out the statue.

Igor was getting impatient. “Come on, let’s go. The old lady don’t put out unless I get home by eleven.”



What was left of the falcon was almost white, with more luster than brilliance. The general outline of the original statue survived. The feathers across the breast were gone; the wings were stubs. The eyes that surveyed Russell Arbuthnot's bedroom weren't even dented in the new finish. Not as heavy as it had been before, but still cumbersome.

"Bring it over here." Igor stood at another bench. On it sat a mat and a small satchel, like a kid's chemistry kit.

"Hold it over the mat," he said. "Don't set it down. Turn an edge, like this." He guided my hand. "Now slide it back and forth and rub some off, like grating cheese." He put both hands on the mat to hold it steady.

I thought the chances of grating a piece off this bird were about the same as getting it to fly, but I knew better than to question him. I felt the resistance, then Igor re-positioning the mat. Less than a minute later he told me to stop.

Goose moved in close while Igor extracted a dropper of liquid from one of the vials in the satchel. "You got a watch, Tim?"

"Yeah, I'm ready," Goose said.

"Go." Igor let one drop of the liquid fall to the smudge. Goose kept an eye on his watch and Igor stared, waiting for whatever he expected to happen. I stood with my thumb up my ass, one of my more practiced activities.

We stayed like that for what seemed like half an hour. I knew it was only four minutes because Goose called out the time. One minute. Two. Two and a half. Two forty-five. Nothing changed on the mat. Igor looked at Wren when we got to three minutes. At four he turned to me and smiled for the first time all night.

"Silver, huh?"

I shrugged. It seemed the most eloquent expression of my ignorance. "Okay, not silver. What is it?"

Goose took pity on me. "What you got here twice as valuable as gold. This motherfucker pure platinum."

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

### Partial Payment of a Debt

Lily O'Donoghue let me into her home wearing a navy blue pleated skirt and a blouse the color of her eyes. An off-white scarf, bobby sox, and saddle shoes completed the outfit.

She looked down when I entered, failed to stifle a self-conscious smile. "I have a client in half an hour. He likes the teacher and student thing."

"Everyone has to make a living," I said. She resembled a high school girl the way a butterfly resembles its cocoon.

"I don't mean to rush you, but he'll be here soon," she said. "I wish we had more time. I'd like to talk to you about some things, but I'm going away for a week this evening. You said it couldn't wait."

"That's all right. I won't take long. Mind if I sit?"

"No, please, I'm sorry. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'm good, thanks." I sat in the same wing chair as before, placed the attaché case I carried beside my right foot.

She sat on the sofa again. No beaver shots this time. Her legs were drawn together, elbows on her knees. Today's light was better, and her mother's eyes looked into me as I got my act together.

"I didn't talk to you at the funeral because I didn't want anyone to connect us."

"I knew. Thank you."

"There are things you don't know that I have to tell you. I couldn't say anything right away because I wasn't sure myself. Now I'm ready."

I brushed imaginary lint from my pants. She smiled and leaned forward a few degrees.

"You're stalling. My mother told me to trust you. Please tell me whatever you want."

I could see her mother in her now. The hair was different and Lily was taller. The eyes were identical, and the shape of her face and contours of her body were reminiscent enough of Sheila to be eerie. Anyone with low self-esteem would miss looks like that. Sheila was reminded of them every time she looked at her daughter and saw the attention Lily attracted. Sheila had only Russell, for better or much worse. I understood a lot in that one glimpse of Lily.

“You talked the night she died?” I said.

“We were on the phone for over three hours. I didn’t know what she planned to do. I should have come over. Maybe I could have stopped her.”

“No, her mind was made up. I should’ve taken her in when I had the chance. That would’ve saved her. All I can do now is try to honor her last request.”

“She called you, too?”

“No.” I paused to decide how best to continue. “You know I found her, right?”

“Yes.”

“She knew I’d be there before anyone else would look for her. She left me a note and one other thing: the falcon.”

“You have it?”

“Not anymore. There’s a story behind that, maybe not as elaborate as the one Arbuthnot must have bored you with, except mine’s true.” She smiled. “It won’t take long, and I think you ought to hear it.”

“I’m all ears.”

No, she wasn’t. Hers was the kind of beauty that when viewed in a movie or a magazine would be written off to makeup, lighting, and photographic trickery. To be confronted with it in such close quarters was intoxicating and stifling at the same time.

“A few weeks ago I was visited by a Treasury agent named Oscar Wallace. He told me a story that was too wild to be believed, which gave it a fifty-fifty chance of being true.”

I laid out Wallace’s story for her, adding a few things he didn’t mention.

“I called someone I know at Treasury. He told me the story of the gold-filled falcon made the rounds and had been written off.”

“Then why – ”

I held up a finger for her to wait. “Wallace came back the other day. He’d made up his mind I had the bird and he decided to take it off me.”

“Did you let him?”

“I let him think he took it.” She knew there was more, but didn’t ask and I had other things on my mind. “Wallace risked everything on that half-assed story. It got me thinking, so I drilled a hole in the real falcon that night.”

“You drilled a hole in it? I read somewhere it might be worth three million dollars.”

“Not to me. Too many people placed too high a value in human life on it. I thought about giving it to you, but then you would’ve been next in line to be killed. So I checked on Wallace’s story. I figured that would end the sequence either way.”

“Was it full of gold?”

“No. Platinum. About seven hundred thousand dollars worth.”

“Seven hundred thousand dollars? How do you know?”

“I know a guy who knows a guy who owes the second guy a favor and is tight with an assayist who will, when properly motivated, look into some things off the books. After certain—umm—fees were taken into consideration, I ended up with half a million dollars.” I slid the attaché case toward her. “It’s in there.”

Lily looked at the case, then back at me. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I just did it. It’s yours now.”

She looked at the case like a snake might jump out of it. “You’re giving me half a million dollars? Just like that?”

“No, not just like that. Nothing’s free, Lily, you know that. Everything has a price.”

Her face clouded over with a look she must have given a thousand men. “What’s yours?”

“Change your career. This money should set you up to do whatever you want. Do it for yourself, and for your mother. Don’t let Russell ruin your life, too.”

Her expression changed to something between disbelief and excitement, like someone waiting for the other shoe to drop. “What do you get?”

“I get to think that maybe I haven’t failed your mother completely. She’d be alive today if I’d done my job. Her note said I’d know what to do with this.” I nodded toward the case. “This is from her.”

“What should I do?”

“What are you, twenty-three? Anything’s possible. What did you study in college?”

“Psychology, “ she said, her voice as hollow as Arbuthnot’s falcon had been.

“Might be something to consider. Give yourself a chance to help people see their influences for what they are before they get into trouble.”

She was lost in her thoughts, staring at the attaché case sitting unopened at her feet. I got up without disturbing her and started for the door.

“How can I thank you?” she said.

I turned to face her, still staring at the case. “Start the career change right now.”

In front of her building, a man closing in on sixty without sneaking up on it got out of a BMW somewhat past its prime. He wore an overcoat over a tweed suit. Wisps of gray hair each sought their own direction in the early March wind.

“Did you love her?” she asked when my hand touched the doorknob.

“No.” I kept looking out the door. “But some man should have.”

The old fart reached the stairs. “Your schoolteacher’s here.” I looked back over my shoulder. “Do you want me to send him away?”

Tears flowed over an expression torn between grief and realization come too late. No sound, no sobs. She nodded without looking up.

I let him come halfway before I stepped out. Standing two stairs higher, I towered over him, which I would have done even if we were level.

“Go on home, Teach. School’s out.”

THE END