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CHAPTER

1

As Billy Graves drove down Second Avenue to work, the crowds worried him: a quarter past one in the morning and there were still far more people piling into the bars than leaving them, everyone coming and going having to muscle their way through the swaying clumps of half-hammered smokers standing directly outside the entrances. He hated the no smoking laws. They created nothing but problems—late-night noise for the neighbors, elbow room enough for the bar-cramped beefers to finally start swinging, and a plague of off-duty limos and radio cabs all tapping their horns to hustle fares.

It was the night of St. Patrick's, worst of the year for NYPD's Night Watch, the handful of detectives under Billy's command responsible for covering all of felony-weight Manhattan from Washington Heights to Wall Street between one a.m. and eight a.m., when there were no active squads in any of the local precincts. There were other worst nights, Halloween and New Year's Eve for two, but St. Patrick's was the ugliest, the violence the most spontaneous and low-tech. Stompings, blunt objects, fists—more stitches than surgeries but some very malicious acting out.

One-fifteen in the a.m.: tonight, as always, the calls could come in at any time, but experience had taught him that the most fraught hours, especially on a drinking holiday, were between three a.m., when the bars

and clubs started shutting down, everyone pouring out into the streets at once, and five a.m., when even the most hard-core animals were out of fuel and lurching off to oblivion. On the other hand, the city being the city, Billy never knew exactly when he'd see his pillow again. Eight a.m. could find him at a local precinct writing up bullets on an agg assault for the incoming day squad while the actor was either still in the wind or snoring in a holding cell; it could find him hanging around the ER at Harlem Hospital or Beth Israel or St. Luke's—Roosevelt interviewing family and/or witnesses while waiting for the victim to either go out of the picture or pull through; it could find him strolling around an outdoor crime scene, hands in pockets, toe-searching through detritus for shell casings; or, or, or, if the Prince of Peace was afoot and Yonkers-bound traffic was light, he could actually be home in time to take his kids to school.

There were gung ho detectives out there, even on the lobster shift, but Billy was not one of them. Mainly he hoped each night that most of Manhattan's nocturnal mayhem was not worthy of his squad's attention, just petty shit that could be kicked back to patrol.

"Seoul man, how you be," he drawled, stepping into the 24/7 Korean's across Third Avenue from the office. Joon, the night clerk with his gaffer-taped horn-rims, automatically began gathering up his regular customer's nightly ration: three sixteen-ounce Rockstar energy drinks, two Shaolin power gel squibs, and a pack of Camel Lights.

Billy cracked a can of Go before it could be bagged.

"Too much of that shit make you even more tired," the Korean delivering his standard lecture. "Like a boomerang."

"No doubt."

As he reached for his Visa card, the security monitor next to the register caught Billy in all his glory: football burly but slump-shouldered, his pale face with its exhaustion-starred eyes topped with half a pitchfork's worth of prematurely graying hair. He was only forty-two, but that crushed-cellophane gaze of his combined with a world-class insomniac's

posture had once gotten him into a movie at a senior citizen's discount. Man was not meant to start work after midnight—end of story, pay differential be damned.

The Night Watch office, on the second floor of the Fifteenth Precinct and time-shared with Manhattan South Homicide, which occupied it during the day, looked like a cross between a fun house and a morgue. It was a drear, fluorescently lit scrum of gun-metal-gray desks, separated by plastic partitions brightened with autographed eight-by-tens of Derek Jeter, Samuel L. Jackson, Rex Ryan, and Harvey Keitel, along with mug shots, family snaps, and garish crime scene photos. An eight-foot glass tank filled with miniature sharklike catfish dominated one cinder-block wall, an embassy-sized American flag fronting the other.

None of his regular squad were in: Emmett Butter, a part-time actor, so fresh to the unit that Billy had yet to allow him to spearhead a run; Gene Feeley, who, back in the late '80s, was part of the team that broke up the Fat Cat Nichols crack empire, had thirty-two years on the Job, owned two bars in Queens, and was just there to max out his pension; Alice Stupak, who worked nights in order to be with her family during the day; and Roger Mayo, who worked nights in order to avoid being with his family during the day.

It wasn't unusual for the room to be deserted thirty minutes into the tour, given that Billy didn't care where his detectives spent the shift as long as they answered their phones when he needed them. He didn't see the point of making everyone sit at their desks all night like they were in detention. But in exchange for this freedom, if any one of them—with the exception of Feeley, who was so old-boy-wired into One PP that he could do or not do anything he wanted—if any one of them failed to pick up when he called, even once, they were gone from the squad, dead batteries, toilet drops, drop kicks, theft, Armageddon, the Rapture, or no.

Depositing the grocery bag in his minute windowless office, Billy walked out of the squad room and down a short hall to the dispatcher's desk, manned by Rollie Towers, a.k.a. the Wheel, a big Buddha boy in track pants and a John Jay college sweatshirt, ass ballooning off either side of his webbed Aeron chair as he fielded the incoming calls, taking

all requests for Night Watch from the various crime sites and fending them off like a goalie.

“Well look, Sarge, my boss isn’t in yet,” Rollie nodding to Billy, “but my guess is here’s what he’s going to say. Nobody got hurt, guy can’t even say for sure it was a gun. I’d just throw a good interview at him, wait for the Fifth Squad to come in tomorrow morning, see if it fits any kind of pattern they’re working, all right? There’s really not that much for us to do on this one. No problem . . . no problem . . . no problem.”

Hanging up and swiveling to Billy: “No problem.”

“Anything happening?” Billy reached for one of Rollie’s Doritos, then changed his mind.

“Throwdown in the Three-two, both shooters female, one on the sidewalk, the other in the rear seat of a ghetto cab. They’re like maybe a couple yards apart, six shots fired back and forth and get this: neither of them gets hit. How’s that for sharpshootin’?”

“Was the cab moving?”

“It started out, one of the broads was chasing the other through the Eisenhowers, she jumps in the car, screams for the driver to haul ass, but the minute he sees the guns he jumps out and starts hoofing it back to Senegal, probably halfway there as we speak.”

“Feets do yo’ stuff.”

“Butter and Mayo are up at the Three-two watching Annie Oakley and Calamity Jane sleep it off.”

“And the driver? For real.”

“They found him eight blocks away trying to climb a tree. They took him in for an interview, but he only speaks Wolof and French, so they’re waiting on a translator.”

“Anything else?”

“No sir.”

“And who do I got.” Billy dreaded the voluntary sign-ups, the ever-changing collection of overtime-hungry day-tour detectives who nightly padded out his paltry crew, the majority of them no good for anything after two a.m.

“There’s three, supposedly, but one guy’s kid got sick, another was last seen at a retirement racket down in the Ninth, so maybe you should

find out if he's in any shape to come in at all, and you better check out what Central Park sent us."

"He's in? I didn't see anybody."

"Check under the rug."

Back in the squad room, the sign-up, Theodore Moretti, was hiding in plain sight, hunched over, elbows on knees, at the desk farthest from the door.

"I'm in the air," he hissed into his cell, "you're breathing me in right now, Jesse. I'm all around you . . ."

Short and squat, Moretti had straight black hair parted precisely down the middle of his skull and raccooned eyes that made Billy's seem limpid and tight.

"How you doing?" Billy stood over him, his hands in his pockets. But before he could introduce himself as the boss, Moretti just up and walked out of the office, coming back a moment later, still on the phone.

"You really think you can get rid of me that easy?" Moretti said to the lucky-in-love Jesse, Billy right then recognizing him for what he was and writing him off accordingly. Although money was the prime motivation for those signing up for a one-off tour with Night Watch, occasionally a detective volunteered not so much for the overtime but simply because it facilitated his stalking.

One forty-five a.m. . . . the sound of tires rolling over a side street full of shattered light bulbs was like the sound of Jiffy Pop achieving climax, the aftermath of a set test between the Skrilla Hill Killaz from the Coolidge Houses and the Stack Money Goons from the Madisons, four kids sent to St. Luke's for stitches, one with a glass shard protruding from his cornea like a miniature sail. Where they got all the light bulbs was anyone's guess.

By the time Billy and Moretti stepped out of their sedan, the 2-9 Gang Unit, six young men in windbreakers and high tops, were already harvesting collars, plasti-cuffing belly-down bangers like bundling wheat. The battleground itself was lined with two layers of rubbernecks: on the sidewalk, dozens of locals, a few, despite the hour, with kids in

tow; overhead, an equal number of people hanging out the windows of the exhausted-looking SROs that ran along both sides of the narrow street.

Sporting a shaved head and calf-length denim shorts like a super-annuated playground bully, Eddie Lopez, the unit FIO, stepped to Billy, a dozen as yet unused plasti-cuffs running up his forearms like bangles.

“These two crews been trading smack on Facebook all week. We should have been here before they were.”

Billy turned to Moretti. “The kids in the ER, go over with somebody from the Gang Unit, start taking interviews.”

“Are you serious? They won’t say shit.”

“Nonetheless . . .” Billy waving him onward, thinking, One asspain down.

From the opposite end of the block, emerging out of the tree-lined darkness like a charging carnivore, came a battered livery cab, hitting its brakes nearly on top of the arrestfest, a fortyish woman in a bathrobe popping out of the rear seat before the car had even come to a full stop.

“They say my son could lose his eye!”

“Seven dollars,” the driver said, extending his hand from the side window.

“Here we go,” Lopez muttered to Billy before leaving his side. “Miss Carter, all due respect, we didn’t tell Jermaine to be out here two in the morning hunting for Skrillas.”

“How do you know what he was doing out here!” The streetlight turned her rimless glasses into disks of pale fire.

“Because I know him,” Lopez said. “I’ve had dealings with him.”

“He’s going on a financial scholarship to Sullivan County Community College next year!”

“That’s great, but it don’t throw a blanket over it.”

“I’m sorry, Charlene,” one of the women said, stepping off the sidewalk, “all due respect, but truth be known you’re just as much to blame as the boy who threw that glass.”

“*Excuse me?*” Miss Carter cocking her head like a pistol.

“Seven dollars?” the driver said again.

Billy slipped him five bucks, then told him to reverse out of the block.

“I hear you every community meeting,” the woman said, “you keep saying, My boy’s a good boy, he’s not mobbing for real, it’s the environment, it’s the circumstances, but this here officer is right. Instead of confronting your child you keep making excuses for him, so what do you expect?”

The kid’s mother became big-eyed and motionless; Billy, knowing what was coming, hooked her arm just as she threw a punch at the other woman’s jaw.

The crowd rippled with clucks and murmurs. A spinning cigarette landed on Billy’s shoulder, but in these close quarters no real telling who had been the intended target, so *c’est la guerre*.

As he stepped back to brush the ash off his sport jacket, his cell rang: Rollie the Wheel.

“Boss, you remember the ’72 Olympics?”

“Not really.”

“The Munich massacre?”

“OK . . .”

“We had a guy there, helped take the silver in the four-by-four relays, Horace Woody?”

“OK . . .”

“Lives in Terry Towers in Chelsea.”

“OK . . .”

“Patrol just called in, somebody stole his medal. You want us to take it? Could wind up being a media thing, plus Mayo’s just sitting at his desk talking to himself again.”

“Then have him head over to the St. Luke’s ER and babysit Moretti, make sure he isn’t boosting scalpels or something.”

“And the case of the purloined medallion?”

Lopez peered at him over the head of a thirteen-year-old manacled Money Stacker. “Hey, Sarge? No sweat, we can take it from here.”

“Send Stupak to meet me,” Billy said into the phone. “I’m heading over now.”

It sounded like a whole lot of nothing, but he had never met an Olympian before.

Terry Towers was a twelve-story Mitchell-Lama semi-dump in the West Twenties, one step up from a housing project, which meant a few less elevators chronically out of commission and hallway odors not quite as feral. Apartment 7G itself was small, stifling, and untidy, dinner dishes still on the dinette table at two forty-five in the morning. In the middle of the cramped living room, Horace Woody, deep into his sixties but DNA-blessed with the physique of a lanky teenager, stood hands on hips in his boxers, the taut skin across his flat chest the color of a good camel hair coat. But his eyes were maraschinos, and his liquored breath was sweet enough to curl Billy's teeth.

"It's not like I don't have my suspicions as to who took the damn thing," Woody slurred, glaring at his girlfriend, Carla Garrett, who leaned against an old TV console covered with esoterically molded liqueur bottles and dog-eared photos in Lucite frames. She was maybe half his age, on the heavy side, with steady, realistic eyes. The droll, resigned twist of her mouth confirmed Billy's hunch about this one being a dummy of a run, at worst a slow-motion domestic, but he didn't really mind, fascinated as he was by the older man's uncanny youthfulness.

"Some people," Woody said, "they just don't want you to have no life in your life."

There was a light rapping at the front door; then Alice Stupak, five-four but built like a bus, eased into the apartment, her chronic rosacea and brassy short bangs forever putting Billy in mind of a battle-scarred, alcoholic Peter Pan.

"How's everybody doing tonight?" she blared with cheery authority. Then, zeroing in on the problem child: "How about you, sir? You having a good evening?"

Woody reared back with narrow-eyed disapproval, a look Billy had seen Alice get before, mainly, but not exclusively, from their suddenly off-balance male customers. But as fearsome as she was for some to behold, Billy knew her to be chronically lovelorn, forever pining after

this detective or fireman, that bartender or doorman, endlessly driven to despair that all these potential boyfriends automatically assumed she was a dyke.

“Ma’am?” Stupak said, nodding to Woody’s girlfriend. “Why are we here?”

Carla Garrett pushed off the console and started camel-walking toward the back of the apartment, curling her finger for Billy to follow.

The halo-lit bathroom was a little too close, uncapped bottles and tubes of skin- and hair-care products rimming both the sink and the tub, used towels drooping from every knob, rod, and rack, stray hairs in places that made Billy look away. As Woody’s girlfriend began rooting around inside a full and ripe laundry hamper, Billy’s cell rang: Stacey Taylor for the third time in two days, his stomach giving up a little whoop of alarm as he killed this call from her like all the others.

“You got it in there?” Woody barked from the hallway. “I know you got it in there.”

“Just go back and watch your TV,” Stupak’s voice coming through the closed door.

When the girlfriend finally stood upright from the hamper, she held the silver medal in her hands, as big around as a coffee saucer.

“See, when he gets his drink on he wants to pawn it and start a new life. He did it already a few times, and how much you think he got for it?”

“A few grand?”

“A hundred and twenty-five dollars.”

“Can I hold it?”

Billy was disappointed in how light it was, but he felt a little buzzed nonetheless.

“See, Horace’s OK most of the time, I mean, I certainly been with worse, it’s just when he gets his hands on that Cherry Heering, you know? The man has got a alcoholic sweet tooth like a infant. I mean, you could get a good bottle of fifty-dollar cognac or Johnnie Walker Black, leave it on the table, he won’t even crack the seal. Something tastes like a purple candy bar? Watch out.”

“I want my damn medal back!” Woody yelled from farther away in the apartment.

“Sir, what did I just say to you?” Stupak’s voice flattening with anger.

“Start a new life . . .” the girlfriend muttered. “All the pawnshops around here got me on speed dial for when it comes in. Hell, he wants to take off? I’ll loan him the money, but this here is a piece of American history.”

Billy liked her, he just didn’t understand why a woman this lucid didn’t keep a cleaner house.

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry they sent you. Usually some uniform guys from the precinct come up, mainly just because he was a famous athlete, and we play Where’d she hide it this time, but you’re a detective, and I’m embarrassed they bothered you.”

When they opened the bathroom door, Woody was back in the living room, sprawled on the vinyl-covered couch watching MTV with the sound off, his jellied eyes dimming into slits.

Billy dropped the medal on his chest. “Case solved.”

Walking with Stupak to the elevators he checked the time: three-thirty. Ninety more minutes and the odds were he’d have gotten away with murder.

“What do you say?”

“You’re the boss, boss.”

“Finnerty’s?” Billy thinking, What the hell, you cannot not celebrate, thinking, Just a taste.

“I always wanted to go to Ireland,” Stupak shouted over the music to the dead-handsome young bartender. “Last year we had reservations and everything but, like, two days before the flight my girlfriend came down with appendicitis.”

“You can always get on a plane by yourself, you know,” he said politely enough, looking over her shoulder to wave at two women just coming through the door. “It’s a very friendly country.”

And that was that, the guy leaning across the wood to buss the new arrivals and leaving Stupak to blush into her beer.

"I've never been to Ireland myself," Billy said. "I mean, what for, I'm around Micks all day as it is."

"I never should've said 'girlfriend,'" Stupak said.

His cell rang, not the Wheel, thank God, but his wife, Billy race-walking out onto the street so she wouldn't hear the racket and start asking questions.

"Hey . . ." his voice downshifting as it always did when she rang him this deep into the night. "Can't sleep?"

"Nope."

"Did you take your Traz?"

"I think I forgot but I can't now, I have to get up in three hours."

"How about you take a half?"

"I can't."

"All right, just, you know, you've been here before, worse comes to worse, you'll have a tough day tomorrow but it won't kill you."

"When are you coming home?"

"I'll try and duck out early."

"I hate this, Billy."

"I know you do." His cell began to vibrate again; Rollie Towers on line two. "Hang on a sec."

"I really hate it."

"Just hang on . . ." Then, switching over: "Hey, what's up?"

"Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water."

"Fuck you, what do you got?"

"Happy St. Patrick's Day," said the Wheel.

By the time Billy and most of his squad made it to Penn Station and then to the long, greasy, lower-level arcade that connected the Long Island-bound commuter trains to the subway platforms at the opposite end, the cops who were on the scene first, both Transit and LIRR undercovers, had taken control of the situation better than he would have expected. Not sure what to preserve of the one-hundred-yard blood trail,

they had cordoned it all off with tape and garbage cans like a slalom run. They had also miraculously managed to round up most of the sodden homebound revelers who had been standing under the track information board when the assault occurred, corralling them into a harshly lit three-sided waiting room off the main concourse. Taking a quick peek into the room, Billy saw the majority of his potential witnesses sitting on hard wooden benches gape-mouthed and snoring, chins tilted to the ceiling like hungry baby birds.

“Looks like the guy got slashed under the board here, took off running, and ran out of gas by the subway,” Gene Feeley announced, his tie unknotted and dangling like Sinatra at last call.

Billy was surprised to see Feeley there at all, let alone first detective on the scene. But then again, this was Feeley’s thing, the old-timer usually disdaining any run unless there were at least three dead or a shot cop, front-page stuff.

“Where’s the body?” Billy thinking he’d be lucky to see his kids by dinnertime.

“Just follow the yellow brick road,” Feeley said, pointing to the red-brown sneaker prints that marked the way like bloody dance-step instructions. “It’s one for the scrapbooks, I’ll tell you that.”

They arrived at the subway turnstiles just as a southbound express pulled into the station, more pie-eyed revelers disembarking onto the platform, ho-shitting, laughing, stumbling, blowing *vuvuzelas*, everyone assuming the wide-eyed stiff was just drunk except for the two middle-aged detectives from the Crime Scene Unit who had opted to take the subway to work, their forensics kits making them look like down-at-the-heels salesmen.

Billy snagged a wandering Transit detective. “Listen, we can’t have trains stopping here right now. Can you call your boss?”

“Sarge, it’s Penn Station.”

“I know where we are, but I don’t want a fresh herd of drunks stomping all over my scene every five minutes.”

The victim lay on his side, neck and torso compressed into a hunch, his left arm and leg thrust straight out before him as if he were trying to kick his own fingertips. It looked to Billy as if the guy had been trying

to jump the turnstile, bled out mid-vault, then froze like that, dying in midair before dropping like a rock.

“Looks like a high hurdler just fell off the front of a Wheaties box,” Feeley said, then wandered off.

As a CSU tech began teasing the wallet out of the victim’s formerly sky-blue jeans, Billy stopped marveling at his live-action lava cast and took his first good look at his face. Mid-twenties, with wide open, startled blue eyes, arched pencil-thin eyebrows, milk-white skin, and jet-colored hair, femininely handsome to the point of perversity.

Billy stared and stared, thinking, Can’t be. “Is his name Bannion?”

“Hold the phone,” the tech said, pulling out the guy’s driver’s license. “Bannion it is, first name—”

“Jeffrey,” Billy said, then: “Fuck me sideways.”

“Why do I know that name?” the CSU tech asked, not really interested in an answer.

Jeffrey Bannion . . . Billy immediately thought of calling John Pavlicek, then considered the hour and decided to wait at least until daybreak, although Big John might not mind being woken up for this one.

Eight years earlier, a twelve-year-old boy named Thomas Rivera had been found beneath a soiled mattress in the tree house of his City Island neighbors, the Bannions. He had been bludgeoned to death, the bedding atop his body spattered with semen. John Pavlicek, back in the late ’90s Billy’s partner in anti-crime but at the time of the murder a detective assigned to the Bronx Homicide Task Force, was called in when the body was found by a cadaver dog three days after the boy went missing.

Jeffrey Bannion’s oversized, learning-disabled younger brother, Eugene, admitted to the jerking off—the tree house was where he always went for that—but said that when he discovered the boy, he was already dead. Nineteen-year-old Jeffrey told Pavlicek that he himself was sick in bed that day, said Eugene had already told him that he had done it. But when the cops turned the lights on the younger Bannion, Eugene not only stuck to his story but couldn’t even begin to speculate on how Thomas Rivera had come to be in the tree house or talk about what kind of weapon

had done the deed, no matter how much trickery or cajoling the Homicides employed, and it made no sense that a fifteen-year-old that dim could hold out on them.

Pavlicek liked the older Bannion for it from the jump, but they couldn't shake his sick-bed story, and so the younger brother went to the Robert N. Davoren juvenile center at Rikers, a Bloods, Netas, and MS-13 petri dish, where he was placed in Gen Pop without the requisite psych eval, a big oafy white kid who tended to throw indiscriminate punches when he was freaked, and his murder, only five days into his incarceration, racked up nearly as many headlines as that of the boy he had allegedly killed.

Within days, despite Pavlicek's full-bore campaigning, the Rivera homicide was marked "closed by arrest," formally shutting down any further investigative work. Shortly after that, Jeffrey Bannion packed his bags and moved in with various relatives out of state. At first, Pavlicek tried to swallow his frustration by burying himself in other jobs—although he never lost touch with Thomas Rivera's parents and he never lost track of Bannion's whereabouts—but when he learned, through connections, of two incidents of assault in which the vics were preadolescent males, one in each of the small towns Jeffrey was living in at the time, neither investigation leading to an arrest, his obsession with nailing this kid returned in raging full effect.

Eventually Bannion moved back to New York, sharing a house in Seaford, Long Island, with three friends. Pavlicek, still on him like Javert, reached out to both the Seventh Precinct in neighboring Wantagh and the Nassau County Detective Bureau, but either Jeffery had kept his nose clean or he had gotten even slicker with age. The last anyone had heard of him—and most galling of all—was that he had recently applied to the auxiliary PDs of a dozen Long Island townships and had been offered training by three.

"My supervisor wants to know how long we have to be shut down for," the returning Transit detective said.

“We’ll be as fast as we can be,” Billy said.

“He says we got to mop that blood up out there by five-thirty, same for removing the body. That’s when the commuters start coming in earnest.”

Clean it up or preserve it . . . Clean it up or preserve it . . . Somebody will complain; somebody always complains.

As another mob staggered off the latest 2 train into Penn Station, a teenage girl stared goggle-eyed at Bannion for a second, looked up searchingly into her boyfriend’s eyes, then wheeled and puked onto the platform, adding her DNA to the mix.

“It’s a bad night for this,” the Transit cop said.

Stepping back into the seamy arcade, Billy stared down the length of the tape. Other than the still-congealing blood, the killing floor—a debris field of candy wrappers, Styrofoam cups, the odd article of clothing, a shattered liquor bottle barely held together by the adhesive on its label—gave up too much and nothing at all.

As CSU continued to bag and photograph, as the LIRR and Transit detectives and his own crew began to work the waiting room, wandering among the semiconscious potential wits like a squadron of visiting nurses, Billy noticed that one of the commuters sleeping there had what appeared to be blood on his Rangers jersey.

He took a seat next to him on a wooden bench, the kid’s head tilted back so far it looked as if someone had slit his throat.

“Hey you.” Billy nudged him.

The kid came out of it, shaking his head like a cartoon animal just whacked with an anvil.

“What’s your name?”

“Mike.”

“Mike what?”

“What?”

“How’d you get the blood on you, Mike?”

“Me?” Still whipping his head from side to side.

“You.”

“Where . . .” Looking at his jersey, then: “That’s blood?”

“You know Jeffrey Bannion?”

“Do I know him?”

Billy waiting, One Mississippi, two . . .

“Where is he,” the kid asked.

“So you know him? Jeffrey Bannion?”

“What if I do?”

“You see what happened?”

“What? What are you talking about, what happened?”

“He’s been stabbed.”

The kid shot to his feet. “What? I’ll fucking kill them.”

“Kill who.”

“What?”

“Who do you want to kill.”

“How the fuck should I know? Who did it. You leave them to me.”

“Did you see it?”

“See what?”

“When was the last time you saw him? Where was he, who was he with.”

“He’s like a brother to me.”

“Who was he with.”

“How should I know. What am I, his bitch?”

“His what? Where do you live.”

“Strong Island.”

“More specifically.”

“Seaford.”

“Who else was with you, point out your posse.”

“My posse?”

“Who, sitting here, in this waiting room, was with you tonight, everybody going home to Seaford.”

“I’m no rat.”

“I’m asking who are his friends.”

Mike turned his head as if it were on a rusty turret, taking in half the dull-eyed commuters around him.

“Ey,” he blared. “You hear what happened?”

No one even turned his way.

“Anybody carrying anything tonight?” Billy asked.

“Like weed?”

“Like a weapon.”

“Everything’s a weapon.”

“How’d you get that blood on you, again?”

“What blood,” the kid said, touching his face.

“Was anybody in your pos . . . was anybody beefing with anybody tonight?”

“Tonight?” The kid blinked. “Tonight we’re going into the city.”

Billy decided to send him and everybody else to Midtown South in order to sleep it off, then be reinterviewed. His guess was that these interviews would yield nothing. He was also pretty sure that with half the eastern seaboard stomping through the crime scene like migrating wildebeests, the forensics would be useless as well. His money was on the surveillance tape.

He called it in to his division captain, the guy instantly starting to quack like a duck as if Billy had killed Bannion himself, worked for a while with the Transit cops down by the subways and the LIRR detectives under the track information board, and then, praying for a money shot, climbed the stairs to the cramped room where the monitors were set up, only to be told by the tech on duty that the master hard drive that uploaded all the security footage had been damaged by a coffee spill a few hours before and the only way to salvage the film at this point was to send it out for file retrieval, a process that could take days, if not weeks.

Back down on the floor, needing one of his squad to supervise the witness transport, Billy started to approach Feeley but balked when he saw him yakking it up with a white-haired deputy inspector, the two of them probably swapping memories of their time together chasing Pancho Villa. He went looking for Stupak instead and found her standing in front of a riot-gated calzone shop interviewing a maintenance worker.

As soon as he told Stupak what he wanted done, her glance reflexively went to Feeley. “What,” she muttered, “General Grant too busy prepping for Gettysburg?”

No one liked having Feeley on the squad, but no one liked him less than Alice, a hater of both the old boy network and shirkers in general. It was personal, too: despite her sixteen years on the Job, including seven in Emergency Services and three with the Violent Fugitive Apprehension Team, the old bastard took way too much pleasure in addressing her now and then as Babydoll.

Once Stupak was on her way, Billy fielded another overwrought call from his division cap, followed by one from the squad commander of Midtown South. Then, at seven a.m., with the scene secured and none of the possible witnesses in any shape to talk, Billy decided to sneak back to Yonkers just long enough to take his kids to school.

At this hour the traffic on the northbound Henry Hudson Parkway was mercifully light, and by seven forty-five he was turning onto his street. As he pulled up to the house, he saw Carmen standing on a six-foot ladder in front of the carport, trying to extract the deflated basketball jammed between the portable hoop and the backboard, the thing having been stuck like that since January, when it became too cold for the kids to play.

“Just poke it, Carm.”

“I tried. It’s in too tight.”

Sitting behind the wheel in a half-trance of exhaustion, Billy watched her try to muscle the ball free, the morning sun turning her polyester nurse’s whites the color of ice.

She was his second wife. His first, Diane, an African-American art therapist, had left him in the wake of the highly publicized protests over his accidental and near-fatal shooting of a ten-year-old Hispanic boy in the Bronx. In all fairness, the bullet that hit the kid had first passed through its intended target, a Dusted giant armed with an already bloodied lead pipe. At first, Diane, only twenty-three at the time to his twenty-five, tried to hang fire with him, but after the papers picked it up and a Bronx reverend with a fat press book set up a month-long protest vigil around their Staten Island home, she gradually came apart and then bailed.

Billy had met Carmen when he was in the Identification Squad posted to the ME's office, having been sent there from anti-crime as a form of internal exile after the shooting. She had come in that day to identify Damian Robles, until his OD, thirty-six hours earlier, her living husband.

Despite being a heroin addict, Robles had been a mixed martial arts professional with a ridiculously chiseled physique, and it embarrassed Billy to admit that two days after death the guy still looked better than Billy did on the best day of his own life.

Dead was dead, however, and twenty minutes after first laying eyes on her, as they stood side by side staring at the corpse through a long rectangular window, he just came out and said it: "What were you doing married to a lowlife like that?"

But instead of going for his face or screaming bloody murder, she calmly answered, "I thought he was what I deserved."

Within a month they were leaving clothes in each other's apartments.

Within a year they were sending out save-the-dates.

Her initial attraction to him, or so he thought at the time, was a no-brainer: sudden widow looking about and glomming onto the protective policeman standing by her side. Billy had always been a sucker for any kind of My Hero vibes when they occasionally came his way, but in truth he had fallen in love purely because of her looks and the way she sounded: her huge, smudge-rimmed eyes in a heart-shaped face, her skin the color of light toast, and that voice—lazy and smoky when she felt that way and backed by a deep and easy laugh that made him drowsy with pleasure. Lust was there from the beginning, but every other long-playing thing—trust, tenderness, companionability, et cetera—had only come about with time.

Not that living with her was any walk in the park. Her mood swings were fierce, and she was prone to savage dreams, often waking him up with her sleep talk, semicoherent tear-choked pleas to be left alone. And what he at first thought was a temporary desire for a protector in her life had over the years morphed into a river of visceral, mostly inarticulate need for him, a neediness he never quite understood but responded to

with everything he had. She could never wear him out with her demands; there was something about her that made him want to be the best possible version of himself. He loved her, loved to come through for her, loved that what he had always thought of with embarrassment as his flatline personality, his bland stolidness, could become the rock in the raging sea of another soul's life.

Still, there was something inside her he could never quite get at. Sometimes he felt like a knight assigned to protect a maiden from a dragon that only she could see, and so he paid attention to the words when she cried out in her sleep, when her half-panicked rants became less coherent and maybe closer to the bone, but he was not a particularly analytical individual, so all his secret studying came to nothing. And given that he had been raised in a home in which he'd been taught to take people as they were, no questions asked, a home in which the character trait prized above all else was an Apache level of forbearance, he would die before straight up asking his wife of twelve years, the mother of his two sons, *Who Are You*.

"Where are the survivalists?" he called from the car.

"You're taking them?" she asked.

"Yeah, but I left a body at Penn Station, so I got to go back right after."

"I can take them."

"No, just where are—"

"Declan!"

Billy's all-night eyelids butterflied in pain: Carmen's initial solution for finding anyone was to yell.

Stalling for a last heartbeat of inaction, he let his gaze stray to their front porch, where Carmen's green nylon St. Patrick's Day banner, all shamrocks and wee people, snapped in the wind, one day past its expiration date, although Billy knew that by dinnertime it would be replaced with the Easter banner, bunnies and parti-colored eggs on a backdrop of powder blue.

“I’ll get them,” he finally said, climbing out of the car like a man with prosthetic hips.

The interior of the house was a rambling, amiable mess—a war chest’s worth of boys’ toys and sports gear strewn around the living room, smothering the worn brocade couch and matching easy chairs; a big yellow eat-in kitchen with its painted-wood “country” table perpetually covered with bills, circulars, condiments, and the odd hat or glove; three thin-walled bedrooms all crying out for a fresh coat of paint; and a sunken den that for some reason always smelled like mushrooms. And wherever one looked was evidence of Carmen’s obsession with country cornball: real, ceramic, or papier-mâché Indian corn and pumpkins resting on every available surface, homely homilies inscribed on chain-hung plaques, farm-stand-purchased whirligigs, milkmaids painted on wooden ovals, and enough framed sketches of barnyards, thatched cottages, and lonely rural lanes to fill a Hallmark museum.

All of this occasionally set Billy’s teeth on edge, but given his wife’s childhood and early adolescence in the cracked-out Bronx of the late 1980s, her later teen years in the notorious East Metro section of Atlanta, and her current job as a triage nurse in the St. Ann’s knife-and-gun-club ER, he didn’t have the heart to question her taste in decor. In fact, he couldn’t care less what the house looked like, as long as it made her happy. All he cared about was his books, the shelves in the den filled with crime novels written mainly by ex-cops, retirement for dummies self-help volumes, sports memoirs, and real estate study guides, these last foisted on him by John Pavlicek, who was hell-bent on hiring him to help run his empire of apartment buildings the moment Billy put in his papers.

Looking for the kids, Billy came upon his six-year-old, Carlos, sitting on the side of his bunk bed dressed in full camo, staring at his seventy-eight-year-old grandfather asleep under the kid’s X-Men blanket. Billy’s dad was a well-remembered city-wide Chief of Patrol who had first made his name as a foot soldier with the Tactical Patrol Force, a.k.a. Riot Squad, during the anti-war, let-it-burn days of the late ’60s. These

days, however, the old guy tended to go in and out of thinking that his grandsons were both Billy and that he was still living in his first home in Fordham Heights with his dead wife. Additionally, he often got up and crept into someone else's bed in the middle of the night, either one of the kids' or Billy and Carmen's, making pajamas mandatory sleep-wear for one and all.

"Let's go, buddy."

"Is Grandpa gonna die?" Carlos asked calmly.

"Not today."

Eight-year-old Declan, also wearing camo from boots to forage cap, was on his knees in the living room, trying to get the pet rabbit out from under a couch with a hockey stick, the huddled, personality-less thing hissing and sneezing like a Komodo dragon.

"Dec, just leave him there."

"What if he bites an electric cord?"

"Then we'll have rabbit for dinner. Let's go."

Just as they finally left the house, Billy's cell rang, the division captain again, and he locked himself in the car before the kids could get inside and screw his play.

"Hey, boss."

"Where are you at?"

"Midtown South doing the bullets and waiting for some of the witnesses to revive."

"Why'd you let them clean up the scene?"

"Because it's Penn Station, you have fifty thousand people walking through."

"It's a crime scene."

"Again, it's Penn Station. It's the crossroads of the Western world."

"What are you, Radio Free America? Since when does Transit call the shots?"

"This time they were right." Then adding: "In my opinion."

"How about the security tapes?"

"Computer glitch."

"Computer glitch."

“They sent them over to TARU.”

“Dad!” Declan belted out, slapping the car window.

“Billy!” Carmen came over with the frozen basketball. “What the hell are you doing? They’re going to be late!”

“Who was that?” the division cap asked.

“Boss, one of the wits just gave up a name. I’ll call you back.”

After dropping off the boys at their school, Billy headed back into the city, wrote up his bullets for the day-tour detectives in Midtown South—it was their headache now—debriefed a few bosses, fended off a police shack reporter, ducked a TV camera, and got back in the car. When he finally re-returned to the house at one p.m., Millie Singh, the alleged housekeeper, was watching *Mob Wives Chicago* with his father in the living room, neither of them acknowledging his presence.

Millie barely knew her way around a mop, prepared spicy Indo-Caribbean dishes that would tear your throat out, and tended to take naps on the job. But back in the day she had been the only one in their moonscape of a precinct with guts enough to take the stand in a gang-related homicide, and as a result she’d had to sleep in her bathtub in order to protect herself from the nightly gunshots coming through her windows, until Billy and the others moved her into one of Pavlicek’s newly renovated buildings. Ten years later, at roughly the same time that Billy’s father had first been diagnosed with dementia, Millie’s teenage daughter moved back to Trinidad to live with her father and she lost her job at Dunkin’ Donuts. Hiring her as their housekeeper had seemed like a good idea at the time, and in all fairness to Millie, the kids loved her, she loved his dad, and she was in possession of a valid driver’s license. Besides, Carmen liked to do her own housecleaning, if you could call it that.

Billy stepped into the kitchen, poured himself half a milk glass of vodka and cranberry juice—the only thing that could put him to sleep at this hour—and went into the bedroom. He stowed his Glock 9 on the top shelf of his closet behind a shoe box filled with old bank statements,

and with a last burst of energy called Pavlicek to give him a heads-up about Bannion.

“Hey.”

“I heard,” Pavlicek said.

“What do you think,” Billy said, crawling into the cool swan boat of a bed.

“That there’s a God after all.”

“It was a freaky scene.”

“I heard that too.”

“Heard from who?”

“The drums.”

“Do the Riveras know?”

“I called them this morning.”

“How’d they take it?”

“The mister was cool, Mom not so good. I’m going out to City Island to see them later.”

“Good.” Billy’s eyes felt like sandpits.

“I want you to come with me.”

“John, I’m sleeping.”

“You saw the dead fuck. They might need to ask you things.”

“Come on, this is private with you and them.”

“Billy, I’m asking you.”

He gargled the last of his drink, crunched on a sliver of ice. “Make it about six, I just got into bed.”

“Thank you.”

“You owe me.”

“Afterwards we can pick up Whelan, then head downtown to the restaurant.”

“The dinner’s tonight?”

“Yes sir.”

“OK, let me sleep.”

“Hey,” Pavlicek held on, “what’s the most bullshit word in the English language?”

“Closure.”

“Give that man a cigar,” Pavlicek said, then hung up.

. . .

He had forgotten all about the dinner, the monthly steak house reunion of the self-christened Wild Geese, seven young cops averaging three years on the Job, fresh to anti-crime in the late '90s, a tight crew given a ticket to ride in one of the worst precincts of the East Bronx. Of the original seven, one had moved to Arizona after retirement, and one had died from a three-pack-a-day habit, leaving a hard-core five: Billy, Pavlicek, Jimmy Whelan, Yasmeeen Assaf-Doyle, and Redman Brown.

They had been something else back then, preternaturally proactive, sometimes showing up at the trouble spots two steps ahead of the actors, and they were decathletes, chasing their prey through backyards and apartments, across rooftops, up and down fire escapes, and into bodies of water. Many cops administered beatdowns as a penalty for being made to run, but the WGs got high off the chase, often treating their collars post-arrest like members of a defeated softball team. They thought of themselves as a family, and family membership was extended automatically to those in the neighborhood they liked: the owners of bodegas, bars, barbershops, and take-out joints, but also the numbers runners—the numbers going back to the Bible as far as they were concerned—a few of the old school reefer men, and a handful of restaurateurs who had secret gaming rooms upstairs or in the basement where the WGs could throw some bones and drink for free.

As far as stolen goods went, fell-off-a-truck merchandisers oftentimes offered NYPD courtesy discounts on everything from kids' backpacks to designer pantsuits to power tools. A drink here, a standing hump there, a cut-rate cashmere pullover now and then—no one in the Wild Geese took money, demanded a sin tax, or even lost their civility. Although they were periodically called on to corral a few for the requisite trip to the Tombs, they generally tolerated whores who were reasonably discreet and, as an added bonus, funny. Nonviolent junkies were left on the street and used as informants. Their dealers, however, were fair game.

And if one of the family got hurt by a bad player—a street girl having her eye blackened or finger broken by her Slapaho Mac Daddy, a Wild Geeser catching a paintball or pellet-gun round in the back, a casino

operator or bodega owner taken off by the local mokes—then they would all descend as one, and the beatdowns and banishments would commence. It was all about family; they would do the job as required, but they would really step to the fore for those they deemed “worthy,” given that some people in the East Bronx, as elsewhere, as everywhere, would always try to get high to escape, want a little extracurricular loving, chase a money dream scribbled in numbers across a crumple of paper. Not all cops were as laissez-faire in their attitude toward the out-riders of the precinct, but the Wild Geese, in the eyes of the people they protected and occasionally avenged, walked the streets like gods.

The good news and the bad news was that their kind of high-yield police work was a fast track to a gold shield. Within five years, all the original WGs had moved on, the irony being that Billy, who was the youngest and least experienced, had been the first one to get the nod. After the double shooting, which earned him both a citation for bravery and a civilian review board hearing, the department, in its slap/caress way, decided to promote him in order to bury him—in his case, to the basement of the morgue, since the Identification Squad, like any other, was composed primarily of detectives.

At the end of the day, some of the WGs became better detectives than street soldiers, others lesser cops behind their gold shields. Some discovered gifts never used before; others lost the opportunity to use the gifts they had had all along.

And it was also as detectives, dispersed to various squads across the boroughs, that, like Pavlicek coming up against a Jeffrey Bannion, they had all met their personal Whites, those who had committed criminal obscenities on their watch and then walked away untouched by justice, leaving their obsessed ex-WG hunters heading into retirement with pilfered case files to pore over in their offices and basements at night, still making the odd unsanctioned follow-up call: to the overlooked counterman in the deli where the killer had had a coffee the morning of the murder, to the cousin upstate who had never been properly interviewed about that last phone conversation he had with the victim, to the elderly next-door neighbor who left on a Greyhound to live with her grandchildren down in Virginia two days after the bloodbath on the other side of

the shared living room wall—and always, always, calling the spouses, children, and parents of the murdered: on the anniversary of the crime, on the victims' birthdays, at Christmas, just to keep in touch, to remind those left behind that they had promised an arrest that bloody night so many years ago and were still on it.

No one asked for these crimes to set up house in their lives, no one asked for these murderers to constantly and arbitrarily lay siege to their psyches like bouts of malaria, no one asked to feel so helplessly in the grip of this nonstop black study that they had no choice but to pursue and pursue. But there they all were: Pavlicek forever stalking Jeffrey Bannion; Jimmy Whelan pursuing Brian Tomassi, the ringleader of a white street gang who, in the aftermath of 9/11, had chased a Pakistani kid into an oncoming car; Redman Brown stalking Sweetpea Harris, the murderer of a college-bound high school baller who had made him look bad in a playground pickup game; Yasmeen Assaf-Doyle forever tracking Eric Cortez, a twenty-eight-year-old small-time felon who had stabbed to death a reedy myopic ninth grader because the kid had talked to Cortez's fourteen-year-old girlfriend at their school.

And Billy himself, in his first year aboveground as a precinct detective after too many living below like a mushroom among the dead, shackled for all time to Curtis Taft, the killer of three females in one evening: Tonya Howard, a twenty-eight-year-old who had just dumped the man who would become her murderer; her fourteen-year-old niece, Memori Williams, who happened to be sleeping over the night Taft decided to get back at his ex; and Dreena Bailey, Tonya's four-year-old daughter by another man. Three shots, three dead, then right back to bed, Curtis Taft, as far as Billy was concerned, the most black-hearted of the Whites. But so were they all, if you asked each of their star-crossed hunters.

Twenty years after they had started out running the streets like high-topped commandos, almost all of them were living new lives. Redman got shot through the hips in a hostage situation, went out on a three-quarters medical, and took over his father's funeral parlor in Harlem. Fast-and-loose Jimmy Whelan put in his papers before he could be fired and became an itinerant building super, living from year to year in some of the finer basement apartments of the city. Yasmeen, who couldn't

take the boss mentality, quit to become assistant head of crimes against students at a university in lower Manhattan and achieved a black belt in complaining about her new bosses over there. Pavlicek, already on the make while still in uniform, just got too busy being rich. Only Billy, the baby of the group, still hung in. He had no reason not to: as his father had declared over a raised glass on the night of Billy's graduation from the academy: "Here's to God, because the man had to be a natural-born genius to invent this job."

An hour after his phone call with Pavlicek, Billy was dreaming about Jeffrey Bannion—nude and adrift in an oversized bell jar filled with red punch—when one of the kids came home from school and slammed the front door as if he were being chased by wolves. A moment later he heard Carlos yelling at his brother, "You quit so I win!," followed by Carmen shouting, "What did I tell you about yelling in the house!"

Even so, Billy managed to fall back asleep for half an hour, until the sheets began to rustle and Carmen, naked, nuzzled into the small of his back, her left hand reaching around to burrow into his boxers. Billy was so tired he thought he would die, but her hand on his prick was her hand on his prick.

"We had three kids brought in with gunshot wounds three days in a row," she murmured in his ear. "Turns out the second kid shot the first for shooting someone in his crew, the third shot the second in retaliation, and the best friend of the second shot the third for the same reason. It was like the bonehead Olympics. Anything going on down there?"

"Give me a second, will you?"

After twelve years they were doing pretty good, he thought, hitting it twice a week more often than once, and they seemed to be putting on weight apace of each other, also not so bad, Carmen still able to pull off wearing a two-piece, although Billy kept his T-shirt on at the beach. In the beginning, there wasn't a physical position or a sexual fancy off-limits, but as they grew more comfortable with each other, it always seemed like straight-up missionary, after a little of this and a little of that, unfailingly

ended with both of them afterward euphorically raiding the refrigerator in search of the next fun thing to do.

“So,” she said.

And in a rush of bleary optimism Billy decided that maybe he didn’t need to sleep this week after all.

MILTON RAMOS

The handcuffed drunk in the backseat had lost three thousand dollars betting on the NCAA Final Four and decided that it was the fault of his wife's face, which he promptly set to rearranging.

"March Madness. I was you, that would be my defense," Milton's partner said without turning around.

"Fuck her, and fuck you."

"You know what? Stick with that attitude, because judges hate sincereremorse."

"And what are you?" the drunk said, squinting at Milton sitting silently behind the wheel.

"Excuse me?" Seeking the guy's eyes via the rearview mirror.

"You know what *SPIC* stands for?" The drunk leaned forward, his alcohol-fueled malice expanding, searching. "Spanish Indian Colored. Otherwise known as Greaser, Savage, Nigger. Put them all together you get one big fucking unibrow Monkey. You."

Milton pulled the car over alongside Roberto Clemente Park, then turned off the ignition. He sat there for a moment with his hands palms up in his lap.

"Can we not do this?" his partner asked with an air of resignation.

"Ook, ook," from the rear seat.

Milton popped the trunk via the lever beneath the steering wheel, got out, and walked to the back of the car.

“The fuck’s he doing?” the drunk asked.

“Shut up,” the partner said, sounding both angry and a little depressed.

The rear door opened abruptly and Milton lifted the prisoner out of the car by his elbow. In his free hand he carried a telescoping baton and a grease-smudged towel.

“The fuck are you doing?”

Without answering, Milton frog-walked his prisoner into the maw of the park until he found what he considered a suitable spot. Not too open, not too constricted, and branches low enough to grip.

“What are you doing?”

“Down, please?”

“What?”

Milton popped him in the chest and the drunk was suddenly lying faceup in the grass, his shoulders on fire from the impact of landing with his hands cuffed behind his back.

“Jesus, man, what are you doing?” Near-pleading now, his voice suddenly much closer to sober than a few minutes earlier.

Milton knew he should never have been given a gold shield. It was a misguided reward for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, a barbershop during a holdup in his own Bronx neighborhood when two assholes with .38s had come in while he was buried in aprons, towels, and shaving cream. The shop was a known numbers drop, easy pickings, and after they kneecapped one of the barbers, Milton kicked his chair around on its swivel and started shooting from beneath his polyester body bib, which promptly caught fire. By the time his barber whipped off the flaming sheet he had second-degree burns on his left arm and thigh.

Both perps, one shot in the throat, the other in the face, survived but went directly from Misericordia to the Tombs. The mayor and the police commissioner came to see Milton in the burn unit of that same hospital, the PC presenting him with his detective’s shield in front of cameras.

The question put to him was “Where do you want to go.”

Where. He wanted to go wherever he could hide.

Patrol had always been his thing, the street his wheelhouse—frontier justice, an eye for an eye, and the culling of information through extra-curricular beatdowns. He would be a terrible detective, and he knew it: not too bright with paper trails, not particularly subtle or patient in an interview room, and possessed of a freakishly violent yet icy temper when provoked.

Since the shootout at the barbershop he’d been transferred to seven different precincts in five years. Truculent and inept, he was a burden to each squad, until he landed at the 4-6 in the Bronx. Even before Milton arrived, the lieutenant there got the message that he was doing a great job with Detective Ramos, we all appreciate it, no more hot potato. Milton’s new boss made the savvy decision to stash him in the burglary squad, which averaged thirty-five cases a month, all difficult to solve. But even in that Eeyore world of low expectation he managed to go three years without a single arrest, at which point he became the supervisor of night complaints, his job to come in at eight a.m. and farm out the complaints that had accumulated since the previous midnight to the other incoming day-tour detectives—a housecat gig that reeked of dunce cap.

But after a long stretch in that purgatory, a new boss finally put him back in the regular squad, and six months after that there wasn’t a known actor in the 4-6 who didn’t come to dread hearing the phrase, usually spoken in a low-key, near-distracted monotone, “Get out of the car, please?”

Milton took the dirty towel and carefully folded it into a thick band. He then straddled the drunk and laid the towel across his throat. Snapping the telescoping baton out to its full length, he perched it lengthwise along the center of the towel. Carefully stepping on the narrow end with his right foot, he pressed the steel rod into one side of the guy’s throat. Then, holding on to a branch in order to keep his balance and modulate the pressure, he placed his other foot on the handle end so that now his

full weight was coming down on the Adam's apple, that weight fluctuating between 180 and 190 pounds, depending on the time of the year and what holidays had just passed.

The drunk's suddenly bulging eyes turned a damp, golden red, and the only sound he was capable of making was a faint peeping like a newborn chick heard from one farm over.

After thirty seconds or so, Milton stepped off the baton one foot at a time, then squatted and lifted the thick towel beneath; the throat was unblemished. He replaced the towel on the guy's throat and once again balanced the baton across its center.

"One more time?"

The drunk shook his head, even the weak peeping sound gone.

"Come on . . ." Milton rose to his height, found his balance again at both ends of the rod, and started seesawing. "In case I never get to see you again."