



ACTS OF DESPERATION

TIM DODGE

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by

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Part 16

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CHAPTER 23

When Ronnie and I were kids, we used to play soldier with our friends. Tim Butler, Joe Sullivan and Matt Sheridan would come over, or we'd go to one of their houses, and we'd pretend to be in firefights. I used to love sneaking up on Joe and taking him out before he had a chance to see me. He would get mad, but he was easy to ambush.

I thought about Joe as I knelt at the corner of the fence around the pool, waiting for Calvin or someone else to come looking for us. My palms were sweaty as I gripped the gun. Truth be told, I had no real idea how to use the thing. I knew I had to point it and squeeze the trigger, but I'd never fired a gun before. I was just as likely to shoot trees and airliners flying overhead as I was to hit my target.

Greg lay in wait in the bushes that lined the fence. In the daylight, he would've been easy to spot, but the pre-dawn darkness hid him well. I'd seen him use a gun before on the late Hank Moss. He seemed comfortable with a weapon, and I hoped that meant he would shoot his target and not miss and hit me.

Jenna knelt next to me, looking calm and ready for whatever might happen. She didn't have a weapon. I didn't expect her to do much in a fight anyway; despite her little speech earlier, I thought she was still in shock. There wasn't a safe place for her to hide, so I wanted her near me.

The wait seemed endless. It had been a long time since Carlson had found us. Why it was taking them so long to check on him, I don't know. Maybe it didn't occur to them that he'd stop for a drink and get a bottle busted over his head. Still, it seemed strange that they didn't send someone out after 10 minutes or so.

I was just getting the feeling that something was going wrong when a flashing red light split the darkness. It came from the street in front of the house and pulsated like a throbbing headache.

Jenna whispered, “Is that the – “

“They called the cops,” I spat out. “Once again, they show up just when I don’t need them.”

“Why would they do that?” she asked. “Littell must have evidence in there he doesn’t want the police to see.”

“My guess,” I said as I strained to get a better view, “is that they reported us as armed trespassers. This way, they get rid of us and the cops never have to go inside.”

She let out a soft groan. “We’re screwed. They’re going to catch us and arrest us for burglary or something.”

I looked back at her. A little germ of an idea was swimming around in my head. “Not if we can lead the police to those things Littell doesn’t want them to see.”

“How do we do that?”

“We go back in.”

“You’re out of your fuckin’ mind.”

It was the reaction I expected from Greg. Jenna and I had sprinted over to his position in a crouch. I almost wiped out once on the dew-covered grass. When we got there, I rattled off a quick summary of what I’d seen and what I wanted to do. He shook his head in wonder. “We almost got killed getting out of there, and now you want to go back *in*?”

“They won’t expect to find us in there,” I argued. “If we can lead the cops to a stash of coke or a suitcase stuffed with cash, the attention comes off of us in a hurry.”

“You think Littell’s got shit like that just laying around?” he asked. “I mean, Allison was clearly the brains in the family, but he can’t be that stupid.”

“Stupid, no,” I conceded. “But he might be arrogant enough to think he has nothing to worry about. You saw him in there. He thinks the sun rises and sets on his command.”

“Okay,” he pressed, “let’s just say we try this insane plan of yours. Where do you propose we look?”

“That crawl space in the basement had a lot of junk in it. He has the basement climate-controlled. I’d say it’s a good place to start.”

Greg didn’t seem convinced. “It could be anywhere in there.”

“True,” I said, looking around to see if the men in blue had wandered back there yet. “But what choice do we have? The way I see it, one of three things is gonna happen. One, we get busted for

burglary. Sure, we can tell the cops we were kidnapped, but right now we're in the backyard holding guns. They might be a little skeptical.

"Two, we run. If we're unlucky, Littell finds us and kills us tonight. If we're *lucky*, we get away and Littell finds us and kills us tomorrow." That drew a snort from Jenna.

"Third, we go back in there, find the dirt we need, and give that bastard what he deserves."

Greg rolled his tongue over his upper teeth. "Or," he said, "we go in there and either get arrested or shot before we find anything."

I didn't need to say anything in response to that. "Those are *really* shitty choices," he said. He thought for another moment. I looked at Jenna, and I could tell by her face where she was coming down on this. She was ready to go back in. My eyes fell on the handcuff still wrapped around her wrist and the broken chain dangling from it.

"Okay." Greg said, with a resigned sigh. "Let's do it."

The window to the basement was still open and the lights were still on. Good thing for us that they'd been in a hurry. I laid down on my stomach and poked my head partway into the opening for a look around. "Anyone down there?" Greg whispered.

"Just Jake," I replied. No one had bothered to move him or even throw a sheet over him. The body was just as we'd left it, surrounded by the dark puddle of urine. I wondered if Littell planned to show the cops that little scene. "Looks like it's all clear. I'll go down first."

I flipped around and went in feet first, being careful to land on the dryer with as little noise as possible. Jenna came next, followed by Greg, who closed and locked the window behind him. When I gave him a questioning look, he said, "It might slow them up for a minute."

The basement was even colder now that the window had been open for so long. A trail of blood led from the laundry area to the stairs, a reminder of the broken nose I'd dealt to my would-be captor.

Greg announced, "I'll look for the stuff in the crawl space. You stand guard."

"Hold on," I said. "You're a lot more experienced with guns than I am. Why don't *you* stand guard?"

"Because I also have a lot more experience with shipments of coke. I'll recognize a bundle when I see it. Can you point and fire that thing if you need to?"

"I can try," I muttered, still not happy with the arrangement.

"You're gonna have to do more than try," he said. "Unless it's a cop who comes downstairs, you've got to take them out." He turned to Jenna. "Give me a hand in here. If you see *anything* that looks even remotely suspicious, let me know."

The two of them went to work while I stood facing the stairs, my gun drawn and ready. My palm felt sweaty against the handle, and I prayed I wouldn't have to fire the thing. There was no telling what I would shoot if I did.

Greg and Jenna were busy searching the contents of the crawl space. I heard Greg cursing to himself as he opened and discarded box after box. He still didn't like this idea; the longer it took to find the goods, the more irritated he became. I couldn't hear what Jenna was saying, if anything.

Then I heard her give a small shriek. I whirled around. "What is it? What's wrong?" I asked, trying to keep my voice low.

She sounded out of breath. "A goddamn mouse just ran across my hand."

"A mouse?" Greg and I replied in unison. "Jesus," I said, "I thought someone had jumped you."

"Sorry," she muttered. "It took me by surprise. I hate mice."

"You're going to get us killed," Greg said, not trying to hide his annoyance.

"I *said*, I'm sorry. Christ."

"Okay, okay," I broke in. "Let's not go for each other's throats here. Focus on finding the dope."

"I'm all for that," Greg said. He turned his back and resumed his search. Jenna glared at him for a second but soon went back to work. I returned to my post. The familiar sound of footsteps on the ceiling drifted down again, along with little wisps of conversation. I thought I caught the word "officer," and slid over to the bottom of the stairs in the hope of hearing better.

"We found no trace of anyone behind the house," an unfamiliar, raspy voice said.

"Nothing?" This voice belonged to Littell. "They might have gone to the woods. Did you look there?"

"We don't have the resources for a thorough search of the woods, given that you say nothing was taken."

"I don't know *yet* that anything was taken, officer, but I haven't had time to do an inventory of my possessions. They may very well have stolen something."

"I doubt that, sir. The plasma TV is untouched, you say none of the silverware is gone, I see a laptop set up over there. None of the obvious things that thieves would go for are missing."

"I *demand* a more thorough search."

The officer's voice took on an icy tone. "We *have* done a thorough search, sir."

As Littell argued with the policeman, I tip-toed back to the crawl space. "Hey," I hissed, "the cop is upstairs and it sounds like he's ready to leave. You got anything?"

Greg said, “Nothin—“, but Jenna cut him off.

“Just a second,” she said. “I might have something here.”

“What?” I asked. “Bring it out.”

She crawled out on her hands and knees. In one hand she carried a very expensive-looking leather briefcase. I took it from her and set it down on the edge of the crawl space. The initials D.A.L. were engraved in its top. “David A. Littell,” I breathed.

“Can you open it?” Greg asked, peering over Jenna’s shoulder. His enthusiasm for the mission seemed to have increased all of a sudden.

“Let’s see.” I pressed the snaps with my thumbs. Luck was shining on us; the briefcase wasn’t locked. I lifted the lid, blinked, stared, and blinked again.

“What?” Greg said. “What’s in it?” He reached over and spun the case around. His eyes also went wide. “Holy shit!”

Jenna’s mouth hung open. She looked at me. “How much do you think it is?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Couldn’t begin to guess. If they’re all hundreds, it could be a hundred grand or more.”

Greg was still incredulous. “You’re telling me this guy leaves a briefcase stuffed with bundles of hundred dollar bills *unlocked* in his basement? *And*, he trusted those numb nuts who were supposed to be guarding us down here with all this money? He must have a dick the size of Texas, ‘cause Allison sure didn’t marry him for his smarts.”

I gave him a look. “Let’s speculate on his more impressive qualities later. Right now, we need to get the attention of a certain officer of the law.”

He nodded. “Any loud noise should do the trick.”

CHAPTER 24

I always wondered how they explained it all to that poor cop's wife. *It was a routine house break-in, Mrs. X. We get calls like this every day. Most of the time, it's nothing.* I'm sure that's what he was thinking when he parked his car in front of the Littell house – another supposed break-in that would turn out to be just a noise coming from an old furnace. Just like the one he'd had the day before and the day before that, he'd take a look around, take a report from the confused and embarrassed homeowner, pretend that he didn't think they were idiots, and move on. Twenty minutes, a half-hour tops, and he'd be back in the cruiser.

But this wasn't a routine break-in. These people had something to hide, and they were prone to panic.

It took just a few long seconds for the cop to hustle down to the basement after Greg dumped the contents of the toolbox on the floor. I'd forgotten it was down there, but he remembered. He dashed over to the spot next to the weight bench where he'd left it. It was full of unused wrenches and sockets, and they all made a jarring clang as they hit the floor.

Within seconds, Littell, Calvin, the guy with the broken nose, and the cop came running down the stairs. The cop looked young, maybe a little older than me. His hand rested on the butt of the pistol in his holster as he faced us. Littell and his crew stood behind him. "Get your hands up!" the cop shouted.

The three of us complied without protest. "That's them!" Littell cried. "Arrest them!"

"Please be quiet, sir," the cop said, in that even tone that they always use when they pull you over on the highway. "I will handle this." He looked at Jake's body lying on the floor, then at me. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

This was bad. Add murder to the list of charges we would face. He bent down and examined the body. “Do you recognize this man?” he asked Littell.

“Yes,” was the reply. “He worked for me. These three killed him earlier.”

The cop stood and looked at Littell with a frown. “You phoned in a breaking and entering. You didn’t say anything about a killing. If you knew someone had been killed, why didn’t you report that?”

Littell sputtered, “*I’m* not the criminal here! I want charges pressed against them!”

The officer looked back at the three of us. “What’s in the briefcase?”

The briefcase lay on the floor next to my feet. I could see that Littell had not noticed it until then. His face flushed and his eyes widened. “I think,” I said, “that Mr. Littell can explain that better than I can.”

“You are under arrest for murder, breaking and entering, and burglary,” the cop responded. “Do not move.”

I kept my hands up and said, “Officer, I really think you should take a look at the contents of the briefcase.”

“That is private property!” Littell snapped. “*My* property that they were trying to steal. The contents are no concern of theirs.”

The cop turned and looked at him. “What’s in there, sir?” he asked.

“My personal papers.”

“What kind of ‘personal papers?’”

Littell gave him a stony look. He clenched and unclenched his fists. “The personal kind, officer.”

The cop studied Littell like a scientist trying to decipher the mystery in a renegade gene. Our plan seemed to be working; the seed of doubt had been planted in his mind. “Open the briefcase, sir.”

“What!” Littell sputtered. “This is an outrage! You have no cause. *I’m* the victim here. Why don’t you question these three dirt bags who broke into my home?”

The cop was unfazed. “Please open the briefcase, sir.”

Littell’s face was a dark color. He stepped forward and picked up the briefcase with shaking hands. As he stood up straight, he looked at me with pure venom in his eyes. I forced myself not to smile at him.

He unsnapped the briefcase, handed it to the cop and took a step back next to the guy with the swollen nose. The cop lifted the lid. I saw his eyebrows rise. He turned to Littell. “You always keep this much in cash around, sir?”

“I don’t have to answer that,” he snapped.

“No, sir,” the officer said, “you are within your rights to not answer questions. However, I must inform you that this gives me probable cause to suspect that illegal activities may be taking place in this house, and those activities may be connected to the death of the man on the floor. I *will* seek a search warrant on the basis of my suspicion. We might be able to avoid that if you volunteer an explanation for this.”

Littell’s eyes were wide, his face was still dark – I thought he looked a little unsteady, like he might faint or something. This was a man of money, accustomed to the power and respect that money gave him. He wasn’t used to policemen talking about search warrants and asking about his business. He took another short step backward and put his right arm out, like he was trying to grab something for support. “Sir?” the officer asked.

The room dissolved into a slow-motion film. The cop was looking at Littell with a confused expression. I was to his left, trying to watch both of them. Greg was to *my* left; Jenna stood behind him. Littell staggered backward, still reaching out with his right hand. I saw him reach toward the guy with the bad nose. He grabbed the guy’s arm, then the side of his faded blue denim jacket. He spun the guy around. The guy ducked his head, as if he thought that Littell was going to pop him and injure his nose worse.

Littell had no interest in his nose, but he *was* interested in what was in the guy’s jacket. He reached into an inside pocket, pulled out a pistol and wheeled back around. I remember thinking, *Holy shit he’s gonna kill us all*. I still don’t understand why he didn’t, or really, *how* he didn’t.

Maybe that isn’t such a mystery. Despite the fact that he was no more than five feet from the cop, his first shot was wild, burying itself in the cinder-block wall behind us. The recoil knocked his arm backward; I got the impression that Littell had even less experience with guns than I did. His face a mixture of panic and fury, he took aim a second time. This time, he didn’t miss.

The cop’s chest exploded in a shower of blood. The force of the impact threw him backward. He lifted up like a hurricane wind had gotten hold of him, and he sailed a couple of feet in the air. When he landed, his head made a stomach-churning crack as it connected with the concrete floor. He made no other sound or movement.

The guy with the broken nose was screaming. “Holy shit! You shot a fucking cop! Holy shit!”

Littell squeezed the gun, his face pale, his whole arm shaking. Snot was running out his nose and dripping onto his lips. He looked around, first at the guy screaming next to him, then me, then Greg and Jenna.

Around this time, the whole room seemed to start spinning. I could hear the guy screaming and the sounds of Jenna crying behind me. Blood was pumping out of the wound in the cop’s chest and streaming onto the floor. The room smelled hot and metallic, and I didn’t know whether I could

smell the blood or the gun or the fear and sweat or what. And just when I thought it was as bad as it was gonna get, the whole universe went to hell.

Littell raised the gun...he pointed it at me...I froze in place, thinking *this is unreal, he's not really pointing that gun at me, this isn't happening...*The other guy was still screaming, and Littell spun around and pointed it at him...The guy shrieked and threw his hands in front of his face...Littell wheeled around again, this time pointing the gun at Jenna, who was sobbing so hard, I don't think she noticed. But I noticed, and I snapped out of it.

"No!" I screamed, and threw myself at her. I grabbed her in a sloppy tackle and knocked us both off-balance. We went down on the floor, landing in an awkward tangle as the gun firing sucked all the sound out of the room.

I rolled her over onto her back and looked for the awful sight of blood oozing from her. There were no wounds in her front, and when I pushed her back over, I nearly wept with relief as I saw no wounds in her back. My next thought was to wonder whether there were any bullets in *me*. But there was no blood on my clothes. I sighed with relief and looked up.

Littell had lost it. He was still holding the gun, still shaking like he was having a seizure. Sweat coated his colorless face. My mind raced, trying to figure out where we could get to before he fired again. Jenna and I were lucky to have escaped his latest shot. I didn't think we could get that lucky again.

All of a sudden, I realized that the screaming had stopped. The guy with the broken nose was still standing next to Littell, and his mouth was open, but no sound was coming out. He stared straight ahead, to my right. I followed his gaze. Calvin was face up on the concrete with a bullet hole in his forehead, just above his right eye. His eyes were still open, staring at the tile on the ceiling.

Greg lay next to him, clutching his stomach. His hands were stained red. His legs kicked and squirmed, slipping in the cop's blood on the floor, blood that was now mixing with his own. I crawled over to him. "Jesus," I gasped.

"M-m-m-motherfucker shot me," he said, right before he vomited. The contents of his stomach landed on his shirt and jacket and made a hideous mixture with the blood. He looked at me with the strange expression of someone who no longer knew where he was. It looked like he was trying to say something, but he lost consciousness before he could get it out.

Still on my knees, I looked back at Littell. He had hired an assassin to kill his wife, he had killed a cop, he had pointed his gun at Jenna and at me, and now he had shot...my friend. I looked at him, the pathetic mess of a man standing there with his gun, looking for all the world like he was going to piss himself. *This* was the guy who fancied himself the big drug kingpin. And right then I decided that he was going down.

With a scream, I launched into another flying tackle. This one was quite a bit better than the one I'd laid on Jenna, and I hit him full force. He grunted as we connected. We tumbled to the floor. I heard the gun rattle as it dropped from his hand.

My goal, to the extent I had one, was to beat him senseless. If he happened to die in the process, that would be a plus. I pounded him with my fists, over and over, striking his face, his head, his neck. He gave me a feeble push, but it was as if he wasn't trying. It was like he *wanted* someone to beat him.

However, his henchman didn't see it that way. He grabbed my neck from behind and squeezed. I don't know why the hell he didn't just grab the gun, but he decided for some reason to try and strangle me. I halted my rain of blows on Littell and clawed at the hands holding my throat. The more I scratched, the harder he tightened his grip.

I could hear Jenna screaming at him in the background. Her voice sounded distant, like she was in another room. Littell scrambled to his feet and sprinted up the stairs. Desperate now, I yanked at the goon's wrists. His hands held firm. I couldn't breathe. My chest felt like it was going to explode, and I was beginning to get a head rush. *Please*, I thought, *please let me get out of this*.

And I did. Not through any of my efforts, but he let go. Just before, I heard a thud, a crunching sound, and a shriek. The grip on my neck disappeared and I dropped to all fours, gasping for air. I turned to see the goon writhing on the floor, his hands pressed to his face, blood squirting from his nose. Jenna stood over him with cold fury in her eyes. Her hands were still balled into fists. "Wh-what did you do?" I managed to hiss.

She fixed the icy stare on me. "I broke his goddamn nose again, that's what I did." She paused, and for a second I thought she was going to do the same to me. "You're welcome," she said.

I nodded, still trying to catch my breath. The pain in my throat was indescribable. "Thank you," I whispered.

Her expression softened a little as she picked up Littell's gun. She cast a disinterested glance at the goon, who was still rolling around on the floor and screaming something about how he was going to kill that bitch. "Shut up, asshole," she snapped at him. "It's over."

He looked up at her and began to stand up. He slipped once in the blood that now covered the cold floor and came down hard on one knee. Howling with rage, he made a second attempt, his arms flailing like some cartoon character trying to fly. This time, he stopped short, as Jenna fired a bullet into the floor a foot or so from where he stood. I think she may have actually been trying to hit him, but she made her point anyway. He froze, at least as much as he could while his feet slipped in the blood.

"I wasn't kidding!" she said. "The next shot will be in your dick. That what you want?"

He shook his head so fast I thought he was give himself whiplash, and he raised his hands up over his head.

"Face the wall," she ordered, and he complied.

"Littell's escaping," I reminded her.

"Go," she said. "I'll keep an eye on this one."

I remembered that her father had been a soldier. The way she was barking out orders, I could see that some of the military style had rubbed off on her. In other circumstances, I might have snapped a salute, but this wasn't the time for sarcasm. I ran up the stairs.

CHAPTER 25

There was no sign of Littell in the kitchen. I reminded myself that he could be anywhere, holding anything that might make a handy weapon, and I had to be on guard. It was also possible, of course, that he had high-tailed it out of the house and into the woods, but I suspected that he was still there. In his mind, he was still the hotshot who wouldn't be chased out of his home by a couple of punks.

Keeping my back to the wall, I worked my way around the perimeter of the first floor. A few smoldering embers cast a glow from the fireplace, throwing shadows from the furniture. My mind saw Littell lurking behind every chair. Every creak of the house sent my pulse rate into the stratosphere. I told myself to calm down, that I was the hunter and he the hunted. I didn't fool myself one bit.

It became apparent that he was not on the first floor, or at least not in the rooms. I hadn't checked the garage. For a moment, I considered looking in there, but something told me I'd come up empty. God knew what else Littell had in that house, but I was willing to bet that the real goods (and whatever weapons he had) were in the upper two floors. I crept to the staircase.

The house had one of those open staircases that led to an upstairs loft. Neither side bordered a wall. There were no lights on in the loft, but there was enough light from the hallway to illuminate some of the second floor, enough for me to see what was in front of me. Trying to remain silent, I climbed the stairs. No sounds came from above or below. For all I knew, I was going up into the bowels of a haunted house.

I was a bit more than halfway up to the second floor when something exploded next to me. Glass sprayed everywhere, showering the steps and me. Instinct kicked in, and I shielded my eyes from the shiny shrapnel. When it was safe to look back, I saw what appeared to be the remains of a large

mirror laying face up behind me at the bottom of the stairs. Shards of glass littered the area around and behind me.

Not only had Littell just given me his general location; he had made it obvious that he didn't have a gun. I had to think that even a dimwit like him would find it easier to hoist a handgun than to rip a mirror off a wall and lug it to the balcony.

I guess I was getting used to near-death experiences, because I shook this one off. Stepping around the glass, I charged up the steps. Littell had dropped the mirror almost straight down on me. That meant that he was up on the third floor; if he were on the second, he would've had to throw the mirror, and I would've seen him first.

I got to the second floor landing fast as I could while glancing upward for any other missiles lobbing my way. The stairs leading to the third floor were on my right; the hallway to the rooms opened up beyond them. It was much darker up there. The most I could see was a few feet in front of me. I edged over to the right and started up the stairs, crouching down low. The railings on each side reached up about three feet or so. It would be easy for him to hit me from out of nowhere and send me flying over the side if I was standing up straight.

There was no sign of Littell at the third floor landing, not even a creaking floorboard. In what little light there was, I could see he had closed the doors to the three rooms up there. Clever; I had to assume that he was waiting behind any one of them, ready to attack. That gave me two choices: Stay out in the hallway and wait him out, or take my chances in the rooms. I knew what I had to do. It felt like my whole body was shaking. Every nerve screamed at me to get the hell out of there. But I knew that this had to end. One way or another, this had to end, and the only way to make it end was to go after him.

I thought of one of those prayers my mother had drummed into me when I was a kid. Why I thought of this one, I don't know, but it ran through my head. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul to keep, if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.* I could hear Mom's voice, younger, teaching me to say the prayer when I was three or thereabouts. Me next to my bed on my knees, my little hands folded in prayer, Mom next to me reciting the words with me. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul to keep.*

The air was as still as a statue and black as midnight. Forcing myself to breathe, I approached the middle door. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul to keep.* I wiped my hand on my jeans and grabbed the doorknob. *If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.* I twisted the doorknob and pushed with all my might.

The door hit empty space. I swatted the inside of the wall, looking for a light switch. Finding one, I flipped it upward. Soft white light spread throughout the room, shocking my eyes for a moment. Once they had adjusted, I saw that the room was empty.

It appeared to be a study or spare office. Tall bookshelves, every square inch crammed with dusty volumes, lined the far wall. A polished oak desk faced the wall with the light switch. An antique table lamp sat on its left next to one of those expensive-looking pen sets that I guess is supposed to impress people. A paperweight that looked like some abstract art sculpture stood to the side of in-and-out-boxes. This was as if Littell had a secretary who distributed and collected his correspondence. Not for the first time, I thought about what a pompous dick he was.

This was all very nice, but the object of my pursuit wasn't in there. I grabbed the paperweight from the desk and went back into the hall, leaving the light on. Still no sound, no smell, nothing to give a clue as to his whereabouts. He had to be in one of the other rooms, and I had to guess which one it was.

I stole a glance over my left shoulder. Nothing coming up on that side. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord, my soul to keep.* I looked ahead toward my right. The light from the room spilled a few feet in that direction. I had to choose. With a gulp, I began to sneak to that door. *If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to –*

I think I felt the floor rise up and knock my wind out before I realized that I'd been hit from behind. The back of my right shoulder burned. Gasping for breath, I struggled to get up, but I was pinned. Someone was on top of me; it wasn't hard to guess who that might be.

I felt my hair being pulled. Littell lifted my head up. I felt a hand reaching around the front of my throat and cool metal pressing against it. He was holding a knife or a letter opener or something. I realized that the burning sensation in my shoulder was the result of him stabbing me there. Now he aimed to cut my throat.

Precious air crept back into my lungs as I struggled to pull the hand away from me. He slammed my face into the floor. I tasted blood in my mouth and felt my nose begin to swell. The knife jabbed at me, nicking my neck but not delivering the intended wound. I knew I might not be so lucky the next time. I had to get him off me, and fast.

In the poor light, he couldn't see what he was doing very well, and that gave me the opportunity I needed. He shifted the hand holding the knife upward a bit, trying to get a better angle on my jugular. I could smell the salty sweat on his right hand, see the whiteness of the knuckles, feel the nearness of the blade. His hand was inches from my face. I lunged forward and bit him.

His thumb was nearest to me, and that's where I aimed my incisors. I latched onto the thumb for all I was worth and ground down. Blood spurted into my mouth; I'm not sure, but I think my teeth hit bone. I bit down on him and I wouldn't let go, not as he shrieked and dropped the knife, not as he pulled harder on my hair, not as I gagged from the thought of what I was doing. I held on like a German shepherd with a prize bone.

Of course, I had to let go. Or he managed to pull away. Or some of both. I had to swallow sometime, and I think I dry-heaved a little. When I did, he ripped his hand away, and "ripped" is the right word. I felt blood splatter my face as he swung away from me. The weight rolled off my back, and I darted away to the wall a few feet from him.

He stood there, squeezing his injured hand, tears of malice spilling onto his cheeks. His face appeared to be some shade of purple, though it may have been the shadows that made it look that way. Snot dripped from his nose. "You motherfucking sonofabitch!" he screamed. "You fucking bit me! You fucking bit my fucking thumb off!"

I was panting. "It's over, Littell. You're going down."

He sneered through his sobs. "You're not so tough, you fucking piece of shit. You have no idea who you're fucking with."

“I think I do. And you’re going down. You’ve killed enough people. You killed your own goddamn wife. And you’re going down.”

He began to circle me. “I don’t think so. If anyone is going down, it’s you. You and the little bitch you hang out with.”

“This is between you and me, Littell,” I said. “Leave her out of it.”

He grinned in that way of your average American psychopath. “You know, I didn’t get to finish what I started with her. But I will, once I’m done with you. Oh, yes, it will be a delight. Her breasts are indeed a delicacy. I look forward to holding them again.”

I knew I was being baited, and I knew he wanted me to lose it and come after him. And I knew that would play right into his hands. I had no way of knowing whether he was telling the truth. It may have been a trick to get me to do something stupid.

If so, it worked. I howled as I threw myself at him. He made a little sidestep, and I hit the railing. My momentum almost carried me over the edge. In panic, I grabbed the bar and stopped myself. He was on me at once, taking advantage of my mistake. I twisted in his grasp, but he was stronger than I’d given him credit for.

He grunted, his eyes wide and filled with spite. His nose was still running; the fluid dripped onto his lips, but he seemed oblivious. He was intent on his goal, which, I realized, was to push me backward over the railing.

I screamed, “No!” and pushed him hard in the chest. He took a half step back but held on. I was bending backward against the railing, trying to resist the force pushing against me. But my resistance was waning. I was exhausted, physically, emotionally, mentally. I was hungry, and in pain, and afraid, and just ready for it to end. And I knew it would, very soon.

You always wonder what your last thoughts will be before you die. I thought about Ronnie, about Mom, about Jenna. I thought of the guys on my high school football team. I thought about my dad, dead for twelve years now. I thought about the last time I saw him in his hospital room, his body wrecked from the chemo and radiation treatments. All he could do was whisper, but he still tried to be a father, giving me a list of things he needed done. There he was, just hours away from going to the Lord, and he was thinking about the things he hadn’t done. I guess we all have unfinished business, and we don’t know when we’re going to run out of time to take care of it.

Now I was just about out of time, and I’d had a lot less of it than my dad had.

I was in this mess because I’d let Littell get my goat with his taunts about Jenna. That was my mistake. However, he also made a mistake, a pretty incredible one. With all that had happened – him shooting a cop and Calvin and Greg, running away, lugging a mirror to the stairway and lobbing it at me, then trying to stab me to death – during all that, this pompous moron had never taken off his tie. Somewhere along the line, he’d lost his suit jacket, but the maroon and black silk tie was still in place. He hadn’t even loosened the knot. Maybe he was planning on a date after he finished killing all of us.

Whatever his reason was, I saw that expensive-looking fashion accessory as maybe my last opening. With what remained of my strength, I grabbed it with both hands and pulled as hard as I could. His

forehead collided with mine and I saw stars for a moment, but I held on. He made a choking noise; I guess the millions of men who have compared neckties to nooses weren't altogether wrong. His face was so close now that we could have kissed. He pushed on me harder, and I kept a firm grip on the tie. That's when he made his second big mistake.

I suppose he was trying to shake off my hold on his tie. If so, it worked, but not the way he intended. He had me bent almost parallel to the floor. Since our heads were so close together, that meant that he was close to being parallel with me. He, however, still had his feet on the floor, while mine had lifted a few inches off. This gave him the advantage, but he lost it when he tried to jump on me.

The next two seconds have run through my mind over and over like a scene from a movie. He rises into the air over me...I see him coming and twist to my left, still clutching his tie...He lands, belly first, on the railing, missing me by an inch or so...I give the tie a hard yank...He slides forward, his hands grasping at air, his fingernails raking my face...I see him flop over the railing, his feet kicking...One hand makes a last-ditch grab for me and misses...I hear a scream, followed a few seconds later by a crunching thud.

CHAPTER 26

Breathing hard and trembling, I peered over the railing. It was too dark to see what lay on the floor, 20 feet below. I turned away and sank to the floor.

It took several minutes for me to stop shaking. I might have stayed there longer, but at some point I remembered that Jenna was down in the basement with the sore-nosed goon. My legs still felt weak, and I had to grab the railing to pull myself up, but I forced myself onto my feet and started down the stairs.

Littell was lying on the floor, his neck bent at a very bad angle. A wide pool of blood surrounded his head. His eyes were wide open, looking surprised, like he couldn't believe he had lost even as he was plunging to his death.

I'd like to be able to tell you that I felt sorry for him, that I was sorry he'd died like that, but I can't. I didn't want to desecrate his body further, like a character on *The Sopranos* who fires an extra five rounds into someone who's already pretty well dead. I didn't feel that kind of hatred. I just wanted to forget him; leave him lying there for someone else to clean up, and forget I ever met him. Stepping around the spreading pool of blood, I headed for the hallway and the stairs to the basement.

I needn't have worried about Jenna. She sat on the stairs, pointing the gun at her prisoner. To my amusement, I saw she had forced him to strip down to his boxers. What was fair for the female prisoners was fair for the males. She looked up at me as I descended the stairs. "Where's Littell?"

I swallowed. The first attempt to speak since the fight was hard. "Dead," I managed to croak out.

She nodded. There was no satisfaction on her face, no relief, no anything. It was as if I'd just told her that I'd answered the phone and it was a wrong number. "You all right?" she asked.

“He got his licks in,” I said in a hoarse voice, “but I’m okay. He stabbed my shoulder, but I don’t think it’s a deep cut.”

“Let me see.” Keeping one eye on the prisoner, she examined my wound. “It doesn’t look too bad,” she announced after a moment.

I nodded my head in the goon’s direction. “What are we gonna do with him?”

“I’m trying to figure that out.” She shifted her feet and studied him like he was a zoo animal or something. “Sooner or later, the police are going to send another car out here to find out why their man hasn’t checked in.”

“Great,” I said. “The place is littered with dead bodies and we’re the ones with the gun. That’s gonna look really good.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” she snapped.

I sighed. “I have no idea.” We were both exhausted and drained. Creative solutions weren’t jumping out at me.

“All right,” she said, “we should get out of here before the police show up. Our friend here comes with us.”

“Jenna,” I said, “I understand where you’re coming from, but we have no car, we have a prisoner to drag around, it’s almost daylight and it’s freezing out. Where the hell are we gonna go?”

“I don’t know, Ray!” The sound of her voice was like a house fire warning me not to get too close. “What do I look like, the grand master with a plan? I’ve been up all night, people have been trying to kill me, I’ve watched people die in front of me, and I want to get out of here. I don’t give a shit where we go or what we do with this asshole. We can leave him on the interstate in his underwear for all I care. Maybe we’ll figure something out once we’re away from here. All I know is I want to get away from this place and have this night be over.”

“Okay.” Maybe she was right; maybe getting out of the house would help clear our minds. “We leave.” Looking at the goon, I said, “Get dressed. You’re coming with us.”

He hesitated until Jenna raised the gun and pointed it at his face. With a sudden burst of enthusiasm, he started to pull on his pants.

I should have heard it coming. Still don’t know why I didn’t. All night long, whenever someone had come down the stairs, I’d heard the footsteps. Maybe this time my mind was still in a fog from the fight with Littell. Maybe exhaustion had dulled my senses.

Jenna pitched forward as she was hit from behind. Her finger had been on the gun’s trigger. The gun, still pointed at the goon’s face, went off as she stumbled. The goon fell to the floor, lifeless. I turned to see what had hit Jenna.

She was face down on the floor now, pinned and trying to reach the gun lying a few feet from her hand. On top of her, also trying to reach the gun, was Carlson. Dried blood matted his hair at the

spot where the bottle had hit his head. He had the weight advantage on Jenna, and he had the weapon almost within reach. I dove, trying to beat him to it.

“Not this time.” He said it in a cool voice, like a handyman talking to a power tool that wasn’t performing as expected. No wildness about him; he was back in professional private eye mode. He was focused on the task at hand, which, in this case, was grabbing the gun and shooting us. He swung an elbow into my jaw, and I saw stars.

He’s going to get it, I thought. It’s over. He’s going to get the gun and kill us. Then Carlson screamed.

Jenna did not have the strength to push him off of her. However, she *could* reach behind her with her left arm. Because Carlson was trying to get to the gun, he had to slide up so that his belly rested on her shoulder blades. This gave her an opening. She forced her left hand between her back and Carlson, found his groin, grabbed a handful of what was there, and gave it a hard twist. This produced said scream.

He rolled off her even as he threw a wild punch. The fist struck her in the shoulder. I have no doubt that it left a nice bruise, but she shook it off and strained forward for the gun. Seeing that she almost had it, Carlson slapped at it. It spun away toward the body of the goon.

I heaved myself up onto my knees, still reeling from the shot to my jaw. Carlson and Jenna were clawing each other, scrambling for the gun. His size and strength would overwhelm her soon. She was putting up as good a fight as she could, but I could see it wouldn’t be enough. If anyone was going to stop him, it would have to be me.

I looked for a way to distract him. I considered and rejected the bleach in the face trick we’d used earlier. He was facing the floor, and there was a risk that I’d hit Jenna with it, too.

My eyes fell on the weight bench to which Jenna had been attached hours before. The bench would make a poor weapon, but next to it sat a pile of weights, the kind that you slide onto a barbell to make it heavier. One of them would do the trick. I sprinted to the pile, grabbed the one on top, leaped over the newest corpse in the basement’s growing collection, and thrust the weight down on Carlson’s unsuspecting hands.

Score one for distracting the opponent. He emitted an ear-splitting scream and rolled over, balling his hands into fists. Freed of his weight, Jenna shot forward and grabbed the gun. She jumped to her feet, breathing hard, and aimed it at the disabled detective. “You all right?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m okay.” Taking her eyes off Carlson for a second, she looked at me. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” I said. “What should we do with him?”

“That’s a really bad question to ask me right now,” she said. I knew that tone of voice. It was bitter and hateful – all the things that she was not, under normal circumstances. “I’d like to string him up and leave him hanging ‘til someone finds him.”

“I’ve heard worse ideas,” I said. I looked down at Carlson, who was now sitting upright and whimpering. “It’s over, Carlson,” I said.

“F-f-fuck you!” he answered.

“Original,” I replied. Shooting a sideways glance at Jenna, I said, “Here’s how I think it should work. We’re gonna call the cops and wait for them upstairs. You are gonna wait with us. Should you attempt to escape, Jenna here may feel compelled to fire that gun she’s holding. There’s no telling what part of you she’ll hit, so I don’t encourage you to try it. You will tell the cops the truth and the *whole* truth about your involvement here, and maybe you’ll get less than ten years.”

I summarized with a statement that showed a whole lot more bravado than I felt. “And *do not* try to fuck us over. If you do, we might have to become unpleasant.” I leaned closer to him. “Capish?”

“I-I’ll kill you,” he sputtered.

“Yes, well, I’d just point out that we have the gun, not you, so that seems unlikely. Now get on your feet.”

He obeyed, though it was a little tough for him to stand up without using his hands. Once he was steady, I said, “Upstairs. Now.”

We marched upstairs, Carlson in the lead, Jenna right behind him with the gun trained on his back, and me at the rear. At the top, Jenna started to direct him toward the large family room where Littell’s remains were lying. “Not there,” I said. “The den.” She gave me a quizzical look but did as I said.

The morning light was beginning to spill through the windows in the den. Looking at the easy chairs and sofa in the room made me realize how much I wanted to sleep. No time for that now. “Where’s a phone?” I asked.

Jenna glanced around the room. “Over there,” she said, pointing with the gun, “on the table next to the – “

Before she could finish the sentence, Carlson had seen his chance and taken it. His hands were no good, but his legs and feet worked just fine. He swung one leg and kicked her legs out from under her, sending her hard to the floor. Now it was our turn to be distracted. He took off on a run down the hallway.

I bent over Jenna. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she grunted. “Worry about me later. Get him!”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I took off after him, shaking my head. This was unbelievable. It felt like this ordeal was never going to end. I didn’t think it would be hard to catch him; I wasn’t in top condition, but I was in better shape than he was. Too many orders of onion rings and too many years away from the football field had added useless pounds to his frame. I would catch him, but this was a complication I didn’t need.

I saw him fling open the door leading into the garage and run inside. I thumped down the hall and into the garage. He was already out the side door. By the time I was out there, he was almost to the end of the driveway and plowing ahead. I’ll bet he hadn’t run like that in 15 years, and I wondered

whether his heart was up to it. That didn't seem to concern him too much, however. He hit the street and kept running, with me in pursuit.

I knew where he was headed. He was following pretty much the same path I'd taken the night Allison was killed. The entrance to the development was off the main road. His aim was to get to the road and disappear, provided he didn't collapse first.

I huffed and puffed down the street, sweat beginning to roll down my forehead and sting my eyes. Reaching the road leading to the security point, he cut left onto the grass. He wanted to avoid the security cameras like I had. I followed, maybe 20 yards behind. The grass was wet with dew, soaking my sneakers and making me slip. I saw him head for the hedgerow that bordered the busy road. He was getting close to carrying out his plan. Letting him get away was unthinkable. Time to kick things up a notch.

I dug down deep for reserve energy and accelerated. When I did, I wiped out and landed face first on the damp earth. The impact reignited the pain in my jaw. Cursing and spitting out dirt and blood, I scrambled to my feet and resumed the chase. He had opened up the lead now; the hedgerow was within a few feet.

Desperate to keep him from escaping, I scanned the ground as I ran, looking for something to chuck at him. The lawn, of course, was immaculate; not a rock in sight. My lungs were on fire, and I was amazed that he was holding up. Then, all of a sudden, he wasn't.

He was still moving, but he was no longer running. I could hear his gulps of air as he walked with long strides toward the shrubs. He'd run out of gas. All I had to do was keep running and I would catch him. Trying to ignore the pain in my face and my sides, I picked up my pace. Now he was 15 yards away...now ten...now five. He split the opening between two shrubs as I closed to within three yards.

A pine-needled branch slapped my nose as I entered the gap. He had held the branch for an extra moment so that it would greet me upon my arrival. Still, I reached out and grabbed a fistful of his shirt as he emerged onto the side of the four-lane road.

"No!" he yelled. He grabbed my arm and tried to pull me loose. I hung on like a leech. "Let – go – motherfu—" he howled, no doubt from the pain in his hands as he held me. Early morning traffic was zipping by on the road, and the sounds drowned out his voice. He dug his fingernails into the flesh of my arm.

"It's over, Carlson!" I shouted above the noise. "Littell's gone, his gang is gone, the money's gone – you've got nothin'. It's all over. You're done."

"The hell I am!" he said. He had twisted around with his back to the road, doing everything he could think of to pry me loose. I wasn't letting go. After everything I'd been through, after all the times I'd been shot at, the kidnapping, the fighting for my life – after all that, I wasn't letting this fat, double-crossing son of a bitch go.

Then he kicked me, and I let him go.

The same powerful leg that had taken Jenna down now worked its talents on me. He'd hit her below the knees. The blow intended for me, however, was aimed right at my groin. I saw what was coming and jerked around toward my right. His foot missed its target but landed a sledgehammer blow on my upper left thigh. The combination of the pain and the spin away from him caused me to lose my balance. I lost my grip on his shirt and fell down hard on my ass.

His face broke out in a triumphant smile as he backed away from me. I tried to get up, but I slipped and landed on my butt again. "This isn't over, Davis," he snarled, backing up. "Thanks to you, my hands are fucked up, else I'd kill you right now. But when they heal, I'm comin' back for you. No one, *no one* does what you've done to me and gets away with it."

I stared at him. All the fight was gone from me. I'd lost.

He was still panting hard and his face was bright red. He backed onto the shoulder of the road and inched backward. "You hear me, boy? This isn't over. You'd better just watch your —" He was cut off by the sound of brakes squealing too late, the nauseating thud of an SUV connecting with his right side, and the sight of his body sailing through the air. In the dim morning light, I saw him fly in a wobbly arc across the horizon and land neck first on the cold pavement of the highway.

Someone with an iota of conscience and human kindness would have gone out there to see if by some miracle he was still alive. I was way past that point. I crawled back behind the shrub and watched as a distraught-looking woman jumped out of the now-parked SUV, screaming for help. A dusty Hyundai pulled up behind her; a black guy got out to give her aid. She was crouched down on the road next to Carlson, wailing about how he'd come from out of nowhere, how she hadn't seen him. The guy looked at Carlson and started a refrain of holyshit holyshit holyshit. I saw him slap a hand over his mouth and turn away. He gagged twice but stopped short of vomiting. Looking shaky, he pulled a cell phone from his pocket, pressed the buttons and held it to his ear. "There's been an accident," he said, presumably to the 911 operator. "I think this guy is dead."

Jenna was sitting on the ground with her back against the garage door when I returned to the house of horrors. She looked up at me with a look that was expectant and resigned. She was filthy and defeated and beautiful. I wanted so much to kiss her. It would have been the exact wrong thing to do.

"He won't bother us anymore," I said.

EPILOGUE

I haven't seen Jenna since we got back to town that day. There wasn't much conversation as we walked the back roads into town. It must've been a ten-mile walk to where I'd left my car, and we tried to keep out of sight as much as possible. We were both a mess; passers-by who noticed us might remember later. Having to answer questions about the night's events was not something either of us wanted to do.

I drove her to her apartment. She got out of my car and closed the door with a weak clunk, having not spoken a word during the entire ride. I watched her walk into the building and close the door behind her.

After waiting a few days, I tried to call her. The phone rang about 15 times, but she never picked up. I tried again the next day; same result. This went on for the next several days, and after a while I stopped trying. I also stopped going to work. I never even quit. Der Fuhrer would have fired me the first day I failed to show anyway, so there didn't seem to be any point in going in.

One day, I threw all my stuff in the trunk of my car and took off. I didn't go straight home; I didn't feel quite ready for that. Celebrating the holidays was the last thing I felt like doing. I spent Christmas Day watching TV all day long in a hotel room.

I drove home a couple of days after Christmas. Mom cried and hugged me and bawled me out for not calling and cried some more and made me eat. "You're skinny as a rail," she declared. "Didn't they have supermarkets where you were?" I mumbled something about not liking my cooking. She seemed to buy that.

As I ate my dinner, she filled me in on Ronnie's successful surgery, paid for with the help of a fundraiser Stevie threw at the bar and some choice communications between a lawyer and the

insurance company. Seems the lawyer heard about Ronnie from a cousin who had worked with him back in the day. This guy was one of those whose commercials bragged about how he wasn't scared of insurance companies. Mom, Ronnie and I can vouch for the truthfulness of his ads.

Ronnie would be laid up for a long time, but the worst was behind him. The doctor told us he would be okay. Mom somehow forgot about how she'd been ready to accept God's will and let him go and how I'd refused to give up. Remembering what she'd said to me on the phone got my blood boiling, but I didn't see any point in dredging it back up. I let it go.

My letters to Jenna went unanswered. I wrote to her about home, about Ronnie, about how much I missed her. God knows if she even opened them. After a while, they started coming back stamped UNDELIVERABLE – NO FORWARDING ADDRESS.

So she had moved on. I wouldn't see her again. I couldn't blame her. As far as she was concerned, I was one big bad memory. If she wanted to make a new start, being around me was not the best way to do it. I imagine she took her share of the money and left the state; hell, maybe she left the country, or maybe she went to college. She had the means to pay for it.

She was the one who had insisted that we not take everything that was in the briefcase. I wanted to grab the whole thing, but she objected. It was drug money, she said, and she didn't feel right taking all of it. Half the cash in the briefcase would be plenty. I made a brief argument, but gave up after a while. Half the contents *was* a lot of cash. If it made her feel better to leave some behind, I wasn't going to put up a fight.

I haven't decided what to do with my share. Mom and Ronnie don't even know I've got it. I guess I should put most of it in mutual funds. Maybe I'll make a donation to some charity; the local Pop Warner football league or something. It has to be anonymous; I don't want people asking me how I came into all that money.

In the end, it doesn't matter much what I do with it. It won't bring Jenna back to me. It won't undo everything I saw and felt, all the people I watched die. It won't make the nightmares go away, the ones that have me waking in a cold sweat every night. Hell, it was the money that drew me down there, into that swamp of drugs and scumbags and violence. It almost got me killed many times over. It got a lot of other people killed. It might have screwed up Jenna for life.

The money's cursed. What will I do with it? Maybe I can do the least harm by just having a few cold ones at Stevie's bar. And I'll be sure to leave the waitress a nice tip.

THE END

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