



# Dark Side of the American Dream - Reinventing Noir Fiction for the 21st Century

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Dark Side of the American Dream—Reinventing *Noir* Fiction for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

An Introductory Essay and a Work of Original Fiction

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A Thesis in the Field of Literature and Creative Writing

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## Abstract

The critical essay portion of my thesis provides an overview and analysis of classic *noir* fiction. The essay explores Dashiell Hammett's groundbreaking work in the early twentieth century and takes into account the further evolution of the genre with Richard Stark's hard-boiled caper in the Sixties and the more recent expansion of *noir* as evidenced by the works of Dennis Lehane. Characters such as tough private eye Sam Spade, the relentless thief Parker, and laconic investigator Patrick Kenzie illustrate important aspects of *noir* and their impact on my writing.

My novel *Poor Man's Lincoln* draws from classic *noir* fiction in its use of characters and setting. However, my novel also deviates from the genre. While my protagonist Jack Coyle is very much cut from the cloth of icons like Spade and Parker, I have added a further dimension of vulnerability and a potential for growth.

At the beginning of the novel, Coyle is alone and on the run from the authorities. The associates he has known and worked with for years are now gone and he is forced to operate on his own. He assembles and then executes a brilliant plan to turn the tables on his opponents. However, his journey is riddled with his own anxiety and uncertainty. In addition, his inexperience with women complicates his tenuous partnership with the beautiful Leah McBride. The arc of his character, from jittery, awkward loner to confident strategist, is what sets the story apart from lesser genre fare.

## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my fellow Harvard Extension writers: Derek Asaff, Justin Call, Suzanne Gray, Matthew Harvey, and Ed Moussouris. May we find immortality through our words.

## Acknowledgements

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## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	v
I. Dark Side of the American Dream: The Evolution of <i>Noir</i> Fiction.....	5
A Fighting Chance: Commentary on Original Fiction.....	21
Bibliography.....	36
II. Original Fiction.....	37
<i>Poor Man's Lincoln</i> .....	40

## Dark Side of the American Dream: The Evolution of *Noir* Fiction

*Noir* fiction is harder to define than most other literary genres; elements can be found in a variety of prose but *noir* itself is difficult to pinpoint. It is not simply crime fiction, though the two are intimately connected. *Noir* is not so much a species unto itself but a mood or an atmosphere—it plays on the seamy undercurrent of city life, a dark and often violent reflection of even the most prosperous society. *Noir* distinguishes itself from other genres with regard to its themes, its narrative voice, and its stylistic choices. I have studied classic *noir* fiction in an attempt to continue (and possibly reinterpret) its traditions with a modern-day sensibility, and my influences range from current best-selling author Dennis Lehane to classic novelists such as Richard Stark and Dashiell Hammett—the latter of whose works are now almost a century old.

Dashiell Hammett has had a profound impact on my work, just as he has influenced every generation of crime writers since his works were first published in the 1920s. His hard-boiled stories with their tough, streetwise language and dialogue set a number of precedents that helped define the genre that would eventually become known as *noir*. These precedents include Hammett's bleak vision of the *noir* world as an inherently hostile landscape as well as his development of the hard-boiled antihero as a protagonist. I have implemented or even reinterpreted a number of these ideas in my own fiction.

While many fictional settings offer a benign and often picturesque world with some conflict that will drive the story, Hammett's *noir* fiction does the opposite. Possessing little aesthetic beauty, his world is an evil one and its depravity can never be vanquished. Good intentions and ambitions mean little in this bleak setting; it is a chiefly urban and intrinsically



dangerous environment. The most that the protagonist can do is to try and overcome some small obstacle; he cannot save the world and would never be stupid enough to try.

Aggression and corruption dominate the environment—no institution, however sanctified, is above suspicion. The bleakness of Hammett’s environment helps to build an air of menace that adds to the atmosphere of danger and uncertainty within the story.

We see this in Hammett’s novel *Red Harvest*, a tour de force that has been credited as an influence for such films as *Yojimbo* and *A Fistful of Dollars*. In *Red Harvest*, an entire town is tainted with blood and corruption; every authority figure, including the police and the local government, is subordinate to the wealthy tyrant who runs the region. The hero, Hammett’s Continental Operative, ultimately takes on the entire community—sometimes one at a time and other times pitting various factions against one another—until just about everyone is wiped out. It is a violent and perverse story that seems intended to disturb as well as entertain the reader.

Like Hammett, I set my novel *Poor Man’s Lincoln* in a hostile environment rife with corruption. Taking place in contemporary Massachusetts, the novel follows arsonist Jack Coyle as he flees from the authorities in his hometown of Philadelphia and scours the streets of Boston in an effort to grab some cash. The entire city is strange and threatening to him. Coyle must not only evade the law, but he also tangles with the local mob. A ruthless FBI agent dogs Coyle’s every step—not to bring him to justice, but to make sure Coyle burns down an apartment building full of innocent people for the agent’s own purposes. Just like the atmospheric settings that Hammett created almost a hundred years ago, Coyle’s world is a sinister landscape; no one can be trusted and everyone is a potential enemy.

Hammett’s protagonists are enigmatic loners who are continually subjected to violence. We are never supposed to read the story from the protagonist’s point of view; the

hard-boiled hero should remain an enigma to the reader. Hammett understood that a character is much more compelling when his words and actions are left open to interpretation. While this conceit has helped to define the classic *noir* protagonist, I have deviated from this rule in an effort to bring a stronger sense of humanity to the character. While Coyle is certainly a gritty and laconic hero in the style of Hammett's creations, he also must appeal to a more sophisticated audience that expects at least some insight into his psyche.

By adding elements of angst and humor to the narrative, I hope to make Coyle a well-rounded and realized narrator. At times in *Poor Man's Lincoln*, body language is employed to establish the subtext of a scene: "I ran my fingers along the .38, but stopped when I realized my hand was trembling again. She smiled and crossed her legs, taking her time doing it. I looked away, making a silent vow to keep my mind on business" (Carter 8). In this manner, Coyle is able to express both his current state of anxiety and his attraction to Leah McBride (as well as her possible attempt to manipulate him) without shattering the subtle moment.

In addition to being an enigma, Hammett believed that the *noir* hero should be a loner and without official ties to the establishment. Such a state of being reinforces his air of solitude and loneliness. The protagonist is expected to not only be outnumbered and outgunned, but also to take his lumps—enduring a vicious amount of physical abuse throughout the course of the story. These characteristics combine to create both curiosity and sympathy for the hero and reinforce the level of danger present in his world.

Sam Spade, the protagonist of Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*, embodies all of these *noir* sensibilities. We are never let inside Spade's mind—we can only deduce what he is thinking through his dialogue and actions, as well as vague hints that he is a profoundly damaged and

haunted man. When his partner, Miles Archer, is killed in the beginning of the novel, it is revealed that Spade was having an affair with Archer's wife, Iva. She comes to Spade's office—despite his instructions for her to stay away—and asks him if he killed her husband.

The fact that Spade is sleeping with his partner's wife immediately establishes his character as being less than pure, but by having Iva suspect him of Archer's murder puts him in an even more ambiguous light. When he coldly dismisses her suspicions, she asks him to be kind to her. His reaction is notable: "He laughed at her, his eyes still glittering. 'You killed my husband, Sam, be kind to me.' He clapped his palms together and said: 'Jesus Christ'" (Hammett 26). Yet moments later, he is kissing her and promising to come see her soon. His character is slippery, hard to peg, but it is clear that he has difficulty responding to emotional distress. Rather than comfort Iva, he laughs at her and pushes her away. Such a moment reveals much about Spade's ability to be compassionate—or lack thereof.

We then see the haunted side of him after Iva leaves: "He took tobacco and cigarette-papers from his vest-pockets, but did not roll a cigarette. He sat holding the papers in one hand, the tobacco in the other, and looked with brooding eyes at his dead partner's desk" (26). This is an important moment, because the impetus for the rest of the plot is Spade's determination to find Archer's killer. So despite the fact that he has betrayed his partner by romancing his wife, Spade is apparently not without a conscience. How he balances his darker impulses against his guilt is not revealed to the reader—and nor should it be.

The reader must continually guess about his motivations. The end result is that Spade is a much more intriguing character than if we had been allowed into his consciousness. When he turns Brigid (the *femme fatale* of the piece, who is deeply involved in the hunt for the titular bird and whom Spade eventually becomes intimate with) in to the

police at the end of the novel, we sense that he is conflicted about this course of action, but his true motives and feelings ultimately remain a mystery. By making his hero's thoughts unavailable to the reader, Hammett has crafted a more memorable story.

Although two thirds of *Poor Man's Lincoln* is told from a close first person point of view, I still made an effort to keep my narrator as much of a mystery to the reader as possible. Coyle is not an introspective character by nature and so he does not always feel the need to explain much about what he does. Despite the previously mentioned passages where he shares his fears and anxieties, the audience is just as often left to draw its own conclusions about his actions. Like Hammett's works, the intention is to leave the reader with an enigmatic, even evocative, impression of the protagonist.

Hammett's rule that the hero should be independent from established authority is also reflected by Spade's character: Spade is a private detective, and his tangles with the law are just as perilous as those with the criminal underworld. Spade's independence from all forms of authority (both legal and illegal) suggests a rough integrity that allows us to trust his character while at the same time adding to the tension already created by the sinister environment. The best *noir* stories feature a hero pitted against the world.

Independent and isolated, Jack Coyle could not be more alone than when we meet him in *Poor Man's Lincoln*. He is an outlaw—alone in an unfamiliar city, dead broke, and on the run from the law. He is cut off from the rest of his gang and he doesn't know who to trust. The reader is led to sympathize with him as a result—despite his tough exterior and his violent history, he becomes a more compelling character due to his dire circumstances. So when he not only survives but actually triumphs over his numerous enemies, the victory is that much more satisfying.

The final rule according to Hammett regards character, and it is as straightforward as it is brutal: the hero is expected to pay his dues. The occupational hazards of a detective or gangster are many and include the probability of physical violence. Therefore, the hero—who is expected to be outnumbered by his enemies—faces the certainty of an occasional beating. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade is roughed up, pushed around, threatened, drugged, and shot at by either the police or the criminals at various points in the story. The constant threat of violence that hangs over Spade reinforces the idea of his inherently dangerous world; it is as if the hero is trapped in an endless minefield where the slightest misstep could spell disaster. This situation also underscores the hero's role as the underdog, making him more empathetic to the reader.

In *Poor Man's Lincoln*, Jack Coyle must also pay his dues. He suffers beatings from various antagonists throughout the story. To say that there are times when Coyle staggers from one fight to the next—and where the only variable is the people who are attacking him—is not an exaggeration. In the classic, if vicious, tradition of *noir* fiction, Coyle earns his victory the hard way—and we find ourselves rooting for him without even realizing it.

Hammett's contributions to *noir* cannot be overstated. As John T. Irwin writes in his book *Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them*, “the genre began with the work of detective-story writers in the twenties (most notably Dashiell Hammett) and reached a high point in Hammett's career with the 1930 publication of *The Maltese Falcon*” (Irwin 171). In addition, Irwin discusses Hammett's work in a larger literary context: “The Hammett style of hard-boiled detective story positioned itself...as a more realistic, and thus in literary terms more serious, alternative to the form as it had developed in England, France, and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (171). Hammett took an established genre, the

classic detective story, and elevated it with his own streetwise sensibility and ambition to capture a stronger, more vivid mood and atmosphere.

The second of my influences is Richard Stark, one of the pen names of the writer Donald Westlake. In the early 1960s, Westlake created the Stark pseudonym and the character of Parker, a relentless thief with a rigid work ethic and a peculiar code of honor. Stark brought the same tough sensibility to his writing that Hammett did, but he helped evolve the genre even further—he created the hard-boiled caper story. In the foreword to Stark's *The Seventh*, Luc Sante writes that, upon first discovering the Parker novels, "I also imagined that I had stumbled upon a particularly brilliant specimen of a thriving genre. But I was wrong. 'There is no such genre' (v). Stark's stories stand apart; his tales are about an amoral but professional craftsman at work.

Throughout Stark's novels, Parker is often referred to as a "mechanic" or a "workman." The stories are about a man so consumed with his profession that he virtually has no life outside of his work, a man who stops at nothing to get the payoff he thinks he deserves. Jack Coyle is also cut from this mold; he considers himself a craftsman in his chosen specialty, however brutal, and takes pride in the moral code that defines his work: "As an arsonist, people sometimes died if I did my job correctly, but I tried to avoid that whenever possible. And I never went after civilians" (Carter 5). It is precisely this code that will bring him into conflict with the job he has been given at the onset of *Poor Man's Lincoln*—to burn down an entire apartment building in an effort to silence a single mother with no apparent ties to the underworld. If Coyle were a mere psychopath, he would have simply pressed on with the contract and killed the target. That he is reluctant to follow through on the job is what sets up the central conflict of the novel, and this is only possible because of his deep sense of professionalism.

I spent most of high school reading the flowery prose of Shakespeare and Dickens, and the economy of language that Stark demonstrated was a revelation to me. Westlake chose the pen name *Stark* because it symbolized the cold and lean approach he took to storytelling. He tells the story straight on with little in the way of literary imagery. If a simile or a metaphor is used, it is just as simple and gritty as Stark's characters. His narrative voice, told in a distant third person, never strays from its taut gracefulness. A fine example of his style can be found in the second chapter of *The Hunter*: "His voice was high and hard, like a tightrope walker out on the rope, knowing his balance was never better. High and hard and sharp" (16-17).

One could argue that Stark's approach to writing and dialogue is a reaction to how absurd the genre had become. Hammett had set a strong precedent for smart and stylish narratives. Raymond Chandler further elevated *noir* with his own fiction and talent for language, but the form became a caricature of itself by the 1950s. As Geoffrey O'Brien explains in his book *Hardboiled America*, stylized crime fiction had become played out: "There had been too many episodes of *The Fat Man* and *The Whistler* and *The Adventures of Sam Spade*, too many low-budget second features exploiting the same handful of plot devices, too many white trench-coats, too many plugs for Wildroot Cream Oil" (O'Brien 139). Something different was needed to reinvigorate the genre.

Stark breathed new life into the crime novel; he stripped all the gloss away and got back to basics. His prose contains the mood of classic *noir* but skips the overly clever banter and exposition. A good example of his no-nonsense approach is the opening line of Stark's *The Mourner*: "When the guy with asthma finally came in from the fire escape, Parker rabbit-punched him and took his gun away" (3). Stark does not waste time dancing around—he goes right for the throat.

Stark also deviates slightly from Hammett's rule of denying access to the hero's thoughts. We read most of the story from Parker's point of view, but the man is so disciplined, so much the antithesis of introspection that we are not really given much insight into his psyche. Though Stark seems to prefer it that way, as previously mentioned I have further departed from the traditional norms of the genre to offer a deeper look at my protagonist.

In the introduction to *The Mourner*, John Banville declares "The fact is, though Parker himself would be contemptuous of the notion, he is the perfection of that existential man whose earlier models we met in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky" (viii). Stark's characterization might reflect Nietzsche's existential man, a rugged individual who defines himself by his choices, but Parker himself would be unmoved by this insight. Parker has no time for introspection and simply gets on with the business at hand; the results are as gritty as they are focused.

I learned from Stark's example while adding complexity to the narrative. Because *Poor Man's Lincoln* is told from the first person point of view, I had to be careful about the narrator's voice—channeling my influences while maintaining some humanity in the voice, but without deviating from the tight, hard-boiled plot. As a result, Coyle doesn't get distracted from the story he is telling and the rare literary effect he uses remains consistent with his streetwise mentality: in Chapter Three, he observes "Her story already had a certain kind of feel to it, like she'd kept it on a shelf for a while, taking it down every now and then to polish it" (Carter 20). His reflection strives for that same rough quality that Stark's prose possesses, an authenticity born from a lifetime of mean streets and dirty deeds, and all the more elegant as a result.



Stark made no apologies for his protagonist; he wanted to tell a story from the viewpoint of the bad guy, a character with no remorse or sentimentality. Over the years, Stark wrote two dozen Parker novels, but it is the first book, *The Hunter*, that is the most relevant to my work. The story begins on an ominous note: Parker has been betrayed by both his partner and his wife—shot and left for dead in a burning mansion. It takes him months to make his way back across the country to find his would-be killers and take back his half of the money they had stolen.

As Parker makes his way up the food chain from street hoods to the upper echelon of the mob, we see just how fixated he is about getting back his money. But along the way, we also get brief glimpses of his humanity. We see that he does not like to kill unless there is no other choice. He is not squeamish about murder but he considers it a waste of energy—something that usually causes more problems than it solves.

He walks a narrow line between morality and ruthlessness and it sets up a peculiar tension in numerous scenes. Early along in *The Hunter*, he forces a low-level manager to drive him out to the beach to have a private conversation. The mobster, a hapless individual named Stegman, knows full well that Parker could (and would) kill him at any moment if Stegman does not answer his questions. Yet during the ride, Parker says ““Watch your driving, there’s a lot of kids”” (*The Hunter* 37). This moment reveals to us that Parker cannot be dismissed as a mere sociopath; he has a moral compass (however muted it may be at times) and does not compromise it. I employ this same dynamic in *Poor Man’s Lincoln*: we sense Coyle’s annoyance when he realizes that Leah McBride is not a member of the criminal fraternity. As mentioned previously, Coyle never goes after civilians. By differentiating between fair targets (such as other criminals) and noncombatants, Coyle is showing us that he possesses a code of ethics. This quality will help us relate to him much

more than we would an amoral psychopath, making the narrative and its protagonist stand out against typical genre fare.

Parker does not believe in crossing his fellow thieves (another reason the recent betrayal by both his wife and his partner is so grievous an offense to him), not out of love for them but out of mutual interest. They all might work together again and so, ironically, honesty seems to be the best policy when it comes to breaking the law. Stark resurrects the notion that honor does—or at least, should—exist among thieves. Just because they are criminals does not mean they can't still possess some sort of moral compass.

Once again, I employ this curious type of morality in my own works. The entire plot of *Poor Man's Lincoln* is predicated on the single decision that Coyle makes at the beginning: to not blindly go ahead with the torch job, but to approach the target and find out why the mob wants a single mother dead. In sparing her life, he finds himself in a world of trouble but his personal code of honor is never open to compromise. Despite his hardened exterior and violent ways, his story is propelled by what is in essence the first good deed he has done in a long time. This tension between darkness and light, between virtue and sin, all tinted by the hard-boiled lens through which the story is told makes the narrative more compelling and its narrator that much more complex.

Another way in which Stark challenges the reader is through alternating points of view. While most of *The Hunter* is seen through Parker's viewpoint, there is a segment where the narrative switches to Mal Resnick—the man who betrayed Parker, stole his wife, and left him for dead. By this time in the story, the reader should feel only dislike and contempt for Resnick, a coward without any sense of honor or decency. By choosing to retell the story through Resnick's eyes, Stark leads us to sympathize with him. As we watch Resnick try to overcome a deep-set sense of inferiority, we relate to his insecurities and frustrations.

Resnick is ultimately humanized: he is another small fish just trying to survive in a world of bigger and smarter fish.

I shift the point of view in *Poor Man's Lincoln* with a similar goal in mind. While two thirds of the novel is told in the first person by Jack Coyle, the middle passage shifts to the viewpoint of Brett Rawson. Introduced in the second chapter as Coyle's dubious contact in the local mob, Rawson comes across as neither good nor evil in Coyle's eyes, but more as a dope—young and stupid. But when we see the world through Rawson's eyes, we see the tragedy of how a college-bound teenager ended up—through bad luck and his own shortsightedness—in debt to the mob and then a federal informant. In Rawson's mind, Coyle is not the hero of the story but is rather an intimidating presence—the latest of many oppressors trying to keep Rawson down. By shifting the perspective, I am able to present each character as a fully rounded individual, each with his or her own desires, ambitions, and flaws.

I am fascinated with origins, how a given character came to be the way he or she is. Coyle must remain something of an enigma to the reader, but with the character of Rawson I am able to explore how one's origins influence the decisions that one makes. This choice also serves the narrative function of clarifying the plot; Rawson finds the banknotes, and through his story we see how the currency affects the lives of every character in the novel.

The third and final influence on my work to be discussed is bestselling author Dennis Lehane. More than any other writer out there, Lehane has not only modernized the *noir* genre but has brought it to the mainstream as well. He may be best known for his standalone thrillers *Mystic River* and *Shutter Island*, but it is the six books featuring his detective Patrick Kenzie that bear the most relevance to my work.

The Kenzie novels are important to the discussion for several reasons. First, Lehane uses the first-person point of view for the narrative, shattering Hammett's rule that forbids access to the protagonist's thoughts. By writing in the first person, Lehane shows us how Kenzie's repeated exposure to violence and horror affects his life and the lives of those around him. Also, Lehane uses humor, often in a strategic way. Not only does he employ humor to disarm the reader while humanizing his narrator, but he also uses it to address key issues in the text. A closer first person point of view as well as a moderate injection of humor can spell the difference between success and failure for a modern *noir* tale, while also helping to dispel genre clichés.

Using the first person perspective can be hazardous in crime stories; in clumsy hands, the character's musings might remind the reader of a bad voice-over. Lehane, however, easily avoids such pitfalls and delivers a powerful and gritty story every time. There is a sense of immediacy to his work because of the viewpoint he chooses to write from; we see the events of each novel through Kenzie's eyes and he proves himself to be a reliable and sympathetic narrator. Unlike the cold and amoral landscape that Stark builds around Parker, Lehane brings a brighter sense of humanity into his work that acts as a perfect counterpoint to the darkness and violence inherent in Kenzie's world. His hero is tough but compassionate, though much of the stories revolve around him struggling to retain his sense of humanity in the face of brutality.

Lehane understands that the bleak aspects of crime fiction have less impact when there is no positive relief. Kenzie, Lehane's protagonist, describes his hopes and fears, loves and hates, and bridges the gap between the novel and the reader by offering a profound glimpse into his psyche and heart. Kenzie's narratives lend merit to the idea that a *noir* hero need not always be a cipher.

I have attempted a similar convention in my own fiction. Having seen that Lehane met success with the first person point of view, I did the same with *Poor Man's Lincoln*. I had introduced the character of Jack Coyle in my previous novel *The Hearts of Kings*, and though he was only a minor character he instantly leaped off the page for me. Coyle had such a distinctive voice that I wanted to take full advantage of it by writing him in the first person and shaping the narrative around his journey.

Like Kenzie, Coyle brings a sense of morality to the story, as well as an endearing vulnerability. When he first approaches Leah McBride, the *femme fatale* of the piece, he is awkward and shy: "We were huddled over the small table and I realized that I hadn't been this close to a woman in a long time. Her perfume was distracting" (Carter 16). But, like Parker, he also brings a certain level of toughness as well as streetwise cunning and resilience. The best *noir* heroes do not overcome their enemies with bullets or brawn—they use their brains. In each of the novels, Kenzie thinks his way through the case rather than just shooting his way through—though there is plenty of action, too.

Lehane brings depth and understanding to his writing, an insight into the *noir* world that few other writers have demonstrated. Unlike Sam Spade or Parker, who go from case to case (or caper to caper) with barely a backward glance, Kenzie's tales build upon each other and show the psychic toll his continued contact with violence and inhumanity is taking. Having been raised by an abusive father, Kenzie (much like Spade) carries internal scars that might never fully heal.

We see this all too well in the second novel *Darkness, Take My Hand*: when talking with his girlfriend Grace (a doctor whose life, until now, has fortunately remained untarnished by the violent world in which Kenzie exists), Kenzie asks point blank why she loves him. She replies "that's the silliest question you've ever asked. Don't you feel worthy

of love, Patrick?’ ‘Maybe not’ I said” (Lehane 104). Neglected and beaten by his father and now pursuing a career that brings him into daily contact with the bleak underbelly of society, Kenzie cannot help but doubt his own worth. It cannot be a coincidence that his love interest is named Grace, which is the very intangible thing that Kenzie yearns for but fears he will never have. It should not come as a surprise that when Kenzie’s enemies try to harm Grace and her daughter, her romantic relationship with Kenzie comes to a bitter and irrevocable end.

This dynamic comes into play near the end of *Poor Man’s Lincoln*. By this time, Coyle has allowed himself to be seduced by Leah McBride and the two embark on a new intimacy while they hide out from their enemies. Yet Coyle suspects that it is too good to be true when he muses “Could this be my life from now on? Waking up beside this beautiful woman, sharing the rest of our days together? Christ, it sounded like a fucking fairy tale” (Carter 255). He has been in hell too long to believe in heaven. His instincts serve him well, however, as it turns out that Leah is only using Coyle to get her hands on the money. She feels no affection for him, something he suspected all along.

More than any other genre, *noir* is a minefield of clichés waiting to happen; the slightest misstep and the narrative turns to dirge. The very elements that define this genre—the setting, the characters, the mood, and the tough, clever banter—are the same fixtures that, if used clumsily, will spell certain death for a story. The challenge for any modern *noir* writer is to avoid beating the metaphorical dead horse and to bring something fresh and new to the story. Lehane does this with his imaginative story lines and through his use of humor.

There are humorous moments throughout all six of the Kenzie novels, but one could argue that the most effective uses of humor are when cliché threatens to rear its head. In *Darkness, Take My Hand*, Kenzie and his partner Angela Gennaro are meeting a prospective

client—a classic *noir* scenario that has been done to death a thousand times over. But instead of playing it straight, there is a wonderful tongue-in-cheek moment where Kenzie observes “maybe she was waiting for us to list our qualifications, show her our guns and tell her how many dastardly foes we’d vanquished since sunup” (Lehane 8-9). Lehane defuses the cliché by attacking it head-on; a less aggressive approach would only compound the problem. Yet his humor is not malicious—in his own offhand way, Kenzie is paying tribute to the mythical yesteryear of his profession, and by extension Lehane is saluting the legendary crime writers who paved the way for him in generations past. Lehane is not afraid to poke a little fun at his predecessors.

I strive for the same balance of irreverence and homage. In the opening chapter of *Poor Man’s Lincoln*, Coyle barges into Leah McBride’s apartment with a gun in hand to demand why the mob has put a contract out on her. What follows is the beginning of a subtle dance between the two that will last most of the novel. Like Kenzie meeting a client, the scene where the *noir* hero meets (and flirts with) the *femme fatale* can quickly descend into cliché if handled badly. I attempt to turn the convention on its ear by reversing the balance of power: traditionally, the scene consists of the tough-talking detective trying to bully the faint-hearted damsel. Instead, once Leah realizes what is going on she snaps “Christ, either shoot me or get the fuck out of here” (Carter 4). Ideally, this dialogue will not only give the reader a strong impression of Leah’s character, but it will also challenge the reader’s expectations. Poorly written fiction perpetuates stereotypes; good fiction shatters them.

## A Fighting Chance: Commentary on Original Fiction

The critical character arc of *Poor Man's Lincoln* is the development of Jack Coyle as an independent strategist<sup>1</sup>. The central conflict of the novel is the fact that Coyle has always been able to rely on his criminal associates to plan out every job that they undertook. Now, with his old gang scattered to the winds and his boss dead, Coyle must learn to rely on himself as he becomes embroiled in a murky struggle over a fortune in Civil War banknotes.

As the novel progresses, Coyle realizes that he *must* believe in his ability to outthink his enemies or he will surely die a horrible death. He conjures up a scheme to neutralize his opponents and get away with the loot, but his plan depends on trusting the story's *femme fatale*, Leah McBride—a less than certain notion. A second and equally important theme is his struggle to control his growing attraction to Leah; he believes that keeping his distance and objectivity in the midst of a job is crucial to his survival, yet he cannot help but be affected by her proximity.

Coyle begins the novel by blundering into Leah's apartment, talking tough but all the while making silent observations such as "I'd never had to map things out, never had to think ahead; all that stuff had always been done for me. Now that I was on my own, I was sure to fuck things up" (Carter 5). By deviating from the classic *noir* tradition and employing this direct access to his thoughts, it not only sheds light on his anxiety about handling the situation, but it also makes him more sympathetic to the reader.

Coyle is at a further disadvantage because he is awkward around women. He sums this up in a brief aside: "I wasn't used to being around women—especially beautiful ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Although my thesis only includes Parts One and Two of my novel, some content from Part Three is included here specifically to tie together the narrative and thematic ideas being discussed.



Usually, they were too terrified of what I did for a living to want anything to do with me”

(7). Unlike Sam Spade or Parker, both of whom exhibit an almost arrogant self-assurance with women, Coyle’s shyness makes him more believable as a character. It also ratchets up the tension in the scene; his discomfort will make it much more difficult to gain leverage over Leah.

Suspicious as to why he was offered a substantial fee for burning down an apartment building—with the specific intent that Leah would perish—Coyle approaches her to find out why the local mob wants her dead. She is coy in her responses, but she hints that a good deal of money is at stake.

In the tradition of *noir*, the two exchange banter that often has an underlying subtext. On top of everything that is going on, Coyle continues to fight his attraction to his intended target. What is more, Leah notices his attraction and plays off it: “I ran my fingers along the .38, but stopped when I realized my hand was trembling again. She smiled and crossed her legs, taking her time doing it. I looked away, making a silent vow to keep my mind on business” (8). Rather than portray the hero as invincible and inscrutable, I endow Coyle with an awkwardness that helps to round him out; his proficiency as an arsonist must be balanced by his shortcomings. The reader will identify much more with a flawed protagonist than the seemingly indomitable hard-boiled leading men from previous generations of *noir* fiction.

Coyle and Leah meet again the next day to discuss things further, and Leah eventually reveals what is going on. The back story that she relates is in keeping with another classic *noir* tradition. *The Maltese Falcon* would not have been possible without either the bloody and murky history of the statue that is at the heart of the novel or the assorted (and often false) stories that Brigid tells to gain Spade’s sympathy. Richard Stark honored

this tradition as well; Parker's relentless thirst for revenge against his wife and old partner stems from the back story of betrayal and murder related in the novel. Such a device accomplishes two things: it establishes a history for the characters, helping to define them by their previous actions and decisions; it also lends a perspective to the world they inhabit—granting a dimension of time that gives breadth to the narrative. While some *noir* devices have had to evolve with the times, this particular tradition is just as effective now as it was in decades past.

Years ago, Leah tells Coyle, her father (a career criminal named Jimmy O'Hare) and his partner had stolen a fortune in old currency. Her father had been caught by the police, but the partner got away and hid the money. O'Hare languished in prison for twelve years, but went to find his old partner as soon as he got out. He found out that his partner had died *just the day before*, not telling anybody the location of the money before he passed away. O'Hare drank himself to death not long afterward, the memory of the hidden fortune weighing on him heavily.

Now, however, the money has been found by a dockworker named Brett Rawson. A legal battle has been going on to determine the rightful owner of the banknotes, but the consensus is that Rawson will ultimately claim the treasure. Leah followed all of these developments and then filed her own claim to the currency using forged documents from her father. What she did not know is that Rawson is deep in debt to the mob, so they have a great deal of incentive to get the money into his hands. Therefore, the gangsters need her out of the way and hired Coyle to torch her apartment—making it look as if she perished in a terrible but unrelated tragedy.

These bleak circumstances reinforce Hammett's notion of the corrupt and inherently hostile world that plays host to the best *noir* tales. It is of particular importance that law

enforcement never enters the equation. This idea is underscored when Leah suggests that she should just go to the police rather than deal with Coyle. His response is telling: “Lady, I can tell just by looking at you that you’re not that stupid” (10). The *noir* universe offers no such easy solutions as running to the cops, and its denizens know this far too well. If they are to find a way out of their dilemma, they will have to do it themselves.

Coyle now understands why both Rawson and the mob are exerting enormous pressure to get him to kill Leah before she can argue her claim at a court deposition. The fact that Coyle is delaying the job puts him in a great deal of danger. His conscience will not allow him to let an innocent woman and her son die (especially a woman he is strongly attracted to), but he is badly outnumbered and outgunned. To forfeit the contract could cost him his life. To make matters worse, he is—as mentioned previously—not used to having to think his way out of a situation on his own. If he is to survive, he has to act strategically.

The necessity for Coyle to rise up to the occasion and enter unexplored territory is a deliberate and significant departure from traditional crime fiction. When we first meet characters such as Sam Spade and Parker, they are already veterans at what they do—jaded and world-weary, we enjoy their adventures knowing we are experiencing them at the top of their game. But Coyle’s inexperience as a lone operative allows us the opportunity to see the growing pains of his progress. As the clear underdog in the story, any chance at victory is slim—making even the smallest triumphs worth celebrating and his eventual success a phenomenal denouement.

Not only is Coyle facing the mob and Rawson, but there is also a mysterious man in a raincoat who has been following the arsonist’s every move. This man confronts Coyle in an alleyway and joins the angry chorus in urging the arsonist to hurry up and perform the

torch job. While pinning Coyle against a brick wall, the man demands to know what kind of game Coyle is playing. Coyle thinks to himself “He’d laugh his head off if he knew I was making this up as I went—and that I had no clue how I was going to get out of this mess. Still, I kept my game face on” (54). It is clear that Coyle is still at a loss at this point. Dodging his various enemies while trying to get to the truth of the matter, he has little time to focus on the situation and brainstorm solutions, as he observes a bit later in the story: “Everything had been happening so quickly, I hadn’t had much time to sort it all out. I could plan out a torch job well enough, but that kind of thinking was tactical, not strategic” (59). The important aspect of this thought is that he is beginning to give himself credit; he acknowledges his ability to choreograph a fire, which is no small thing. A seed of confidence is now planted, and it will enable him to see that he just may be smart enough to outthink his opponents after all.

As the story builds, so does Coyle’s belief in himself. Even when he is tempted to contact one of his old associates—who could strategize with the very best—Coyle realizes he is reluctant to do so: “even though I knew I’d flounder around looking for a way out of this situation, part of me wanted to handle it on my own” (59). We now see a new side to the character who busted in on Leah McBride at the beginning of the story, brandishing a gun in his shaky and sweaty hand. He is far from certain about his ability to handle things, which is understandable, but he is now at least willing to try. His newfound confidence cannot arrive all at once; it must come in increments to be believed by the reader and appreciated by its own beholder.

A definitive turning point comes when Coyle, out of moves, decides to visit the Charlestown house where Rawson had found the banknotes. It is here that his potential skills as a strategist are displayed:

I could use this house—I knew it right then and there. I didn’t know exactly how to work it, but I knew the potential was there. Like I’d told Rawson that morning, he had no idea what I was capable of if I was given a chance to plan ahead. Maybe that meant something after all. But could I do it? Could I really pull off a trick this big and get away with it? So many things could go wrong and I didn’t know if I could even account for all the contingencies. But what other choice did I have? I was in too deep to do anything but keep pushing ahead. (85)

Once again, Coyle is less than sure of himself, but in the *noir* world all the hero needs is a fighting chance. By starting with his ability to map out a fire, he realizes that he can apply such a skill to a larger dynamic. The key for him is to not get too far ahead of himself. He continues to pick apart the situation in his head:

I thought about it and realized that if I took it slowly, one step at a time, then maybe I could make it work. To try to view the whole picture at once was too overwhelming; if I broke it down into smaller parts, it seemed more manageable. I wondered with a grin if that was how McTeague had always done it. After all, I’d managed to lose the Raincoat on the way here, and I didn’t think he was an easy tail to shake. If I could manage that, then it was possible that I could think my way through something bigger. (85-86)

The importance of Coyle’s breakthrough here cannot be overstated. Not only does he take comfort in the idea of breaking down his developing scheme one step at a time—thereby not getting overwhelmed by all that he must do, instead using tunnel vision to focus on what lay directly ahead, but he also finds unexpected common ground with his late boss and mentor. Just the idea that McTeague may have approached a situation in the same way is enough to bring a smile to Coyle’s face. In this moment, he begins to see that he might be giving others too much credit and, by extension, not enough to himself.

By reminding himself of his previous accomplishments—being able to plan out a fire, as mentioned above, as well as shaking off the Raincoat’s car on the drive to Charlestown—he is at last validating his own, albeit fledgling, self-reliance. There is no

doubt that he would not have been allowed to search the Charlestown house with impunity (and therefore hatch his plan) if the Raincoat had managed to follow him the entire way. So his success in eluding his tail is even more important than he is consciously aware.

This realization of Coyle's ability to think on his feet should resonate as authentic with the reader; his victory was long in the making and was not easily earned. Still, this self-acknowledgement is just the beginning of his growth. His revelation builds momentum, and as he continues to develop his plan his confidence increases proportionately:

What I had realized while standing on the roof hadn't been a fluke—by taking my scheme apart and figuring it out one step at a time, I'd been able to plan it all out much better than I ever would have thought. I still couldn't account for all the thousands of things beyond my control, but I felt better about my chances of getting out of this thing alive. (98)

With such heavy odds against him, it would be foolish for Coyle to feel overconfident at any point in the novel, much less in the earlier chapters. But his burgeoning self-reliance must be established in the reader's mind or the story will simply not work. Facing such a bleak situation, it is not unfair for the audience to all but dismiss his efforts as futile. It does not matter yet whether Coyle can actually win—what is vital at this point is that he has to at least *believe* he can win. As a result, it is reasonable that his confidence will rise and fall. His lingering doubts should not be vanquished easily, giving rise to such brooding thoughts as the following:

I wondered if this was just a fool's errand—if I was stupid for thinking a thug like me could possibly outsmart all the other players in this little drama. Well, there was no turning back now. I was all in, as they say at the gaming tables. If something went wrong—and that was almost sure to happen—then at least I'd take a few of them with me. (101)

What is remarkable about this passage is Coyle's ever-evolving state of mind. The confidence has been growing, but now he adds a sense of defiance: he is now fully dedicated to his scheme and counterbalances his uncertainty with the cold consolation that his enemies may die with him should he fail. Coyle has now cast his lot and therefore has passed the point of no return. The reader should sense this turning point and should know that the stakes have risen even higher.

Meanwhile, Coyle continues to struggle with his attraction to Leah. Every interaction between them becomes a minefield of distrust and unspoken urges. After she has finished telling her story about her father and the money, there is the following exchange: “‘So when will I hear from you?’ She brushed my arm with her hand and I felt gooseflesh appear. *Be careful, Jack. Be very careful here*” (40). The ambiguity that is such a time-honored aspect of *noir* is on full display; Coyle cannot be sure if she is acting sincerely or if she is trying to manipulate him. Given his inexperience with women, he should not be sure at any time what her true motivations are—and by extension, neither should the reader. As a modern day *femme fatale*, Leah cannot be fully trusted. When his only ally cannot be relied upon, it reinforces Coyle's sense of isolation.

The tension between the two characters only escalates as the story progresses. After three mob enforcers pay Coyle a visit—pushing up the deadline for the torch job by a day and roughing him up in the process—he heads over to Leah's apartment to discuss their options. Though his mind is on the business at hand when he arrives, he cannot help but become distracted by her presence: “It wasn't like she was standing there in a sexy negligee or anything. She was wearing flannel pajamas, for Christ's sake. And she was suddenly making my mouth water” (67). A key factor in her ambivalent behavior is the fact that she is not making any effort to entice him with her appearance. Somehow, her outfit has the

opposite effect—he is that much more enthralled. Still, in this instance, he stands firm and leaves before anything can happen. He believes that, by becoming intimate with his intended target, he is further compromising his ability to be objective about the situation. His willpower, for better or worse, cannot last. This losing battle against temptation is another classic noir fixture: no mortal man can resist the *femme fatale* forever.

Their relationship reaches its first boiling point when Leah calls him in tears, claiming that she just escaped being run down by a car. Coyle goes to her apartment where she begs him for comfort. The two hold each other and begin to kiss, but then Coyle's phone rings. It is his contact with the revelation that the man in the raincoat is one Richard Ferrell, an FBI agent. Furthermore, Rawson is his confidential informant.

This turn of events should have a major impact on the story and its reader. It certainly forces Coyle to reassess everything he thought he knew about Rawson and finally reveals the nature of the dockworker's relationship with Ferrell. If the story is working as it should, the dramatic tension (as well as the stakes) should rise exponentially with this scene.

While this new information about Ferrell and Rawson makes a major impact upon the story, the interrupted kiss is no less important. Coyle and Leah have now crossed a threshold, symbolically consummating the sexual tension that has been brewing since the first chapter. The fact that it was interrupted only prolongs the suspense and whets their appetites (as well as the reader's, hopefully) to see this new intimacy unfold.

When we next see them, Coyle and Leah are on the run from their enemies. They bring her son to a safe place before fleeing to a Framingham motel. For a story to truly progress, there must always be movement. Now physical motion has been added to the dramatic action already in play, raising the stakes and literally propelling the narrative forward.



Coyle reveals that he has a plan to lure their various enemies together and dispatch them all at once. But his plan depends on the element of surprise, so he is reluctant to share his scheme. She seduces him, upping the ante in their ongoing power struggle and heightening the tension at the same time. This scene shows a profound example of cause and effect: Leah demands information; Coyle refuses; Leah finds leverage by offering the only thing she has left—her body.

They spend hours making love. Crucially, Leah asks again what his plans are. He tells her enough to satisfy her curiosity, but still keeps the bulk of the scheme secret. She is content and takes him back to bed. Their eternal power struggle continues; all that has changed is the forum in which the battle is being fought. What began as verbal fencing has now become physical.

Yet Coyle is not so easily conquered. His growing confidence as a professional has carried over to other aspects of his psyche, and he is able to keep his wits even in the headiest moments of their new intimacy. When he insists on holding back information despite her seductive tactics, it is clear that he is not completely taken in by her charms.

They buy a disposable cell phone and Leah calls Rawson. She threatens to give the mob hard evidence that he is an FBI informant unless he and Ferrell bring the banknotes to the Charlestown house the following evening. Coyle drives to Charlestown to set his trap.

Just as dawn breaks, he finishes his preparations. He takes out the disposable cell and makes a call. He has a conversation with an unidentified individual, promising to make all of that person's problems go away. Once again, the dramatic suspense of the novel needs to remain high, so introducing this unknown factor accomplishes several objectives. First, the reader will likely wonder who Coyle is talking to. Second, by extension, it should introduce further uncertainty into the plot: what exactly is Coyle's big plan? Who is he

secretly cooperating with and will he betray Leah? Last, this scene reinforces the *noir* perspective that there are no true heroes left; the world should not be viewed in absolute terms of good and bad. Morality is relative and very often the world's denizens must choose between the lesser of two evils.

Underlying these dramatic elements is Coyle's growing resilience. The shaky thug who burst into Leah's apartment in Chapter One has now developed into a much savvier individual. He breaks it down in clear terms for the reader:

If you can understand someone's motivation, you can understand that person to some degree—and you can predict what he'll do. Rawson wanted the money, so he could be depended upon to do whatever it took to get that cash into his hands. Ferrell wanted Rawson in one piece, to continue to be an informant and further the agent's career. Ferrell, therefore, would do whatever it took to keep his stool pigeon alive. (257)

In a continuation of the approach he took earlier in the novel, Coyle takes the large and murky situation and compacts it into smaller, more manageable pieces. By picking apart something as simple yet as important as motives, he is able to predict how his adversaries might behave. The unspoken element here is that he must also be assessing Leah's actions and what that might imply about *her* possible motives.

He returns to the motel, where Leah sweeps him up into another round of sex. Finally, the time comes for them to head to the meeting. Coyle drops her off at a bus station, first taking one of her cigarettes (though he does not smoke) before driving alone to the Charlestown house and hiding outside.

Rawson and Agent Ferrell arrive. They observe that the tarps on the roof appear to have been blown off by the wind. As a result, the living room is covered in puddles from the rain. Coyle can tell by the conversation that the two men brought the money in a duffel bag. Leah arrives and the three antagonize each other. Their dialogue is cut short by the

arrival of the three gangsters who ambushed Coyle two days before. The stage is now set: all of the players, most of them armed, have arrived and all of them want the money. The tension should now be at a fever pitch, and everything depends upon Coyle's uncertain abilities as a strategist.

Two of the criminals go inside while the third brings Coyle out of his hiding place. Everyone assembles inside. Leah glares at Coyle, assuming his big plan has been foiled. The enforcers also uncover what they believed to be Coyle's trap—a pile of mineral spirits canisters in the kitchen, with a twine fuse leading to where Coyle was hiding outside. Everyone assumes that Coyle was planning on igniting the fuse and grabbing the money while the others were distracted by the fire. Coyle claims that this was indeed his plan. This scene is important with regard to expectations of the genre. Typical *noir* offers constant reversals of fortune and no character—not even the hero—is immune to the shifting winds. Having set up the notion throughout the novel that Coyle is not a planner helps make this twist, however unfortunate, quite believable.

When Agent Ferrell remains defiant, the mobsters shoot him. The cold-blooded murder of Ferrell should underscore the brutal nature of Coyle's world: nobody is bulletproof, not even a federal agent who half-believed in his own invincibility. Ferrell's death should make the reader fear that much more for Coyle, Leah, and Rawson. Their vulnerability at the hands of these merciless gangsters now becomes all too clear.

Everything that Coyle has planned all comes down to this moment, when he and Leah are at the mercy of the gangsters. All of his meticulous planning will mean nothing if he has misjudged his enemies. He can only hope that they care more about the money than they do executing three apparently harmless bystanders.

Coyle, his gun and lighter confiscated, is nevertheless calm. He takes out the cigarette he borrowed from Leah, requesting a light. The enforcers comply, their attention now on the money. The leader kneels to examine the bag. Coyle tosses his cigarette into one of the puddles, which are not water but the odorless mineral spirits.

Here is yet another reversal, this time very much in the protagonist's favor. It should also surprise the expectations of the reader, showing that Coyle had planned well after all. The best dramatic twists work when they surprise their audience, yet still remain plausible. The ongoing tension around Coyle's wavering confidence in his ability to pull off his scheme helps keep the reader uncertain. That lingering sense of doubt should enable this turn of events to have that much stronger of an impact.

The house burns. Leah runs outside and Rawson is lost to sight, but the gangsters perish in the fire along with the all-important duffel bag. Coyle stumbles down to the street where Leah is waiting. Coyle explains his scheme and apologizes for losing the banknotes.

Leah is furious, blaming Coyle for letting the cash burn. Revealing that the money was all she had ever cared about, she spurns Coyle. He takes this rejection very calmly and walks away. Once again, the hardened sensibilities of the *noir* world are in full effect here; even the purest character has a mercenary streak and there is little room for sentimentality. Leah is ultimately revealed as neither a victim nor a saint—she is simply a single mother looking for the best advantage for herself and her son. Coyle failed to come through with the money, so he is no longer of any use (or interest) to her.

Leah represents a modern take on the *femme fatale* (the “deadly woman”) in that she is beautiful, dangerous, and seductive. Yet her fate, however poignant, is better than most of her predecessors. Instead of being killed or carted off to prison, she is allowed to go free. The victory that she and Coyle hoped to share seems quite pyrrhic at this point. Yes, they

survived, but the money has apparently been incinerated and Coyle must live with the fact that she had been using him all along and had no true affection for him. Yet the drama has not fully played itself out.

Coyle goes back to his car and finds Brett Rawson there waiting for him. Brett was the person Coyle had called on the disposable cell and had set up a side deal with him. Suspicious that Leah was only using him to get the money, Coyle convinced Rawson that he was never going to get out from under the mob or Agent Ferrell—unless they were all dead. So Rawson filled a second duffel bag with newspaper and then switched the bags when Ferrell wasn't looking. The real banknotes are safe in Rawson's car, and he and Coyle split them up before going their separate ways. This is the final, and hopefully best, of all the dramatic reversals in the novel. Despite the dark and brutal nature of the *noir* landscape, there is still a sense of goodness that comes through.

By including Rawson in his plan, Coyle is ensuring a payoff for himself, but his charity is not wholly out of self-interest. It can be argued that he sympathized with Rawson in a way that he could not even attempt with Leah. While he suspected his lover of false pretenses and ulterior motives (a suspicion that unfortunately proves to be true), Coyle perhaps recognized that Rawson was a good kid who had simply gotten in over his head. A more cynical story might have featured Coyle double-crossing Rawson at the end, killing the dockworker and taking all the money. But, like Stark's Parker and other hard-boiled antiheroes, Coyle believes in honor among thieves. We learn that he would have shared the money with Leah as well, if she had proven herself as trustworthy, but once she revealed her true colors her share was forfeit.

Coyle's sense of honor enables Rawson to escape his fate and have a second chance at life. Even more important, Coyle's mercy redeems his character and elevates him above

the typical *noir* gangster. In addition, his potential for growth and capacity for change signal a more dynamic arc for his character. Dashiell Hammett's heroes, especially Sam Spade and the Continental Operative, do not change at all from story to story; they simply continue to survive in a lethal environment.

Richard Stark's Parker is not much different in 2008's *Dirty Money* than he was in 1962's *The Hunter*. Parker, from beginning to end, epitomizes the no-nonsense professional thief, with little in the way of sentimentality or self-destructiveness. He stays away from either end of the emotional spectrum, ultimately proving himself to be a sociopath consumed by his chosen vocation.

Dennis Lehane's detective Patrick Kenzie does evolve over time, but that is mostly in regard to his relationship with his female partner and his attitude toward his profession. At his core, Kenzie remains the same in the sixth and final novel as he was in the first: he is a tough yet compassionate man with both street smarts and a head for deduction.

The movement of Coyle's character, in contrast, evokes a deeper ambition—the reader actually gets to see him develop as an independent professional who maintains a profound disregard for the law but who also tries to uphold a sincere (if relative) moral standard. Coyle has emerged, against all odds, from a caper that should have been the death of him. Instead, he has outsmarted a rogue's gallery of enemies and makes off with a fortune in banknotes. The reader can hope that, with a newfound sense of confidence in his ability to operate alone and a proven follower of a higher code of ethics, Coyle will continue to surpass genre expectations and carve out a place of honor in *noir* fiction.

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# POOR MAN'S LINCOLN

BY

WILLIAM F. CARTER



*For Ruthie*

PART ONE:

THE TORCH JOB

## Chapter One

“You need to give me a reason not to kill you,” I said.

Leah McBride stared at me from across her living room, still in her cashmere coat and designer heels, her blonde hair framing her lovely, angry face. She looked even better than the photo I had been given. Just to look at her made me wish I’d never been offered this job in the first place.

For the past hour, I’d been waiting for her to return to her apartment. Finally, when she showed up, I came out from a doorway down the hall and shoved her inside just as she was turning her key in the lock. She had put some distance between us as I locked the door behind me.

“What do you want?” she asked, her eyes locked on the .38 in my hand.

“I need to talk to you.”

“You need a gun to talk?”

“The gun’s to make sure I have your attention.”

“Are you trying to be funny? Christ, either shoot me or get the fuck out of here.”

This wasn't going exactly the way I had expected. I shouldn't even have come here in the first place. The checkered grips of the revolver were slick with my sweat.

"Look, we don't have a lot of time here," I told her, "so I'm going to be blunt with you—"

"Who hired you?"

"I don't discuss clients." The more questions she asked, the more I realized how dangerous—and stupid—it had been for me to come here. I'd never had to map things out, never had to think ahead; all that stuff had always been done for me. Now that I was on my own, I was sure to fuck things up. Maybe I already had.

"Was it that idiot Rawson? It would be just like him to send a hit man after me—"

I gritted my teeth. "I'm not a hit man."

It was a small distinction, but an important one. As an arsonist, people sometimes died if I did my job correctly, but I tried to avoid that whenever possible. And I never went after civilians. This time was different, though—my employers specifically wanted her dead, and that made me uneasy.

"Then who are you?" she asked.

"That's none of your business."

"But you were hired to kill me?"

"Just tell me why someone would want you dead." I needed the money this job would bring. I needed it very badly, in fact, with both a rival mob and the Pennsylvania State Police on my ass—but even more I wanted to know what exactly I had gotten myself into.

"What about my son?" she asked. Her voice cracked a little as she spoke.

I hadn't been told about a son. "What about him?"

“If something happens to me, then what will happen to him?”

It was right about then that I noticed some toys—action figures and chipped die-cast Matchbox cars, mostly—scattered here and there on the floor. “I’ve known lots of orphans over the years. They may not have much, but at least they’re still alive.”

She backed up farther into her living room, a cramped ten-by-ten space covered in dull green wallpaper that was taken up by an ancient recliner, a small coffee table, and a new-looking couch.

I took a step forward. “Where is your son now?”

“At the babysitter’s down the hall. I’ll need to get him soon.”

“That can wait.”

She sighed and dug into her purse, causing me to bring the gun back up. Noticing that, she slowly fished out a pack of Parliaments. She used a little pink Bic to light the cigarette, tilting up her delicate chin as she did it, and then offered the pack to me.

I shook my head. “Those things will kill you.”

She sat down on the sofa. “Tell me about it,” she said, and inhaled deeply. But her eyes never left mine. “However you’re supposed to do it, I’ll bet a month’s pay that it’s supposed to look like an accident.”

I played it cool. “What gives you that idea?”

“It just makes sense,” she said. “So what else do you know about the situation?”

“Not a whole hell of a lot—all I was given was this address and your photo.”

“But it was Rawson who did it, right?”

I shrugged. “Since you seem to have made up your mind about it already, let’s pretend that he was the one who hired me.” I supposed that it didn’t make much of a

difference if she knew who hired me. In fact, I realized that she could give me more information if she knew who was gunning for her.

“Let’s pretend he did. What did he say about me?”

“Nothing I care to repeat. From what I can tell, he doesn’t like you very much.”

She snorted laughter. “That’s an understatement.”

“So that’s what this is all about—revenge?”

“No, it’s about money,” she said. “Look, do you mind if I hang my coat up?”

“Stay right where you are,” I replied as I went over to the window.

I eased open the curtain and looked out into the gathering dusk. Sure enough, there he was—the same guy who had been following me ever since I hit town a few days ago. He was standing in the shadow of a run-down movie theater looking up at the apartment building. He wasn’t much to look at—middle-aged and overweight, a beige raincoat over a hideous Argyle sweater vest, a pie-shaped face. He was either an Outfit man or a shield. Either way, he was trouble.

I came back, unbuttoned my suit jacket, and took the seat across from her. I put the .38 on the arm of the chair. She looked at me for a moment through the curls of smoke.

“You’re not from around here,” she said, dumping her coat on the sofa and smoothing her skirt. After this was done, she picked her cigarette back up from the ashtray. “I can tell by your accent.”

“Looks like I’m in the presence of genius.”

She smiled at that and I couldn’t decide if I liked her more for her looks or her attitude. Either way, she was a handful. “Where are you from?” she asked.

“Somewhere else,” I replied cleverly. On top of everything else on my mind, I wasn’t used to being around women—especially beautiful ones. Usually, they were too terrified of what I did for a living to want anything to do with me.

“So what are you doing in Boston?”

I decided there was no harm in giving an honest answer. “Word got to me that someone from this area was looking for out-of-town talent for a job, so here I am.”

“So why are you chatting up someone you’re supposed to kill?”

It was a good question. I’d spent my whole career operating from a distance, never getting close to my targets. But this job was different. I hadn’t liked it from the start—the rushed offer, the inflated payoff, the refusal to give me any information at all about the victim. They had the stink of people with something to hide. So I was going to find out on my own, as risky and stupid as that probably was. “Like I said, I want to know why there’s a contract out on you.”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

The Pennsylvania cops were already hunting for me, spreading around the northeast like an oil spill on the ocean. By now, they’d probably put the word out on me to all the local precincts and hit up all their informants. Soon it wouldn’t even be safe for me to stop at a gas station. The smart play would be to grab some money fast and blow the state.

“It matters to me,” I repeated.

“I guess so.” She looked me up and down. Her expression was cautious, but she bit her lip as if she was holding back a desperate sense of hopefulness. “You said that Rawson was looking for someone from outside the city.”

“Something along those lines,” I replied. I ran my fingers along the .38, but stopped when I realized my hand was trembling again. She smiled and crossed her legs, taking her time doing it. I looked away, making a silent vow to keep my mind on business.

“I suppose that means Rawson’s a little smarter than I gave him credit for,” she said.

“And I suppose you’re perfectly happy to keep me in the dark about all this.”

“You mean you *really* don’t know?”

“I haven’t exactly had time to do a background check on the players in this little drama here. Tell me what the deal is between you and Rawson.”

She looked at her watch. “I’m expected at the babysitter’s pretty soon.”

“I’m sure you have a few minutes.”

“It’ll take longer than that,” she said.

“Look, I’ve been given a deadline, all right? If you’re still breathing three nights from now, Rawson is going to start wondering why I haven’t honored my end of the contract yet. Tell me what’s going on—now.” I couldn’t afford to drag this out any further, but if I walked away at that moment, then I’d be condemning her and her son to death. I realized that I didn’t want to live with that on my head.

She shrugged. “What does it matter? Either you’re going to kill me, or you aren’t.”

“There’s more to it than that and you know it. I mean, if Rawson is so hot and bothered about getting you out of the way, why doesn’t he just do it himself?”

“Because he can’t,” she said, and took a long drag. “If something happens to me and he’s found to be connected to it in any way, he’s finished. He *needs* it to look like an accident.”

For the thousandth time, I cursed myself for not getting more information up front from the bozos who hired me. I had always insisted upon it, but in a strange town dealing



with strange people I hadn't been able to use my usual leverage. "Explain to me why that is."

"Look, if I'm not down the hall soon, the babysitter's going to be banging on my door with a screaming kid—and she'll be very curious about what you're doing in my apartment. Do you really want that?"

"Maybe I'll just come back later tonight."

"No way," she said, her eyes flaring for a brief moment as she crushed out her Parliament. "I won't have this discussed when my son's here. He stays as far away from this as possible."

I thought about it for a minute. "I noticed a diner down the street. Meet me there this time tomorrow. You tell me what I want to know or I go ahead with the job."

She made a face. "Maybe I should just call the police."

I grinned. "And what would you tell them? That some guy dropped by and asked you to talk him out of killing you?"

She shrugged. "I could tell them about Rawson—get him off my back for good."

"Lady, I can tell just by looking at you that you're not that stupid."

"Still," she said. "What's in it for me?"

"If I know what's going on here, maybe I can help you."

She blinked at me. I didn't blame her; I was just as surprised by what I'd said. I hadn't decided to throw in with her—not just then—but if she thought I was on her side, maybe she'd be more forthcoming with her information.

"All right," she said. "Tomorrow it is. I'll tell you what you want to know."

"You mentioned money earlier. How much are we talking about?"

“A lot,” she said, smiling at me. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes, though; they looked hardened, calculating—but still with that tiny reservoir of hope. “And I’m willing to share it with you if you’ll help me stay alive long enough to get it.” She took out another cigarette.

I brought out my old Zippo and stood to give her a light. She looked up at me while I watched the flame dance in her eyes.

“You know,” she said. “I never did get your name.”

“That’s right,” I replied, and I turned and walked out of the apartment.

## Chapter Two

I trudged down three flights of rickety stairs to the street, braced for a confrontation with the man in the raincoat—only to find that he was nowhere to be seen.

But that didn't mean he was gone.

I buttoned my overcoat and looked around at the East Boston neighborhood, a collection of crumbling tenements interspersed with liquor stores and Brazilian restaurants with fading signs. The gutters were blocked up with garbage and the sidewalks were pitted and cracked.

I took out the photo that Rawson had given me, the one of Leah McBride with her name and address written on the back. When I first arrived to scout the building out, I had expected to find a warehouse or maybe a bar or a brothel. Imagine my surprise that the address matched an apartment building packed with civilians. Not the kind of place I would normally ever consider taking down.

I stared at the photograph. I had convinced myself that she was a professional—and therefore, an acceptable target. I imagined she was some mid-level manager, maybe a madam who had skimmed a little too much off the top. But she didn't seem like either of those things; she was just a single mother caught up in something that was bigger than she was.

Was she worth risking my payoff—as well as my life—to protect her? It occurred to me that even if I decided not to kill her, someone else would just do it instead. So if I was really going to turn my back on the job, betray my side, then I was effectively taking hers. And I couldn't just leave her to die. On top of that, she seemed willing to clue me in on this money angle—something my employers weren't likely to offer any time soon. So there was a potential reward in keeping her alive. Still, it was a huge risk for a payoff that was questionable at best.

Why did I even get involved? It would have been so much easier just to go through with the contract. But one look at that photo and I had known she would haunt me if I lit her up. Not to mention her son, who certainly didn't deserve to burn. Yet to turn my back on the job meant nothing but bad news for me. I had no money, no connections, and too many people were already on my trail. It would have been much easier to just do what I was hired to do.

But I had learned that the harder thing to do was usually the better thing. It had been a while since I'd done anything remotely resembling a good deed. Maybe it was time to start balancing the books. Or maybe it was just time to high-tail it out of town—to take the advance and split while I still had all my organs intact.

Which road would I take?

As an answer, I brought my Zippo back out, set the picture alight, and tossed it to the ground. As I snapped the lighter shut, I imagined that I caught a trace of her perfume still clinging to the polished metal. It brought to mind her blond curls; her impish, upturned nose; her cynical yet hopeful green eyes; those sumptuous lips.

I remembered the way she'd tilt up her chin when she'd just lit up a cigarette; the way she hid her fear behind a crooked smile. I remembered the toys strewn across the living room.

After a minute or so, there was nothing left of the photograph—and, possibly, my future. The local mob wasn't going to tolerate me backing out of the deal.

I walked down the block to where I'd parked the Mercury. Just the sight of the stupid car was enough to set my teeth on edge—and for the thousandth time I cursed my bad luck for being stuck with it. Still, I was relieved to find that no one had broken into it. I popped open the locks with the remote and opened the door. I stopped for a minute, taking one last look around the area.

I got behind the wheel and started the engine, trying to shake off the feeling that I was being watched. I took it slow and easy back to my hotel, keeping an eye on the rearview mirror.

How had it come to this? Just a few weeks ago, I had been part of a top-notch crew led by the legendary McTeague. Most of us had come up together in Philadelphia's juvenile prison system, and we stayed together once we were released. We jumped bail and drifted west, putting down stakes in Cincinnati.

We took on the Battaglias, the family that ran the city, and eventually chased them out of town. We hit a snag along the way, when McTeague chose a rookie shooter to assassinate one of the Battaglia's chief lieutenants as a rite of passage. The idiot kid botched it, gunning down a high-level city official instead. We took off that same day. We hid down in Mexico, but returned to Cincy once the heat died down there. After a final run at our opponents, a blitzkrieg of gunfire and explosions, they surrendered their territory to us.

We ran the city for years. I smiled to myself as I drove through Boston, recalling all the good times. It had never been meant to last, though. McTeague's whole reason for taking over Cincinnati was so that he could build up a power base to one day return to Pennsylvania. He'd had some unfinished business there with the people who had ruined his life and sent him away to juvie on the charge of attempted murder.

Two weeks back, we finally did it. In a shitty little coal town called Little Belfast, we took on a renegade branch of the Irish mob and burnt everything of theirs to the ground. I had gone in a week ahead of everyone else, breaking into key buildings and houses to plant my sly little bombs. Everything went according to plan—except that nobody had counted on McTeague dying in the process.

Things went even further downhill when we walked right into an ambush at the rendezvous point. The few of us who hadn't been nabbed by the state cops had been forced to split up and go our separate ways.

I kept on driving toward the hotel, forcing myself to go slower than I would have liked. I continued to watch my mirrors, alert for any hint of a shadow. If anyone was tailing me across the city, I caught no sign of it.

As I crossed the bridge back into Dorchester, I took stock of my situation. Here I was—a felon in a strange city. I had no assets and for the first time in twenty years I was completely on my own. My friends, who had planned every job we had ever done, were long gone and I was left to fumble around by myself. Strategy was not my forte.

I'd been caught completely off-guard by the ambush, and now I was cut off from my resources and bank accounts back in Ohio. I had maybe fifty bucks in my wallet and a bunch of credit cards that I didn't dare use. Gas for the monstrosity I was driving and rent for my hotel room were going to drain what little money I had left.

I supposed that I could have been using the advance that Rawson had given me to live it up a little, but deep down I knew that I didn't want to do such a thing. To use the money would mean I was agreeing to do the job, and I wasn't going to do that. Of course, to give the cash back would have been saying the opposite, and I couldn't afford to tip my hand to Rawson or whoever was backing him. So I held onto the advance, but I couldn't bring myself to use it just yet.

And now I was apparently going to pass up a lucrative job that had been gift-wrapped by the local mob and given right to me. What was worse was that I'd gotten myself into a bad situation with this job, and I had no idea how I was going to get out of it. McTeague would have understood, though. Still, it didn't make it any easier for me to stomach.

I pulled into the cramped parking lot behind the hotel and found a corner spot. I killed the engine and opened my door. As I climbed out, my right hand was on the butt of the .38 while my eyes tried to look in every direction at once.

I walked across the lot toward the back door of the building. Every step felt like a marathon and every window was a potential sniper's roost. Finally, I made it to the door and forced myself to take my time opening it. My hands were shaking again and I dropped my keys.

I bent to pick them up, feeling stupid for the thousandth time that day. I focused on my hands and willed them to be steady. After a minute, I brought the key to the slot once again and actually succeeded in getting the door open.

The walk up the three flights of stairs was just as bad as crossing the parking lot, but I got through it. No matter how keyed-up I was, I refused to let it show on my face. McTeague would have understood that, too.

At last, I made it to my room. I locked the door behind me and collapsed on the bed.

*Lucky bastard*, I thought. *You lived through another day.*



## Chapter Three

The next morning, I caught Rawson just before he started his shift on the docks. I had slept better the night before and my hands weren't shaking like they had been for the past few days. There had also been no sign of the pudgy guy in the raincoat when I came out of my hotel. Maybe I had lost him. Maybe he just slept late. It didn't matter; after a full night's sleep with nobody trying to arrest or kill me, I felt back on my game.

Rawson's car, a gaudy red Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution, pulled into the employee's lot outside the shipyard just as the sun was coming up. I saw his head—his black hair coated with gel—poking up as he got out of the car as he fiddled with an MP3 player.

I scanned the parking lot carefully. I needed to give a message to him, loud and clear, and maybe get a little payback for the shit he'd pulled the night before.

I'd spotted him as soon as he came in the door of O'Shaughnessy's bar where we were supposed to meet, a stupid and panicky-looking kid. He'd stuck out like a spider on a wedding cake—a green amateur among career criminals. He would've been eaten alive if I hadn't given the others the nod to leave him alone. Still, I let him sit at the bar for a while to see what he was made of. He was jittery as hell, unable to sit still.

When I did finally go up to him, he'd had the nerve to give me shit. He even refused to give me my advance until I answered his retarded questions. I had cut him some slack, only to find out later that he'd been holding out on me. I'd killed men for less, but I needed Rawson alive for the moment. A beating would have to do.

But I couldn't have my way with him here on the pier if there were witnesses around. Cargo ships loomed out of the fog like great hulking beasts and the rough pavement was dotted with trash, but otherwise the area was clear. Voices carried from across the docks—too far away to see who they belonged to.

Once I was sure that nobody else was in sight, I made my move.

Rawson was tall—almost my height—and he probably had about twenty pounds on me. That wouldn't matter, though, if I got the jump on him. As it turned out, he didn't even notice I was there until I walked right up behind him and pushed him to the ground.

He glared up at me. "What the fuck? Coyle, is that you?"

I needed to put him off-balance and keep him there. I kicked him in the ribs and crushed his iPod under my heel. Rawson's eyes bulged. I grabbed him by the back of his collar and threw him up against his car.

"You know, Brett," I said, "I'm kind of mad at you."

"What the hell are you doing here? Don't you have a job to do?"

I punched his gut and he doubled over. I flipped open the lid of his gas tank and unscrewed the cap. Meanwhile, Rawson stood and curled his hands into fists. I slammed him against the car.

"Fuck, Coyle!" He was breathing heavily, trying to get his wind back.

I put my forearm against his throat. "I knew you were dumb, but I didn't think you were *this* dumb. You said you knew all about me when we met."

“Well, I—”

“Don’t you know my rules?”

“What—”

“The guys I came up with, the way we do things. We don’t go after civilians—ever.”

Rawson sneered at me, his bravado back. “Those were McTeague’s rules, from what I heard. I don’t know whether it’s penetrated your thick skull yet, but your boss is dead. And I also heard it was his own stupid code of honor that got him killed—”

“You heard wrong.”

“—and here you are,” he said, “still following his rules, still being his little bitch.”

I put a bit more pressure on his throat, and he started choking.

“It doesn’t matter, asshole,” I said. “McTeague’s rules are *my* rules now, and you should’ve fucking known better when you hired me.”

He pulled my arm off his windpipe just enough to be able to talk. “You’re not backing out, are you? You know that you’ll never get another contract again if you welsh on this deal. I’ll make damn sure of that.”

I put my knee in his groin. “Let’s get something straight. I don’t like you and I don’t like this job. Call it off, or maybe I’ll come after you instead.”

“I don’t think so,” Rawson said, wincing in pain. I watched as he coughed for a moment and spit up saliva. When he was able to talk again, he said, “You might think you’ve got me by the balls here, but I’ve got some friends that want to make sure the McBride woman bites it. They won’t let you just walk away.”

I took a step back. “Are you talking about Duggan? After our little meeting yesterday, I had a word with him. He doesn’t know you from Dillinger, so I don’t think he’s going to back you up if I decide to rain hell on you.”

“No, I’ve got other friends, Jack—better ones.”

I laughed. “Who’s that? Your jerk-off dockworker buddies?”

He shook his head and grinned. “I’ll tell you this much—they’re people who’ll kill you and bury you where nobody will ever find the body.”

“Bullshit.”

“Been watching over your shoulder lately? Did you notice anyone keeping an eye on you?”

I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out the rag I’d found earlier. The thick smell of petroleum filled my nostrils like sweet, heavy cologne. I stuffed half the length of the oily cloth into the Mitsubishi’s open gas tank. Rawson’s eyes went wide and he stopped struggling against me.

“What the fuck are you doing, Coyle?”

“You like your car?” I took out my Zippo and ran my thumb along the wheel.

“You wouldn’t,” he said.

I was bluffing, but I figured he was either too dumb or too angry to figure it out. “Oh, I would—and I’ll enjoy it, because I take such pride and pleasure in my work. Isn’t that why you hired me in the first place?”

He swallowed. “This wasn’t the deal, man. We had an agreement!”

My laughter echoed across the dock. “How old are you, Brett? Have you even made it to twenty-five yet?”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“You want to live to see twenty-seven? You back off the McBride woman. I’ll give you back the advance and we’ll both go our separate ways. And then you leave her the fuck alone.”

He shook his head. "I can't do that."

"Yes, you can, Brett. I'm giving you permission right here and now." I flicked on the Zippo, turning the lighter to and fro to watch the flame curve and waver.

"You don't understand, man! This is already in motion."

"What?"

"I don't have the power to stop it anymore. If you don't go through with it, then it's my ass on the line instead of that bitch's. And if I go down, I'll make sure you go down with me."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's none of your goddamn business."

"Are you actually trying to make me even angrier than I already am?"

"You brought this all on yourself. Remember that when they come for you, freak."

"Do you think you're smarter than me, Brett? I mean, I ambushed you with a rag and a lighter—imagine what I can do when I really plan ahead." It was an empty threat—almost a joke, really—but he didn't know that.

He bared teeth. "That's nothing compared to what they'll do to you if you piss them off."

I stared at him for a moment. He had the fear of God in him, all right. But it wasn't me who had put it there. Someone had scared him much more than I was ever going to.

"You're serious," I said.

"Damn right I am! What are you, deaf? Now for both our sakes, stop fucking around and get the job done!"

“Get the job done,” I repeated. No matter what happened from here on out, I realized that it was important for him to think I was back on board. “All right, I’ll think it over.”

“Thank you!” Rawson shouted, throwing up his hands. “For Christ’s sake, he finally sees the frigging light!”

Several pairs of headlights shone in our direction. Rawson and I were no longer alone. I put the lighter back in my pocket and shoved him away from me.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I told him, and got the hell out of there.

## Chapter Four

Leah McBride was there waiting for me in the grimy coffee shop later that afternoon. I walked into the nearly empty diner, letting an aromatic tidal wave of coffee and maple syrup wash over me. She sat at a corner table, sideways from the door so she could keep an eye out without being obvious. *Smart girl*, I thought.

I went over and grabbed the chair across from her. Like yesterday, she was dressed in business clothes—today it was a coral-pink blouse and a black pencil skirt, a get-up that showed off her ample curves yet still looked professional. I also noticed that her hair and makeup were a bit more done up than before.

I ordered some coffee. She sipped orange juice and picked at a muffin.

“Let’s have it,” I said.

“I’m not sure where to start,” she replied.

“Come on, you’ve had long enough to think about this.”

“It’s been a busy day.”

We were huddled over the small table and I realized that I hadn’t been this close to a woman in a long time. Her perfume was distracting. “The beginning always works for me.”

She shrugged. “My father was a heist man. He usually worked alone doing bank jobs, check-cashing stores, stuff like that. I didn’t know him—my parents divorced when I was just a baby. I imagine it was something to do with him being sent to prison.”

“I imagine it was.”

My coffee arrived. I sipped it. Not bad, a little bitter.

“I want to tell you something,” she said. “Something I want you to know right up front. I didn’t grow up like some fairy tale princess, okay? I’ve had a lot of bad stuff around me for as long as I can remember—I just didn’t understand what was going on until I was older.”

I waited. She pried off a hunk of her muffin and nibbled at it.

“Even though my father was gone,” she continued, “I figured out that my family still had connections to the, you know, the local mob scene.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, my mother remarried a few years later, to a guy who’d served as a medic in Vietnam. As far back as the first grade, I can remember strangers coming to our house in the middle of the night so my stepfather could fix them up.”

“What was wrong with them?”

“A lot of knife and gunshot wounds. The kinds of injuries people suffer in your line of work. People who can’t go to an emergency room and have the police come by asking questions.” She laughed. “Considering my stepfather painted houses for a living, I could never really understand how we lived so well. I didn’t put it all together until I was in high school. But that was my childhood. I’ve been around men like you my entire life.”

“What’s your point?” I asked.



“My point is I don’t want you thinking I’m, like, some helpless woman—that I’m some kind of liability.”

I put down my mug. “Just get on with your story.”

Her alabaster cheeks flushed red. “Okay, fine—where were we?”

“You said something about your father being a heist man.”

She gave me a thin smile. “Dad was apparently pretty famous back in his day—you’ve probably heard of him.”

“I don’t seem to recall any thieves named McBride from around here worth mentioning.”

“That’s my stepfather’s name. My real father was Jimmy O’Hare.”

I almost choked on my coffee. “No shit.”

She grinned. “I guess that name rings a bell for you.”

“The guy was a legend. What was it like being his kid?”

She hesitated. “I don’t really know.”

“What do you mean?”

“He didn’t get out of jail until I was in the eighth grade. By that time, he was just a tired old man. Have you ever been to prison?”

“I did a four-year stint in juvie. That was more than enough for me.”

“What did you do to deserve that?”

“An older kid, Andy Moreland, beat me up and stole my bike.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

I didn’t respond, but simply recalled that day when the Moreland family was away and I snuck onto their property with a gasoline tank and a box of matches. I remembered setting the primer and then watching the house go up. I remembered staring slack-jawed at

the blaze that burst through the glass and tore down the sturdy walls like they were made of paper.

“Why are you smiling?” she asked.

My mind snapped back to the present. “Never mind that—we didn’t come here to talk about me, did we?”

“Right, back to the main feature,” she said. “My father was sort of a lapsed Catholic, so although he hadn’t gone to church in a while, he still felt the need to confess. You know what I mean?”

I shrugged.

“When he got out of prison,” she said, “he used to spend a few afternoons a week with me. He’d pick me up from school in his old Cutlass and drive around the city telling me all about the capers he used to pull.”

“Not your typical father-daughter bonding moments.”

“We had some quality time together. For weeks we’d hang out and cruise around. He kept me entertained with his stories. It was fun, but I got the feeling after a while that he was working his way up to something—something important.”

If he wasted as much time as she did getting to the point, it probably took months. I pushed my coffee cup to the side and stared at her as the noise picked up around us. People were starting to come in. From the sea of rumpled business suits, it looked like it was quitting time for the local office workers. Scuffed shoes clicked and scraped against the faded linoleum floor.

“Get to the part where you explain why Rawson wants you dead,” I told her.

“You said to start at the beginning, didn’t you? That’s what I’m doing.”

“I don’t need a fucking history lesson.”

“Just let me tell it my way, okay? That way you know what my investment is in this whole thing. Don’t worry—you’ll get the information you want soon enough.”

Her story already had a certain kind of feel to it, like she’d kept it on a shelf for a while, taking it down every now and then to polish it. It would probably only make things worse if I tried to rush her through it. Still, I was working on a deadline. “We don’t have a lot of time here.”

“Actually, it’s getting kind of crowded in here. You want to do a change of scenery?”

“No.”

“What?”

“You’ve kept me waiting long enough. No more delays.”

“Do you really want me to tell you about this in front of all these people?”

I knew she was right, but I made her wait a minute for an answer. “You have some other place in mind?”

“Well, my neighbors will notice if I go back to my apartment with a strange man, and I don’t really want them in my business. So how about we take a walk?”

“All right,” I said. “Let me finish my coffee and we’ll take a walk.”

She picked up her coat and stood. “I’ll meet you outside. Don’t forget to pay the bill.”

A few minutes later, I dropped a handful of cash on the table and followed her out the door.

## Chapter Five

She had lit up a fresh cigarette, taking a drag and shivering against the wind as I came outside. She buttoned up her topcoat and led the way down the avenue. I turned up my own collar and followed after her. The sun was starting to go down, and our shadows stretched out like giants in front of us.

“You were saying?” I prompted.

She blew out a cloud of smoke. “Give me your name and then I’ll tell you everything.”

“Coyle,” I said.

“Is that your first name or your last?”

“It’s the only one you’re getting. Now spill it.”

We walked along quietly for a minute, the staccato click of her heels filling the silence.

“My father worked alone most of the time,” she said finally. “He went for small, low-profile jobs. Big jobs meant bigger risk and so he figured that he could live with smaller payoffs if it meant keeping his ass out of jail. But one day, about thirty years ago, he’s

approached by this two-bit burglar named Godowsky who claimed to have come up with the perfect heist.”

“How did this Godowsky find him?”

“Through a mutual friend,” she replied. “I guess Dad was pretty well known by then.”

“What was the heist?”

“Some retired banker over in Charlestown who was said to keep a fortune in cash in a safe somewhere inside his mansion. Godowsky had been part of a landscaping crew that worked on the guy’s property a few months before, and he told my father that he knew the ins and outs of the entire place. My dad was down on his luck at that point, short of cash with no other prospects, so he threw in with Godowsky.”

“How had Godowsky learned about the money?”

“Good question,” she replied. “That was one of the first things my father asked him, too. Godowsky had heard a rumor about the cash from somewhere a while back and joined the landscaping team to case the property. The job they had been contracted to do was supposed to last about a month, so a week or two into the project Godowsky starts chatting up the gardener. They end up going out for drinks the next weekend and Godowsky goes in for the kill. He gets the poor guy falling down drunk and grills him about the house. He doesn’t mention the money, but instead focuses on the security. By finding out about how much security a place has, Dad always said, you can figure out how much the owner has to protect.”

“That sounds reasonable.” I studied the sidewalk, spotting patches of grass peeking up through the cracks in the concrete. Winter was gone, but nobody had told spring to show up yet.

We reached a corner and I was about to cross when I realized she was no longer at my side. I turned and saw her behind me, waiting for the crossing signal. The wind blew bits of newspaper down the sidewalk. The streets were deserted except for the two of us. Everyone else in the city was apparently smart enough to stay inside on a cold day like this. I sighed and waited with her.

“So the gardener tells him there’s next to no security at all,” she continued. “And that makes Godowsky suddenly think he’s been busting his ass on the landscaping crew for nothing. He’s about to take off when the gardener says how strange it is that there’s no security considering that the owner has a small fortune stowed away in his safe.”

“Bingo,” I said. We crossed the street and were confronted with a block of tired-looking retail shops under an overcast sky. To our right was Julio’s Bakery, a squat building painted to look like a frosted doughnut. Beside that was Ice Age Beers, one of those microbreweries that had its heyday ten years back. A sign displaying the company’s apparent mascot, a fearsome mammoth, hovered over the front doors, riddled with .22 bullet holes. And so on and so on. Everywhere I looked I saw dirty glass and peeling paint.

Leah dropped her cigarette on the ground and crushed it out with her toe. “So Godowsky is careful now—he doesn’t want to seem too interested, just in case the gardener isn’t as drunk as he looks. He gets all concerned, like he’s the owner’s guardian angel, asking if the house is secure.”

There were problems with her story—wrinkles in the garment she was stitching together for me. But it was her story and she seemed determined to tell it. “Still, that’s not very subtle,” I said.

She shrugged. “Apparently, that’s as subtle as Godowsky got. So, taking the word of a very tipsy gardener, he concluded that there was a pile of money in a safe in an otherwise unprotected house. That’s what he brought to my father.”

“So what did your father say?” I would have told Godowsky to go fuck himself, but I was guessing Jimmy O’Hare had been a little more open-minded.

“Dad told me that he thought it was risky, but doable.”

I glanced over at the remains of a hardware store that had burned down at some point. Just by looking at it, I could tell someone had torched it—probably for the insurance. They’d done a pretty clumsy job of it, too, judging from the arc of the flashover. “Your father must have been pretty desperate.”

“Like I said, he was hard up for cash—he’d started drinking a lot and my mom was pregnant with me. Otherwise, he might not have gone along with the job.” She paused and took a deep breath. “He also didn’t know Charlestown very well and didn’t like operating in unfamiliar territory. That’s where Godowsky would pull his weight—the guy could walk the neighborhood blindfolded.”

“What about the Charlestown mob? Didn’t they have a problem with outsiders operating in their territory?”

She shook her head. “Godowsky and my father were independent thieves—they didn’t run with any particular neighborhood. But Godowsky knew the underbosses in C-town and had cleared it with them. They were supposed to get a cut of anything that was taken.”

We stopped in front of a display window for a small jewelry store. The windows were barred like a prison. As I studied her in the glass, she lit another Parliament. “So, then what happened?”

“So, a few nights later they pulled the job,” she replied. “They took my father’s car and parked a couple of blocks away. They put on their masks, jimmied the door to the service entrance, and snuck inside. They found the old man in his study, reading. My father kept a gun on him while Godowsky conducted the interrogation—mostly by using his fists. It didn’t take long for the poor bastard to give up the location of the safe. They dragged him at gunpoint into the bedroom and made him open it up.” She paused and tapped a half-inch or so of ash onto the sidewalk.

“Okay,” I said. “What did they find?”

She got a faraway look in her eye. “They found money, Coyle—a big pile of money.”

“All right, so what—”

“But it was old money, and that was a problem.”

“What do you mean? Like out-of-circulation old?”

“I mean like Civil War old,” Leah replied. “It was a stack of cash that was printed over a hundred years ago.”

“What did they do?”

She shrugged. “The only thing they could do after all the trouble they’d caused—they took the money. And they had absolutely no idea what to do with it.”

“Last I checked there wasn’t much of a black market for nineteenth-century currency.”

“Not much, no,” she replied.

I glanced in the reflection and spotted someone across the street. The man in the raincoat was back. “Let’s keep walking,” I suggested, and we set off down the avenue.



She turned to me as we passed a convenience store. “I’m sure someone could get top dollar at an auction house for a payload like that, but Godowsky and my father weren’t really in the position to go that route. But, as it worked out, it didn’t matter so much.”

“What happened?”

She smiled crookedly. “Remember that lack of security that the gardener wondered about? Turned out it wasn’t so lacking. The owner had installed a silent alarm on the safe—cutting edge technology for its day.”

“You’re kidding.” I squinted at a storefront window angled horizontally forty-five degrees from the street and saw the Raincoat following at a discreet distance. I couldn’t see as much as I would’ve liked in the red-tinted twilight, but I could tell he had something in his hand—a phone or a camera. I couldn’t tell for sure. I wanted to confront him, but I couldn’t do it with Leah there.

She went on, oblivious to the threat behind us. “They were still in the house when the cops arrived. My father was the first one out the door and they pounced on him. Godowsky got away—with the money.”

“That was convenient for him,” I said. “Not so much for your father.”

“No, not at all,” she replied.

I wanted to turn around and see where our shadow was, but I didn’t want to tip him off that I’d noticed him. We’d passed the little business district and were flanked by houses with cheap, faded vinyl siding. No more big windows, no vantage points. I wouldn’t be able to see an ambush coming and I didn’t want her to get hurt. I wasn’t sure which part of that equation was the bigger concern. “Let’s turn back.”

Leah shrugged, pushing her hands into the small of her back and stretching—the net result of which was to thrust her breasts forward in the tight-fitting blouse. She took her

time doing this, but I didn't mind. I wondered, though, if she was setting a trap for me—and I also wondered if I'd already fallen into it. I dropped my eyes to the street.

Once we got going, I got back to the story. "So what happened next?"

She sighed. "It was about what you'd expect. The banker identified my father by his voice in a lineup. Dad tried his luck at trial and won the grand prize of ten to twenty years—do not pass go, do not collect a fortune in antique money."

I peered into the window of a furniture rental store, but the angle was no good. If the man in the raincoat was still behind us, I couldn't see him. McTeague or even McClellan could have thought their way out of this mess in two seconds. Why had this been left to an idiot like me? "I hate to say it, but there are a few holes in this story. I mean, what would a gardener know about security? And why would a professional as experienced as your father take a chance on something so sketchy in the first place?"

She rolled her eyes. "Look, my father told me this story like twelve years ago, and it all happened about twenty years before that! You have to cut me some slack here."

"Still, it doesn't add up." I didn't know much, but I knew that.

"So fucking what? Maybe I remember it all wrong. Maybe it was a butler instead of a gardener. Maybe the banker had a bitter ex-wife who sold him out to Godowsky. The point is, they ripped him off and my father was sent to prison for assault and armed robbery. It's all public record, so go ahead and look it up."

"All right, fine," I said. These stories sometimes took on a life of their own. "What about Godowsky? What happened to him?"

She uttered a brief bark of laughter. "Like I said, he got away clean. My father could have sold him out and gotten a lesser sentence, but that would've been like kissing the money good-bye. Besides, he thought Godowsky was a stand-up guy."

I figured it was time to smooth things over. “I think your father was pretty stand-up, too.”

She smiled a little. “Yes, he was. Anyway, a few months after my father landed in prison, Godowsky sent that same mutual friend of theirs to visit him. The friend told my father that the money was safely hidden and nobody except Godowsky knew where it was. Also, Godowsky promised not to touch it until Dad got out of jail.”

“Was that out of loyalty to your father, or was he just afraid of him?”

“It was a bit of both.”

I would never have admitted it to her, but she’d hooked me with her story. It didn’t help that I was feeling a hell of a lot more protective toward her than I had the day before. “So what happened?”

“My father served twelve years and was released on good behavior. The first thing he did when he got out was to take a cab to Godowsky’s house in Dorchester. My father hadn’t heard from him in a few years and he was anxious about the money. So he banged on Godowsky’s door and this ragged-looking woman answers, see?”

We came up to another storefront window, and I was able to survey the entire area behind us in the reflection. The Raincoat was gone. Shit, so much for me keeping track of him.

I turned back to her. “Was she his wife?”

Leah nodded. “Yeah, and she was dressed all in black.”

My jaw went slack. “Godowsky was dead?”

“He was as dead as disco—a heart attack in the middle of the night. My father looked her and asked when Godowsky had died. She seemed surprised.” She took a deep drag.

I made a keep-it-coming gesture with my hand. “What did she say?”

She looked at me for a long, quiet moment. “She said, ‘Yesterday.’”

## Chapter Six

“Jesus,” I muttered. “He’d just died the day before?”

“Yeah,” she said. “And it was quick.”

“So he never had a chance to tell his wife where the money was, did he?”

“No, there was no time for any of that. By the time she realized what was going on, Godowsky was dead.”

“And they never found anything he left behind? No letters or anything?”

“I’ve told you quite a bit,” she said. “Now it’s your turn to pony up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“How were you supposed to take care of me?”

“What?”

“What were you hired to do?”

“The same thing I always do—start a fire on purpose and make it look like an accident.”

“You’re a firebug?”

The obvious contempt in her voice shouldn't have bothered me, but it did. "I prefer a different term, but yeah—that's what I do."

"What would've happened to my son?"

"I was supposed to do it late at night. He would've been home when you were home, I suppose."

"Goddamn it, you would have let my son *burn* to death?"

I shook my head. "I told you before that I wasn't comfortable with this job. Otherwise, you both would've been ashes already. So now you answer *my* question—did Godowsky leave anything behind?"

She folded her arms. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. I need to get home."

I gritted my teeth. "Look, I need to see the whole picture if I'm going to help you."

"Maybe I don't need your help. Just leave me alone, okay?"

I took her arm and pulled her around to face me. "Look, I've bought you a day or two by not going ahead with the job, but you need to understand that your life is still very much in danger and you need to understand that *now*. I may not be much, but I'm the only friend you've got."

She narrowed her eyes. "All right, tell me the truth, then. Why are you helping me?"

I shrugged. "I told you, I have this—"

"I don't want to hear about your fucking code of honor! That's not good enough. You level with me or I don't say another goddamn word."

I stared at her for a long moment. "All right, my folks split up when I was a kid. My father took off and I never saw him again."

She exhaled smoke. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be, he was a waste of space. What was worse is that he left me with my mother, who had a habit of smacking me around when she was in a bad mood.”

“Oh,” she said.

“But after Dad left it was like she woke up from a bad dream. It was just me and her so she tried to be a better mother and I tried to be a better son. We struggled for a while and then I was sent off to juvenile prison.” I snorted some semblance of laughter. “I remember thinking that I was doing her a favor—that she would be better off without me.”

Leah’s face softened. “No child should ever think that.”

“No, they shouldn’t,” I replied. My mom had died while I was in juvie. She’d fallen asleep smoking and burned to death. I’d always blamed myself for not being there to help and I’ve never been close to anyone since. And I’d certainly never told anyone about any of this. Yet I felt comfortable telling her. What did that mean? “So let’s just say that I have a soft spot for single mothers in a jam and leave it at that, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, and started walking again. “So where were we?”

“I was asking if Godowsky had left behind any clues about where he hid the money.”

“No, there was nothing,” she replied. “He was as good as his word.”

“What about the wife?”

“What about her?”

“Do you think maybe she knew and kept it a secret?”

She sighed. “Two things, Coyle—you haven’t yet asked a question either me or my father haven’t asked ourselves a hundred times over the last twenty years. Second, my father was all over everything Godowsky owned in the weeks after his death. If there had been something there to be found, he would’ve found it.”

“That doesn’t mean the wife didn’t know something.”

“No, Dad grilled the wife to no end. She didn’t know anything—not even who my father was. Godowsky kept her out of his work.”

“So what did your father do?”

Leah shrugged. “What could he do? He gave up after a couple of months and resigned himself to the fact that he would probably never get his hands on that money.”

We found ourselves back in the commercial area not far from the diner. It was just as empty and depressing as it had been the first time. I had a thousand questions for her that were about more important things than her father, yet I couldn’t help feeling curious about the poor bastard.

“Did your father go back to doing heists?”

“No, he went straight—got a job as a handyman in a Neponset apartment building and never looked back. He didn’t talk about it much, but I think losing that money broke his heart.” She paused and frowned. “No, that’s not quite right. It broke his spirit—at least, whatever little he had left that prison hadn’t already beaten out of him.”

“That must have driven him crazy—knowing the money was out there somewhere, just waiting for someone to grab it.”

“He could never let it go,” she told me. “He drank himself to death right around the time I graduated high school.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I felt a certain rhythm in our conversation, a comfort level that hadn’t been there the day before. Part of me liked being near her. Another part of me thought it was a mistake. But it was too late to turn back.

“So was I. He was a nice man.”



A thought occurred to me. “What about the old banker they ripped off? Whatever happened to him?”

She shook her head. “He was obsessed with two things—getting his money back and punishing the two men who took it.”

“Just how obsessed was he?”

“Well, like I said, the old bastard was at the police station the morning after the robbery. Apparently, he was pissing his pants for the opportunity to pick the culprits out of a lineup. He took all of five seconds to point his finger at my father.” She lit up yet another cigarette. “That must have been the highlight of his week.”

“Another thing,” I said. “Why did your father use his own car for the heist?”

“Let me ask you this—are you one of those psychos who get off on lighting fires?”

I looked at her for a moment before replying. So that was how it was going to be now, I thought. Give a little, take a little. I decided to play along. “No, I’m not a freak who creams his jeans at the sight of an open flame. Fire’s just my weapon of choice.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Some guys prefer guns, some use knives. My weapon is fire. I understand it and I can control it.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. Now, why didn’t they use a different car?”

“Remember, they thought it was going to be a straight-up snatch and grab—a pile of supposedly untraceable cash. They figured they’d be in and out in a hurry and then they’d just disappear with the money. The fact that it was old cash *really* threw a wrench into their plans.”

“They could have just killed the banker—eliminating any witnesses.” But even as I said it, I knew why they hadn’t done such a thing. In their shoes, I wouldn’t have done it either and I knew Jimmy O’Hare was at least as much of a professional as I was. My instinct was quickly proven right by Leah’s response.

“Dad was a lot of things, but he wasn’t a killer. Besides, it wouldn’t have stopped them from being caught, and there would have been a murder charge on top of everything else.”

“I guess it was just bad luck all around.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets to keep them warm. She flicked her cigarette and the ash disappeared in the wind.

“It was the worst luck in my father’s whole career,” she said. “Especially because the money was covered by insurance—the banker was really no worse off, but he couldn’t stand the fact that two ‘lowlifes,’ as he called them, had stolen from him.”

“Hence, his presence at the lineup,” I said. “He must have enjoyed seeing your father arrested.” We crossed the street and I could see my car off in the distance.

“Yes, he did,” she replied. “But he was furious when Dad refused to give up his partner or the money.”

“I bet. Did the old guy testify at the trial?”

“Are you kidding? He was the star witness for the prosecution—he was there on the stand, in all his glory, for three days.”

“He must have made a hell of a witness.”

She took a final drag off her Parliament and tossed it to the sidewalk. She stopped for a minute to grind it out with her toe, showing a lot of leg as she did so. I waited with her, not feeling any urge to hurry. She looked up at me, squinting a little. “He was an

excellent witness, as a matter of fact, which I think was the main reason Dad got slammed with such a heavy sentence.”

I was still looking at her legs. “Did your father have a record?”

“Not much of one, no,” she replied. “He’d gotten busted a couple of times, but he was never convicted. He was usually too smart to get caught red-handed, but the police still had his number. I guess it was just a matter of time before the odds caught up with him.”

“I suppose so, but to have been so close to such a pay day—”

“He thought about it every day for the rest of his life. He scanned the papers every day, looking for some mention about banknotes being discovered somewhere. Even if someone else found the money, he just wanted some kind of closure on it. Anything was better than sitting around knowing the cash was just sitting there, waiting to be found.”

“I can understand.”

“But he never saw any mention of it. And on his deathbed, he told me to do the same. He said to me that the money was my inheritance, and if I saw a chance to grab the money that I should go for it.”

“That’s advice to last a lifetime.”

We walked along quietly for a few minutes, both of us seeming to enjoy the company in silence, until she pulled up her sleeve to check her watch. “Shit, I better get home.”

I sighed. “The sitter’s expecting you, I presume.”

“As usual,” she replied. “No offense, but after talking about all this stuff, I just want to spend time with my son.”

“So when do we pick this conversation up again?” I didn’t like how eager I sounded.

She shrugged. “You tell me. After all, you’re the one on the deadline.”

I shook my head. “Don’t remind me. And be careful, because I’ll bet things are only going to get crazier as that deadline gets closer.”

“So when will I hear from you?” She brushed my arm with her hand and I felt gooseflesh appear. *Be careful, Jack. Be very careful here.*

“I’ll get in touch later tonight or tomorrow.”

“That’s fine. Do you have enough information now to plan the next move?”

“Well, it’s a good story and all,” I said. “But I still don’t see what any of it has to do with Rawson or why he wants you dead.”

She frowned. “Haven’t you figured it out yet? Rawson’s the one who finally found the money.”

## Chapter Seven

I watched her go inside her building before heading back to the car. Not for the first time, I glared at the Marauder. Why couldn't McTeague have driven a Mercedes, for Christ's sake?

I began driving back toward my fleabag hotel downtown, thinking about everything she had told me. So the money had been found after all these years, and by a punk like Rawson. Things were starting to make more sense, but I knew I'd have to do more research to get to the bottom of it.

That is, *if* I got to the bottom of it. Solving mysteries wasn't really my strong suit. To add to the fun, Leah was taking her sweet time painting the picture for me and Rawson wouldn't say a word unless someone was holding a gun to his head. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

Once, when I was young, my mother had splurged for me to go to summer camp out in the country. I remembered wandering in the woods during a nature hike, awestruck at the trees that seemed to stretch all the way up to the sky. I had lost track of time and the others left me behind. I walked around in circles until one of the counselors came back for

me. I had been balling my eyes out at that point, scared out of my wits. Just the memory of that day was still enough to give me the shakes.

That's how I felt now; lost in an endless wilderness, but this time without a friendly grown-up to come rescue me. I'd have to find my way out on my own.

Mulling these thoughts over, I arrived at the hotel and went upstairs. As I opened the door and walked into the unlit room, I was unprepared for the blow to the back of my head that sent me sprawling to the floor. I lay on the grimy carpet for a moment as lights were turned on around me and heavy footsteps reverberated along the floor. While all this industrious activity was going on, I was collecting my wits and bracing for further attacks. But none came.

Finally, I turned over and saw two heavies standing over me with bright smiles on their faces. One of them was wearing a leather jacket and jeans, with a buzz cut that was graying at the temples and the other one had on work pants and a hooded sweatshirt. A small gold loop dangled from his left ear. Both had Hispanic features, which told me quite a bit.

Neither one was the Raincoat, which told me even more.

They each took one of my arms and hauled me onto my feet. The guy with the buzz cut held me in place while the other patted me down. It was a good thing I'd decided to hide the .38 in the trunk of my car, or those bozos would have taken it away from me. It's such a pain for someone on the lam to find a gun in an unfamiliar city. The only thing they found was my Zippo, which Golden Earring confiscated like it was buried treasure.

They carried me down the little hallway and into the main room before tossing me onto my unmade bed. A third man sat in the cheap recliner in the corner. He was heavy-looking and was wearing a suit and topcoat. He leaned forward into the anemic light,

revealing slicked-back hair above a Sicilian face. His fog-gray eyes gleamed with what I could only imagine was amusement.

“Welcome home, Coyle,” he said.

“What do you want?” I asked as I sat up. I put my feet on the floor, more for balance than anything else. My head was reeling, and not just from the hit I had taken. That wilderness I’d found myself lost in had just become a lot darker—and it was filled with monsters.

The man in the chair smiled at the other two, who now stood on either side of me.

“Gets right to the point, doesn’t he? No small talk or anything.”

“It’s just like we heard,” Buzz-Cut said. “Cool as ice.”

“Let’s make him scream, then,” Golden Earring suggested. “Wipe that coolness right off his stupid *gringo* face.”

“I believe I detected a trace of disrespect in his tone a moment ago,” the man in the chair said. “Please teach him the error of his ways.”

The side of my head exploded in a bright burst of pain. I leaned forward, trying not to puke or black out. The two enforcers laughed.

“Not so tough now, is he?” Golden Earring asked. He had a pistol in his hand, held with the butt facing out. I was surprised that there wasn’t any blood dripping from it.

I brought my head back up and stared at the man in the chair. “What do you want?”

The man in the chair chuckled. “He’s like a broken record.”

“Do you want us to ‘teach’ him some more, *jefe*?” Buzz-Cut asked while opening and closing his impressively large fists.

The man in the chair shook his head. “I don’t think it’ll do much good at this point. After all, we need him conscious. Did he have a weapon?”

“He’s clean,” Golden Earring said, and produced my old lighter. “This little *cosa* was about all he had on him.”

“That’s right,” the man in the chair said. “Our boy here doesn’t play with guns. He plays with fire. Isn’t that right, Coyle?”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“He’s asking a different question,” the man in the chair observed, “but it’s essentially the same one he asked before. I think he wants to know what we want.”

“Smart *gringo* like him ought to know already,” Buzz-Cut said.

Golden Earring didn’t chime in, but instead took out a straight razor and began scraping it up and down his sleeve. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

But no matter how dumb they sounded, they had me over a barrel. I was suddenly aware of just how hot it was in the room. I felt a bead of sweat trickle down my throbbing temple.

“What are all those nasty stereotypes about firebugs, boys?” the man in the chair inquired. “That they wet the bed as kids? That they’re sexual deviants? Tell me I’m wrong, Coyle. Go ahead and disagree with me. I dare you.”

I said nothing.

Buzz-Cut snickered. “Maybe he’s actually *inteligente* enough to keep his fucking mouth shut when he should.”

“All right, let’s get down to business,” the man in the chair said. “My name is Ginelli. I represent a certain gentleman named Castiglione. Do you recognize his name?”

I did. Angelo “The Castle” Castiglione was the underboss of the eastern half of the city. Castiglione controlled everything from the docks to the South End, and supposedly protected his territory like a supermodel’s jealous husband.



What the hell did someone like Castiglione want with me?

“I can see by your expression that you recognize his name,” Ginelli said. “Good for you. Now you know that we’re not screwing around here.”

“I didn’t think you were,” I replied. “But my original question still stands.”

“Ah, yes,” Ginelli said. He smiled and crossed his legs. “Mr. Castiglione has been informed that not only are you dragging your feet on an important task, but you have also taken to harassing the man who hired you, a Mr. Rawson, both verbally and physically. Is this correct?”

There was no use in lying about it. “Yeah, that’s right. I—”

“Mr. Castiglione does not care about your reasons for doing this,” Ginelli continued. “We also care little for the well-being of Mr. Rawson, but it is essential that he remain alive for the moment. On the other hand, it is even more imperative that a certain woman from East Boston perish in a tragic but completely accidental fire. Am I being clear?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Then you understand what your priorities are in this situation?”

“Absolutely,” I told him. “But I have a couple of questions.”

“He thinks he can ask questions,” Buzz-Cut remarked.

“Go ahead,” Ginelli said with a smile. “Ask your questions.”

“First of all, what’s a goodfella like you doing with a couple of Puerto Ricans?”

Golden Earring’s face became a sneer. “We’re Dominican, *cabron*. Get it straight.”

Ginelli grinned. “The Dominicans run East Boston, and we run the Dominicans. But that isn’t what’s really on your mind, is it?”

I shook my head. “Okay, let’s cut to the chase. Up until this point, did you trust me to hold up my end of the deal?”

Ginelli shrugged. “We assumed you would honor your contract. We’ve only become involved now because Rawson called to complain about you.”

I made a mental note to pay Rawson back for that. “All right, then why has there been a tail on me since I took the job?”

Buzz-Cut surprised me by bursting into laughter, while Golden Earring simply smiled.

“That’s rich, *jefe*,” Buzz-Cut remarked, still snickering. “He thinks we put a tail on *him*—”

Ginelli frowned, which was enough to stop Buzz-Cut in mid-sentence. Ginelli looked at both of his men for a long moment before turning back to me.

“Coyle, we don’t need to follow you around,” Ginelli said. “We know where to find you if we need to.” He stood, letting me see for the first time just how tall he was, and buttoned his coat. “You know, you’re in way over your head here. Without McTeague to hold your hand, you’re a blind man in a minefield. Why don’t you be smart for once in your life and do as you’re told?”

“Whoever said I was smart?”

“Always the wiseass,” Ginelli said, shaking his head. “And there’s one more thing—we’re pushing up the deadline. You now have twenty-four hours to complete your task. After that, we take over the job. And then we add your name to the dead-list.”

“I understand,” I said.

Ginelli looked at his two men. “He says he understands.”

“That’s what he says,” Golden Earring agreed.

“Make sure,” Ginelli said.

Another bomb went off, this time against the back of my head. When I regained my senses, I was again lying on the floor. Through a red haze, I watched a cockroach skitter across the carpet and into the bathroom. There was a small thud near my head. I glanced over and saw my lighter on the floor.

Heavy footsteps pounded across the room, vibrating the floorboards. I turned my head—sending new waves of pain through my skull—and saw three sets of shoes heading to the door.

“I’m glad we had this discussion,” Ginelli’s voice floated down to me. “But I’d hate to have to come back and have another one.”

I wasn’t too thrilled about the prospect, either.

## Chapter Eight

It took a little while for me to regain mobility. After that, I spent a half-hour with a plastic bag of ice against my head as a local newscaster prattled away on the television screen. The news was mostly bad, but the news was pretty much always like that. The weather report was the lone highlight—the coiffed meteorologist pretty much guaranteed that Boston would see warmer weather in the next few days, but with chances of rain instead of snow.

Oh, boy.

I got up and checked the window. This was becoming an all too familiar habit lately, and I didn't like the implications of it. I bent the blinds apart and surveyed the street. The sun had set a little while ago and the streetlights were on. Nobody was in sight for a change. My head felt better and I didn't want to waste any more time. I tossed the ice bag into the sink and grabbed my coat. It was time to do a little digging.

There was an Internet café not far from my hotel, but I didn't want to use a credit card or dip into my dwindling cash supply. I looked through my city atlas and found the address for the Boston Public Library. I memorized the directions and drove downtown.

The directions didn't help. Some kind of major construction diverted traffic into all kinds of detours and the simple route I'd memorized was useless within minutes. The hours I'd spent studying the city maps paid off—otherwise, I would have been hopelessly lost in this goddamn maze of a city. The commuters didn't help, either. They drove like maniacs, cutting each other off and breaking every known rule of the road with what seemed like perverse enthusiasm. More often than not, they covered up for their transgressions by leaning heavily on their horns and flipping off anyone with the nerve to call them on their bad driving. What a fucking city.

I finally came into Copley Square a while later. It took a few minutes to find a parking spot in a garage nearby, and it wasn't until I saw the hourly rates that I realized the money I was saving for free Internet access was just going to be blown on parking instead. I shook my head and walked toward the library.

From the outside, it looked more like a museum than a library. I grew up with the more modest kind—a building that looked like a converted schoolhouse or something. This monstrosity was almost like an insult to its small town counterparts.

The foyer inside only reinforced the idea of a museum. There was a grandiose marble staircase with murals and busts dotting the walls. I shook my head and went in. The metal detectors took me off-guard, but I quickly remembered that I had nothing to worry about. Back when McTeague and the rest of us owned Cincinnati, I never went anywhere unarmed. That was then, as they say, and this was now.

But overall I was glad I wasn't carrying the .38 around anymore. More often than not, guns caused more problems than they solved—at least, if you were a wanted man in unfamiliar territory. I put my lighter and my keys in the tray and the guard gave them back

to me once I crossed through. He smiled as he handed them over, just two of many harmless items he would see over the course of his shift. If only he knew.

I smiled back, pocketing my belongings. I asked where I could find the public access computers. He nodded and pointed toward the east wing. I thanked him and headed in that direction.

I found the computers a few minutes later, along with the obligatory sign-in sheets. I looked around the counter and didn't find any indication that identification needed to be presented. So much the better, I thought as I picked up a pen and wrote "Ewell Byrne" on the sheet. It was an old joke, but I still liked it.

I stopped for a minute to look around at the cavernous room, marveling at the towering shelves of dusty old books.

*How quickly would they ignite?* I thought.

Part of me hated the idea of destroying such a wealth of accumulated knowledge and culture, but another side of me thought it would be worth it to see the place go up. Either way, it was just another moment that would certainly be denied to me. I sighed and got back to business.

The library was quiet, so I was able to access a computer right away. It took me a few minutes to get going—I wasn't exactly computer-savvy—but it didn't take long for me to bring up several news articles. I scanned them eagerly. Each seemed to provide a different piece of the puzzle I'd been trying to put together.

### **Side Job leads to Potential Jackpot for Local**

Charlestown, MA—Dockworker Brett Rawson, 26, visited the Charlestown Police Sub-Base on Bunker Hill Street yesterday afternoon to turn in a cache of Civil War era currency in a local residence. Rawson and several others were reportedly working as

independent contractors at 109 Crescent Road under the direction of the property's owner, Ralph Fletcher. According to the statement he filed with the police, Rawson was breaking down a wall inside the house when he found a recess in what should have been solid brick. Exploring the opening, he found a canvas bag full of hundreds of banknotes. Boston Police officials have offered no comment as of yet and are launching a full investigation into the matter.

### **Treasure Find becomes Legal Battle**

Charlestown, MA—The discovery last week of a pile of 1863 banknotes has prompted a flurry of litigious activity in the local precinct. When Brett Rawson turned in the hundred-year old currency to the police, he started a chain reaction of events that has led to a great deal of legal wrangling. Ralph Fletcher, 42, the owner of the property where the money was found, filed a claim for the cash while at the same time declaring to the police that Rawson and his associates had no legal reason to be in his house. This quickly became superfluous when Rawson was able to produce a contract signed by both parties. Rawson's attorney, Milo Devonshire of Everett, is using the "treasure trove" statute—where someone can claim ownership to found valuables if the current owner was unaware of its existence and if such treasure is old enough to presume its original owner is deceased—to argue that his client is the rightful owner of the cash. This tactic is dependent upon proving to the authorities that Fletcher had no previous knowledge of the existence of the banknotes. Magistrate Leonard Morrison is expected to make a finding within the next few days.

### **Rumors of Coercion Fuel Speculation about Owner's Surrender in Banknote Case**

Charlestown, MA—After several weeks of intensely advocating for ownership of a fortune in Confederate currency, Ralph Fletcher suddenly acquiesced to dockworker Brett Rawson's claim that he, not Fletcher, is entitled to the money under the ancient—and fairly obscure—"treasure trove" statute. Fletcher made a statement before Magistrate Morrison that he has renounced all claims to the banknotes and agrees with Rawson's

attorney that the young dockworker is the rightful claimant to the money. Friends and relatives of Fletcher were quick to suggest that some kind of intimidation has taken place, but Fletcher himself denies any such allegations. Rawson and his friends celebrated on the steps of the courthouse once the hearing was over. Court officials say that it is now only a formality to declare the money to be Rawson's rightful property.

### **New Claim in Civil War Currency Case Rocks Charlestown**

Charlestown, MA—Just when the authorities thought the matter regarding a cache of nineteenth century banknotes was resolved, a new party came forward to make legal claim to the money. Leah McBride, 29, of East Boston filed a claim in city court that the currency indeed belongs to her and not to dockworker Brett Rawson. When asked by reporters what evidence she had to back up her claim, she would not comment. In response to this new claim, a spokesperson for the Boston Police announced that they will not hand the money over to anyone until all ownership claims have been fully reviewed by a judge. Ms. McBride, a single mother who works as a receptionist at a downtown insurance agency, is scheduled to give a deposition in three weeks time.

I stopped reading and shut down the browser window, slamming the mouse against the desk as I did it. One of the librarians glanced over at me, but did nothing else. I took the hint and went easy on the hardware. I went back to the counter, enduring the librarian's glare by ignoring it, and signed out from the terminal. I was so distracted that I almost signed my real name. Luckily, I remembered to use the alias just as I was putting the pen to the sheet.

I now had the answers I was looking for—some of the last few puzzle pieces—but I didn't like the look of them.

Not one bit.



So that's how this whole stupid mess had come about. Rawson, in his dumb luck, stumbled across the cash while working on the Charlestown house. But had it been an accident? Had Godowsky's wife actually known something, and had Rawson somehow discovered it? Had my good buddy Rawson set up the job, including getting Fletcher to sign that convenient contract, simply to pilfer the house? What's more, going by the date of the most recent article, it was easy to figure out that the original three-day deadline I had been given was meant to prevent Leah from ever giving that deposition. Just how deep was this wilderness I had stumbled into? What lengths would Castiglione and his men go to in order to achieve their goals?

I didn't know, but I was going to find out. Also, Leah had a bit to answer for. No, she had a *lot* to answer for, actually.

It was too bad. I was really beginning to like her.

## Chapter Nine

It was past seven. Leah probably wouldn't be putting her son to bed for a little while longer, so I decided to go back to my hotel to kill some time and plan out my next move. I was just coming around the corner to my place when I spotted the high spoiler fin of a red import peeking out from behind a nearby bodega. Artificial light from the old streetlamp above bounced nicely off the plastic-looking Mitsubishi spoiler.

Rawson was here somewhere.

I banged a quick right and took the long way around the block to the hotel's lot. I got out of the Marauder and eased my way up the alley beside the hotel. I considered popping the trunk and grabbing the .38 from where it was wedged under the spare tire, but decided against it. It would take too much time.

I inched toward the street, guessing that Rawson wouldn't stray far from his little hot rod. He'd be too afraid of it getting stolen in a neighborhood like this. Sure enough, as I got closer I could hear Rawson's nasal voice talking and laughing. I hugged the far corner of the alley, edging forward, and soon the punk came into view. He was leaning against the

front of his car, smoking a cigarette and talking with another guy around his age. If this was Rawson's idea of a low-profile stakeout, then he was even dumber than I'd thought.

I put on my leather driving gloves and was just about to charge the two of them when a hand the size of a catcher's mitt closed over my arm and spun me around. I found myself face-to-face with the Raincoat, and his features were flooded with what could only have been fury.

Before I could react, a fist collided with my jaw and sent me flying. I landed against a pile of trash and felt the world go blurry for a minute. I came back to reality ready to defend myself against the Raincoat, but the pudgy man wasn't even in sight. I stood up and looked around. Harsh voices echoed past me from the street. I stumbled forward, blinking several times, to see the Raincoat yelling at Rawson.

"—and don't ever let me catch you doing this kind of thing again," the man was saying. It was the first time I'd heard him speak, and his voice was low and guttural—the kind of voice that was hollowed by years of cigarettes and hard liquor.

Rawson, looking quite cowed, simply nodded and skulked back to his car. The Mitsubishi roared away a moment later. I don't know what happened to the other guy who was with him.

The Raincoat turned and saw me looking at him. He was on me in an instant. Before I knew what was happening, he had me back down on the ground. My right arm was suddenly twisted behind me. I clenched my teeth to keep from crying out.

"You've been busy, spark," the man whispered, wrenching my arm further. "When you're not making trouble for the people who hired you, you're mixing it up with the woman you're supposed to burn. What kind of game are you playing, boy?"

He'd laugh his head off if he knew I was making this up as I went—and that I had no clue how I was going to get out of this mess. Still, I kept my game face on. “Call me ‘boy’ again and you’ll find out,” I replied.

“Don’t try and play the tough guy with me, Coyle,” the man snapped. “I was a veteran at this stuff when you were still wetting your pants. What I want to know is—what’s a guy who’s wanted by the Pennsylvania State Police doing causing trouble here in Boston? I mean, how could anyone be that stupid?”

*You have no idea, buddy.* “You sure know how to make a guy feel all warm and fuzzy,” I said. “Go ahead, keep up the flattery.”

“Five days ago, you and your hooligan friends were blowing up mansions in Luzerne County. Word has it that McTeague got himself dead out there, and the state troopers have put the rest of you at the top of their hit list. Anyone with half a brain would be in Canada by now, and yet here you are.” He punctuated his little speech by shoving my face against the pavement.

I felt the stubble of the asphalt bite into my cheek. “I’m on vacation.”

“Oh, like that little jaunt you and your buddies took down to Mexico a few years back?”

He knew about *Mexico*? Who the hell was this guy?

“No, for real,” I told him. “I’m just in the city to enjoy myself.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” he said. “Now comes the part where I tell you to quit fucking around. Some people around here have a vested interest in Brett Rawson, so stop causing trouble for him. You got that?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He twisted my arm even harder, something I wouldn't have thought possible. "Want to know what the psychologists say about sparks?" he asked. "You'll love it. The average IQ of most arsonists is between seventy and ninety—not exactly genius-level. And one in four actually falls below seventy, which lands us right down into the mentally retarded category."

"There you go," I said, "buttering me up again."

He hauled me back on my feet and shoved me face-first against the hotel façade. "Anger is the primary motivator," he continued. "Usually it's because you freaks have no articulate way of expressing your emotions."

"You think I'm angry?" I shrugged—not a small accomplishment, given that I was pinned tightly against a wall. "You couldn't be more wrong."

"Sure," he replied, grinding my face into the brick. "You're just a cool breeze, sailing down the coast without a care in the world."

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

"Do you want to know why arsonists are so angry in the first place? It's because of a bad childhood, of course. The whole nine yards—neglect, abuse, humiliation. Did Mommy and Daddy not pay enough attention, Coyle? Or did they maybe pay *too much* attention?"

"You lost me, old man."

"Doesn't sound too difficult," the man snapped. "Another theory is that firebugs are sexually aroused by their work. One can easily trace that back to childhood as well."

"Doesn't mean shit to me."

"Maybe you're not trying hard enough. Did your father come in your room at night—maybe exercise his fists, or some other body part, on you before drinking himself to sleep? Did your mother slap you around before she sent you off to school?"

“You got it all wrong, Daddy-O,” I said, thinking back to the midnight beatings and the occasional 911 calls. “My family was picture-perfect. We were something right out of a studio portrait from Sears.”

His fist took a quick jab into my kidney, and it was suddenly all I could do to stay on my feet. I bit back the first words that came to mind and focused on simply staying conscious.

“I’d love to just hang out here and kill time with you,” the man said. “But I’ve got more important things on my plate.”

That time, I couldn’t resist. “That’s your problem, old timer,” I said. “Cut back on the servings and maybe you’ll lose a little of that extra weight.”

There was about five seconds of silence and then that fist rammed into the small of my back and then into my head. Once his other arm released me, I collapsed. I smelled asphalt and stale piss.

“Nobody can say I didn’t give you fair warning,” the man said from somewhere above me. “Now stop screwing around and do the job you were hired to do.”

He stomped away, his worn heels thudding against the pavement. I accomplished a miracle and turned over, keeping a hazy eye on where he was going. Just before my head fell back to the ground, I saw the Raincoat getting into a white Impala parked across the street. Then, for a while, there was nothing.

## Chapter Ten

I came to my senses some time later. I saw cars buzzing by on the street as if it were just another normal day. I caught a flicker of movement to my left, but it was just a cat creeping through the piles of trash.

The Raincoat was a puzzle. He dressed and talked like a cop, but he acted like a hood. I'd seen cops like that before, of course, but this guy was different somehow.

Would a cop be putting pressure me to carry out the torch job? Was he a former badge who now worked for the Outfit, or was he a crooked detective who moonlighted for the Castiglione family? Most law enforcement types—crooked or not—would break their legs to bring me in, put a wire on me, and set me loose on the bad guys. They'd pounce on the first hint of a felony and grab a quick bust and the penny-ante glory that came with it. In my experience, cops never saw the big picture and rarely ever went for the big prize—always content to gather a few crumbs while ignoring the feast right in front of their faces.

The Raincoat wasn't like that. He was acting way too ruthlessly. There was no way a legit cop would be on my back like that, urging me to commit a capital crime—and letting a whole building full of innocent civilians possibly burn to death as a consequence.

He was still too much like a cop to just be another hood, yet the Raincoat acknowledged no connection with Castiglione or his goons who'd visited me earlier. Nor did it feel like they were working together. If anything, they were duplicating each other's efforts. It was like neither knew the other even existed. The Raincoat was following me, yet Buzz-Cut had laughed when I asked if Castiglione had put a tail on me.

Why had he laughed?

The more I thought about it, as I lay there in the garbage—slowly gathering the strength to stand up again—the more it puzzled me.

I looked up and saw a rusty fire escape above, its ladder swaying precariously from brittle hinges. Finally, I was able to stagger to my feet and find my way up to my room. Thankfully, there were no more hoods or crooked cops waiting around to bash my skull in some more.

I picked up the plastic bag I'd tossed in the sink earlier. The ice that had been inside had long since melted, so I grabbed a fresh batch of cubes from the ice machine down the hall and filled the bag back up again. I wanted to put the ice on my head and on my back, but I was too sore to take my shirt off. The bag went back against my head and I figured my back would have to fend for itself.

I sat on the edge of the bed for a while, thinking things over. Everything had been happening so quickly, I hadn't had much time to sort it all out. I could plan out a torch job well enough, but that kind of thinking was tactical, not strategic. Now McTeague was dead, however, and the other guys were scattered to the four winds. We'd made a promise to lie low and not contact each other unless it was a matter of life and death.

I wanted to call McClellan and get him to think all of this through for me. He'd have been happy to help, and he'd recognize the angles right away. But even though I knew I'd



flounder around looking for a way out of this situation, part of me wanted to handle it on my own.

I knew what the next step was, anyway. Going back to Leah's apartment and getting some answers out of her.

I took it slow going across town. The Marauder wasn't good for slow. It drank up gas like it was dying of thirst and seemed impatient with me—like a dumb racehorse chomping at the bit. Goddamn stupid fucking car.

There were no tails this time. Whatever Rawson had been doing outside my hotel apparently wasn't urgent enough to defy the Raincoat, and the Impala was nowhere to be seen.

I thought a lot about those two men as I drove back toward East Boston. The Raincoat had appeared only after I'd met Rawson and taken the job. Rawson knew that someone was following me, and Ginelli had denied putting a tail on me. The Raincoat had not been with Ginelli and his goons and there was no apparent connection between them.

Furthermore, the Raincoat was the only one who'd seen me and Leah together, yet Ginelli didn't seem to know about it. Given Ginelli's impatience for me to get the job done, he would not have been happy to know I was having coffee and taking walks with the woman I was supposed to kill. And since I was still alive, there was no way Ginelli knew I'd been meeting with Leah. Therefore, the Raincoat couldn't have been working with Ginelli.

Finally, the Raincoat had chased off Rawson outside my hotel. That not only implied a connection between the two of them, it also suggested that the Raincoat was calling the shots. A picture was starting to take shape, a map of the various affiliations and

the hazy connections between them, but it wasn't quite clear yet. I needed to know the nature of Rawson's relationship with the Raincoat.

I parked a few blocks away from Leah's building and hit the sidewalk. It was long since dark and I blended in with the rest of the shadows.

I slipped into her building and took the stairs as quietly as I could. I passed nobody in the stairwells. I'd become familiar enough with the tenement's routine to know that the place settled down once night came. The fewer people who saw me coming and going, the better off I was.

I rapped on her door. After a moment I heard a click and the door cracked open. I figured she must have scoped me out in the peephole. She was too smart to open her door to strangers these days. Yet the door's chain was pulled taut. She glared at me through the three inches of space between the door and its frame.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"We need to talk."

"For Christ's sake, didn't you get enough of that earlier?"

"Something's come up," I replied.

"Do you have any idea what time it is? Come back tomorrow."

"This can't wait. We have to talk and it has to be now."

"I told you that I don't want you here when my son's home."

"You're going to have to make an exception," I said through gritted teeth. "Now open the fucking door before I kick it in."

"Okay, okay," she muttered. She shut the door for a brief moment and I could hear the chain being released. She opened up once more and gestured for me to come in. I did

so, shutting the door behind me. She was wearing a faded green robe over flannel pajamas. With her hair back in a French braid, she looked young enough to be in high school.

“All right, what’s so urgent?” she asked. She must have caught a better look at me, because her expression softened. “Jesus, what happened to your face?”

“I received a visit from some Outfit men,” I replied.

She didn’t even miss a beat. “What did they want?”

“Take one goddamn guess,” I said.

She exhaled. “They wanted to know why you hadn’t done the job yet.”

“That’s right.” I didn’t feel like telling her they cut the deadline in half. “Where’s your son?”

“Sleeping,” she replied. “I put him down a little while ago.”

“Good, then I have your undivided attention.”

“So what are we going to do?” she asked. “And are you sure you’re all right? You look pretty bad, if you don’t mind me saying.”

My head felt like one big bruise and my vision was still a little blurry. “I’m fine, and I’m still working on the answer to your first question. But that’s not the reason I came by.”

She knitted a brow. “What else did you want to talk about?”

“How about why the fuck did you charge into court and file a claim to that money?”

She looked at me for a minute and then sighed. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from a pocket in her robe and sat down on the couch. She lit up, took a drag, and stared out the window. Throughout all this, I stood watching her, making what I believed to be a heroic effort not to strangle her.

“It’s complicated,” she said, still looking out into the night.

“Simplify it for me.”

“You have to understand something—”

“No, I don’t.”

She snapped her head up at me. “What?”

“I don’t *have to* understand anything. I’ll *consider* what you have to say, but I’m about an inch away from saying the hell with you and just leaving you at the mercy of those gangsters. So this is your last chance to be straight with me.” I paused to lock eyes with her.

“Better make it good.”

## Chapter Eleven

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, *please* believe what I’m about to tell you.”

“Like I said, I’ll consider it.”

“Okay, that’s good enough, I guess. I am convinced that the reason my father died at a relatively young age was that he could never get his hands on that money.”

“All right, I’ll give you that.”

“He was obsessed with those damned banknotes—it was all he ever thought about. So when he realized that he didn’t have long to live, he took what was left of his savings and contacted Edward Lynch, an old friend of his.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

She lifted her chin. “Lynch was a forger and he doctored up some papers for my father to make it look like I was the legal beneficiary to the currency. On the off chance the money was ever found, he wanted me to be able to claim it.”

“Those papers must have been pretty fucking good.”

She nodded. “Lynch was the best, and we had the advantage that the banker who originally owned them passed away without an heir. Distant relatives are *still* fighting over his estate to this day.”

“So he set you up to be able to grab them if they were ever found. That was nice of him.”

“So when the story broke in the local papers, I knew that my chance had come. Rawson looked so smug, so sure of himself, on television and in the news articles. Like the world was just handed to him on a silver plate. Like he was just going to swoop in and steal *my* money. I wanted so bad to step forward and wipe that grin off his face with Lynch’s documents, but something told me to wait.”

I was tempted to point out that the money was no more hers than it was Rawson’s. But instead I just said, “That was probably a good idea, considering the owner of the property contested Rawson’s claim.”

“Exactly,” she said. “I figured it was best to wait to see what happened before I came forward. Once the dust cleared and Fletcher bowed out, I knew it was time to make my claim.”

I closed my eyes and silently counted to ten. “I don’t care how good this Lynch guy was, those documents weren’t going to pass muster with a city court. Didn’t you realize that you don’t have a legal leg to stand on?”

“I didn’t—”

“What the hell were you going to tell them if they figured out your scam? That your daddy stole the money fair and square?”

She shrugged. “Remember, my mother remarried and then had her first marriage annulled. There’s nothing solid connecting me to Jimmy O’Hare.”

They would have found a connection, though, if they dug deeply enough. “So what the fuck were you going to say in your deposition?”

“I was just going to play dumb and say that the documents were handed down to me.”

I rolled my eyes. “And what were you going to do after *that* brilliant ploy failed?”

She shook her head. “I hadn’t thought it out that far. I just wanted to make Rawson’s life miserable as much as I could. I owed at least that much to my father.”

“Well, you better be thinking a little further ahead now. You screwed with the wrong guy and now there’s a contract out on your life.”

“How the hell was I supposed to know that? Rawson was just this dopey kid, for Christ’s sake. Believe me, if I’d had any idea he was connected, I wouldn’t have gone into court.”

“I figured as much,” I said. “But why did you tell me everything else and still conceal this legal shit from me? What was to stop me from just looking it up?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t think you’d have the time to look into it. I figured you’d be too busy trying to stay alive.”

“When it comes to protecting my interests, I try to make the time sooner or later to figure out what kind of mess I’ve gotten myself into. But it doesn’t make trusting you any easier.”

She winced at that. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, there’s no use crying over it. We have to get out of this predicament and we have to do it quickly. If I haven’t done the job by this time tomorrow night, I’ll be joining you in the local morgue.”

“Jesus, they’re not kidding around,” Leah said.

“No, and these love taps they gave me earlier will be nothing compared to what they’ll do if I don’t hold up my end of the deal. And you don’t even want to think about what they might do to you before they give you the big send-off.”

She wrapped her robe tightly around her body. “So what are we going to do?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “I’m out of moves right now, but I don’t want to wait to see what the other team’s going to do next. I was thinking I might take a look at that house in Charlestown. You know, where Rawson found the money.”

She frowned. “What good would that do?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just a feeling I have.”

“You’re going to drive all the way out to C-town because of a feeling?”

“It’s more than that. Look, I’m a hands-on kind of guy. I don’t deal with things in the abstract—I like to have stuff right where I can see it. And my gut is telling me to go see the house where this all started.” Maybe it would give me a clue as to how to turn the situation to our advantage. Maybe it would just put off having to tell her that I was an idiot with no plan.

“Well, my mind is blank so I’ll have to trust your gut.”

“You’re too kind,” I said. I rooted through my pocket and came up with a scrap of paper. I had scribbled a number on it earlier. “Here, I want you to take this. It’s my cell number.”

She frowned at me. “Why?”

“Because things are heating up and I think we should be able to get a hold of each other when we need to,” I said.

She stood up and wandered toward me, her big eyes staring up at me. “So you *are* still going to try to help me, aren’t you?”



This was the first time she'd played the damsel card and I wasn't ready for it. Not with a few marbles still loose from the day's hi-jinks. I nodded like a stupid schoolboy. It wasn't like she was standing there in a sexy negligee or anything. She was wearing flannel pajamas, for Christ's sake. And she was suddenly making my mouth water.

"Yeah, sure," I said, the rational part of my brain knowing that I wasn't in control anymore and that there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. I was just too tired and too broken and she was too overwhelming.

She came up nice and close to me, her perfume still strong, and her lips barely brushing mine as she whispered, "Thank you." She plucked the paper with my cell number on it out of my frozen hand with the deftness of a pickpocket.

"Yeah," I said. And then I got out of there before I could say or do anything even dumber than what I'd already said and done.

I was just out the door and on the sidewalk when my cell phone rang, startling me. For a second I thought—was afraid?—that it was Leah, wanting me to come back up. I looked at the caller ID and saw that it was Glen Duggan, the mid-level boss from South Boston who had originally offered me the torch job.

What the hell did he want?

I wanted to just let the call go to voicemail, but knowing what I did about Duggan made me believe that the stubborn prick would just keep hounding me until I answered.

I picked up the call. "This is Coyle," I said into the phone.

"Jack," Duggan's nasal voice came through. "What the fuck are you trying to do to me?"

"Glen," I replied. "Good to hear from you."

“Yeah, nice to talk to you, too, asshole,” he shot back. “Now would you do me the courtesy of answering my original fucking question?”

“Well, gee, Glen—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, smartass. How about the fact that I—in all my selfless generosity—do you a solid by handing you a cakewalk of a job and you manage to fuck it up from the start?”

“That’s a little unfair.”

“Unfair? When a job comes down from Castiglione, there’s pressure from the get-go. That’s why I handed it to you instead of some other yahoo. And what do you do to thank me? You drag your fucking feet—”

“Wait,” I said. “This job came *directly* from Castiglione?”

“What, did I stutter? You’re getting slow *and* stupid in your old age.”

“Just answer my question.”

There was a pause on the other end. I imagined that Glen was trying to rein in his temper. “Yeah, that’s where the job came from. Now are you going to get off your ass and do the job or am I going to continue to get harassing phone calls from the Castle’s men?”

“I’ll take care of it,” I told him. “And Castiglione’s thugs have already done a lot worse than talk harshly to me. Just so you know.”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Duggan replied. “Just get the fucking job done.”

I tried a different tactic with him. “Doesn’t it strike you as odd that all this pressure is coming down from the top just to burn out a civilian apartment building?”

“Coyle, I don’t give a shit if they told you to burn down Vatican fucking City—just stop screwing around and get it done!”

The line went dead. That was fine—he’d made his point.

## Chapter Twelve

I got into the Mercury still thinking about Duggan's call and peeled away from the curb. When he first offered me the job, nothing was ever said about it coming down from Castiglione. Why was that little tidbit just coming out now? Had Duggan known all along, or was he just finding out as well?

Too many questions all of a sudden.

It was late enough that traffic had thinned out a bit, but there were still plenty of slow-moving idiots in my way. Didn't these people have homes? I listened to the loud and clumsy rumble of the Marauder's engine and shook my head. Where was my Jaguar? Probably long since impounded in some Philadelphia lot, I guessed.

I escaped the airport traffic and headed through the city toward Charlestown. As usual, I kept a constant eye on the mirrors. It was a good thing I did. The staccato flashes from the streetlights picked up a white vehicle not far behind me. I kept an eye on it, seeing that it stayed a few car lengths behind. I tried a few turns and it hung with me. Finally, we came to a red light and the white car came to a stop with only a yellow taxi between us. I squinted in the side mirror and caught a look at the driver's face under the streetlight.

The Raincoat was on my tail.

The light turned green and I went easy on the gas pedal. I was suddenly just another guy taking his time at the end of a long day. I gave it a few minutes, keeping an eye in the mirrors and on the streets around me. After another few blocks, I found what I was looking for.

I pulled over and was lucky enough to get a spot right in front of the liquor store. I got out of the car, taking my time while resisting the strong urge to look around. I sauntered through the front door of the little shop and wandered around the wine section for a few minutes. The store was empty except for me and the cashier.

I maneuvered myself into a position near the far corner of the store, where I could scope out the front window and most of the block beyond. Sure enough, the white Impala was parked two spots back from mine. I estimated that the Raincoat could just barely see into the store from where he was. Most likely, he was just waiting for me to come out and then follow me to wherever I was going.

Well, we'd see about that. If this was going to work, I'd have to be quick.

I picked out a random bottle of Burgundy and went over to the cashier, a bored-looking Korean kid who looked young enough to be in junior high school. I put the bottle on the counter.

The kid picked up a plastic gun and shot a red beam across the bottle's UPC code. "That'll be eight ninety-nine."

I took out a fifty and slid it toward him. "This place has a back door?"

He blinked at me. "Well, yeah."

"You're welcome to keep the change if I can use it and then come back inside."

"Do you need to take a leak or something? Just use the alleyway, man."

“It’s more than that. Do you want the money or not?”

He shrugged and nodded toward the corner. “Yeah, it’s just through that door back there. Go straight down the hall. There’s a block of wood to prop it open for when we take our smoke breaks. Leave it open or you won’t be able to get back in.”

“You have to love those fire doors,” I said. “Now do me a favor and poke around in front of the window a bit. Make it look like you’re trying to find something for me.”

He grinned. “For fifty bucks, I’ll do a whole song and dance routine.”

I grabbed a pen off the counter and headed toward the back.

As soon as I was out of sight of the front window, I started running. I slammed through the door and into a dimly-lit area. I passed a shabby desk buried under piles of paper and raced down a narrow hallway stuffed with boxes of beer and wine. The back door had a warning sign on it, but most of those were disabled by their owners for the very reason the kid had mentioned. Everyone needed a smoke break now and then.

I opened the door and took a quick look around. I found the little block the kid had told me about and I shoved it into the door’s hinge. Once I could see it was secure, I ran down the alley toward the street.

I came to the corner of the liquor store where it met the sidewalk. The Raincoat’s car was not ten feet away. From what I could see, the Raincoat was on a cell phone, talking and listening in turn. I wondered who he was speaking with.

I knelt down and wrote the license plate number of his car on a scrap of paper from my wallet. I then rushed back to the fire door and closed it behind me.

I went back through the dark room and into the store. I returned to the counter and watched as the Korean kid made a show of finding some obscure brand of Chablis and paraded back to the register.

“Was that enough of a show for you?” he asked.

“Yeah, you’re Marlon fucking Brando,” I assured him.

“Who’s that?”

“How about you just put my stuff in a bag and I’ll get out of your hair?”

His grin faltered into a quiet grumble and he put my selection in a paper bag.

“Anything else?” he asked. He didn’t sound quite so enthusiastic anymore.

“No, that’s it,” I said, leaning in to make sure I had his attention. “But if anyone comes in here asking about me, you didn’t see a thing. Got it?”

“Sure,” the kid said. “Have a nice night, sir.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, and tried to look casual as I sauntered out the front door. I pretended not to see the Impala as I climbed back into the Mercury. The Raincoat must have been feeling pretty confident to hang so close. He must have thought I blacked out more quickly earlier that afternoon and hadn’t seen him getting into his car. Or maybe he just thought I was an idiot.

Taking my time starting the car and putting on my seatbelt, I eased my cell phone out of my coat pocket and hit the speed dial button for Frank McClellan. I put the phone on speaker and laid it on the passenger seat. I didn’t want the Raincoat to know I was calling someone. I put the car in gear and pulled back out into traffic.

“McClellan,” a gruff voice came through.

“Frank,” I said. “How are you doing?”

“I’m still alive. It’s nice to hear your voice, Jack.”

“Same here,” I replied. “Listen, I’m kind of in a jam and I was hoping you could give me a hand with something.”

There was a dry chuckle. “I heard you were raising a ruckus up in Boston. I should’ve known it wouldn’t take long for you to get in trouble again.”

“It’s one of my many talents. Look, could you trace a plate for me?”

“Sure. Give me the number.”

I read off the plate number to him. McClellan read it back to me to make sure he’d taken it down correctly. He had.

“Give me a couple of hours,” he said and broke the connection.

“No problem,” I said to the dead phone. That was one little item taken care of.

Now there was another. Until I found out exactly who I was dealing with, I didn’t want him following me anymore.

It was time to lose my tail.

## Chapter Thirteen

When we'd scrambled out of Little Belfast, Pennsylvania a week before, we already had a feeling that McTeague wouldn't be meeting us at the preplanned rendezvous point down in Centralia. So when Siobhan Maher—the woman he'd gone in there to rescue—had shown up alone in McTeague's Marauder, we all knew what had happened without her having to say a word.

The four of us—McClellan, Daigneault, O'Dwyer, and I—had escorted Siobhan to one of our safe houses in Philadelphia before meeting at one of our warehouses to compare notes. Everything should have calmed down by that point, but then a squadron of state police cars showed up out of nowhere and swept down on us like a plague. One of the troopers shot out a tire on my Jaguar and since the Maher woman had happened to give the Mercury's keys to me, I was forced to pile into the Marauder to get away.

Now, six days later, I was cruising through an unfamiliar city with a hard case on my back. I had come to hate the Marauder quite a bit over the last few days, but it was finally going to earn its keep once I broke free of the traffic.



The Marauder didn't have a lot going for it, in my opinion. It was basically just a blacked-out Grand Marquis with a bigger engine—and a Grand Marquis was really just a glorified Crown Vic. It looked like shit, drove like shit, and sucked gas like there was no tomorrow. It was so heavy that it couldn't beat a tricycle off the line and its maneuverability was nonexistent.

It was good for exactly one thing. Once it got going, it could *move*.

I banged a slow left, still making it look like I had no idea I was being followed. Sure enough, the Impala stayed with me. I was getting to know the city well enough now that I could find my way around. Also, I used what little down time I'd had hanging around my hotel room to study the city atlas and memorize the layout of the area—the main routes, anyway. It was a longstanding habit ingrained in all of us by McTeague when operating in strange territory. He'd always wanted us to be prepared.

So now I knew the city. And the route I was taking, however lazy and roundabout it might have looked, was gradually leading toward the highway.

From the way the Raincoat had talked to me—not to mention the impolite way he'd hit me and thrown me up against a brick wall—I figured he thought I was beneath his contempt. That he was tougher, smarter, and more experienced at this game.

Well, there's nobody easier to lull than someone who thinks he's smarter than you.

I reached the onramp and merged with the traffic. I kept driving listlessly, slogging along with the commuters and interstate truckers like a man with no real destination. I slid my eyes to the left and studied the side mirror to see if the Impala was still on my tail. It was there, still hanging back three or so car lengths.

I eased up on the gas little by little, easing down to just below the speed limit. From the chorus of horns that sounded from behind, I figured I had accomplished my goal of

issing off the other drivers. Two cars and an eighteen-wheeler roared by while I pretended to look alarmed about my car's sudden lack of performance. I slapped the dashboard a couple of times, trying hard to keep a straight face. I checked the mirror again. The Raincoat had slowed down right along with me—I imagined that he didn't want me to see him and he certainly didn't want to pass me and let me see his plate.

I gave it another thirty seconds, enough time to let the Raincoat's car lose its momentum and to let the traffic in the lane ahead of me clear out. The Impala would have been stuttering between gears and the Raincoat should've been ready to kill me. Then I added the finishing touch, tapping my brakes just enough to trigger the rear brake lights yet not so hard that I lost much speed.

As I hoped, the Raincoat panicked and slammed on his own brakes, skidding wildly and causing further panic among the cars behind and around him.

That was when I gunned it, opening up that three hundred horsepower engine and leaving the Impala far behind. The mercury-vapor streetlights on either side of the highway turned into a steady parade of blurred flashes as the speedometer rose past eighty and kept climbing.

I caught up to the tractor trailer that had passed me a minute before—luckily, it was back in the middle lane—and I swerved past it into the left lane. I knew the Raincoat was a pro and wouldn't take long to recover. I also knew that the Impala had a pretty powerful engine and could catch up with me quickly. I didn't want to turn this into an idiotic high-speed chase, so I shut off the Marauder's lights and slowed down until I matched the speed of the truck beside me.

On the way to Boston, I had unscrewed the tiny light bulb that illuminated my rear license plate. I knew McTeague's plate would become hot sooner rather than later, but I'd

had no other choice for transportation at the time. Now, between the black finish of my car and being hidden in the shadow of the eighteen-wheeler, I was invisible to anyone around me. If the Raincoat came right up behind me, my plan was shot. Not only wouldn't I get away, but he'd know that I was fucking with him. If he got his hands on me again, it would be worse than a twisted arm and my head against a brick wall. All that could happen—all that happy horseshit raining down on my head—just on the off-chance that he took the left lane.

I was betting he wouldn't do that.

A moment later the Impala roared by, shooting along in the right-most lane—just like I thought he would. He would have guessed that I'd gun the Marauder for all it was worth and then break off at the next exit. Therefore, he'd plan to be right on my tail ready to chase me down.

Instead, I stayed with the tractor trailer. Once the Raincoat's sedan was lost to sight I put the lights back on and motored along for a while. I set the cruise control firmly at sixty-five, not wanting to do anything as irresponsible as break the speed limit.

A little while later, I carefully changed over to the right-hand lane and took the off-ramp into Somerville. I doubled back southeast and came into Charlestown. I pulled over at a gas station and took the atlas out again. I paged through and found the blow-up of the area. I looked at the map and was surprised to see just how small Charlestown really was. I scanned the grid of interlocking streets and soon found the location of the abandoned house.

I memorized the route to get there and put the atlas away. I scanned the street, wanting to make sure the Raincoat hadn't followed me after all, and saw no one. I put the Marauder back into gear and pulled out of the gas station.

I took it easy heading into Thompson Square and kept my eyes peeled for the cross street I was looking for. It was a wealthy-looking neighborhood, more so than I'd expected. I played it safe and kept the car about five miles under the speed limit. If I went too fast, I'd probably miss the turn and maybe attract the local law. If I went too slowly, I'd look like I was casing the neighborhood.

My memory came through and I spotted the cross street where I'd expected it to be. I turned down a narrow side street and eased the Mercury down to a crawl until I turned onto Crescent. Going slow on a street this small wasn't being suspicious—it was just blending in. Roaring down a quiet road was the worst way to get attention.

A few minutes later, I saw the house. I didn't even have to check the number on the rotting shingles. I knew it was the one as soon as I saw it. It didn't hurt that it was the only house on the block without any lights on.

I parked the car and killed the engine.

## Chapter Fourteen

I rooted around in the Marauder's trunk and found a flashlight inside a little emergency kit. It was one of those Maglite jobs that took four D batteries. I clicked the soft button and the thing lit up like Christmas. I shut it off for the moment. Before I closed the trunk, I reached down under the spare tire and grabbed the .38. I kept the flashlight ready in my right hand. The gun went in my coat pocket.

The house itself was dark, but there was enough light coming from the street lamps and the other houses for me to see it pretty well. It was smaller than I'd expected—more of a shack than a house. Compared to the other places around, some of them big enough to be called mansions, this little house seemed like some rich guy's tool shed.

It was a single story high, but I couldn't tell much more about its design. I could pick out a Cape Cod-style home in a line-up and I was pretty sure I knew what a French Tudor was supposed to look like, but other than that I didn't know shit about houses. It was old, its worn gray shingles looking ready to fall off the walls. There was a decent-sized yard around it, maybe a quarter of an acre, surrounded by a white picket fence that looked as

old as the house itself. The thick green grass, unlike the house or the fence, seemed well-cared for.

I walked up to the gate. It was short, reaching just above my waist, its paint peeling to reveal splotches of light brown wood. I reached over and unlatched the door. I swung it open slowly and carefully. If it was as old as it looked, I didn't want it squeaking too much. On a quiet street like this, a rusty gate would sound like a bomb going off.

It didn't squeak. Whoever took care of the property—either that guy Fletcher from the papers or someone in his pay—had taken pains to do things like maintain the lawn and oil the gate hinges. It was too bad they didn't care as much about the rotting exterior of the house.

I pushed the gate shut behind me and walked up the narrow concrete path toward the front door. There was yellow police tape crisscrossed in a large X over the doorway. I imagined the house itself was locked up tight as well. After one jerk-off stumbled across a fortune hidden in the walls, the city wasn't going to take the chance that other treasure hunters might start picking around the rest of the house.

O'Dwyer, one of my partners in crime over the years, had shown me how to pick a lock back when we shared a bunk in juvenile hall. I could have forced my way inside, but I didn't want to take any unnecessary chances. I just wanted to see the house.

I clicked on the flashlight—making sure to keep the beam as narrow as possible—and walked around to the side. I touched a few random shingles, feeling the texture of the old dried-out wood. This house would go up in a heartbeat if I so much as thought about lighting a match.

When I thought about flash fires, I always pictured the marshes behind my house as a kid. My conversation with Leah back in the diner made me recall torching the Moreland house, but that hadn't my first flirtation with fire. In the summer after sixth grade, my friends and I used to hang out near the river. We played guns and built forts out of discarded plywood and other stuff that twelve-year olds did. We kept to ourselves and rarely got into any real trouble.

But one day, I convinced my buddy Jess to bring along a few model cars he'd built earlier that spring. Jess was good at model building, but not so great when it came to painting them. He'd built a little Ferrari and an old-fashioned police Paddy Wagon (a phrase I'd always hated; almost from the cradle my mother had warned me that I'd be riding in such a wagon before long. The fact that she turned out to be right didn't help). Jess had done a fantastic job building these two models—every tiny detail was perfect.

Then he tried to paint them and all his previous hard work was, as usual, for nothing. The paint was too thick and bubbled up in places. Flecks of red paint for the body of the Ferrari were splashed on the narrow tires. I never figured out how he could have such steady hands when he glued the various pieces together, but then could be so sloppy when it came to painting them.

Anyway, he was thinking of using the models for target practice with his BB gun. That's how much the models meant to him at that point. I had a better idea. While kicking around Jess's basement, I'd been looking at the table where he spent so many hours building his little cars and jet fighters and battleships. I was attracted to the smell of the model glue—even in those days, my nose was drawn to such things—and I happened to read the label of the sticky little tube.

So there was Jess, with his models on a tree stump in a clearing among the marsh reeds. There was Ricky and Fitz and Chase, all standing around with their usual dim expressions. And there was me, with a fresh tube of model glue. I don't remember exactly what I told them—something about trying a special effect like we'd see on TV or in the movies. We were going to douse the models in glue, light them on fire, and then send them over the edge of the tree stump like a stunt car on "The A-Team" or the "Dukes of Hazzard." They were all up for it, loving the idea of being a junior special effects team.

The plan came off well enough. The cars burned quite spectacularly, and though I kept my expression calm I was feeling a thrill inside like I'd never felt before. I'd taken precautions, bringing a five-gallon bucket from the house and filling it up in the nearby stream. It had been a hot and rainless summer, and the marsh was dryer than a desert. Once each car flamed out and crashed on the ground, I was right there to pour water on the little fires before they could spread.

What I hadn't counted on was Fitz taking the tube of glue and playing with it. Of all the random things, he found a grimy pom-pom hat and hung it on the end of a stick. And while we pretended to be a bunch of half-assed effects engineers, Fitz had the brilliant idea of dabbing little globs of glue all around the pom-pom and then igniting the glue. Mesmerized by his own little special effect, he then compounded his stupidity by twirling the stick—sending little burning missiles into the dead reeds around us.

I looked up from the incinerated Paddy Wagon—feeling a strong burst of satisfaction in my gut at the sight of it burning—just in time to see the marsh go up. To this day, I've never seen a fire spread so quickly. It was like someone had replaced the fence of reeds with walls of flame. I remember being terrified, but I also remember feeling intoxicated. Yes, this was dangerous, even deadly. Yes, this was bad, in so far as the



concepts of good and bad could be appreciated by a rebellious twelve-year old. Yes, this was power.

We ran out of the marsh like Olympic sprinters, screaming our lungs out. And we would have been fine—if I hadn't been knocked down by one of the others scurrying to get away. It was probably Fitz. There I was, sprawled across the ground and surrounded by pillars of flame. I remember being unable to move a muscle. I was paralyzed by the sight of the inferno. I was scared and awestruck all at the same time. And I would have been dead if Jess hadn't come back for me.

I still don't know how we managed to get out, since the fire was all around us. We all somehow made it, with the secret resilience that young boys seem to have. Even Fitz escaped, which was too bad.

And boy, did we get in trouble. The fire department came, of course, and hosed down the fire before it could spread. I never found out who called them—probably one of my nosy neighbors who were always spying on me from a window—but it was a good thing someone did. Even back then, I hadn't liked the idea of an uncontrolled fire. I still don't.

My parents found out when the fire chief called later that night. I was grounded for the rest of the summer. That sucked, but I remember feeling like it had almost been worth it to see such a glorious sight. Night after night, as I listened to other kids playing outside, I lay on my bed and remembered the spectacle of raw flames bursting and dancing all around us.

Yet it also taught me two important lessons. First, command what you create. A flash fire could be a magnificent thing, but it had to be leashed. It had to be controlled. Second, don't panic in a fire. If you freeze up—like most people do—you're dead. If a bunch of idiot kids could find their way out of an inferno like the one in that marsh, then

there's usually a way out of most fires. You just have to keep your head. At the age of twelve, I knew at least that much.

Two dozen years later, I looked at Fletcher's house and all I could see was a flash fire waiting to happen.

I heard the rustle of thick plastic from above and I continued my stroll around the perimeter. I found a rusty watering can lying near the remains of a small garden—now overgrown with weeds. The can was big with a perforated spout, so that the water would come out in a stream of thin jets. I picked it up, stood it against the foundation, and kept going.

In the back, of all things, was an extension ladder propped against the house and stretching up toward the roof. It was a good piece of equipment that was now getting rusty from being left outside. I figured that Fletcher—probably under orders from the city—had called off the renovations once the money had been discovered, and things like the ladder had been left behind while the job remained in stasis.

I climbed a few rungs of the ladder, testing its strength. It was sturdy, more than enough to hold my weight and then some. I went up higher, curious to see what work was being done. I reached the top and saw several thick tarpaulins made of clear plastic stretched out across the roof. The tarps were, for the most part, pinned down by bricks that had been placed at each corner. The wind had blown a few of the bricks loose and portions of the tarps fluttered in the night breeze.

I slowly climbed onto the house itself, edging in toward the tarps. Panning the flashlight around, I could see that many of the roofing tiles were crumbling. Therefore, I wasn't surprised when I took a closer look and saw that someone had ripped up a big section

of the roof right in the middle. Maybe that part had collapsed; maybe the renovators had decided it needed to be replaced. Either way, they had been interrupted right in the middle of the job, leaving their half-assed tarps to block out the snow and rain.

I could use this house—I knew it right then and there. I didn’t know exactly how to work it, but I knew the potential was there. Like I’d told Rawson that morning, he had no idea what I was capable of if I was given a chance to plan ahead. Maybe that meant something after all.

But could I do it? Could I really pull off a trick this big and get away with it? So many things could go wrong and I didn’t know if I could even account for all the contingencies. But what other choice did I have? I was in too deep to do anything but keep pushing ahead.

I thought about it and realized that if I took it slowly, one step at a time, then maybe I could make it work. To try to view the whole picture at once was too overwhelming; if I broke it down into smaller parts, it seemed more manageable. I wondered with a grin if that was how McTeague had always done it. After all, I’d managed to lose the Raincoat on the way here, and I didn’t think he was an easy tail to shake. If I could manage that, then it was possible that I could think my way through something bigger.

I climbed back down to the ground. Miraculously, nobody seemed to have noticed me poking around the house. I got into the car and took off as quickly as I could. I had pushed my luck enough for one night.

## Chapter Fifteen

I drove back to my hotel, feeling the long day—not to mention the remnant ache of several hard blows to my head—catching up with me. Too much had happened and I was still trying to catch up with it all. I needed a full night's sleep and a week or so to map out all the people involved and the cross-currents that connected them. I was tired and hurting all over.

That's the only excuse I have for what happened next.

I parked the Mercury in the hotel's lot and got out. I started toward the door before I remembered the .38 in my jacket. I used the car's remote to pop the trunk and I stuffed the pistol back down below the wheel well. I shut the lid of the trunk, scanning the parking lot to make sure nobody was watching.

I staggered up the stairs and came within sight of my room. I stumbled down the hallway and found my balance again as I stood before my door fishing around for the key. I sighed to myself, confident that an incredibly long day had finally come to an end. At least I wouldn't have to worry about anyone sucker-punching me again.

And then I heard Rawson's voice behind me.

“Thought we’d given up, didn’t you?”

I had enough time to turn halfway around when something hard slammed into my ribs. Rawson and two of his pals stood in a semicircle, all holding baseball bats, cutting off any escape. I fell to my knees, trying like mad to catch my breath.

“I’m tired of sitting around waiting for you to set a stupid fire,” Rawson said. “Now you’re going to tell me why the job hasn’t been done yet.”

I shrugged, about the only movement I was still capable of. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, man.”

One of the other bats swung past my eyes, missing my head by an inch or so. The guy who’d swung it either had bad aim or he lacked the killer instinct to make his hits count.

“He’s not so tough now, is he?” Rawson said.

“Not so tough at all,” another voice replied. I decided to refer to him as Buddy Number One. “You said this dude’s a mob guy?”

“So he says,” Rawson said. He came at me from the side, and I brought my arm up just in time to prevent my head from being split open. Instead, the aluminum bat whacked my elbow, sending a blinding jolt of pain up my arm. “But now I think he’s full of shit. So tell me, Coyle, what the fuck are you waiting for? Why haven’t you done the job yet?”

“I’ve just been laying the groundwork. Tomorrow night I pull the job.”

“Bullshit,” Rawson shot back. “You’re dragging your feet on this, and I want to know why. After what you pulled this morning, I think I’m entitled to some straight fucking answers.”

“What did he do?” Buddy Number Two asked.

“Fucker snuck up on me and ambushed me,” Rawson told them. “Talk about scumbags. And that wasn’t all he did.”

One of the other two landed another good hit to my gut and I felt the wind get knocked out of me. I wanted to point out that Brett was doing pretty much the same thing to me right now that he was complaining about me doing to him—although he was armed and had brought along two friends, which wasn't exactly fighting fair—but I couldn't quite find the breath to say anything. I mostly just wished I had kept the .38 on me instead of putting it back in the Mercury's trunk.

Buddy Number One took Rawson's bait. "What else did this shithead do?"

Rawson snorted. "He stomped my iPod while he had me down." He swung at me again and missed. He was too angry—and too busy talking—to aim very well. "You motherfucker, I had all my favorite songs on there!" He danced back, winding up for another shot. "He also threatened to set my car on fire. Can you fucking believe that shit?"

"That's hardcore, man," Buddy Number Two remarked.

I couldn't tell whether he meant it as a threat or a compliment. I was still mulling it over when another bat glanced off my shoulder and thudded against my head. I saw hazy flowers bloom before my eyes and fell to the floor.

"Okay, that's enough for now," Rawson said. "I need him to answer a few questions for us. You ready to talk, Coyle? Or do we need to soften you up a little more?"

I slurred some kind of answer. I would have been astounded if anyone actually understood what I was saying.

"Damn, man," Buddy Number One whispered. "I think you broke him."

"Not quite," Rawson replied. "He's all right. It'll take more than a few love taps to bring down the great Jack Coyle. He's just faking so he doesn't have to tell me anything."

God, I wished that were true. Then again, he didn't know about the beatings handed to me by Ginelli's men or the Raincoat. I tried to explain this and succeeded in making some drool bubble from my lips.

"He's mocking you, man," Buddy Number One said. "He's laughing at you."

Apparently, Number One was in a mood to beat someone to death. No boring conversation for him. And what was worse, Rawson must have believed him.

"I've taken just about all the shit I'm going to take from you, Coyle," Rawson said. "I gave you a chance to come clean and this is how you repay me. I hope you think of me when you try walking on two broken legs. Let's put him in pain, guys."

"Hey, wait a minute, Brett," Buddy Number Two said. "Didn't you say you that you need this guy to torch that bitch's apartment?"

I guessed he was the intellectual of the bunch. I ordinarily wouldn't have hesitated to speak up and agree with this profoundly valid point, but I was too busy lying on the floor trying my best not to slip into a coma.

Rawson stopped swinging his bat around, a good sign that he was taking his friend's question seriously. "Well, yeah, but that doesn't mean we can't rough him up a bit."

"He's not going to be able to do much if we beat the shit out of him," Buddy Two pointed out. "And you know how much is riding on this deal."

"I know," Rawson replied. Now he sounded like a sulking kid. "But for Christ's sake, he was going to blow up my car!"

"Let's do this, guys," Number One whispered. "Let's really do it."

Buddy Number Two tossed his bat to the floor. "Dude, this was a bad idea. I think we should just get out of here."

I almost smiled. Only Brett could find a way to screw up a three-on-one fight.

“No fucking way!” Rawson exclaimed. “I want some payback.”

“What about the woman?” Number Two asked.

A most excellent question, I thought with what little awareness I still possessed.

Rawson’s reply was like an anvil being dropped into my stomach.

“We can take care of the bitch ourselves.”

Before I even knew what was coming, a steel-toed work boot first bludgeoned my kidney and then my head. The hallway started spinning around me and I felt myself fading away.



## Chapter Sixteen

I woke up in my hotel room on my bed. I looked at the clock and saw that it was two in the morning—about three hours later than I’d expected it to be. What a long, miserable, shit-ass day it had been. It was one thing to get ambushed by a professional like the Raincoat, but to be suckered by three morons like Rawson and his friends was embarrassing. If McClellan and O’Dwyer ever found out about it, they’d never let me live it down. The worst part was that I felt lucky to be alive and in one piece. It could have been worse—a *lot* worse.

An annoying jangling noise erupted near my ear and I realized that it was my phone. That must have been what woke me up in the first place. I was about to just roll over and ignore it when I remembered that the ringtone I was hearing belonged to McClellan.

I reached toward the phone and then closed my eyes as the world swam out of focus. I groped around blindly and my hand eventually happened upon the phone. I brought it to my ear and picked up the call.

“Yeah,” I spoke into the receiver.

“Coyle,” McClellan’s voice came through loud and clear. Too loud, I realized, and held the phone a few inches away from my ear. “I’ve got some news for you about that license plate.”

“Okay.”

“The car is registered to a Richard Ferrell. Do you recognize that name?”

It hurt to talk, but I tried anyway. “No, but I didn’t expect to. Did you run a trace on him?”

“Yeah, and that’s the strange part,” McClellan said. “I worked my usual magic and came up with a great big goose egg.”

That didn’t make sense. “What?”

“I found nothing, man—nothing at all. Someone went through a lot of trouble to wipe out every trace of this guy’s background. Ferrell might not actually be his real name, come to think of it. It could just be an alias.”

I was having trouble keeping up with the conversation. There were too many twists and turns. “So he could be a cop, right?”

“I don’t know. Most badges still have a credit history, loan applications—all the usual shit that comes with a straight life. If he was just a local cop, I should have found *something* on him.”

“Could he be an Outfit man?”

“Maybe,” McClellan replied. “You know the mob does that with some of their operatives—the really scary ones, anyway. Is this guy scary?”

“Scary enough,” I said. “He got the drop on me earlier on, and that’s not easy to do.”

“I should say not. Or maybe you’re getting soft.”

“Ha-ha,” I replied. “So you really think he’s connected?”

“It seems like a good working hypothesis. I suppose the Outfit’s wet works guys couldn’t function very well if they can be traced through the ordinary channels.”

That was fair enough. “So I’m guessing there are other, less ordinary channels you can try next?”

“Yeah, I can pull a few strings,” he replied after a moment, “but you of all people should know that this isn’t exactly the best time for me to be calling in some favors—drawing attention to myself. After that mess in Little Belfast, we should both be lying as low as possible.”

“I know, but I’m in a real bind here.” I clenched my teeth and pushed out the words that he needed to hear, the words that I’d never had to speak. “I need a little help.”

McClellan chuckled. “I didn’t think I’d ever hear you say that.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“Okay, but it’s going to take some time.”

“Time is one thing I don’t have,” I snapped. “How long will it take?”

McClellan thought about it before replying. “Give me twenty-four hours.”

“You’ve got ten,” I said, wondering how I was going to stay alive for even that long.

“Good old Coyle,” McClellan said, chuckling again, “always willing to meet halfway.”

I suddenly remembered something else. “Oh, there’s just one more thing.”

“You’re pushing it, Jack.”

“See if you can dig up anything on a guy named Rawson—Brett Rawson.” I felt a fresh wave of nausea coming and I did my best to fight it off. My best wasn’t too good at that moment. I clenched my teeth some more and continued. “He’s connected to this Ferrell guy and I need to know how.”

“I live to serve,” McClellan replied, and broke the connection.

I tossed the phone away and shook my head a few times trying to clear it—and immediately regretted it. After the world stopped its roller coaster ride a few minutes later, I slowly sat up. I looked around the room, seeing everything in order and found myself trying to figure out why that seemed strange to me.

I suddenly remembered Rawson and his friends ambushing me in the hallway. I gingerly touched my head where one of the bats had bashed me and was surprised to feel a bandage taped firmly in place there. I looked down to see that my shirt and suit jacket had been removed and were folded neatly on the chair across from me. My overcoat, dirty and dusty from a hard day’s work the last time I’d seen it, was hanging from the coat rack without a speck of grime on it.

On my bare chest there was another, larger gauze pad taped over the spot where I’d been kicked. I leaned over to grab my shirt and almost passed out again from a new wave of pain that flooded through my head and down my spine. Taking the hint, I stayed still for the moment.

My brain finally caught up with things. The last I remembered, Rawson was kicking my head in. So how did I end up back in my room? And not only was I not dead, but my injuries had been treated.

Who had helped me? The Raincoat—no, *Ferrell*; he had a real name now, and I had to remember it. Ferrell intervened earlier that afternoon when I was about to confront Rawson, but the pudgy-looking guy had just chased Brett away and then roughed me up. Even if he’d called off the attack in the hallway, I doubted that he would have taken the time to tape me up. More likely, he would have been content to let me rot on the hallway floor, just like he’d left me in the alley outside the hotel.

And then I got the news that Ferrell had no history in any of the databases that most competent hackers could access. Someone like that, whether he was a badge or a made man, wouldn't bother with bandages unless he had more at stake.

So what happened? Nothing in this whole fucked-up situation made any sense and I was tired of dealing with it. I had Rawson acting tough and making trouble, too stupid to make up his mind whether to get me to do the job or just beat me up. I had Ginelli and his men breathing down my back for reasons I didn't understand. I had Ferrell also putting the pressure on, and I still didn't know who or what he was. And then there was Leah, who kept me at arm's length and then didn't.

What a screwed-up cast of characters. And I was no better.

I took my time getting to my feet, supposing I should be thankful that Rawson hadn't followed through on his promise to break my legs. Finding some sense of balance after a minute, I shuffled over to the door. I threw the chain and the bolt and then dragged a chair over and propped it under the doorknob. One thing was for sure—I had to get out of this hotel. Everyone and his brother seemed to know I was here. First I was going to get some fucking sleep.

There was still a lot that I needed to figure out, but it was going to have to wait until morning.

## Chapter Seventeen

I got some sleep. Six whole hours of it before the daylight streaming through the windows roused me. I would have preferred to sleep longer, but I had things to do. I dragged myself out of the bed and inspected the door. The chair was still there. The next thing I did was check my phone. There were no messages.

I took a shower, relaxing under the blasting hot water a little longer than I usually did. I let the water run down my back and massage my aching joints. It helped a little. I was concerned about ruining the bandages, but whoever had put them on had done it right. They were wet, but still serviceable. I wasn't sure if I still needed them, but I figured I might as well keep them on.

I shut the water off and toweled myself dry. I opened the bathroom door to ease my sense of claustrophobia and to get the steam out. Once the mirror cleared, I shaved off the three-day growth that had begun to itch two days before.

I went to the closet and assessed my wardrobe situation. The week before, I had packed three suits because McTeague had said we'd be in Pennsylvania for a few days. Now it was eight days later and I was still using the same three suits. I put on the cleanest one, the

dark gray single-breasted number, and the matching shirt and tie. I looked at the result in the mirror. I concluded that I looked all right enough, but I'd have to get to a laundry pretty soon—if I managed to live that long, of course.

As I stared at myself in the mirror, thinking about how respectable I might have looked to the untrained eye, it suddenly hit me. Just like that, I knew what Ferrell was, what he *had* to be. It was the only possibility that made any real sense. And if I was right, he was even more dangerous than I'd thought. But he could be more useful, too. If I could just draw him out, lull him into a false sense of security, maybe I could actually find a way out of this whole mess.

The plan that had begun to hatch at the Fletcher house was continuing to build in my head. What I had realized while standing on the roof hadn't been a fluke—by taking my scheme apart and figuring it out one step at a time, I'd been able to plan it all out much better than I ever would have thought. I still couldn't account for all the thousands of things beyond my control, but I felt better about my chances of getting out of this thing alive. Now that I'd had a few hours to recover from Rawson's little visit, I could really start to put things into gear.

I left the room, taking the time to check the hallway very carefully. Once I was as sure as I could be that it was safe, I made my way downstairs. The lobby was empty, which spared me from having to cough up another night's rent to the rat-faced landlord. I walked out of the hotel—once again scanning the area to make sure I wasn't being watched—and headed down the street.

I used a bit of the money I would have had to fork over for my room to access a terminal at the nearby Internet café. No sign-in sheets, no metal detectors—this place was more to my liking and well worth the cost.

I still didn't want to use the advance money, though there was no practical reason not to. Pride goes before a fall, I supposed.

I opened up a browser window and started a search for one of those warehouse-sized outlet stores that sold hardware supplies. I found three within a few miles, which was a better selection than I had expected. I picked the closest one, a store in Somerville, and looked up the directions from the café. The cost to print from these computers was ridiculous, so I took a flyer from the front counter and jotted down the directions.

I could have logged out at that point, but since I'd had no choice except to buy the minimum fifteen-minute block of time, I figured I might as well use up the rest of my minutes. I'd been out of touch with everything going on back in Pennsylvania, so I accessed the online sites for several Philadelphia newspapers to see what had been happening.

It was nothing less than a firestorm. Quaint Little Belfast, a blip on most maps and a place most people never heard of, was now making the headlines. Of course, when the county sheriff and several of the town's most prominent citizens were killed in a gang war, it would certainly grab some attention.

A full-scale investigation was now underway by the Pennsylvania State Police and the local U.S. Attorney. The notion that this sleepy little town had been a haven for numerous underworld figures shocked the entire state. I skipped the editorials—many calling, of course, for better oversight from the governor's office and railing for protection from these bloodthirsty gangsters—and focused on the meat of the articles.

There were a few mentions of McTeague, but not as many as I would have expected. But dead men tell no tales, and McTeague was more of a mystery dead than he would have been alive.



So it didn't surprise me that nothing substantial about McTeague was mentioned, but it was only a matter of time before they found out. They hadn't pointed the spotlight at him just yet, which was a good thing. They were still too busy sorting out the chaos we'd left behind. Once they did get around to McTeague, however, they'd come after his associates with guns blazing.

They'd come after me.

I found no mention of my name or anything on McClellan or O'Dwyer. The state authorities would know who we were by now, if they were smart enough to talk to the Feds, but they weren't telling the public just yet. I was sure they'd already put out feelers, quietly poking the bushes to see where we'd gone to ground. That would explain why I was still allowed to roam free, but it was only a matter of time before the heat came down. For the moment, the papers didn't know who we were or what role we'd played in the whole thing.

Yet the Raincoat seemed to know all about us and what we'd been up to in Little Belfast. That only further cemented my suspicion of the Raincoat's profession.

I had read enough, and closed the browser windows. I left the café and headed back to the car, ready to resolve this situation for once and for all. I got behind the wheel and started the engine. As I let it warm up for a minute, I did my usual scan in the rearview and side mirrors. No white Impala and no red Mitsubishi in sight. That was a pleasant surprise.

Following the directions I'd jotted down, I headed to the outlet store. Traffic was light for a change and I got there in less time than I'd expected. I parked in the far corner and walked across the empty lot to the doors. I went inside and grabbed one of those big flatbed dollies instead of the usual shopping cart.

I would be buying in bulk.

I looked around and saw my fellow shoppers were mostly adult men in jeans and flannel shirts. Contractors, I supposed. For a brief second, I wondered what they thought of me in my suit and overcoat, shopping right along with them. But it didn't matter, and I banished the foolish thought as quickly as it had come.

I went straight to the paint supplies aisle and soon found what I was looking for. I loaded up the dolly until every square inch on it was covered. I then went to the garden supplies area and grabbed an extra little item there. My shopping done, I wheeled my purchases toward the nearest cash register.

I wondered if this was just a fool's errand—if I was stupid for thinking a thug like me could possibly outsmart all the other players in this little drama. Well, there was no turning back now. I was all in, as they say at the gaming tables. If something went wrong—and that was almost sure to happen—then at least I'd take a few of them with me.

The clerk, an acne-scarred boy who looked fresh out of high school, raised his eyebrows at my selection of items.

"Are you stripping an entire house?" he asked, his voice cracking slightly.

I manufactured a grin. "It's something like that."

He didn't seem to like my expression very much, so he ducked his head, took out his scanning gun, and began targeting the UPC codes on each item. While he was busy, I thought about how I was going to pay for everything. I could use one of my stolen credit cards, but the odds were good that the cops would start snooping around a few days from now and this innocuous purchase would look quite suspicious. I didn't want to take that chance, so I sucked it up and opened the envelope that Rawson had given to me three days back.

He wasn't going to be asking for it back, if all went according to plan. If my plan worked, that was. And that was a big "if."

I was loading my goods into the trunk—one other good thing about the Marauder that I have to acknowledge: it had a lot of trunk space—when my cell phone rang.

I took it out and studied the caller ID for a moment. I didn't recognize the number, but I picked it up just in case.

Leah's voice came through. "Hello? Hello?"

"What is it?"

"You have to come over, now," she said, her voice sounding hoarse and strained—like she'd been crying or something. "Please."

"Where are you?"

"At my apartment," she replied, choking back a sob. "Can you come by?"

"Why?"

"Someone just tried to kill me."

I thought of Rawson and what he'd said last night—that he could take care of her on his own without my help. She was dangerous in her own right, and while I might be better off in the long run without her, right now I needed her alive and in control of herself. I also felt a twinge that scared me more than anything she'd said. That twinge meant that I was too concerned about her, too involved to stay objective about the situation. If she had become a liability, I should have been ready to walk away without ever looking back.

I sighed. "I'll be right there."

## Chapter Eighteen

I didn't exactly hurry over there—I didn't want her to think she was *that* important—but I didn't take my time either. I also didn't want to get pulled over for speeding, not with the cargo I now had stashed away in my trunk. It was all legal materials, of course, but it would certainly look suspicious. I didn't need that kind of attention.

So I cruised back to East Boston and parked down the block from her building. I grabbed the .38 and stuffed it in my jacket. I would have preferred to keep it stashed away, but too much had happened in too short a time for me to be unarmed anymore. I scanned the area as usual, still seeing nothing suspicious, before setting off to her apartment.

I quietly crept up the stairs to her floor, now familiar with each creaking stair and avoiding them accordingly. I studied the hallway, empty as usual, before heading down toward her door.

I knocked softly three times and waited. After a minute or so, the door cracked open. Leah's eyes, now wide and brimming, peeked out at me.

"You came," she said.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I replied. “Now let me in before the whole world notices me camping out in your hallway.”

She opened the door just wide enough for me to slip in. She closed it behind me, latching the bolt and drawing the chain. Then she shuffled back to the couch and wrapped her arms around herself. From what I could see, she was still dressed in her work clothes and had simply draped her frumpy, threadbare robe over her outfit.

I eased myself into the living room and sat down across from her. I looked at her for a minute, taking in the bitten nails and the running mascara. This woman before me was a far cry from the self-assured person I’d first met two days ago, the one who’d stared me down and told me to either shoot her or get the fuck out of her apartment.

I’d admired her for saying that, though I would never tell her as much. That woman had guts. I didn’t care much for the version of her I was looking at now. With time, she’d sort herself out and recover her composure. But, like I told McClellan, time was the one thing we didn’t have.

“What happened?” I asked.

She jumped a little, as if just thinking about whatever had taken place was enough to threaten her life once again. She took a few deep breaths and then started talking.

“I was on my way to work, taking the bus as usual. The stop I get off at is a few blocks from my office, so I usually pop into a little convenience store. I grab a paper and some coffee most mornings. My hands are full coming in the door.”

I twirled my finger. *Get on with it.*

“So, I was walking toward my office,” she continued, “fumbling with all my stuff, when this car came out of nowhere—”

“What kind of car was it?” I asked. Rawson’s red Mitsubishi came to mind, but even an idiot like him would know better than to use his own vehicle. Still, I figured we might get lucky.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I didn’t get a good look at it.”

“Do you remember *anything* about it?”

She frowned. “You don’t have to look at me like that. It whipped around a corner and came right at me. I was too busy trying to get out of the way to get a detailed description.”

“Fine, but you must have seen something. Do you remember what color it was?”

“I’m not sure. It was dark, maybe black or a dark blue.”

It wasn’t red, so anything short of a plate number was useless, anyway. Maybe someone else saw something. “So what happened after you got out of the way?”

She blinked at me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, did the car stop or did it keep going?”

“It kept going—I mean, uh, it was gone before I even got up.”

At least the would-be killer was smart enough to get the hell out of there once he’d missed her. “Was there anyone else around who might have gotten a better look at the car?”

She shook her head. “Maybe—”

*“Maybe?”*

She stared at me for a minute, slack-jawed. “Look, I don’t know, okay? It all happened so fast, and then my whole body was shaking—somebody came over to me, but I don’t remember what he said—”

“You don’t remember? Are you fucking kidding me?”

She threw her hands up. Her eyes, brimming already, were now streaming with tears. “I didn’t want you to come over here so you could give me the third degree, okay? Can you please just act like a human being for once and hold me?”

“All right,” I said.

I got up from the chair and sidled over to the couch. I got a little tangled in my overcoat as I sat down beside her. Though her head hung down while she wiped at her face, I could see that she was watching me out of the corner of her eye. She was waiting to see what I would do. I was a little curious myself.

I’ve never been good with people. The other guys in McTeague’s organization used to joke that I could read a fire forward and backward, but I didn’t have the first clue about what made people tick. The other guys were right.

Now here was this beautiful woman crying right in front of me, asking for comfort, and all I could do was wonder if she was just playing me. After another minute or two crept by, I reached out and put my arms around her. She stiffened at first, but then relaxed in my grip. Slowly, she turned on the couch until she faced me, and put her head in the crook of my shoulder.

I ventured to put my hand on her head and stroked her hair. Maybe it was this little gesture that did it, but she suddenly let loose the floodgates and began sobbing into my coat. I just sat there, letting her get it out. I figured it would be better that way.

Her sobs trickled off and after a few minutes she raised her eyes to meet mine. Her big eyes, suddenly the size of dinner plates, looked into me—cleaving me in half. This wasn’t some hard-bitten player; she was just a young, single mother who looked to be scared out of her mind.

“It’s going to be all right,” I whispered to her, wondering even as I said these words where the hell they’d come from. I was never the type of guy to spill worthless platitudes on anyone, so I was curious why I was starting to do just that.

She nodded, and then leaned forward. Her lips met and then mashed against mine. I wasn’t ready and drew back. She flinched as well, her eyes ever wider. I shook my head, wanting nothing except to calm her down, to regain the contact she’d initiated.

I leaned forward on my own, suddenly desperate to feel those lips again.

And then my cell phone rang.

Ordinarily, I would have ignored it. But the ringtone announced that it was McClellan calling. I broke away from her, fumbled through my coat pocket, and finally managed to snag the device on the third ring. Leah withdrew and wrapped her robe even more tightly around herself.

“This is Coyle,” I said as I picked up the call.

“Jack,” McClellan replied. “You sound a little out of breath.”

“I had to run for the phone. What’s up?”

“Well, I came through for you, as usual. It took a lot of digging and more than a little cash, but I got the goods on your mysterious Richard Ferrell.”

I felt blood pounding in my temples. “All right, who is he?”

“You owe me, Jack. You wouldn’t even begin to believe the shit I went through to get this information.”

“Sure, I’ll give you my firstborn fucking child. What did you find out about Ferrell?” My whole plan—not to mention several lives, especially mine—depended on McClellan’s answer.

“He’s a fed.”



Although I had come to that very conclusion earlier that morning, to hear it out loud was still a shock. My hands went numb and I almost dropped the phone.

“Jack? Are you still there?”

I stood, stretching my taut muscles. “Yeah, I’m here. What agency is he working out of?”

“You hit the jackpot,” McClellan replied. “He’s a special agent of the Federal fucking Bureau of Investigation, Boston office.”

“Right,” I said. This was, in a way, even better than I could have hoped. But it was that much more dangerous, too, if I made just one false move. “What’s his record look like?”

“Well, the file on him is kind of buried—it took me a while to find it. He’s good, but not nearly as good as he thinks he is—the usual tragic flaw.”

“Well, thanks, man. I know you went out on a limb—”

“That’s not all,” McClellan interrupted.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean there’s more. You asked me to check out someone named Rawson?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I asked you that.”

“Well, you were right about him and Ferrell being connected. Boy, were you ever right.”

The phone started to shake a little in my hand. “What is it?”

“Well, among other things Agent Ferrell has going on up there in Boston, he runs a handful of local confidential informants. Most of them are small potatoes, but I’ve heard he has one special CI that’s got him connected right into the heart of the Castiglione organization.”

I groaned and covered my face in my hand. “Let me guess—”

“That’s right,” McClellan cut in. “Brett Rawson is the rising-star informant for the FBI’s Boston field office.”

PART TWO:

RAW DEAL

## Chapter One

From about the age of twelve, Brett Rawson had been known to just about everyone within his small universe as Raw Deal. Nobody could exactly remember where the nickname had come from or who had come up with it, but it had stuck.

Brett had grown up in the sprawling suburban town of Weymouth, about twenty miles or so south of Boston. It was a decent town, and he lived in a decent house with his decent parents. He'd been given a good childhood and lacked for nothing.

Except good luck, that was.

The pattern that would soon come to dominate his existence began when he led his Little League team to a regional championship. Brett had been their star pitcher and a good hitter, and nobody disputed the fact that the team had only gotten as far as it had because of his efforts. Everyone on the team would also have admitted that a big part of their incentive to win had come from a promise their coach had made to them at the beginning of the season to take them to Riverside amusement park out in western Massachusetts if they brought home a trophy.

Well, they had brought home the trophy and the coach had agreed to hold up his end of the bargain. But when the time came around that summer for the team to go to the park, Brett came down with poison ivy after stumbling through some bushes while performing a dare with his friends. He was forced to stay behind, mired in his bed, while the rest of the team was packed aboard a bus and whisked away to the park.

When he decided not to sign up for Little League the following spring, people were surprised. Brett never came out and said it, but he knew in his heart that any love he'd had for the game had died when he missed that trip. Part of him thought he was being petty, but he thought about all the endless days spent in the dirt and heat, nursing the scrapes and sprains—all of that sweat and effort spent to win that trip to Riverside. And when he couldn't go, it killed some part of him that he hadn't even known existed, something he couldn't give a name to yet knew was hugely important.

The pattern continued, only getting worse as time went on. There was always the appearance of good fortune, some moment where he would be singled out for some positive reason, only to have it taken away. What made it even worse was that his downfall in each situation was often caused by his own shortsightedness rather than by some mass conspiracy against him. More often than not, he would realize that he had nobody to blame except himself for his own misfortune.

By the time he reached high school, his reputation had spread all around town. He had a number of predictable nicknames—the Jinx, the Curse, Lucky Thirteen. It was the phrase that coincided with his last name, however, that had really stuck: Raw Deal.

That didn't stop him from trying to overcome his apparent handicap. Brett did well in school and had consistently placed high on the honor roll every term since the sixth grade (men like Coyle and Ferrell would have been astounded to know this, as both generally

considered him to be an idiot). He was the strongest in the “soft” classes like English and History and weaker in the “hard” classes such as mathematics and physical science. He knew this was why he wasn’t ranked higher in his class, but he was too proud to get extra help in the classes where he struggled. He had simply soldiered on, figuring that his untutored best would be good enough.

Although his parents had tried to give him everything as a child, the one thing they couldn’t provide was a college education. Never rich to begin with, they had spent wildly over the years on cars, clothing, and furniture and had ruined their credit. They had leveled with their only son when he started the tenth grade—and had started making his list of dream schools to attend—that they were not going to be of much help financing his tuition.

If he wanted to go to college, he was on his own.

So he began doing what thousands of other high school students were doing, researching scholarships and grants. Brett quickly found out that, while he was a good student, he was apparently not quite exceptional enough to qualify for the really big money. A lot of universities took a good look at someone in the top five percent of his or her graduating class, but most were indifferent to someone in the top fifteen percent.

Brett spent most of his sophomore year agonizing over his chances. He was also angry at himself for giving up baseball several years back; many of his former (and, to be honest, much less talented) teammates were in the running for incredibly generous athletic scholarships at good colleges all over the country. Once again, Raw Deal found himself screwed over, and by his own doing.

But then something happened that seemed to put an end to Brett’s bad luck for once and for all. The University of Massachusetts at Amherst offered something called the Chancellor’s Award—a full four-year ride to their school, including housing and tuition.

Three hundred Massachusetts high schools each chose one student to go and visit the school. These three hundred teenagers would take a comprehensive test. The top one hundred scorers would receive the award.

Brett had only heard about it because Joey Giannakos, the top student at their school, had been offered the chance to visit UMass Amherst and compete for the award—and turned his nose up at it. (Joey Giannakos had ended up getting a full ride to MIT, just like everyone knew he would, and had then disappeared into some pharmaceutical company; the last Brett had heard, good old Joey was on his third trophy wife and was nursing a stupendously expensive cocaine habit.) With Joey having rejected the offer, the head of the English department had then presented the UMass Amherst opportunity to Brett.

It had been one of the best days of his young life. To be given such a chance, of all the students in his school, Brett was certain that a lifetime of bad luck and poor choices was over, that he'd paid his dues and would now reap the reward that he deserved. After all, he had a one in three chance of getting a full ride to a great school. For an honors student like him, how hard could the test be?

His parents were elated, bragging to their friends and co-workers about their son's accomplishments—though he hadn't actually accomplished anything yet, he pointed out to them several times, and was subsequently ignored—during the week leading up to the college visit. They made the two-hour drive to Amherst on a bright Saturday morning in their newly-leased Cadillac Seville.

Brett's sense of anticipation had built up to monumental levels by then. Part of him was afraid it was all too good to be true, that it couldn't possibly be *that* easy. But the other side of him, the stubborn side, felt like the universe was unfolding exactly as it should. He'd

earned this, for Christ's sake, and he wasn't going to let anyone take it away from him—certainly not any namby-pamby little nerds from the other schools.

They arrived at the college. Brett didn't remember very much about that day, recalling a great big blur. They'd taken a tour of the grounds, eaten in the cafeteria, and listened to a long and impassioned speech from the dean.

They'd taken the test.

Brett had been feeling pretty good about everything that day, until midway through the exam. The first section, on reading comprehension and vocabulary, had been pathetically easy. The second section on critical thinking had been a little tougher, but nothing to sweat about. The third section had been advanced mathematics—specifically, Trigonometry.

Brett had put his worn pencil down and sneaked a look around at the other students. They were all busy plowing through the test, making enterprising little calculations in the margins. None of them appeared to be freaking out about the competencies they were assumed to have. None of them stared at the various equations and diagrams as if it were the first time they were seeing such things.

Brett did his best, fudging through the questions, guessing more often than not. He finished the exam early and didn't even have the energy to go back and check his answers. His feelings of invincibility—of *inevitability*—were gone. If by some miracle two hundred other kids freaked out and completely bombed the test, then he might have a shot at getting the award. Otherwise, he was out of luck.

The drive home was much more subdued than the ride up had been. Brett didn't have the heart to tell his parents what he was thinking, but they picked up on his mood anyway. They still believed in him—if only to justify the enormous amounts of boasting



they had done over the past week—and they tried their best to cheer him up. It didn't help much.

It took two months for the results to arrive.

## Chapter Two

When Brett received the letter from Amherst, he hadn't even wanted to open it. He knew what it was going to say. His mother opened it for him, and her bright smile became a grimace all too quickly. She had cried, for a long time. Brett had tried his best not to lose it and cry right along with her. The fact that she cared so much for him should have made him feel better, but it didn't. Brett could only kick himself for not trying harder in math back when it might have made some kind of difference.

Raw Deal strikes again.

Brett had felt lost for most of his senior year in high school. He'd gone through the motions of filling out the applications for scholarships, but he assumed he would get nothing. He didn't even bother with financial aid; his parents were wealthy enough on paper that no aid officer in his right mind would grant him a penny. Aid officers didn't know or care about credit debt and second mortgages. And being a white male, any affirmative action initiatives were just in his way.

He settled on the Army next. He'd talked to a recruiter and gotten a ton of information about the GI Bill and college opportunities once he served his four years. He

took the ASVAB entrance exams and had stunned everyone except himself by scoring extraordinarily high. Unlike the Chancellor's exam, there had been little math on the military test—just some practical, everyday stuff. Brett was told by a dazed officer that he had qualified for any job he wanted short of nuclear research.

He wanted a job in Intelligence, though he knew next to nothing about the field. What little knowledge he did have had come from reading Tom Clancy novels when he was younger. But the recruiter seemed optimistic and felt he could find a place for Brett somewhere in that field. All was set.

And then the latest Gulf War broke out.

All promises were rescinded. Suddenly, not only could Brett not be guaranteed a specific job, he was no longer even promised a specific *field*. He had just as much chance of spending four years pushing a broom or guarding a hanger as he was of actually doing something meaningful. He could also simply be shipped out to a war zone with a gun and a helmet.

Still only seventeen, he needed his parents' permission to enlist. Upon finding out about the change of terms, his father had yelled at the recruiter for twenty minutes on the phone before hanging up. His son wasn't going to be a front line grunt. His son was meant for better things.

His son was going nowhere quickly.

Brett finished high school with few hurrahs. Most of his classmates, having long since secured spots at various colleges, treated him with a bleak sympathy one might use for a sick pet that wasn't expected to live. Brett smiled back at them, knowing they were now above him and hating them almost as much as he envied them. Knowing that they would

likely piss away their chances at a good education because they took it for granted and simply wanted to get away from their parents and party much more than they wanted to study.

Brett would have studied; would have studied his ass off. So he worked instead. He had gotten a job at a local hardware store back in his freshman year and continued to work there after high school. The manager liked him and offered Brett a full-time position. Brett was hesitant to take it, because going full-time pretty much meant giving up on continuing his education. He had driven over to Quincy College the week after graduation and collected an information packet. His friends would have laughed at the idea of going to such a low-rated school, but Brett was now a beggar who couldn't afford to be a chooser.

The classes were a few hundred dollars each, which was incredibly cheap as far as college went but was still expensive to Brett. Earning a pathetic ten dollars an hour, he could barely afford car insurance—and sometimes even gas—for his old Cougar. Still, he figured out that if he worked as much as possible and maybe borrowed a bit from his father, he could afford to take one class a semester.

This plan lasted for a couple of years, with Brett spending the entire time broke and miserable. While he had wasted hours on end trying to calculate his finances, he never did what he later thought to be the most important calculation—that at the rate he was going, he might have a degree by the time he was thirty-five.

So when a friend told him about a job opening on the waterfront that paid four times what he was making at the hardware store, Brett took it. The next few years were good ones, with Brett working harder than he'd ever worked before and raking in the cash. No longer thinking about college, he bought a new Mitsubishi street racer and better clothes for himself. He found himself an apartment and opened several credit card accounts. He did all this without even once realizing that he was completely following in his parents'

footsteps. If this had occurred to him, things might have been much different. Things might have been much better.

He followed his dockworker friends to their usual haunts and soon became a regular himself. The bars, the clubs, and the racetracks all became his playground. He was a big guy, a good-looking guy with cash in his pocket, and the girls flocked from everywhere to be near him. They wanted things, from drinks to diamonds, but what the hell? He was making good money.

Six months came and went. Brett stopped to breathe and realized that he was now thousands of dollars in debt—tens of thousands, he saw once he did the math. He examined his credit card statements with mounting panic and saw that his cards were maxed out. He'd been burning through his money so quickly that his checking account was overdrawn and his wallet was empty with rent due all too soon. His car payments were two months behind.

It was like waking up from a dream. Completely sober for the first time in weeks, Brett wondered what the hell had possessed him. After riding the party train for half a year, he was in danger of losing everything.

So he did the only thing he thought he could do—he borrowed from a loan shark. The interest rate was murder, but at least he could stave off losing the apartment and his car. He figured that if he cut down on the after-hours lifestyle, he could catch up on his bills and be okay again.

It didn't quite work out that way. The girls kept calling or dropping by. Every week there was another cause to celebrate, either a birthday or an anniversary among the dockworkers or some other such thing. Brett worked hard during the day, and that small voice continued to tell him that those who worked hard deserved to party hard. And when

he received a hefty bonus at work, one of his friends talked him into going to the track to double, even triple it. He ended up losing the entire thing.

Soon just the interest payments to the loan shark were getting out of hand. He borrowed more, giving the guy a gold chain that had been a confirmation gift ten years back. The loan built up instead of decreasing. Creditors began calling on a daily basis until Brett solved that particular dilemma by letting his phone plan lapse. He put gas in his car with credit cards, squeezing every last dollar out of them before calling the companies to get his limit increased. And throughout this whole process, the drinks and the girls and the parties never let up.

The loan shark began waiting for Brett in the hallways of his apartment building. The threats began—promises of busted kneecaps and broken teeth. Brett became scared.

One of his co-workers, a surly guy named Tim Brennan, dealt on the side and was sympathetic to Brett's situation. More to the point, Brennan was in need of some muscle for a big interstate deal and agreed to hire Brett as an enforcer on a contingency basis. Desperate for cash, Brett jumped at the offer, a thousand dollars for an easy hour's work.

It didn't go down as planned.

Brennan's "clients" turned out to be an interagency sting operation comprising the DEA, ATF, and FBI. Brennan, a major distributor who had been targeted for months by the feds, went down for hard time. Brett should have been busted as well, but the FBI agent-in-charge—an older, dumpy-looking guy named Ferrell—had taken an interest in him and held off arresting him.

Brett was allowed to drive home, free of any legal encumbrances. A few days later, Ferrell came to visit. The agent seemed to know all about Brett's debt problems and his obligations to the local loan shark. Ferrell told Brett to confront the loan shark and request

a meeting with the shark's boss's boss, a certain *Angelo Castiglione*. Terrified and confused, Brett knew he had little choice except to agree.

## Chapter Three

So that was how, on a crisp autumn day—about six months before Jack Coyle came into his life—Brett Rawson found himself in the waiting room of Castiglione’s luxurious downtown office. He was not wearing a wire, a fact for which he was profoundly grateful. When he was still in Ferrell’s car a few blocks away, he’d asked if he would have to wear one, inspiring a look of disgust from the agent.

“Do you have a death wish?” Ferrell had asked. “Don’t you think Castiglione’s men have scanners that could pick up a wire the second you enter the building?”

“I guess,” Rawson replied. “Look, I’m just trying to help.”

The agent shook his head. “Then shut the fuck up when it comes to stuff you have no clue about. Let me do the thinking and maybe you’ll live a bit longer. Now get in there and for Christ’s sake remember what I told you to say.”

That was Ferrell’s idea of a pep talk before sending Brett into Castiglione’s den. Brett had exited the car and walked down the avenue to the office building. He studied the wall directory in the lobby and found the entry for Castle Investments, a financial company



housed on the twentieth floor. He took the elevator up, feeling his stomach twist in upon itself as the car rose closer and closer to his destination.

The elevator opened up into a hallway. The hallway led one way to a glass door marked *Castle Investments*. He opened the door and walked inside. The empty waiting room was painted dark green and lined with mahogany trim. Leather chairs sat in a loose circle around a coffee table where a scattering of magazines lay. The only other door stood shut at the far side of the room.

Not knowing what else to do, Brett took a seat where he could see the other door and picked up a copy of *Sports Illustrated* that was at least six months old. He paged through, scanning breathless previews about championship series long since decided and wholesome interviews with athletes now suspended for drug violations.

A big man in a dark blue suit strode through the other door and came up to him. Brett looked up and made eye contact with the man for a brief instant before he was sent flying across the room.

He picked himself up off the floor, blinking several times. The man in the suit came over to Brett and grabbed him by the collar.

“Listen, I—” Brett started to say, but then got the wind knocked out of him by a quick jab to his gut. While he gasped for breath, the man threw him face down against one of the chairs and frisked him from head to toe. When he was done, he grabbed Brett’s shoulder and spun him back around.

“Come with me,” the man said.

“Whatever you say,” Brett coughed out.

They went through the other door deeper into the office. Brett was eventually led to another, larger room lined with books and taken up by a massive oak desk with several neat

stacks of documents on them. The big man in the blue suit stood just inside the door, his eyes never leaving Brett for a second.

A tall, powerfully-built man with Mediterranean features sat behind the desk. He wore a light gray suit that probably cost more than Brett took home in a month. The man stared at Brett for several minutes before speaking.

“I believe, Mr. Rawson,” the man said, “you have gotten in a bit over your head.”

“I’m sorry?” Brett asked.

“You should be. You have incurred quite a large debt with one of my operatives, a low-level lender by the name of Hanson. And because of that situation, you have requested a meeting with someone a little higher up the food chain. Am I correct?”

“Uh, yeah—yes, sir, that is.”

The man behind the desk smiled. “My name is Angelo Castiglione. Before you flatter yourself regarding my attention, I want to make it clear that I do not ordinarily involve myself in this kind of business.”

Brett shrugged. “Okay.”

“But I happened to glance at your file—”

“You have a file on me?”

Castiglione looked at him with no expression for a long, painful moment. “Do not ever interrupt me again. Is that clear?”

Brett swallowed hard. “Yes. Yes, sir,” he said, bobbing his head like a circus seal.

“I glanced at your file and could not help being intrigued. You are not the usual gutter trash that imposes on my organization. You are a well-educated young man from a good family, and I wish to acknowledge that. To be honest, I think you should have known better than to get involved with us in the first place.”

“I, uh, didn’t know what else to do, sir. I didn’t want to lose my car or my apartment.”

“Do you read Rousseau, Mr. Rawson?”

“What?”

“The philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” Castiglione said. “Are you familiar with his works?”

“Not really, no.”

“Among other things, he once said that shame is a much stronger motivator than guilt. Do you understand what that means?”

“I think so—”

“You should, since it is exactly what led you down this path. You would rather risk the law and your own neck bartering with a loan shark rather than give up your wild lifestyle and lose the amenities to which you have become accustomed. In short, you have skirted the edge of financial ruin with your poor decisions. But we are going to change all that.”

“All right,” Brett replied. “That’s good.”

“I have taken the liberty of examining your activities for the last few months. It appears that you are, in a manner of speaking, your own worst enemy.”

“Huh?”

Castiglione rolled his eyes and sighed. “What I mean to say is, you are in desperate need of someone to take a firm hand with you and rein in your spending habits—since you are obviously incapable of doing so on your own.”

Brett felt hurt by this assessment, but kept his mouth shut.

“I take your silence as a confirmation of that,” the crime boss continued. “So, this is where we stand. You owe us a great deal of money, and unless you receive a more stabilizing influence on your actions, you are unlikely to pay us back.”

“I’m good for it, I swear.”

“I do not doubt that, Mr. Rawson. Now, it has also come to my attention that my associate, Mr. Hanson, has significantly increased the interest on your outstanding loan. Is this correct?”

“He raised it a bit, sure.”

Castiglione crossed his legs. “Then I shall lower it a bit, as this was outside of his authority to have ever done in the first place. The interest terms will go back to the original agreement. In addition, I have sent my men around to every back room poker dealer and bought up your other outstanding gambling debts. Those amounts will be lumped in with what you owe us, but will not be included in the interest calculation.”

“So why—”

“You are a curiosity to me, Mr. Rawson,” Castiglione said. “I half-imagine that I am buying your soul along with all your debts, and I am interested to see how you treat this situation. Besides, there is a good chance that these penny-ante card games you persist on playing are run by someone in my organization anyway, so you could say that I am just being proactive in collecting what is due to me.”

“Okay, so—”

“This is where we stand, Mr. Rawson. We own you until we say otherwise. But before you begin to pay us back, we will allow you to catch up with your other bills—your rent, your car, and so on. Do you know why we’re letting you do this?”

“Uh, well—”

“It is because you are no good to us homeless and without a vehicle. You would not be able to work at your job, thereby cutting off your livelihood. We are doing this so that you will be able to then pay us back what you owe. We are a business, Mr. Rawson, and we are not unreasonable.”

“I appreciate that—”

“But we are not a charity, either. In exchange for our generosity, you will comply with a few new terms that I am adding to the agreement. First and foremost, you will stop going out at night. You will resist the siren song of those whores you cavort with and you will turn down all future offers from your co-workers to gather and imbibe at the local taverns. You will fight and defeat the temptation to spend any of your spare cash at the racetrack or at a casino. Do I make myself fucking clear?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“There is no ‘but,’ Mr. Rawson. Either you accept these terms or Mr. Reynolds over there will cave in your skull. Do you understand me?”

Brett sneaked a look at the man in the blue suit, who looked quite excited by the prospect of some skull-caving. Brett turned back to Castiglione and nodded. “Yes, sir, I understand.”

“The next new term of the agreement is that you will occasionally help out our organization. This labor on your part will cancel out the interest I am losing by allowing you to recover your more legal assets. There will be no notice, just a phone call on some evening. Six months may pass before you get such a call, if you get one at all, but you will comply with the orders of the person calling you immediately. If you do not do so, you will be receiving a visit from Mr. Reynolds shortly thereafter.”

Brett felt his throat go dry and nodded again. “Okay.”

“Finally, the third and last term of the agreement is that you do something productive with your free time. I do not care if you sign up for extra hours at the waterfront or take on some part-time work, but you will work.”

“I don’t understand—”

“We have done the math, young man, and your current salary is simply not large enough to keep up with your bills and repay your debt to us within an acceptable timeframe. So you will find more work and avail yourself of it. The only conditions we have are that the work is both lucrative and legal.”

Brett suddenly felt lost. “What?”

Castiglione clenched his jaw for a moment. “A vocation such as running a paper route would indeed be staying within the boundaries of the law, but it would hardly increase the bottom line to our satisfaction. Dealing drugs, on the other hand, might provide a windfall profit—but you are not much good to us if you are in jail. Then again, your recent brush with the law should have taught you that already, no?”

Brett nodded.

“People will be watching you, Mr. Rawson. It will not be twenty-four hours a day, or seven days a week, but they will be keeping you under regular supervision until if and when your debt is repaid. You will probably never see them, but do not ever doubt that they are there.”

“Okay.”

“This is not only to make sure that you have indeed given up your errant lifestyle, but to also guarantee that you do not forfeit the terms of our agreement by the simple expediency of skipping town. Have I made myself sufficiently clear?”

“Yes,” Brett replied, “crystal clear.”

“Excellent,” Castiglione said, putting the tips of his fingers together into a tent and leaning back in his chair. “Now get the fuck out of my office.”

## Chapter Four

Brett Rawson, with the generous assistance of Mr. Reynolds, exited Castle Investments with record speed. Within three minutes of Castiglione's final words to him, he was back out on the street.

He walked as quickly as he could away from the building, trying to look in every direction at once. Nobody was looking at him. Everybody was looking at him. He briefly wondered if Castiglione's talk had made him paranoid. He realized after a minute that it didn't matter. Even if he was paranoid, he had good reason.

Brett soon came into view of Ferrell's Impala. The agent glared at him from behind the wheel, apparently looking for some sign of how the meeting went. Brett, even in his sudden panic, figured that jumping into a Fed's car immediately after meeting with a mob boss would not be the best idea in the world. He shook his head and kept walking. Ferrell seemed to take the hint, because the agent didn't come after him.

Brett continued walking, forcing himself to slow his frantic pace. A young female jogger brushed against him as she went past, her light brown hair bouncing in a slim ponytail. Brett admired her trim figure, her toned limbs. On the tail of that came the



sudden suspicion that she was working for *them*, that maybe she had planted a bug on him as she'd run by.

Stop it, he thought. This isn't helping.

He kept walking, having no idea where exactly he was going. He just wanted to get away from Castle Investments and away from Ferrell.

He wondered if Ferrell would call him. Brett had heard somewhere that cell phones were basically just radios. Could Castiglione's men be hovering over a scanner at that very moment, ready to listen in on any calls he was stupid enough to make?

Don't overestimate them, he told himself. Just because they're professional criminals doesn't mean that they're all-powerful. And don't overestimate your own importance, either. You didn't just become the center of Castiglione's universe. You're a debt he wants to collect, and he's smart enough to keep you alive and healthy so you can work off that debt. He probably has much more important fish to fry.

Brett shook his head and kept walking. The female jogger was just a blur in the distance. He wondered if he walked a little faster that maybe he could eventually catch up with her. She'd be winded after such a vigorous run and she'd be resting somewhere up ahead. She would have the answers he was looking for—a girl sensible enough to keep in good shape would surely be able to tell him how to untangle himself from the barbed wire fence of bar tabs and mob debts. She could deliver him from this laughable existence that he called his life. She could save him.

He scanned the street again. She was already lost to sight.

He walked for a while longer. His phone didn't ring and Ferrell's Impala didn't cruise up beside him, so he figured he was safe for the moment. He solved his dilemma

about getting home when a local bus came by. He ran up the block to the next stop and caught the bus just in time. Breathing heavily, he stumbled to the far back and collapsed into a seat.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the window. The pitted street tested the tired shock absorbers of the bus and made Brett feel nauseous after only a few seconds. He opened his eyes and the motion sickness just as quickly disappeared. He sighed and decided to entertain himself by looking around at his fellow passengers.

Up near the front of the bus, a baby cried while his mother chatted away on her cell phone, studiously ignoring him. A burly guy in a Members Only jacket was reading a newspaper and stealing looks in Brett's direction every now and then.

Was that his tail?

No, he decided. Castiglione wouldn't have been kidding when he said that Brett would never see the people watching him. This guy reading the paper wasn't really doing anything, but all the same he was just too loud. Brett glanced to his side and noticed a slim, effeminate-looking man with a receding hairline staring back at Members Only. As Brett watched, the two men smiled shyly at each other. After a minute, the slim guy stood and walked up to sit next to the bigger man.

Brett smiled. That'll teach him to be paranoid.

He hopped off the bus a few blocks from his apartment and strutted down the avenue. He wasn't entirely surprised to see a white Impala parked at the corner on the next block down. He continued at his casual pace and after a few minutes he spotted movement in the Impala. Ferrell got out and sauntered over to him.

"Well?" Ferrell asked.

“Well what?” Brett replied.

“Don’t give me that shit. What happened in the office?”

“Should we really be talking about this in public?”

“You were about to invite me upstairs into your apartment. We’ll discuss it there, genius.”

“Oh, right. Well, come on up.”

They clomped up the stairs to his place. He unlocked the door and then locked it again once they were both inside. Without asking, Ferrell dropped into Brett’s recliner.

“Do you think it’s safe to talk in here?” Brett asked.

“I swear, half my job is fucking hand-holding,” Ferrell said. He took out a strange-looking device, turned it on, and put it on the coffee table. “Yes, it’s safe or we wouldn’t be doing it. Besides, there’s no safer place in the world than next to me, so grow a pair and tell me what the fuck went on in that meeting.”

“What’s that thing you have there?”

“It scrambles any listening devices that might be around.”

Brett froze. “Do you really think they have bugs in here?”

“You’re beginning to test my patience, asshole. Now spill it.”

“Well, before I get into that,” Brett said, “there’s something else you should know.”

“What is it?”

“Castiglione said that, from now on, he was going to have his people following me.”

Ferrell threw his hands up. “Oh, is that it? Jesus Christ, you had me worried for a second there!”

Brett sat down on his ratty sofa. “You mean you’re not scared of me being tailed?”

“Kid, I don’t give a shit if they’ve got satellites following your every move. They’re not going to put us together. I’m a ghost around here—nobody’s got anything on me. But now I see why you walked by me on the street earlier. I’ve got to admit, that pissed me off a bit.”

“I was just playing it safe.”

“I get it,” Ferrell replied. “It was the smart thing to do. But no matter what he told you, he’s not going to have guys on you all the time. And even if he did, it still won’t get in the way of things. So how did the rest of the meeting go?”

“Okay, I guess. They’re going to give me time to catch up on my bills before I have to pay them back. He said I’m no good to them if I lose my car and my apartment.”

“Really,” Ferrell said. “And what are they asking for in return?”

“Boy, you don’t miss a trick, do you?”

“I’ve been at this game for a long time. So what do they want?”

Brett shrugged. “I’m not exactly sure. He just said that I might be asked to do some stuff for them here and there.”

“Stuff,” Ferrell repeated. “What kind of stuff?”

“He didn’t say. Just that I might get a phone call and I’m to snap to when they say so.”

Ferrell rubbed his hands together. “Oh, this is good. This is better than I expected.”

“Well, I’m glad *you’re* happy about it,” Brett said. “Personally, I’m not looking forward to doing their dirty work. Isn’t there anything you can do about this?”

“Are you crazy? Even if I could, the last thing I would do is interfere in such a lovely arrangement. Don’t you get it? They’re going to let you get some kind of look at their

operations. Then you can tell me about it and I'll be that much closer to busting them wide open."

"And most likely get me killed in the process."

"Don't be such a little girl," Ferrell told him. "Now, tell me about the office. What kind of security did it have? Were there any documents on his desk?"

"I'm not your rat, you know," Brett said. "And just so you know, this isn't my goddamn life's ambition."

Ferrell leaned forward. "You *are* my rat—that's exactly what you are. Or would you like to join your buddy Brennan in jail?"

"You wouldn't do that."

"Oh, no?" the agent asked. "You just try me. The statute of limitations on drug-related felonies has a long way to go before it runs out. I can bust you any fucking time I want and there's nothing you can do about it."

"No way, you let me go right in front of that whole task force."

"No problem. I'll just say that you decided to cooperate *at first*, but then you turned obstinate and refused to work with me. The guys I work with will gladly testify against you to make sure you do hard time, and they won't give a shit that it didn't happen right away. The Feds do stuff like that all the time with bozos like you. It just involves a small carrot and a very long stick."

Brett just stared at him for a minute. "So how long until I'm free and clear from this shit? When do I get my fucking life back, huh?"

Ferrell grinned. "Never, asshole—you belong to me until I say otherwise."

## Chapter Five

The next few weeks were a blur. Brett worked long days, grabbing any sliver of overtime whenever the chance came up. He went home at night and actually stayed home. He caught up on sleep for the first time in months and felt better than he could ever remember. But he agonized over all the fun he was missing in the meantime.

The usual crowd of girls—taking it for granted that Brett would be around to buy drinks and other such things for them—reacted in disbelief to the idea that he could no longer go out with them. He almost bit his tongue the first few times he received a phone call or when one of the women dropped by. It was difficult, but he just pictured Castiglione behind his desk offering to let Mr. Reynolds cave his skull in. Turning down such lovely nights out with the girls became easier and then unnecessary; the ladies could always find someone else to be their toy. And they did.

Brett was surprised to find that it was actually harder to turn down the offers from his co-workers to accompany them on their nightly shenanigans. While the girls just saw him as a bottomless source of money to be gratified occasionally, his fellow dockworkers

craved his presence as a true friend. Since Brett could not tell them about his arrangement with Castiglione, he was at first at a loss to explain his new sedate lifestyle.

The guys suspected a girl at first. Not one of the usual bimbos who hung on them at the bars, but a real I-can-think-for-myself woman (a species that most of Brett's friends suspected only existed in television and movies). Brett's red-faced denials only heightened their certainty. His friends became so convinced that he had something going on the side that they began hanging out at his apartment every night, waiting for a knock on the door or for the phone to ring.

Brett didn't mind this turn of events that much. It was amusing to watch his friends behave in such a way, gave Brett the company he'd been missing since renouncing the night life, and took his mind off his troubles. Eventually, his co-workers figured out that either there was no such woman in Brett's life or that he had hidden her for the time being. Regardless, they were bored stiff of their half-assed vigil. Soon, they were forsaking Brett to once again heed the eternal lure of Lansdowne Street.

Staying in at night and working a few extra hours here and there, however, was not getting Brett the financial stability he so desperately needed. He had caught up on his bills, yes, but the effort had left him practically penniless and he still had yet to begin repaying his debt to Castiglione in earnest. The gangster had been right—Brett would need to find extra work on the side.

He began scanning the want ads in the local papers and asking around at the docks. He tried a number of leads, performing a number of duties. He ran electrical cables for a phone technician; he tested fire alarms for the Quincy Fire Department; he helped dig a ditch outside a government facility in preparation for laying new pipe. All of these jobs were

back-breaking, all of them paid fairly well, but they were short-term jobs—sometimes lasting as little as a single day—and he was running out of leads.

Finally, about two months after Brett's meeting with Angelo Castiglione, a veteran dockworker named John Carney approached him during their lunch break.

There was a job in Charlestown, Carney explained. Some guy named Fletcher wanted a crew of four to bust down a few walls in an old house. Carney had already roped in two other men and just needed one more. He'd heard Brett was looking for extra cash.

Brett was ready to jump at the offer, but asked a few questions first. He wanted to know if Carney had a written contract with Fletcher. Carney apparently hadn't thought that far ahead and admitted that he did not have anything in writing.

On one of the first side-jobs Brett had done, the terms of the work had been verbal and once the work was done the man who'd hired him tried to weasel out of the deal and pay Brett only a fraction of what he'd originally promised. Since then, Brett had been demanding a written deal every time he took on a new job—no matter how briefly it would last or how little he was being paid.

Carney soon showed himself to be at a loss when it came to negotiating business terms. Brett took over and dealt with Fletcher directly. How much work is involved? How many hours of labor? How much per man?

By the time the terms were drawn up in a hasty contract Fletcher had typed up on his home computer, the Christmas season had arrived and any hope of work was postponed until after the New Year. Brett cursed the delay, but since Fletcher was leaving town for the holidays there was little that could be done. Brett went so far as to ask if they could just do the work while Fletcher was gone. And just as Brett expected, Fletcher refused to allow



anyone on his property while he was away. To make matters worse, all of Brett's other leads dried up as well. Nobody felt much inclined to hand out work at that time of year.

All this time, Brett hadn't heard a thing from Castiglione's organization. The unexpected silence from that particular front was almost more unnerving than if Mr. Reynolds had been camped out by Brett's door every night. After all, popular culture had depicted loan shark tactics in a much less subtle way—oversized goons being sent over to break legs was the least he had expected. The fact that he'd been left alone seemed that much more ominous.

Brett rang in the New Year in a decidedly anxious mood.

Finally, a few weeks after the holidays, Fletcher returned and was ready to begin work on his house. Brett and the others showed up early and were raring to go—at least Brett was enthusiastic about the job, anyway. He soon saw that the other three men leaned on their sledgehammers much more often than they were swinging them and took frequent breaks for the beer and doughnuts they'd brought in several grimy coolers. Fletcher walked them through what he wanted done and then drove off in his truck, promising to return later in the day.

Work progressed through the morning and into the afternoon. They took an hour for lunch at noon—the others did, anyway, while Brett wolfed down a sandwich and then got right back to the job. The work was going to get done even if he had to do the rest by himself. He wanted the generous paycheck that Fletcher had promised. He wanted to make a big payment on his debt so that Castiglione—that smug, grinning bastard—wouldn't send the dogs out after him. That was more than enough incentive to make him want to get right back to work.

By then, Carney and his friends were more than a little tipsy from all the alcohol they'd consumed and didn't seem eager to join him. Brett had sworn off booze at the same time he'd given up the women and the bars, so he looked upon his co-workers with a newfound and scathing contempt.

Had he really been like them just a short time ago?

He thought about it as he moved over to the hall outside the dining room. He had come a long way in a short time, and it was probably long overdue. He was taking charge of his life, by God, and nothing was going to get in his way anymore. Not those jerk-offs in the next room swilling down their beer, and not these obstinate walls that somehow resisted his best efforts to knock them down.

This was the last of the weakened walls to come down to make room for Fletcher's redesign. Brett began pounding at the chipped brick, imagining that he was hitting Castiglione and a thousand other persecutors as he hammered away at the wall. It seemed to help, because the exterior soon gave way.

His sledgehammer had opened up a recess in the wall, which surprised Brett. These walls were more or less supposed to be solid. He had been pounding away at the level of his shoulder and he peeked inside the opening to see that it dropped down almost to the floor. He took a few more swings, widening the hole. A strange smell wafted from within, a smell that reminded Brett of the library. It was an odor not unlike that of musty old books.

He grabbed a flashlight and looked into the recess.

## Chapter Six

For a minute, the world went completely still and silent for Brett Rawson. The drunken laughter from the other room, the tinny radio in the next hallway playing the latest top forty hits, the light traffic outside—it all went away as he stared at the sight before him.

Inside the hollowed-out wall, there was a large olive drab duffel bag. Inside the sack—spilling out of it, in fact—was what looked like money. A lot of money, Brett saw. He heard a rattling noise near his right ear and realized it was the flashlight. He couldn't hold it steady all of a sudden.

He took a deep breath and brought the light in closer. It was money all right, but it was funny-looking—like it was fake or something. He reached into the recess, blundering through spider webs and dust balls, and eased the bag up and out of the wall.

He picked up one of the bills. In large letters the words "The State of North Carolina" were printed across the top. Below it, he read "Raleigh, 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. 1863." And printed several times on the bill, represented by both words and numbers was the amount "twenty dollars."

He handled the bill gingerly, half-expecting it to disintegrate in his hands. He was surprised to find that the banknote was made of tougher stuff than he'd thought—it felt no less sturdy than one of its modern-day counterparts. And these weren't half-rotted relics, either. The money looked as if it had just been printed yesterday.

He didn't know much about antique money, but he figured one of these bills—especially with the pristine condition it was in—must be worth quite a bit. He pulled the zipper down on the duffel bag, exposing its contents. He whistled. At first glance, there were hundreds more banknotes inside just like the one he held in his hand.

That's when the shakes got him. He lost control of his hand and the bill floated down to the floor. Brett tried to talk, to draw attention to his astounding discovery, but couldn't make his mouth work.

This was it, some part of his brain that was still rational thought. This was the payoff for a lifetime of disappointment and frustration, a lifetime of bad choices and bitter outcomes. A lifetime spent busting his ass with nothing to show for it—a lifetime of raw deals.

And the timing of it! Talk about luck. This was the windfall he needed not only to pave his way into the high life, but to get Castiglione off his back for good. This was the luckiest day of his life.

Laughter floated in from the other room, making Brett freeze up. He felt a wave of anxiety—quite similar to the one he'd felt just after leaving Castiglione's office a few months back—sweep over him. He suddenly suspected that the whole world was watching him.

What about the other guys? They'd want to share the prize. And there was also Fletcher. It was his house after all—would that make him the *de facto* owner of the money? The sudden joy of finding the banknotes was eclipsed by panic.

Brett chewed on a fingernail. He didn't know what to do. He didn't even know what he was going to do with the money. He had to find out how much it was worth. There must be appraisers in town somewhere. He'd have to find one. And how does one sell old banknotes, anyway? There were auction houses, but they probably charged a big fee. Could he just sell them online, like on eBay or something?

He didn't know, he didn't know, and he didn't fucking know.

All these thoughts and a thousand others raced through his brain as he kneeled in front of the bag. This was his salvation here, printed more than a hundred years ago by men long since dead. This was his ticket. This was his way out. But how the hell was he going to make it happen?

Then it hit him. Ferrell, he thought. Ferrell would know what to do.

He stuffed the banknotes back inside the bag and zipped it shut. He made his way over to the back door—well away from his drunken co-workers—and out to his Mitsubishi. He put the bag in the trunk and took out his phone.

Ferrell picked up on the third ring. “What do you want?”

“I need your help,” Brett told him.

“You're beyond help, kid,” the agent said, and laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

“Seriously—this is important.”

“Oh, it's *important*, is it? Then, by all means, let me put my serious hat on. Okay, go right ahead—astonish me with your idea of what's important.”

Brett gave him a quick rundown of what had happened. By the time he finished, Ferrell wasn't laughing anymore.

“You've got the whole thing?” the agent asked.

“It’s stashed in my trunk as we speak.”

“Did anyone see you do this?”

“No,” Brett replied. “The other three guys are in the kitchen getting plastered.”

“They’re drinking?”

“That’s an understatement.”

“And where’s the owner of the house?”

“He took off for the day once he got us started. He won’t be back for a while.”

“Okay,” Ferrell said, and didn’t speak again for a moment. Brett could almost hear the cogs turning in the agent’s head. “That’s good—that could help later on. Now, you’re probably going to have a fight on your hands with the owner. So what you need to do is to get down to the local police station and turn the money in.”

Brett paused for a minute and then asked “Why the fuck would I do that?”

“Because you want the law on your side and it’ll pre-empt the homeowner from making a claim of his own. Obviously, he didn’t know it was there, but he’ll fight to get it anyway. If you’re the first to file and get your name on the books, that’ll help.”

“Okay,” Brett said. “Should I tell the guys about this?”

“Don’t say a goddamn word,” Ferrell shot back. “Not to anyone until a report is filed. You got it?”

“I got it. But—”

“No buts, kid. This is bad in some ways, but good in others.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, of course it’s good because if you get the money it’ll help you pay off your debt and you won’t get killed by the mob.”

“Well, that’s a comfort—”

“But if you do pay back Castiglione, then he won’t need you to do those mysterious jobs for him and we won’t learn more about his operation. That’s bad.”

“So what are you saying—that I shouldn’t get out from under him?”

“Shut up and let me think for a minute,” Ferrell said. There was silence once more for several long minutes. “Okay, we could use this to our advantage. This cash should square you with the Castle and then some. You grease the gears with those boys and maybe weasel your way into their operations another way—maybe you want to invest some of the leftover cash with them and make a quick profit, eh?”

“You’re spending my money before I even get it, you know.”

“Keep your trap shut. I’m trying to help you stay alive, junior. The mob will smell blood when they hear about your little discovery. You want to be ready in case they try to con the rest of it out of you.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that—”

“Well, I’m thinking about it enough for the both of us. Remember, you work for me and I work for a higher power. That power wants the dirt on the Castiglione operation and you’re my golden ticket inside. You don’t have any higher fucking priority in life than that—got it?”

“Yeah, sure,” Brett said. “But—”

“Stop asking stupid questions and get down to the cops. Right goddamn now or I’ll come over there and stuff that cash down your throat.”

“You’re all heart, Ferrell,” Brett remarked, and realized he was talking to himself.

Ferrell had already hung up.

## Chapter Seven

Brett's act of reporting the cache of Civil War-era money with the Charlestown Police set off a flurry of local media coverage. Caught in the middle of a slow post-holiday news cycle, the Boston-based newspapers and television stations smelled an uplifting human-interest story in Brett's discovery and gave him the full court press.

He found himself a minor celebrity in his neighborhood, and along with that newfound fame there were the inevitable questions about the money. Since he'd turned the cash into the police, he had been bombarded with inquiries. Everyone wanted to know what he was going to do with the money. Brett was at a loss with how to answer. He cringed at seeing his photo in the papers and couldn't bear to read the tongue-tied quotes that had been printed. He just hoped the interest in his situation would pass and he could go back to his business.

He hadn't heard anything from the police yet and he wasn't at all certain that he'd actually be given any of the antique money. Nobody had appraised the currency yet so he still didn't know how much it was worth. And although the news channels and the local



papers had reported this information, everyone still asked the same stupid, impossible questions.

And Brett had no answers.

It became even worse when his friends and relatives got in on the act. People who he hadn't heard from in years—and who Brett was sure had previously despised him—were suddenly calling or dropping by, giving advice on tax-free gifts and other such important topics. In addition, his three “co-workers” from the job at Fletcher’s house began hounding him at work. They did everything from begging for a share of the cash to harassing him for not including them in the find in the first place. Still not knowing if he’d even get any of the money he’d found, he put the men off with vague responses and other brilliant stalling tactics.

So he spent his days at work with people constantly buzzing in his ear and would return home only to have to field more of the same from friends and relatives. After a few days of this, he only left his apartment to go to work, disconnected the doorbell, and methodically checked the caller ID before answering the phone.

He still hadn't heard a word from Castiglione’s organization, and for some reason that scared the shit out of him.

Finally, about a week after he’d found the money, he received a phone call while hiding in his apartment. The ID screen tagged the caller as someone from the City of Boston’s offices, so he picked up the receiver.

“Hello,” he said.

“Is this Brett Rawson?”

“Yeah, who is this?”

“Barney O’Dell, attorney for the City Clerk’s office. I have some news for you regarding the currency you turned in last week.”

Brett suddenly had trouble keeping the phone steady in his hand. “Okay, uh, what’s up?”

“We inventoried the bag and confirmed that there were two thousand, three hundred and fifty-seven bills. We took the liberty of hiring a local appraiser to inspect the currency and she concluded that each bill would be worth around two hundred and twenty-five dollars at current collector market rates.”

“Okay,” Brett replied, trying to do the math in his head. He hated math.

“That comes to around five hundred and thirty thousand dollars,” O’Dell told him, “just in case you were wondering.”

A half a million dollars, Brett thought. A half a fucking million bucks, and it could end up being his property. Maybe.

“All right,” Brett said, trying to sound casual. “That sounds good.”

“I imagine you’re curious about custody rights for what you’ve found.”

Brett started to get annoyed. Of course he was curious about who’d get the money. This lawyer was just giving him a hard time for the hell of it.

“Yeah,” he said into the phone. “The thought has crossed my mind.”

O’Dell chuckled. “I’m not surprised. Well, we’ve sent word through the official channels, trying to determine if the goods you found are stolen. In our experience, someone doesn’t go through all the trouble to hide something like this unless it’s been obtained illegally. And if someone does come forward claiming ownership to the cash, we’ll duly investigate.”

“And if nobody makes a claim?”

“If nobody else comes forward, then the money will be given to you under the ‘treasure trove’ statute. If another claim is made—”

“Wait, what’s this treasure cove thing?”

The lawyer sighed. “It’s pronounced ‘treasure *trove*.’ It’s a law that covers these kinds of situations. It stipulates that, if currency is found in a hidden place and is old enough that the original owner is presumed deceased then the person who found it can claim it.”

“Oh, that’s good—right?”

“I would certainly file that under ‘good.’ As I was saying, if another claim is made in the meantime, then we’ll suspend the process until the investigation into the claim is resolved. Is this clear?”

“Wait a minute. The whole train stops if there’s a claim? How is that fair?”

“You have to understand something, Mr. Rawson. Our primary responsibility is not to you, it’s to whoever might be the actual owner of that currency. In the eyes of the law, you’re just an afterthought. Nothing personal, but that’s the way it is. You see where I’m coming from?”

“I guess,” Brett said. “So all I have to do is wait out the ninety days?”

“No, not exactly,” the man replied. “There is one other little wrinkle.”

Brett closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “And what’s that?”

“The owner of the house, one Ralph Fletcher, came to our office to say that you had no business being on his property on the day in question. He claims that you and your friends ransacked the house and stumbled upon the money.”

“What? That’s bullshit!” Brett stopped and then took a moment to rein in his temper. “Uh, I’m sorry about the language.”

“I’ve heard worse. You were saying?”

“We were there to do some renovations, just like I told the papers! Why would he say something like that?”

“I imagine it was to deny you the chance to collect the money. Do you have any proof that you were in the house with his permission?”

Brett bit his lip. So much had happened since that day—but then he remembered something. “Yes! I have a, uh, contract that Fletcher signed! It’s pretty amateurish, but it’s the real thing. Will that help?”

“It’s very likely,” O’Dell replied. “But I’m not the one who’ll decide that.”

“No? Then who will?”

“This will probably go before a judge. If you have a contract proving you were there for a legitimate reason, then Fletcher’s case will disintegrate. If what you say is true, then he was an idiot to say anything in the first place.”

“Great, then—”

“But you’ll still want to get yourself a lawyer.”

“Wait—what?”

“An attorney,” O’Dell said. “You know, like me. Hire one—sooner rather than later.”

“But you just said that Fletcher has no case!”

“That very well may be, not that you should quote me on that, but you’ll still need a lawyer. Fletcher’s idiotic claim that you had broken into his house is one thing, but he still owns the house and could be entitled to that money.”

“So I’m still going to be fighting for this in court.”

“That’s my prediction, and you’ll want someone who’s ready to represent your interests. You’re free to do what you want, of course, but just be ready when they summon you into court.”

“Hire a lawyer,” Brett repeated.

“That’s right,” O’Dell replied, “sooner rather than later.”

## Chapter Eight

After a week of searching, Brett found a lawyer he could afford. It was his uncle's lawyer, a sad-sack kind of guy who worked out of a shabby office in Everett. He did personal injury stuff and the occasional will or trust case that happened to come along. The guy's name was Milo and his drooping jowls oozed sweat in the hot little room as Brett explained his situation.

Brett didn't actually have to fill Milo in on the details; he could tell that Milo—just like everyone else—already knew the whole story. But Milo had wanted to hear the part about Fletcher and the contract. In fact, he made Brett go over it several times, like a cop in an interrogation room—rehashing the story over and over until it didn't mean anything anymore.

Milo had listened, frowning here and there when it seemed appropriate, and had taken some illegible notes on a legal pad. Brett knew the man was doing his best to look casual, but was actually hiding a great deal of excitement. According to the “treasure trove” law, the banknotes were practically Brett's property. The contract, the ace-in-the-hole, only

sealed the bargain. But a lot of things could go wrong in court, and Brett knew better than to assume anything about this situation.

Milo's hands were shaking as he finished his scribbling, probably calculating his fee for this case in his head. Brett asked about any other claims that Fletcher could make to the money as the legal owner of the property. Milo brushed that off for the moment, wanting to focus on the contract first. Seeing the look of concern on Brett's face, Milo promised to research any precedents from past cases of this kind. Brett rolled his eyes and tried to remain patient. He needed a lawyer for the upcoming court appearance, even if it was a fat-assed Mickey Mouse lawyer like this guy.

Milo shuffled some papers around on his desk and he muttered promises to get back to Brett as soon as possible. Brett shook the lawyer's sweaty hand and couldn't get out of the office quickly enough.

There was a surprise waiting for Brett when he got back to his apartment. The door was hanging open just a crack and there was melting snow on the laminate hardwood floor just inside the doorway.

Brett took out the buck knife he used at work and flicked the blade open. It was a feeble weapon, he knew, but it was all he had. He held the knife down by his leg as he crept forward through the hallway.

Who had broken in?

He guessed it was some idiot who'd heard about the money and thought that Brett had it stashed somewhere in his apartment. But then he realized that the front door hadn't been broken down—the lock had been forced or picked. The intruder, therefore, couldn't have been some shaky junkie or petty thief—

Just as he rounded the corner to his living room, his thoughts were cut off as a thick hand appeared from out of nowhere, grabbed him by the neck, and threw him to the floor. His knife clattered away. Brett looked up to see three men towering over him. One was Italian-looking while the other two were Latino. They all had one thing in common, though—they all looked mean as hell.

The one in the middle, the Italian with the slicked back hair and a chiseled face, smiled.

“Good evening, Mr. Rawson,” he said. “Welcome home.”

“Who the fuck are you guys?” Brett asked, trying not to sound scared. “What are you doing breaking into my place like this?”

The smiling man nodded to his companions. Two pairs of hands reached down and pulled Brett back to his feet and then just as quickly pushed him into the nearest chair—the same cheap leather recliner where Ferrell had relaxed not that long ago.

“Take a load off, Mr. Rawson,” the smiling man said. “I’m sure it’s been a long day for you.”

“What do you want?” Brett asked, more quietly now. This time, he couldn’t quite keep the trembling out of his voice.

“My name is Ginelli,” the smiling man replied. He took a seat across from Brett on the old futon. When he finished situating himself among the dust balls and food crumbs, he was no longer smiling. “I represent the business interests of Angelo Castiglione. These are my associates, Mr. Feliciano and Mr. Ruiz. They’re here to make sure you listen attentively to what I have to say.”

“Okay,” Brett said. He was almost afraid to look at Ginelli, who was busy brushing the dust of potato chips off the arm of the futon with his gloved hand.



“Mr. Castiglione feels that he has been very patient with you,” Ginelli said. “I do not believe any reasonable person would dispute his opinion on this matter.”

Brett just looked at him, unsure if he was supposed to respond.

Ginelli leaned forward. “Agree with me so that I know you are not without ears.”

Brett blinked. “Uh, sure—he’s been extremely patient. Please let him know how much I appreciate that.”

“I’ll pass it along. In the meantime, he has asked me to communicate to you the importance of repaying the not insignificant sum that you owe to him. It has come to our attention that you recently were the beneficiary of an unexpected windfall. We assume that you are planning on utilizing the necessary portion of this asset to pay back the aforementioned debt.”

Brett cocked his head. “What?”

Ginelli sighed. “I’ve been around Castiglione too long—I’m starting to sound just like him. Would one of you please translate my message into words that our friend here will understand?”

The older enforcer, the one named Feliciano, stepped forward and slapped Brett across the face. “He’s wondering if you’re going to pay back the vig with that old money you found.”

Brett shook his head in an effort to recover from the sting of Feliciano’s slap. “Well, yeah—of course I plan on doing that.”

“You have no idea what a comfort that is to us,” Ginelli said. “Now let us talk about this antiquarian currency you happened upon.”

“What, the Civil War money? I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

“That is for certain,” Ginelli replied. “So please inform us why you haven’t yet converted this discovery of yours into funds that would be useful to our organization.”

“Huh? Oh, there are some problems with that.”

Ginelli looked over at his men. “He says it so casually. To what sort of problems are you referring?”

“Well, I heard from the city that Fletcher—the guy who owns that house—is saying that we had no permission to be on his property in the first place. That he’s going to take it to court to prevent me from getting the cash.”

Ginelli stared at him. “Did you have permission to be there?”

“Absolutely,” Brett replied, digging through his pockets for the all-important sheet of paper he now carried on him at all times. “Here, this is a contract Fletcher signed.”

Ginelli took the contract from Brett’s hands and studied it. Feliciano and Ruiz looked over his shoulders while he did it. After a moment, Ginelli handed it back. “That was good foresight on your part, Mr. Rawson. I would say that this effectively takes away any such claim that Mr. Fletcher intends to make regarding the legitimacy of your presence on his property.”

“Then we should be all set, right?” Brett asked.

“Not necessarily,” Ginelli said. “There is still the matter of any legal claim to the currency. Since Fletcher is the lawful owner, it would stand to reason that he would still get a good portion of the money if no other claimants come forward.”

“Damn,” Brett muttered.

“But,” Ginelli said, holding up a finger, “we might be able to assist in that particular matter.”

Brett perked up. “What would you do?”

“In return for a slight fee, we can send a few fellows over to Mr. Fletcher’s residence and convince him that it would be in his best interests to forego any further claims on this currency.”

“Wait,” Brett said, “you’re going to intimidate him?”

Ginelli waved the comment off. “That’s an imprecise term for our methods, Mr. Rawson. We’ll do what we need to do, and that’s all that should concern you.”

“And what’s this slight fee you mentioned?”

Ginelli smiled. “We’ll work that out once you get the money in your hands. But it won’t be more than a few extra percentage points of what we’re already owed.”

Brett sighed. “I guess I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“No, Mr. Rawson—you have no choice at all.”

## Chapter Nine

Milo resolved the matter of the contract in a surprisingly quick and simple manner. He merely brought a photocopy of the document to Fletcher's lawyer and asked that Fletcher's complaint be withdrawn. Fletcher's lawyer, a much more prosperous man who probably had much better things to do than run down his client's wild goose chases, took one look at the contract and put his face in his hands.

He agreed to drop the complaint, but was still adamant about pushing Fletcher's rights as the property owner to claim the money. Milo, who didn't know a thing about Brett's mob connections, left the lawyer's office more worried than when he'd arrived.

Brett received a frantic phone call from Milo once the pudgy lawyer was back in his own crumbling office. Oddly reassured by Ginelli's visit, Brett had once again felt the swell of inevitability in his gut. In response to Milo's panicked questions, he told the lawyer that everything would work out.

Brett had been frustrated at first by Ginelli's naked grab for more money, but intimidating Fletcher was probably the best way to stop him from laying claim to the cash and trapping the whole process in court for weeks—maybe months—to come. And Brett

didn't have months, or even weeks. Castiglione and his men had been patient, even polite, to him—but it was for a limited time only. Their courtesy, he knew, would only be extended as long as he was useful to them.

Several days went by, and Brett spent the time with a constant pit in his stomach. Would Fletcher back down? Would he do something stupid, like call the police, and get both him and Brett killed? Brett wouldn't know until someone was merciful enough to tell him what was going on.

Ferrell, of course, had been in constant contact. The agent wasn't very helpful or comforting but at least he understood what was happening. Instead of lamenting the fact that Brett had been made to forfeit a larger percentage of his future gains in return for Ginelli's help, Ferrell had applauded it.

"Every interaction you have with these scumbags is a gift," the agent told him over the phone. It had been three days since Ginelli's visit and Brett was going out of his mind with worry. "Every service they perform for you is like a blueprint into the way their minds work. Play your cards right and you'll be inside their operations by this time next year."

Brett had almost choked on the "next year" part, but knew better than to say anything about it. Instead, he replied, "Yeah, and if I play my cards wrong, they'll find a way to siphon off every last cent of that money before I even see it!"

Ferrell chuckled. "You worry too much, kid. They'll be smart enough to let you have your piece of it—otherwise, they've left you no incentive to cooperate. But you'll be out of debt and, more important, on the inside helping me."

"Do you ever think of anything besides building your case?" Brett asked.

"No," Ferrell replied, and hung up.

\* \* \*

Ginelli stopped by the next day. For once, he was without his two goons; Brett didn't know whether to be flattered or scared.

Ginelli came in and sat in Brett's recliner. He made himself comfortable and then looked up at his reluctant host. "Would it be too much to expect that you have any sort of whiskey in your possession?"

Brett shook his head. "No, but I've got some beer."

Ginelli sighed. "Then I suppose we'll just get down to business. My men recently had a conversation with Mr. Fletcher. As you might imagine, he wasn't very happy to see them."

"Did they hurt him?"

"Would it bother you if they did?"

"I don't know," Brett said. "I just don't want anyone getting hurt, if it can be helped." *Especially me*, he thought.

"A noble sentiment, but one that is perhaps misplaced," Ginelli replied. "No, we did not harm Mr. Fletcher—this time. The threat of harm was more than enough to induce his complete cooperation."

"So he's off our backs?"

"Yes, he should no longer be a problem. He agreed to claim a small percentage of the currency should it be given over to you."

"How much are you giving him?"

Ginelli smiled. "Are you worried that nothing will be left over for you once everyone's taken their share?"

*Damn right I am*, he thought. “Yeah, I’m a little concerned about it.”

“As well you should be. But we are not here to rob you, Mr. Rawson—just to do some business and recoup what is ours. You should not allow yourself to think of that money as already being yours. That is, I believe, the worst mistake you can make.”

“What are you talking about?”

Ginelli spread his hands. “Not much time has gone by. It has only been three weeks since you discovered the money. A legitimate claimant could still come forward and take all that cash right out from under your nose.”

Brett groaned. “Please, don’t even joke about that.”

“I am deadly serious, Mr. Rawson. Valuables that have been hidden away like that are rarely obtained in a legal fashion. It is very probable that the banknotes were stolen some time ago and then concealed in the wall of that house. Remember, Mr. Fletcher only purchased the property a few years ago. It’s very likely that the money was sealed in that recess long before he came along.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m merely warning you that there must be someone out there who knows about the origins of this money. Maybe you will be lucky and that person has fled the area, or better yet, has passed away. But maybe that person is still here and is waiting for the right moment to come forward.”

“Why would they wait at all? Why wouldn’t they just speak up as soon as they heard about this whole thing?”

“Because, Mr. Rawson, they could have been waiting to see what would happen initially. The newspapers have been plastered with lurid tales of pending legal action

between you and Mr. Fletcher. If a claimant is out there, he'll wait for the dust to settle and then come forward. Mark my words."

"You're not exactly comforting me here."

Ginelli stood. "That's not my job. My duties here are to keep you apprised of the situation as it unfolds. Mr. Fletcher plans to make a public statement first thing tomorrow withdrawing his claim to the banknotes. Once that is done, we'll see who crawls out of the woodwork."

"But if nobody comes forward, then the money is mine?"

Ginelli started walking toward the door. "You can count on it. After all the costs are taken out, of course."

Brett stopped short. "What costs?"

"Mr. Rawson, you did not forget that taxes will be taken out of your discovery, did you?"

"Fuck, I didn't even think of that."

"You had better keep it in mind. There is also the question of any fees involved with converting the banknotes to modern-day cash."

"Oh, yeah—how much do you think that will be?"

Once again, Ginelli spread his hands. "I do not know, Mr. Rawson. That will be your responsibility. But be prepared that the ones who perform such a service for you will take what they believe to be their fair share."

"Well, I wouldn't have to convert the *whole* amount, right? I mean, I figured I could just give a portion of it to you guys to do what you want with it—"

"No, Mr. Rawson, we do not work like that. You will repay us in current, circulated cash or you will pay the consequences."



“But you know how much these banknotes are worth—to the penny! I don’t see why you can’t just—”

“Our organization has been more than patient with you, and we will not be put through any further expense on your behalf.”

“I’m going to be left with nothing. I know it.”

“Come now, Mr. Rawson—that’s not the attitude we want to see. In order for us to get what is ours, you need to get what is yours. And you need to be ready to fight for it, come whatever may.”

Brett nodded. “I’ll try.”

Ginelli opened the door and strode into the hallway. He turned and looked at Brett.

“No, Mr. Rawson. You will do more than try. You will succeed—or we will kill you.”

## Chapter Ten

Fletcher read his statement in front of the City Clerk's office the next morning, with a few bored reporters for an audience. The reporters knew that with Fletcher's capitulation, any juice that still existed in the story was gone. They had been looking forward to a feisty court battle that would stretch on for weeks—keeping up interest and the circulation of their respective publications.

Brett watched the whole thing unfold on a local television station with a glee that bordered on mania. This was it, his last hurdle before finally getting what was rightfully his.

Since no other claimants had come forward, the money should soon belong to him. He would still have to wait for all the paperwork to be processed, but he figured he could do that standing on his head as long as no one else came forward to make a grab for the cash.

Brett continued through the next few days, feeling like he was on top of the world—that nothing could possibly bring him down. That feeling abruptly ended on Friday, February 13<sup>th</sup>.

Friday the thirteenth. Looking back on that day, Brett didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The day had gone well enough. Work was busy and Brett busted his ass as usual to get things done. He wanted to show the world what he was made of, that he wasn't just a slacker waiting around for a payday. Until the money was in his hands, he showed every outward appearance of not thinking about it at all.

Inwardly, it was all he ever thought of.

He'd gone right home after work, still obeying Castiglione's commandment. He performed his usual routine of checking his messages as soon as he got home (one of the first debts he had paid was his delinquent phone bill). Usually there were no calls, but he immediately saw the red light pulsing and rushed over to the machine.

He didn't know whether he was expecting good news or bad news, but just that any message these days was important. He checked the caller ID and saw that Milo had called. And Milo never called unless it was urgent.

He pressed the PLAY button on the answering machine.

"Hello, Brett. This is Milo, and it's about two in the afternoon. Something has come up and I need to speak with you as soon as possible. I'll be at my office until seven, so please call me as soon as you get this. Thanks."

Two in the afternoon, Brett thought, wanting to tear out his hair. Why didn't Milo just call him on his cell phone? Then Brett remembered that Milo refused to conduct any meaningful conversations over cellular lines. There was, according to the fat lawyer, too much chance of someone else listening in. Brett didn't know whether Milo was being careful or just paranoid. But after the last few months of dealing with Castiglione's organization, Brett didn't mind being a little careful.

He grabbed the phone and dialed Milo's number. The lawyer picked up on the second ring.

“Milo Devonshire’s office,” he said in a flat voice.

Brett suppressed a snort. Milo was the only person in his office, but the lawyer answered the phone like he had a staff or something. “Milo, this is Brett.”

“Brett! I’m glad you called!”

“What’s the big emergency?”

“Well, it’s like this. Some woman stormed into the city clerk’s office and filed a claim to that money you found.”

“She did *what?*”

“You heard me,” Milo said. He was a fat loser, but Brett knew he didn’t waste time when it came to business. “She said that *she’s* the rightful owner of those banknotes and demanded that a full investigation be made.”

Brett felt his mouth go dry. “What kind of investigation?”

“Everything except the kitchen sink, my friend. She wants to know how the money came to be sealed inside that wall, how it remained there for all the time Fletcher owned the place, and every detail about how you came to find it. I don’t know whether she’s pure evil or just crazy, but it’s like she *wants* to tie the clerk’s hands for the next six months or something.”

Why did this have to happen, just when he thought he was finally in the clear? “Can she do that?”

“In theory, yes,” Milo replied. “If she’s a legitimate claimant, then she has a right to an inquiry.”

“Did she offer any evidence that proves she’s the rightful owner?”

“No, but she doesn’t have to—not yet, anyway. Right now, she’s too busy trying to impugn you and Fletcher for attempting to pull a fast one at her expense.”

“Me? I didn’t do anything!”

“I know that and you know that, but the law is a different story. The law has to be satisfied.”

“Yeah, well, the law’s a bitch.”

“Tell me about it.”

There was silence for a moment and then Brett blurted out what had been on his mind for the last few minutes. “I want to meet her.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The woman who’s come forward—I want to talk to her, figure out where she’s coming from. Can you arrange that?”

“I suppose. She doesn’t have a lawyer that I’m aware of, but the city clerk gave me her contact information.”

“What’s her name?”

“Leah McBride,” Milo replied, “and she has the misfortune to live somewhere over in East Boston.”

Brett stifled a snort—that was rich coming from a guy who lived in *Everett*. “Just give me her number and her address, okay?”

Milo read off the woman’s contact information, which Brett scribbled down on a notepad beside his phone. Once Milo was done, he asked, “What exactly do you hope to accomplish by getting in touch with her?”

Brett smiled. “I’m known to have some pull with the ladies. Maybe I can talk her down, get her to be reasonable about this whole thing.”

Milo cleared his throat. “Don’t get your hopes up too much, sport. The clerk mentioned that this lady’s a bit of a wildcat.”

“Come on, how bad could she be?”

“Have you been listening to a word I’ve said? This woman is *angry*. She’s suddenly making it her central purpose in life to obstruct your desires to get your hands on that cash. Does that sound like someone you can wine and dine and win over?”

“I think I’d have a sporting chance.”

Milo sighed. “I won’t hold my breath. Just do us all a favor and try not to piss her off, okay? That’ll just make things worse.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

## Chapter Eleven

Brett called the McBride woman and managed to get her to agree to a meeting.

She hadn't sounded angry over the phone, just sullen and a bit distrustful. Brett took that as a good sign of encouragement. She just needed to meet him, he thought. Once she realized that he wasn't a bad guy, she'd be willing to negotiate and make this problem go away quickly and quietly.

Brett had suggested a downtown bar in Kenmore Square—one of his favorite haunts before Castiglione had taken away Brett's night life privileges. The McBride woman had seemed indifferent to where they would meet, so Brett was quick to jump in with an option. He figured that once she saw the friendly way in which the various bartenders and waitresses treated him, she couldn't help liking him.

He arrived early and grabbed a good table. He had come right after work—assuming that Castiglione wouldn't begrudge him a night out if it meant resolving this new problem with the money—and snagged the best spot, a highboy right by the window with a view of the street.

He was in luck that most of his favorite employees were working that evening and he prepped them all—using all of his innate charm as well as the promise of generous tips—to treat him and his imminent guest like VIPs.

Leah McBride made her entrance soon afterward.

Clad in a tight pencil skirt and an equally form-fitting blouse under a loose overcoat, she was a knockout. Her long blond hair floated around her head like a golden glow and her full lips were just begging to be kissed.

Brett had been with his fair share of women, but this lady blew them all away. Her hair, her lips, her eyes—they all made her smolder without even her having to make an effort, robbing him of his carefully-prepared speech and leaving him stammering for something to say.

She was small, he noticed as she was directed to his table by the hostess, not much taller than five feet. But as soon as she was up close and took her coat off, he could see that her curves were just as sensational as he had first thought—a Playboy Playmate in miniature.

She sat down on her stool in a huff, looking around the bar with an expression that Brett feared might be scorn. She looked right at him, studying his features for a moment before speaking.

“You’re him, then?” she asked. “Brent Rawson.”

“Brett,” he replied. “It’s Brett.”

“Whatever. So what did you want to talk to me about?”

This meeting wasn’t getting off to a very good start, and Brett was honest enough to admit that. He gave her his best smile—a smile that had lured many women into his bed—and leaned forward.



“That can wait a while, can’t it?” he asked. “Come on—let me buy you a drink. I’ve heard the margaritas here are awesome—”

“Look, I don’t want to be rude or anything, but I didn’t come here to gulp down the local swill with you. Why don’t you just tell me what you want?”

“First I wanted to make sure you were taken care of, is all. Did you want to maybe look at the menu?”

“I’m not hungry, *Brett*. What I am, more than anything, is morbidly curious about why you felt the need to get in touch with me. And if you don’t tell me why in the next five seconds, then I’m leaving.”

“Hold on there, really,” Brett said as he spread his hands in what he hoped was a calming motion. “I’m not trying to give you a hard time here.”

“Then tell me what the fuck I’m doing here with you.”

He had heard vulgar language from women before, of course, but coming from this gorgeous creature it seemed wrong somehow. And the fact that it was directed right at him made it even worse. “Well, you know, I figured we could talk about this money stuff a little.”

She folded her arms. “What about it?”

“I, uh, was just curious about your claim.”

“Shouldn’t your lawyer be having this conversation, not you?”

Brett shook his head. “No, I didn’t mean it like that—”

“Then how did you mean it?”

“I was just wondering how you can be so sure that the money belongs to you.”

“What, is it that a poor girl from East Boston couldn’t possibly have a legit claim to that fortune you found? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“I was just wondering why you think it’s yours.”

“Well, I don’t really have to tell you. I have a right to my day in court and I don’t have to justify myself to you in the meantime. Is that why you asked me down here, to try to talk me into dropping my claim?”

“No! Look, I’m not trying to start a fight here—”

“Well, you’re doing a pretty goddamn good job of it.”

Brett spotted the waitress making her way over with two flamboyant-looking drinks, laden with fruit slices and miniature umbrellas. Brett quickly waved her off.

“Listen, I don’t know why you’re being so hostile, Leah—”

“That’s Miss McBride to you.”

This wasn’t going well. He could practically see his life slipping away with every word out of her angry mouth. “Okay, okay—Miss McBride it is. I’m not the bad guy here.”

“No? Please, enlighten me as to why you think so.”

“All right, I will. The way I look at it, I did you a favor by finding that money—if it does actually belong to you. I imagine it’s been buried in that wall a long time.”

“Maybe it has, maybe it hasn’t. What’s the difference to you?”

“It’s nothing to me,” Brett told her. “But it’s all the difference in the world to *you*. If anything, I think you should be a little grateful to me for stumbling onto it.”

“Grateful,” she repeated, staring down her nose at him. “Are you fucking kidding me? What possible reason could I have to be grateful to a little worm like you?”

“Hey, now that’s not very nice.”

“I didn’t come here to be nice, you prick. I came here to listen to whatever bullshit you were going to shovel, give you your pathetic little chance to convince me to back off—”

His hands were trembling badly all of a sudden. “For Christ’s sake—”

“And then, once you were done, I was going to tell you that I’m never going to back off and I’m never going to let up.”

Brett shook his head. “You don’t mean that shit. Come on.”

“No, you come on! Where the fuck do you get off, thinking you’re just going to waltz away with my money? What gives you the right, asshole?”

That was it. There was only so much he would take, even from a fox like her. “You don’t talk to me like that,” Brett said. “Nobody talks to me like that.”

“Oh, what—are you a tough guy now? Are you going to pretend to be some kind of player?”

If she couldn’t be sweet-talked, then maybe another tactic was needed. “There’s no pretending, Miss McBride. I’m not someone you want to mess with.”

She laughed. Tipped her head back and laughed at him. “Give me a break. You’re a South Shore rat if I ever saw one, and you’re all the same—all talk and no guts. Where are you from, Quincy?”

“Weymouth,” Brett said through gritted teeth.

She leaned back in her chair, that irritating smile still plastered on her perfect face. “I thought as much. You don’t know shit about being tough.”

“What, you think my life has been perfect, just because I didn’t grow up in the city? Is that what you think?”

“That’s exactly what I think.”

Brett ignored that. “This money is my fucking payday, okay? It’s the payoff for a whole life of eating shit and I’m not just going to stand by and let you mess it up for me!”

Her voice became a cutting whisper. “I don’t know a thing about your life and I don’t care. I don’t know how it got into your head that you’re entitled to this money, but I’m here to tell you that you’re not going to get it any time soon.”

Why did he ever think he could control this conversation? He was lost, drowning. She was going to take it all away. “Now hold on just a second—”

She kept right on going. “And you won’t get it at all if I have anything to do with it. Am I coming through? Are these words penetrating that thick skull of yours?”

“You’re going to regret this,” Brett said. “There are other people involved in this situation, not just me. They won’t let you screw this up for me.”

Her eyebrows hit the ceiling. “Are you threatening me now? A poor little defenseless girl who barely weighs half of what you do. What a big man you are.”

Brett stood, almost knocking his stool over. *This is my ass on the line*, he wanted to scream at her. *This is my life!*

But he wouldn’t—he *couldn’t*—tip his hand like that. He couldn’t show weakness, not after everything she’d hurled at him.

“I’ve taken all the shit I’m going to take from you,” he said. “I tried to do this the nice way, but you wouldn’t have it. Whatever happens next is your fault, not mine.” He figured his last words were as good a parting shot as he was going to get, so he grabbed his coat and started toward the door.

He heard her exhale deeply from behind him and then she spoke.

“Wait,” she said.

## Chapter Twelve

Brett turned back toward her. “What?”

“Just hold on a second,” she said.

“Why the hell should I?”

She smiled at him, making him forget much of what had just happened. “Just come back here, okay?”

He ambled back toward her slowly, not wanting to seem too enthusiastic. But instead of sitting back down at the table, he went right up to her. Her perfume was intoxicating.

“What?” he asked again.

“Maybe I was being a little hasty,” she said with a shrug. “Maybe you’re not such a bad guy after all.”

Brett brought his winning smile back out. “That’s *exactly* what I’ve been trying to get you to see all along.”

“And you sound like you’ve got some pretty good connections.”

Brett thought of Ferrell and Castiglione, feeling more like their master at that moment than their pawn. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Tell me, why did you really ask me down here?”

He shrugged. “I just wanted to know where you were coming from, that’s all.”

“Oh, was that all?”

Brett still couldn’t figure out her tone, whether she was being sincere or she was just fucking with him, but he kept playing along. “Yeah, that’s all.”

“Well, I’ve decided that I’m willing to tell you,” she said, grinning impishly, “but I don’t want anyone else to hear it.”

Brett returned her grin, feeling back in his groove. This was the real thing—there was no way she was just screwing around. She must have sized him up and realized he wasn’t someone she wanted as her enemy. “Then why don’t I just bend over, little lady, and you can whisper it in my ear.”

“I honestly think you can read my mind. That’s just what I was going to ask you to do.”

Brett’s grin widened and he leaned over and put his head beside her mouth. He would have preferred to just meet her mouth head-on, but this was a good start—

She slapped his cheek hard.

“That’s for thinking you could use whatever pathetic charms you think you have to get what you want!” she exclaimed, and slapped him again. “And *that’s* for trying to intimidate me when your original scheme didn’t work!”

Brett held a hand to his face, touching his stinging cheek. “Jesus, what the hell—”

“Don’t ever come near me again,” she told him. “Or I’ll have the cops on you so fast, you’ll think you were Whitey Bulger, Charles Stuart, and the Boston Strangler all wrapped into one.”

And while Brett was still recovering from her assault, she grabbed her coat and was out the door in a cloud of cashmere and sweet perfume.

Brett stayed at his little table with its grand view for a while longer, nursing his cheek—and his pride—while ignoring the looks he was getting from the staff. Finally, when he felt like enough time had gone by, he slunk home. He didn’t even want to consider how screwed he was. If anything, he was worse off for his little ploy. Visions of torture and various methods of execution swarmed his mind.

On the way back to his apartment, Brett called Ferrell. The agent picked up on the first ring.

“What is it?” Ferrell asked.

“Something just came up.”

“Can it wait?”

“What, am I bothering you?”

“No, I have absolutely nothing else to do with my time than take your idiotic phone calls. So what’s so important?”

“I just had a meeting with Leah McBride.”

“Who the hell is Leah McBride?”

“You know, she’s the one who just filed the claim on the money.”

“You met with a woman who filed a claim against you? Are you out of your mind?”

“Well, I just thought I could find out what made her do it—find out what her agenda is.”

“Ah, well played, Master Spy. And just how successful was this little endeavor?”

“Not very,” Brett replied. “She kind of ripped my head off about it.”

“Naturally,” the agent said, and paused for a moment. “Wait, are you talking to me on your cell phone?”

“Yeah, I figured this couldn’t wait—”

“How many times have I said to you—don’t ever fucking talk to me on your fucking cell phone! I didn’t think there was a whole lot of ambiguity in that statement, but I guess I was wrong!”

Brett felt his face go red. “I know you said that, but I was just giving you an update. I didn’t think the sky would fall if I just told you about what happened—”

“You didn’t think the sky would fall? No, you idiot, you just didn’t think—period. Where are you right now?”

“I’m walking up the block toward my apartment.”

“Good. I’m going to hang up now and attend to what I was doing. You get the fuck back into your apartment and stay there until you hear from me. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Brett replied, but received no answer. He shook his head and stepped up his pace toward his building.

Ferrell arrived at Brett’s door two hours later.

“You sure took your time getting here,” Brett muttered as he let the agent in.



“Believe it or not, slick,” Ferrell shot back, “your pathetic self is not exactly the center of my universe.” He collapsed in Brett’s recliner and lit a cigarette. He then took his little device out again and activated it.

“Come on in,” Brett said. “Make yourself at home.”

“Don’t mind if I do. Now why don’t you quit with the smartass remarks and tell me, step by step, what you said to this woman?”

Glossing over some of the more awkward details, Brett gave a summary of what happened at the bar. Ferrell listened intently, flicking his cigarette on the floor until Brett found him an ashtray. When Brett was finished, the agent was quiet for a few minutes.

“This isn’t that bad,” Ferrell said, plucking at his vest.

“Well, I’m glad *you* think so. You’re not the one who’s going to be stuck in court for the next few decades, or worse, the victim of a mob hit—”

“No, I’m serious. We can use this to our advantage.”

“I would love to know where you got that idea—”

Ferrell’s head shot up. “Shut up for once in your life and let me think.”

“Okay, fine. Far be it for me to offer some common sense in this fucked-up situation—”

“You’re being awfully talkative for someone who’s supposed to be quiet. Now this is what you’re going to do. You’ll arrange another meeting with Castiglione—”

“Are you fucking kidding me? If he finds out there’s been another setback with getting the money, he’s going to rip out my guts and hang them on a fence!”

“Yes, but that’s hardly your fault, is it? He’s been a reasonable man so far, so there’s no evidence to suggest he’s going to change that pattern of behavior.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not the one who has to go tell him about this shit—”

“God, you’re such a wimp,” Ferrell said as he crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray. “If you ever want to lay your hands on that money, you’re really going to have to grow a pair one of these days.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

“You do that, and then you’ll meet with Castiglione and tell him about this woman.”

Brett threw his hands up. “What possible good can come out of that?”

Ferrell just smiled. “You’ll see.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Castiglione accepted Brett's request for a meeting with surprisingly little resistance. Brett had tracked down Hanson, the loan shark who still held his marker, and asked him to get in touch with the Castle. Hanson had been a little annoyed to do Brett's bidding, but he finally agreed to pass the word along. Within three hours, Ginelli called Brett's apartment to let him know the meeting was on—at noon the next day.

Brett Rawson was finally moving up in the world.

Having no other choice except to call in sick for work—he rarely missed a day and had more sick time than he'd probably ever use—he took it easy for the morning. Unable to keep his mind off the impending meeting and still feeling nervous that Castiglione would be angry with him, he treated himself to a luxurious breakfast at a local diner. Brett had long ago discovered what he believed was the key to life—when one was anxious, there was nothing like comfort food to make everything better.

Embracing this philosophy, he inhaled a full complement of sausage, bacon, scrambled eggs, and home fries, along with a few gallons of coffee to wash it all down.

When he finally staggered out of the diner, feeling bloated yet content, he glanced at his watch and saw that it was getting perilously close to noon.

He made it to a nearby bus stop just in time to catch a ride downtown. He hopped off the bus a few blocks away from Castiglione's building and began heading toward it. He suppressed a sausage-coated belch as he entered through the revolving door and walked through the lobby toward the elevator.

The impact of what he was doing suddenly came home to him. Both Ferrell's assurances and the serenity of the morning faded away as he reminded himself that he was about to meet with a crime boss who would be more than a little justified in caving Brett's skull in. He stepped into the elevator, his legs suddenly barely able to support his weight, and pushed the button for Castiglione's floor.

The car rode up without any stops until it came to rest at the twentieth floor. The doors opened and the empty hallway beckoned to the elevator's lone occupant like a silent invitation into the lion's den itself. What was that quote from Dante?

*Abandon all hope ye who enter here...*

He took a deep breath and stepped out into the corridor, half expecting Castiglione's men to jump him the instant he left the elevator. When nothing happened, he began walking toward the door at the far end of the hall.

He arrived at the door and tried the knob. It turned just as it had before. He opened the door and entered the waiting room. It was empty, just as it had been the first time he'd been here. The same magazines were spread around the table. The imposing door on the opposite wall was closed and Brett had no doubt that it was locked. It was as if the last few months hadn't happened and Brett had woken up from a dream to find himself right where he had been last autumn.

It wasn't a pleasant thought.

But the illusion shattered quickly enough. The door at the far end of the room opened and Mr. Reynolds appeared. This time he wore a black suit—not the most reassuring color, but at least it was a sign that *something* was different.

Reynolds said nothing, merely jerking his head to indicate that Brett should follow him. Brett did so, struggling to keep up with the swift pace set by the silent bodyguard as they strode toward Castiglione's office.

Reynolds opened the door and gestured for Brett to enter. Brett did so, feeling more than slightly panicked when Reynolds came in behind him and shut the door.

"Welcome back, Mr. Rawson."

Brett turned to see Castiglione behind his desk, wearing a neatly-tailored dark gray suit. Castiglione was leaning back in his chair, running the index finger of his right hand around the large jeweled ring he wore on his left hand. The crime boss smiled at Brett.

"Have a seat."

Brett sat down in the single chair in front of the desk.

"You look a little grave, Mr. Rawson," Castiglione said, still smiling. "In fact, you look downright terrified."

"If you say so, sir," Brett replied. He wasn't about to argue the point.

"What possible reason could there be for you to feel like that?"

"Well, it's like this—"

"Could it have something to do with the fact that you have yet to repay us what we are owed?" Castiglione continued to fondle the ring lovingly.

"It does involve the money, sir. You see—"

"Has another complication arisen?" Castiglione asked.

“Something along those lines—”

“And after all the trouble we went through to have a word with your Mr. Fletcher and convince him to discontinue his pursuit of those banknotes, now you are here to tell me that there is yet another problem?”

“Yes, sir,” Brett replied, trying not to think about how much Castiglione’s ring would hurt if the man decided to hit him. He took a few minutes to quickly summarize the developments with the McBride woman, ending with the unfortunate encounter in the bar the day before.

“That was a bold move, asking her to meet with you,” Castiglione said. “It might have been a mistake in hindsight, but I cannot fault your sense of initiative.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And so there is no doubt in your mind that she cannot be persuaded from her present course of action.”

“None, whatsoever,” Brett replied. “For some reason, she’s ready to dedicate her life to making mine as miserable as possible.”

Castiglione sighed. “I was afraid of that.”

Brett somehow felt more nervous now. “So, what should I do? What should *we* do, sir?”

“We may have to resolve this situation in an extra-legal manner, so to speak. Would you have a problem with that?”

Brett thought back to the moment when Leah McBride had slapped him—twice. He wouldn’t mind seeing her suffer a little, if Castiglione was willing to apply some heat.

“I have no problem with that at all,” Brett replied.

“Excellent, so the way I see it there are three ways we can handle this.” Castiglione ticked off options with his fingers as he began speaking again. “One—we can help you. Two—we can allow you to help yourself. And three—we decide that you are more trouble than you are worth and we can have you eliminated.”

Brett tried to say something, but found that he suddenly couldn’t speak.

Castiglione broke the tension by bursting into laughter. After a moment, Brett joined in half-heartedly. Reynolds did not.

“Not to worry,” the crime boss said, still chuckling. “We are not quite ready to entertain the third option just yet.”

“So you’ll help me?”

Castiglione shrugged. “We have invested our time and money into your case, so assisting you would be protecting our investment. And that is always a good business policy.”

Brett sat up a little straighter. “I appreciate that, sir.”

Castiglione held up a finger. “But, we have already given you an unusual amount of assistance. It is my opinion that to continue to assist you in such a way might reflect badly upon our organization. If we set such a precedent with you, it could be perceived that we are soft.”

“Pardon me?”

“There is a danger that we could set a bad example with the way your case is being handled, and others in your situation might take advantage of that in the future.”

Brett frowned. “So, what does all that mean?”

“It means that, for now, we are going to choose the second option—to give you a chance to help yourself. If you can resolve this situation with the McBride woman, using

whatever means necessary, then it would prove to us that you are a solid investment. Do you feel up to this challenge?”

“I do, sir,” Brett replied. “I *want* to handle it myself.”

Castiglione smiled. “Give it a shot, young man. But if you find yourself unable to take care of it, do not feel as if it is the end of the world.”

Brett felt more confused than ever. “Okay.”

“We may have some doubts about any future endeavors with you, but we would be willing to help expedite this matter if necessary.”

Brett remembered their previous conversation and ventured a question. “What’s the catch?”

Castiglione smiled broadly. “Our little boy is growing up right before our eyes. So you are coming to understand the concept of *quid pro quo*. My answer to your question is this—we could further assist you in this matter, but we will exact a price.”

Brett sighed. “You mean an even higher percentage of my payday, don’t you?”

Castiglione’s grin grew even wider. “You catch on quickly. So please, find a way to settle this matter with the woman. Consider our price of doing business an incentive to handle it on your own.”

Castiglione picked up some documents on his desk and made a waving gesture to his guest. Brett turned to see Mr. Reynolds at the door, waiting to show him out.



## Chapter Fourteen

Brett assembled his closest friends at his apartment later that night to discuss the matter. Two of them, Tommy Murphy and Jamie Thayer, had been working with him in Fletcher's house the day he'd found the money. They had followed the story ever since, pestering Brett for updates at every opportunity. The other two, Don Cosgrove and Matt Seeley, also worked on the docks, but had only now become involved in Brett's situation.

The last few days had taken their toll on Brett. He knew what he had to do, but he was too tired and scared to face it alone. He hoped that having his friends in on it—to have their tacit approval—would soothe his conscience.

"Okay, here's the deal," Brett said as he stood in front of the gathering. They'd all started the night with a few pizzas and some beer, and they were now ready to talk business. Brett had tried to limit the drinking so that his worthy companions would not be so drunk as to make the meeting useless. "That money I found is still sitting in the City Clerk's office, just waiting for me to claim it. But there's one more obstacle in my way—that bitch Leah McBride that I told you guys about."

"Do you mean the hot chick?" Tommy asked.

“Yes, that’s who I mean. The fact that she happens to be drop-dead gorgeous is sort of beside the point. We need to stay focused on the important stuff, okay?”

“What’s the important stuff again?” Don inquired.

Brett ground his teeth. “The money, Don—it’s how we’re going to get the money.”

“Oh, right.”

“So what’s the situation?” Matt Seeley asked.

“The situation is this,” Brett said, “we’ve got a half million dollars just sitting around, waiting to be claimed by yours truly. Only there’s this psycho bitch from hell who *claims* the cash belongs to her.”

“What if it does actually belong to her?” Jamie asked.

“I don’t see how it could,” Brett replied. “She’s just some white trash from East Boston. How the fuck could a pile of Civil War money possibly belong to someone like her?”

Jamie shrugged. “You never know.”

“That’s not the point,” Brett said. “The point is, she’s dead set against me ever getting my hands on that cash. From what she said, she’s ready to do anything she can to delay the process.”

“So?” Don asked. “Wouldn’t you still get it in the end?”

“Wake up, idiot,” Tommy said. “He’s got that vig with the mob. If he doesn’t come up with a boatload of cash soon, he’s going to be in deep shit.”

“Oh,” Don said. “So what do we do about it?”

Brett sighed. “That’s why we’re here—to figure out what to do. The mob has put this in my hands to take care of, and I don’t want to fuck it up. You guys got any ideas?”

Jamie looked thoughtful for a moment. “So you already tried talking to her, right?”

Brett nodded. “Yeah, that didn’t go so well.”

“And the law’s on her side with this, right?”

“Seems like it,” Brett replied. He took a deep breath and then uttered the idea that had come to him the night before. It was an idea that had kept him awake the rest of the night. “We’re going to have to take the law into our own hands, if you guys know what I mean.”

Don’s mouth curled into an ugly grin. “We could rough her up. You know—a little gang bang to change her attitude.” He gyrated with his hips to illustrate his idea.

Jamie rolled his eyes. “Cosgrove, you’re a fucking animal.”

Matt frowned. “The details aside, he brings up a good point. Shouldn’t we try to scare her into dropping this thing?”

Brett shook his head. “She doesn’t scare easy, from what I saw. And she’d have the cops on me in a heartbeat if we tried some stupid shit like that.”

They all looked at him with blank faces.

Brett sighed. “Think about it—she made front page news for coming out of nowhere and filing her claim—a claim that happened to be against me. If anything happens to her, who the fuck do you think people are going to blame?”

His friends nodded. The room was quiet for a minute while they all thought about the situation. Finally, Tommy stood up and paced back and forth in front of the windows.

“All right,” he said after a minute. “We’re all thinking the same thing, but I bet nobody wants to be the one to come out and say it. So I’ll say it.”

“Say what?” Don asked.

Tommy stared at him. “We have to kill her.”

Brett's eyes bulged. He didn't know about the rest of them, but he had *not* been thinking that. "Uh, hold on a second here."

Matt stood. "No, he's right. That's the only way this problem is going to go away."

"This *problem*," Brett said, "is a human fucking being. No matter how much of a bitch she might be, that doesn't mean we should kill her!"

Tommy shook his head. "She's not a person anymore—she's just a problem. The only way you're going to get your hands on that money is if you eliminate the problem."

"Okay, fine," Brett shot back. "But even if you're right, we're still back to where we were before. If she were to suddenly up and die, the cops will be at my door ten minutes later!"

Tommy just smiled. "Not if it looks like an accident."

They talked for a little while longer, not making a lot of progress, before calling it a night. Brett showed them to the door, noticing that Jamie was lingering behind while the others paraded out into the hall. Jamie was also looking a bit green.

"You okay, man?" Brett asked him.

"I'm all right," Jamie replied. "But this shit is bad news. I'd think twice about this business if I were you."

Brett shook his head. "I think it's too late for me to back out now."

"But not too late for me. I'm sorry, but I don't think I can be a part of this. I guess I'll see you around at work."

"I understand," Brett said, and shook his friend's hand as Jamie left. Part of Brett wished he could go with Jamie—just go and leave all this behind. But he was right. It was too late for him.

After locking up and cleaning out all of the trash left behind in the living room, Brett was about to go to bed when someone began pounding on his door. He figured it was one of the guys coming back for something. He went over and began pulling the locks open again. But then his instincts kicked in and he stopped.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“It’s your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man,” Ferrell’s voice came through the door loud and clear. “Now open the fucking door.”

Brett began fumbling with the locks again. “Okay, okay. Hold your horses.”

Ferrell was already turning the knob even before all the locks were disengaged. He burst through the door and slammed it shut behind him.

“Well, what do you want?” Brett asked.

“Updates, you piece of dog shit,” the agent spat. “What, do you think I’m psychic?”

“Huh?”

“You met with Angelo Castiglione almost ten hours ago and I have yet to hear the results. Do I have to remind you who’s in charge here?”

“No, of course not,” Brett said, and held up his hands as if someone had a gun on him. “Look, it’s just been a hectic day.”

“I don’t give a fuck if war broke out—you keep me updated on what’s going on or I throw you in jail. Do you fucking understand me?”

“Yes, sure, *jawohl*—whatever,” Brett replied. He watched as Ferrell took out and activated his peculiar device yet again and then spent the few minutes relating the details of his meeting with Castiglione.

When he was finished, Ferrell inhaled sharply and stared at his informant.

“What?” Brett asked.

“You offered to take care of this yourself.”

“Well, yeah. I figured it would be better—he said he’d be impressed if I could handle it.”

“Come on—you chose that option because it might cost you less money.”

“Like I said before,” Brett told him, “Castiglione’s just going to keep bleeding me until there’s none of that money left.”

“And you figured a few extra bucks in your pocket is more important than some priceless intelligence about the way he conducts his business?”

“Well, I—”

“Spare me. You’ve proved to me enough times already that you’re unable to think strategically—or even just see beyond your own material gain. So you’re going to go back to Castiglione, admit that you were unable to resolve the situation on your own, and ask—no, *beg* him to help you. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, but my friends and I—we thought of an idea to get the girl out of the way.”

Ferrell snorted. “Oh, this ought to be good. What exactly did you geniuses come up with?”

Brett took a deep breath. “We’re going to kill her and make it look like an accident.” There, it was out there—he’d said it out loud and made it real. Part of him felt like a genuine gangster, a big shot. Another part of him felt small and ashamed. He brushed his thoughts away and looked at the agent to see his reaction.

For the first time since meeting Ferrell, Brett Rawson had the brief satisfaction of seeing the agent look completely surprised. Ferrell didn’t talk for a moment, merely standing there with his jaw open. But the dumbfounded expression quickly turned into a snarl.

“Who are these friends of yours?” Ferrell demanded, grabbing Brett’s collar and lifting the young man up. “And how much do they know?”

“They don’t know anything about you, if that’s what you’re asking! They know about the money and Castiglione, but that’s it!”

Ferrell glared at him for a minute and then released him. “Better make sure it stays that way.” He withdrew into the corner and lit a cigarette. He took a few drags and then turned back to his host. “You know, you might have stumbled onto the only feasible way out of this whole mess. Taking the girl out—that’s a ballsy move.”

Brett swallowed. “I didn’t want it to come to this, but she’s left me no choice—”

“Keep telling yourself that if it helps you sleep better. All right, this is what you’re going to do. You’re going to wait a few days—long enough to have come up with this idea on your own—and then you’ll ask for another meeting. You’ll tell the Castle your idea, but you’ll admit that you don’t know how to pull it off.”

“But—”

“You’ll negotiate a price with him, splitting the difference of what he would’ve charged you to take care of it, and you see what he does. I’d give my life savings to see how he handles this situation, so keep your eyes and your ears open. This could be some of the best intelligence we’ve gotten so far on this pig, so make the opportunity count.”

“If what I’m doing is so important, then maybe you could treat me a little better.”

Ferrell laughed. “Then I’ll ask you to do it like I said—pretty please with sugar on top.”

Brett sighed. “That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s as good as you’re going to get, so appreciate it. Now set up the fucking meeting.”

“But how am I going to do this without looking like an idiot? What do I say?”

“Shut up and I’ll tell you. And you won’t look like an idiot. If anything, you’ll come out of this in an even better position.”

“Really,” Brett said. “That would be a neat trick.”

“Just keep your mouth shut and you might learn something.”

Brett listened as Ferrell gave his instructions.



## Chapter Fifteen

This time, the meeting took place a few days later in a dimly-lit restaurant in the North End. Brett was shown to a C-shaped corner booth in the back where Castiglione and Ginelli were waiting for him.

Castiglione motioned for Brett to take a seat in the booth.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me,” Brett said.

“If you have something productive to tell us,” Castiglione replied, “then it is time that is well spent.”

Brett nodded. “I think you’ll appreciate what I have to say.”

Ginelli signaled to a waiter, who came over and asked for an order. Castiglione requested a glass of *pinot noir*. Ginelli asked for whiskey. Brett didn’t feel comfortable drinking any alcohol, so he settled for some water.

“So,” Castiglione said after the waiter had departed. “To quote Lewis Carroll, ‘the time has come to talk of many things.’”

Brett raised his brow. “I’m sorry?”

“‘The Walrus and the Carpenter,’” Castiglione said.

Brett continued to stare at him blankly.

“Did you somehow manage to avoid *Through the Looking-Glass* in your studies?”

“I guess.”

“Sir,” Ginelli spoke up, “this may not be the time.”

The crime boss sighed. “Mr. Rawson, please provide us with an update on your situation.”

Brett nodded, thinking back to the conversation with Ferrell a few nights ago.

“Why is this all so important?” Brett had asked his handler. “It’s not like Castiglione’s going to suddenly open up to me with all his secrets.”

“What you’re doing is more vital than you could know,” Ferrell replied. “Castiglione is smart—as smart as they come. Did you think that, being an informant, you were just going to bust his operations wide open? No, that would take years. And he’s too smart to ever get caught like that.”

“Then what’s the point of all this shit I’m doing?”

“In order for me to really understand the man, I need to know how he acts and reacts,” Ferrell said. “I’ve got to admit, he’s treated this whole thing with you a lot different than I would’ve expected.”

“How do you mean?”

“I figured he’d do what most bosses do—send a few guys to rough you up and scare the shit out of you. But he’s been much more patient about it all and that gives me some good insight into his way of thinking. But I need more information and you’re the one who’s going to get it.”

“What kind of information?”

“For example, when faced with a difficult situation, how does he approach it? Does he farm things out to his lieutenants or does he take charge of things personally? Does he flip out and act all macho or is he cold and methodical? When he gives orders, who are his go-to guys? It’s intelligence like that which will help me get into his head and understand his methods.”

“So the stuff I told you already—that’s been helpful?”

“You bet, kid. But I’m really curious about how he’ll react to this latest twist. Remember, you be tough and give it to him straight up. And watch closely to see how he takes it.”

“I’ll do my best...”

And here he was, after three mostly sleepless nights, ready to deliver the pitch that could win the ball game. But if he were to screw it up, it could cost him his life.

“So come out with it out already,” Ginelli said.

Brett blinked and came back to the present. “Okay, it’s like this. Leah McBride—”

“Never say names,” Ginelli cut him off.

“What?”

“What my associate is trying to say,” Castiglione said, “is to refrain from such formal identification. Instead, you should try using phrases like ‘our friend’ when referring to a person of interest.”

“Okay, our friend from East Boston has made a claim on the cash and she’s not going to be talked out of it. Her deposition is scheduled in a few weeks.”

“We’re well aware of this,” Castiglione observed.

“I know,” Brett said quickly. “I’m just laying the foundation. So, what can be done? If I rough her up or try anything to change her mind, she’ll just go to the cops. But what if she was to suddenly—and tragically—perish under some terrible yet unrelated accident? Specifically, before she’s able to testify?”

Castiglione and Ginelli leaned back and were quiet for a moment.

“That is not a bad idea,” Castiglione said. “And it is one that, honestly, I did not expect you to have the temerity to come up with. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I was thinking that the more random and impersonal the accident was, the better it would look, right? And then I got to thinking about where she lives. I don’t know if you guys get out to East Boston much—”

“We do *not*,” Castiglione said.

“Right,” Brett said. “Well, it’s a dump. And from what I understand, she lives in a really old, really run-down part of that dump. So, how could we take care of her and make it look like an accident without it looking suspicious?” He paused for a second and took a deep breath. “I say we burn down her apartment building.”

The booth went silent once more as the two mobsters considered Brett’s words. The waiter came back with their drinks and the table remained quiet until the server was gone again.

“It’s got potential,” Ginelli said with a shrug.

Brett was amused to realize that Ginelli talked just like Castiglione when the crime boss wasn’t around yet lapsed back into his cruder manner of speech while in his employer’s presence. It was almost like he didn’t want to compete.

“It does indeed,” Castiglione replied. “So what exactly did you have in mind, Mr. Rawson?”

“Well, I figured that we’d want a real professional to do this—in order to make it look like a fire that started by accident. The bigger the fire, the less chance the cops have of thinking a single woman was being targeted, right?”

“That would be logical,” Castiglione replied.

“But I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t know any professional arsonists. So that’s where you guys come in.”

“I see,” Castiglione said, the ghost of a smile now on his face. “You wish us to procure such a person—a ‘spark,’ as we call him.”

“You guys have the network, right?” Brett said. “I figure you have a much better chance of finding a guy like this than I ever could.”

“We should be able to locate an appropriate candidate,” Castiglione replied. He turned to Ginelli. “Get in touch with Mr. Duggan down in South Boston.”

“Duggan,” Ginelli repeated. “You mean that Irish prick?”

Castiglione nodded. “He owes me a favor. Have him put the word out for an independent operative—someone who would be unfamiliar with the victim and her unfortunate link to our young Mr. Rawson here. And, above all, make sure to tell him *not* to mention my name in connection with this job.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Ginelli said. He slid out of the booth and went into the back room.

“You guys run this place?” Brett asked.

“We have a controlling interest in this establishment,” Castiglione replied, “as well as several others in the neighborhood. It is swept regularly for bugs or wire taps, so I consider it safe. And no patron dines here unless I know who they are.”

“Sir,” Brett continued. “If you don’t mind me asking, why don’t you want your name connected to the job?”

“It is an old habit of mine. When my name becomes involved in this kind of business, it tends to have an adverse effect on the people involved.”

“What do you mean?”

“They start stumbling over themselves, trying to do a good job in an effort to impress me—and more often than not they end up making mistakes—bad mistakes. I am sure you would agree that we cannot afford any further mistakes in this particular business you and I share.”

*He’s really doing it, Brett thought. He’s opening up to me. Not a lot, but it’s still a foot in the door.*

He cleared his throat. “I agree completely, sir. And I really appreciate everything you’re doing here.”

“I am sure you do, but now we must touch upon a less comfortable subject.”

“What’s that?”

“The price of our continuing assistance,” Castiglione answered.

Brett exhaled. “Okay, I knew this was coming. How much is it going to cost me?”

“I cannot give you an exact figure as yet, but I imagine it will run at least into a sum of five figures.”

Brett almost dropped his water glass. “Ten thousand?” he exclaimed.

Castiglione smiled slightly. “A top-notch operative will cost at least that much, young man—probably more.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I would thank you not to utter further blasphemies in my presence.”

“Oh, sorry,” Brett said.

“But the final cost cannot be determined until we find and negotiate with a reasonable candidate. At that time, we will iron out the exact expense.”

“Well, since I came up with the idea,” Brett said, “I was figuring we could maybe split the difference of the cost.”

Castiglione raised an eyebrow. “Mr. Rawson—did you at some point mistake me for an idiot?”

“What? No, of course I didn’t!”

“Then please do not assume that I am one. And also do not ever think that you could devise a scheme that we would not have already considered.”

Brett found his confidence deflating. “So my arson idea was just crap?”

“No, not at all,” Castiglione said. “It is, in fact, a very good idea. But it is one that would have occurred to us without your assistance.”

Ginelli came back to the table.

“Duggan will put the word out right away,” he told them. “He even thinks he might already have someone in the pipeline—some psycho guy on the run out of Pennsylvania.”

“Not too psychotic, I would hope,” Castiglione said.

“No, not too much—but he’s maybe just psycho enough to get the job done quickly and without remorse.”

“That would be ideal,” Castiglione replied. “I imagine that such a man will require an advance payment on his services.”

Ginelli nodded. “I’m sure he’d insist on it.”

“Then this is what we will do,” Castiglione said. “Once Mr. Duggan has confirmed the retention of an operative, we will determine the cost that will be involved. The money

will be added to Mr. Rawson's debt, but will not be included in the interest calculation. We will give the operative the specific terms of the assignment, the time frame in which it will need to be done, and provide half of the negotiated fee up front. The rest will be paid once the task is complete."

"That's going to be tricky," Ginelli said. "Dealing with these independent contractor-types, it's always a delicate business. Half the time they rough up the contact man if they don't like the deal."

Brett swallowed. "It's *that* delicate?"

Ginelli nodded. "I heard once or twice that the liaison has been killed when the contractor got pissed off about something. We have to handle this carefully."

"I agree," Castiglione said. "I do not quite envy the one who will be the liaison in this matter, but we should proceed with caution. Luckily, I have the perfect person in mind to serve as our contact."

Brett snickered. "So who's the lucky slob who has to deal with the pyro?"

Castiglione smiled again. "It is humorous that you, of all people, would ask such a question."

Brett suddenly didn't like the way the crime boss was looking at him. "Why's that?"

"Because it will be you, Mr. Rawson," Castiglione replied. "You are the one who will be working with our new pet arsonist."



## Chapter Sixteen

A week later, Brett received the phone call he had been dreading. He knew what the call was about as soon as he heard Ginelli's familiar rasp on the other end.

"Go to this address," Ginelli told him and read off the name and number of a street that Brett recognized to be in Dorchester.

"Okay," Brett replied as he jotted down the information. "When should I be there?"

"Ten minutes ago," Ginelli said and then hung up.

"Right," Brett muttered, and grabbed his coat.

He arrived at the address twenty minutes later, cold and out of breath. The closest parking spot he had found was three blocks away. On top of that, the weather was awful. It had been a frigid February and the beginning of March was shaping up to be no better. The street number he was supposed to find turned out to be a small convenience store. Not seeing anyone around on the avenue, he walked inside. A bell tinkled over the door to announce his entrance.

The store, cramped and dirty, looked deserted. Brett began to stroll down an aisle when he heard a cough from behind him. Brett turned and saw a grizzled man sitting behind the counter.

“Are you Rawson?” the man asked.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Take this and bring it to the address written on the back. Everything you need is inside.”

A thick envelope came hurtling at Brett, smacking him hard in the chest before falling to the floor. Brett picked it up like it was radioactive.

“So, I have to go somewhere else now?”

“Did I stutter the first time? And put that away before someone sees it.”

Brett stuffed the envelope in his jacket. “But—”

“And get the fuck out of my store.”

“Okay, okay,” Brett said, and hustled back out to the street. He took the envelope back out and examined it. Sure enough, there was an address written on the bottom—O’Shaughnessy’s, a bar in Fields Corner. There was also a single word written under the address: *COYLE*. Brett wondered for a moment what it meant, finally concluding that it was probably the name of the man he was supposed to meet up with.

“It’s a goddamn scavenger hunt,” he muttered.

The envelope wasn’t sealed, so he peeked inside. When he saw the large wad of money within, he quickly closed the package up and put it back in his coat. He looked around to make sure nobody had noticed and then started back toward his car.

When he reached the Mitsubishi, he locked himself in and took the envelope back out. Keeping the package as hidden as possible—this wasn’t the best neighborhood—he

inventoried the contents. After a few minutes of counting, he confirmed that about seven thousand dollars in cash and a single Polaroid photograph had been put inside the envelope.

The photograph turned out to be, no surprise, a candid shot of Leah McBride. It looked like the picture was taken as she was coming out of her apartment building. At the bottom of the photograph an address was written in thick black marker. Brett looked at the photo for a moment, marveling at just how easily a death warrant was created.

A city bus roared by, rocking his small car and startling its driver back to life. He realized that whoever was supposed to receive this envelope was probably waiting at the Fields Corner bar right now. And from what Ginelli had said about these killers-for-hire, they probably weren't too big on patience. It was time to get moving.

He made it to the bar in about ten minutes, this time getting lucky enough to find a parking space right out front. He parked behind a big black Mercury—one of those Marauders that had sold for a couple of years and were then discontinued. It looked a hell of a lot like a cop car.

Brett pushed the envelope deep into his inside coat pocket and went inside.

The place was dark, like every bar that ever existed, but for once the music was being played at a mercifully low volume. Brett wondered how exactly he was supposed to make contact with the arsonist. He took a casual glance around the room, but saw no immediate candidates. Everyone looked tough and mean and nobody he would want to approach. Lacking any better strategy, he took a stool at the bar and glanced around occasionally with what he hoped were surreptitious scans of the barroom.

In the end, the contractor found him.

After two beers, Brett was ready to give up and go home. But just as he was fishing out his cash to pay the tab, a man came up next to him. Brett looked up from his wallet and came face-to-face with the coldest-looking person he'd ever seen in his life.

Brett's first impression of the man was that he looked like a human scarecrow. Tall and thin to the point of being almost invisible, the man had lank brown hair and pale blue eyes. He wore an expensive suit and overcoat and stared at Brett like he was a pile of garbage. Brett was sure about two things at that moment—one, this guy would kill him without a second thought and two, the guy had been here the entire time (Brett hadn't seen anyone enter the bar after he did) and Brett had never once noticed him.

"You're Brett Rawson," the man said.

"Who wants to know?"

"You have something for me," the man said, ignoring Brett's question and continuing to stare at him. Brett had yet to see his eyes blink.

"Maybe," Brett replied, thinking of the car that looked like an unmarked cruiser outside. "It depends on who you are."

The man sighed. "I'm the guy who's going to ram a fist down your throat unless you give me what's making that suspicious bulge in your coat. So stop wasting my time and hand it over."

"Is that how you knew to come to me, because you noticed the bulge in my coat?"

"That and the fact that you're the only one in here who's been scanning the room every five seconds like the world's dumbest secret agent. Now give me the fucking money."

Brett knew by now that he was pushing his luck asking questions, but he figured Castiglione would kill him if he didn't take the proper precautions. "What's your name?"

"The same one that should be written on the envelope," the man replied.

“So you’re Coyle?”

“The one and only,” the man said, tipping an invisible hat. “So who’s calling the shots here?”

“Huh?”

“Who’s footing the bill for the job?”

Brett remembered what Castiglione had said about keeping his name out of things.

“Uh, I’m the one paying for your services.”

It was true in a way, he realized.

Coyle took a long look at him. “So I’m supposed to believe that Glen Duggan, the guy who runs South Boston, is taking orders from a pipsqueak like you? Why don’t you tell me what’s *really* going on here?”

Brett swallowed. “I already told you. I have a job that needs doing. It was decided that we wanted someone from out of town and you’re the guy they recruited to do it. What else is there to know?”

“I want to know why.”

Brett frowned. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Coyle cocked his head. “You say you know who I am. If that’s so, then you should know the way I operate. I don’t do these things blindly. I want to know the reason for it.”

Brett wasn’t about to tell him a thing, even if it meant getting his ass kicked. “It’s important, okay? A lot of people, including and especially me, have a lot riding on it. That’s as much as I can tell you.” He thought it was a decent answer. Hell, even Castiglione couldn’t fault an answer like that.

Coyle shook his head. “That’s not good enough.”

Brett sat up on his stool. “Well, it’s going to have to be. Or else there’s no job to be done.”

Coyle thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. “Fine, just give me the money.”

Brett suppressed a smile. He’d gotten the upper hand, just like that. Maybe these dealings weren’t so difficult after all. Now it was time for a little payback for this guy acting all cocky before.

“So tell me, you set fires for a living, right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Coyle said through clenched teeth.

“So, do you have like theme music or something?”

Coyle finally blinked. “What?”

“You know, do you groove to some tunes when you do your thing? Like Def Leppard’s *Pyromania*?”

“Two things, Rawson,” Coyle said. “One, *Pyromania*’s an album not a song. And two—give me my fucking money.”

“Not until you answer the question.”

“Kid, I can take that envelope from you any time I want. It’s just a question of how alive you are afterward.”

“Ah, but Duggan and his crew wouldn’t like that very much, would they? Come on, just answer the question and then we all go on with our lives.”

Coyle leaned in. “Listen, you little prick. I’m not your monkey. I’m the best there is at what I do, so I don’t have to do a song and dance for you just to get a lousy paycheck.”

Brett shrugged. “All right, I’ll just have to tell Duggan that you went back on the deal.”

There was a tense, quiet moment as they stared each other down.

“There’s this one song,” Coyle said. “You probably wouldn’t know it.”

“Try me.”

“It’s from a band called the Afghan Whigs.”

“Never heard of them,” Brett said.

“I didn’t think so. Anyway, I heard them in passing a few years back. They had this soul-rock thing going on—Nirvana meets Motown. And there was this one song called ‘Going to Town.’”

“What was it about?”

“It was about this couple, a guy and a girl, who were both into setting fires. Kind of like a Bonnie and Clyde of the arson crowd. It was a cool song, romance and anarchy all rolled into this funky beat. Anyway, when I’m really focused in on a job, when I’m ready to really make things burn, I think in my head that I’m Going to Town. There, you fucking satisfied?”

It all sounded kind of corny to Brett, but he didn’t want to push his luck any further by saying so. He took out the envelope and offered it over. “See, that wasn’t so painful, was it?”

“You’re just lucky I happen to need this cash,” Coyle said, grabbing the package and slipping it into his coat. “But you and I aren’t done yet.”

“I think we are,” Brett replied. He remembered another thing that Castiglione had told him. “You’ve got three days to get the job done.” Leah’s deposition was coming all too quickly.

“That’s not enough time. I have research and preparation to do.”

“Sorry, buddy. That isn’t my problem.”

Coyle smiled. “We’ll see.”

Brett wanted to wipe that smug grin off the arsonist’s face. He made a silent vow to tell Ferrell about Coyle. If he was as good as he said he was then Ferrell would know about him. Brett wanted to learn everything there was to know about this guy. If they were to meet again and Coyle tried to throw his weight around, Brett wanted to be ready to really put the pyromaniac in his place.

Brett hopped off his stool and zipped his coat. “All the information’s in there. I want to be reading about the fire in the paper before the week is gone.” He grinned and walked out—nothing to it. If he had seen the expression of bald anger that dawned on Coyle’s face after he turned away, however, he might not have felt so confident.

But he didn’t see Coyle’s face and he went back to his car counting the money that would be coming to him all too soon. Now that Coyle was on board, Leah McBride was as good as dead. And the banknotes would finally belong to him.

Everything from here on out would be a breeze.