

**Monday**  
**June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010**

**A true friend is someone who is there for you  
when they'd rather be anywhere else.**

**-Len Wein**

# One

Daniel Logan, Attorney-at-Law, planted a pair of .22 caliber bullets behind my left ear late one night in June of 2010. This was in retaliation for my exposing his connection to a Russian mobster named Dudiyn Alekhin, and for thwarting the Russian gangster's well-thought-out plan to become the Don Corleone of New Orleans. Alekhin placed this unassuming attorney in New Orleans immediately after Hurricane Katrina had done its own damage to my hometown. The disruption the storm brought to the criminal justice system allowed Logan to find and exploit weaknesses in the court system and in the laws themselves. Logan spent the first five years of the city's post-storm recovery defending a precisely chosen sort of criminal. All of them committed the exact sort of crimes Dudiyn Alekhin had in mind to advance the resurgent New Orleans underworld. A titanium plate in my skull saved my life and drove home to the attorney and his client that not only was I not going to be easily removed, but that I would continue to stymie them at every turn. The plate that saved my life this time was only there because my skull had been cracked open in a previous attempt on my life nearly six years earlier. I tell you this not so you can be impressed by my luck, or to offer comfort for the way life and death seem to be playing a game of hot potato with my soul.

I share these details mostly because not dying meant I entered the hellish bureaucracy of the Louisiana State Police's human resources department rather than the actual Hades that surely awaits me. I could not return to duty until I convinced the same state psychologist who objected to my initial hiring that I was not suffering debilitating flashbacks or harboring severe anxieties from having been shot yet again. Doctor Jorgens had been justifiably concerned with the VA's PTSD diagnosis in the military records submitted with my application to join the Louisiana State Police. It took the intervention of a politically connected uncle to secure my place in their ranks. Uncle Felix had also arranged for me to leave the academy as an Inspector 2 thanks to my background in military intelligence.

Logan's assassination attempt had inflicted nothing more than a flesh wound, but I phrased my responses to Doctor Jorgens's questions about my reaction to the

attack to at least sound as if I took the attack seriously. The state police cannot afford to employ a detective who is cavalier about life and death. Dr. Jorgens was satisfied that I was successfully dealing with being shot while also emotionally juggling my almost-fiancé leaving town because *she* could not handle the latest attempt on my life.

The doctor cleared me to begin two weeks of desk duty before returning to active duty. Being sidelined came at an inconvenient time. The Chief of Detectives was about to retire, so I went on vacation for the two weeks rather than face whatever administrative tasks he might find for me to do until his replacement took office.

Hopefully this explains why I was wide awake at two o'clock on a Monday morning holding a half-empty plastic cup imprinted with "Huge Ass Beer" and watching a street hustler shuffle a trio of red cups on an old TV tray. He was pocketing five bucks at a time from anyone dumb or drunk enough to think they were going to beat a short con's game that pre-dates Cleopatra. Roux, my seventy-five-pound pit bull and unofficial K-9 partner, was mesmerized by the hustler's hand speed.

The trick in this game was to keep up a patter that distracted the mark while he shuffled the trio of cups. He allowed his marks to 'win' enough times that they started placing large bets. The hustler's movements became subtly different, and he made eye contact just long enough to change the position of the ball from where the mark had been tracking it. I was much less concerned with this hustler's practiced trickery than I was that he might be working with one or more of the Quarter's pickpockets to rob the distracted crowd the hustler had attracted. I was about to flash my badge and let the young man know it was time to move along when my phone rang.

"You have reached me," I said after checking the caller ID. The incoming number displayed as Caller Unknown on the screen. While I had no idea who was calling me at that hour of the night, the caller had to know me because this was my private line.

"Ghost?" a male voice inquired. Now I knew the mystery caller was someone from very far in my past. I have been called 'Cadillac' nearly my entire four years' of posting in New Orleans. The nickname the caller used dated to my days in the 75<sup>th</sup> Rangers. I had gradually developed my habit of distancing myself from my teammates after burying one too many of them. I earned the nickname Ghost because I was always the first to lose contact with my Army buddies as soon as one of us left our unit.

“Who is this?” I asked. The connection was not very good.

“Brian,” the caller said. “Brian Hollis.”

Brian Hollis was my high school roommate for three years at Wentworth Military Academy in Lexington, Missouri. We served one tour in the Rangers together. The last time I had seen Brian was after my Army discharge and I was looking for work with the private security outfit he was operating in Iraq at the time.

“Are you in New Orleans?” I asked. Perhaps he was in town on business and was looking for a familiar face to join him for a late-night cocktail.

“No such luck,” he said with a hollow chuckle. “I am in serious legal trouble. That’s where I am.”

“I am not a lawyer,” I reminded him. “How much trouble are you in and where are you?”

“Think lawyers, guns, and money. I am being persecuted for doing the right thing.” Referencing a Warren Zevon song did not satisfactorily address the first part of my two-part question. “I am on my way to Lexington. I can explain everything better in person. Can you meet me there on Saturday?”

“Probably not,” I decided. “Do you have any other friends you can call?”

“Friends got me into this,” he answered cryptically.

“Well, good luck,” I said and waited for Brian to hang up.

I felt bad for less than a minute about refusing to get involved in his legal woes. I could not forget that I received the skull plate which saved my life doing a job he recommended I take. What he led me to believe was a State Department-sanctioned operation proved to be an illicit conspiracy by a private contractor intent upon influencing the election of the Iraqi Transitional Government. I was not inclined to trust Brian, and his vague answers did not overcome my reluctance to lend a hand to a former brother in arms.

The first colorful tints of Monday morning’s sunrise were illuminating the corner of Esplanade and Frenchman Street and the Marigny neighborhood across from the French Quarter by the time Roux and I returned to our apartment above the Italian-Creole bistro on Decatur Street where I have a partner’s stake. Brian’s call was forgotten by the time I crawled into bed, but that damn song was stuck in my

head.

## Two

Ralph Easter and I were enjoying cocktails at Strada Ammazarre's L-shaped bar that evening. Ralph works for the State Department, and I do not believe Ralph is his real name. He was responsible for monitoring and blocking Iraq's efforts to extradite Tony Venzo and me to answer for our roles in the illegal operation which nearly ended my life.

I was lavishing free cocktails on Ralph to celebrate his thirty-fifth birthday and I was doing my best to keep a friendly look on my face while the confirmed bachelor provided his unsolicited advice on my love life.

"Face it," Ralph said before sharing another of his philosophies. "People get sucked into a relationship because the sex is like the odor inside a new car. Sooner or later, that new car smell dissipates and leaves you with a beast that needs constant maintenance."

"It's why I prefer cars that challenge me to do my best driving," I said. I should have told him in plain English that the reason Katie and I had worked as a couple was that we were compatible outside of bed. The great sex was just a bonus.

"Now there is a new car I wouldn't mind spinning around the block," Ralph said and adjusted his barstool to watch the woman who had just walked into the restaurant. Our high-backed barstools were at the street end of the bar so I could keep an eye on the door and the dining room beyond the service well. We were tucked into a corner, so most of the regulars and guests did not notice us.

Jason, the happy hour bartender, moved to the center of the bar to take the striking woman's drink order. She was a tall blonde who looked closer to forty than thirty. She wore a knee-length red dress with a halter top and very low back. The garment covered less skin than it exposed. I could literally hear Ralph panting.

She handed Jason a gold Amex card and ordered a bottle of Krug champagne. Jason poured her first flute and twisted the bottle into the ice filled bucket that he set on the bar just to the left of her seat. The bar only keeps six bottles of it in stock at a time. I suspected that she had ordered the Krug to set a price for her company that few men standing along the bar could afford.

She looked around and then leaned forward to ask Jason something. He pivoted

and pointed directly at Ralph and me. She gave a small shake of her head but then looked at the two of us again. She downed her flute in one long gulp and continued to stare at us as Jason silently refilled the slender wineglass.

There was a visceral intensity to the woman's expression, but she allowed a thin smile to crack the line of her lipstick as she approached us. I had initially failed to recognize the woman because she was the last female I expected to walk into my bar. This was not going to be any scene from Casablanca.

"Make your escape while you can," I advised Ralph as the blonde beauty closed the distance between us and I finally put a name to her face. He ignored the advice and offered his seat to her. His gentlemanly act allowed him to stand behind her at an angle which allowed him to admire her tanned back and partially exposed breasts. She touched his cheek as she thanked him for his manners and made sure he had a good look at her cleavage before she swiveled the stool to face me.

"Hello, Princess," I greeted Alexis Hollis with her derogatory nickname from our childhood in hopes it might make her reconsider speaking with me. Brian Hollis had lobbied for his kid sister to be our military high school's Queen for three years running, but she had received fewer votes each year she was nominated.

"I didn't recognize you. Have you had plastic surgery?" Alexis may have thought this was an insult in turn.

"I needed some reconstructive surgery a few years back, and my sister saw an opportunity to make me handsome." Tulip had provided the plastic surgeon who reconstructed my face over my rebuilt skull in an Italian hospital with an actor's photograph she had ripped out of a magazine in the hospital's waiting room because she had no recent pictures of me.

"Kudos to your sister." Alexis touched my face before firmly pressing her hand to my arms and chest. "And you work out. Very nice."

"I am going to pass on swapping compliments," I informed her and fell silent. She did not need my validation to know she was even more attractive than she was as a fifteen-year-old harlot who had amused herself by seducing my classmates.

"How are you doing these days?" she asked, to salvage the conversation.

"I am getting by." I leaned far enough back to stop her touching my face.

“I should say so,” she laughed. “You own half this place and still find time to play cops and robbers for the state police. I always imagined you were going to be a lifer in the Army.”

I had not spoken to Alexis Hollis in over twenty years. There was no rational explanation for how she knew this much about me.

“Plans change,” I replied and waited to hear what else she knew.

“You seem to have changed course very well,” Alexis said and waved her empty champagne flute. Jason appeared with practiced timing to refill her glass. He pressed three fingers to the stem and barely raised his left eyebrow to let me know her rate of consumption exceeded the bar’s usual tolerance. We prefer not to overserve and create problematic guests.

“It’s been an interesting transition,” I continued to deflect her attempts to act as if we were old friends. “What brings you to town?”

The man sitting to Alexis’ left stood up to answer the hostess’s call that his table was ready. Ralph jumped into the empty seat rather than make a quiet exit.

“He is never going to tell me how the two of you know one another, so let me ask you,” Ralph joined the conversation I was doing my best to end.

“My brother was his roommate at Wentworth,” she told him before turning back to me to fill in the lost years I had not asked her to explain. “I got married straight out of high school and divorced six months later. It turns out I am not a one-guy kind of girl. I kept my married name because I like the name Paradis more than Hollis. I majored in Art History at Stephens College and then I earned my doctorate in archaeology from Brown. That was where I developed my passion for Persian history and antiquities. I do provenance research for museums and private collectors, but I have done consulting work for the government, as well. My meal ticket is finding antiquities for private collectors. I am in town to meet with a client, but I would love to pitch you on investing in antiquities. Nobody is making any new ones, so they keep increasing in value, just like real estate.”

“What is providence?” Ralph asked. I thought he was making a joke, but he was so busy gawking at Alexis that he completely misunderstood the word she said.

“Provenance, not providence, silly,” Alexis managed to correct and flirt with



Ralph in four words. “Provenance is the certification that a given piece of artwork has followed a legal path of ownership, is not stolen, and is not fake. I sort through receipts and any evidence the owner can produce before I certify an item is authentic and legal to sell or buy.”

The way Alexis rocked her legs was meant to let me know she remained interested in adding me to her long list of conquests. I placed my right hand atop her leg and squeezed until she stopped moving her knee. She pouted again. “I am not a minor anymore, Cooter. We can do all those things you wouldn’t do with me when we were kids, and maybe some things we’ve both learned since then. Come on, we are finally consenting adults.”

“This is me at my most adult and very least consenting, Alexis,” I said and pulled my hand from her leg. “I am flattered that you still want to collect my scalp, but I am never going to sleep with you. You are still my roommate’s kid sister. Speaking of which, have you spoken to Brian lately?”

I hoped Alexis might have more information on Brian’s situation than I had allowed him to share with me before I refused to be pulled into his drama.

“We have not spoken in years,” she informed me. “Our politics are not on the same page. I have no interest in knowing what his mercenaries are up to and he doesn’t want to listen to my rants about the number of antiquities and historical landmarks which have been lost thanks to the wars he fought.”

She had answered my question and I saw nothing to be gained by reminding her that Brian and I had fought in the same military conflicts.

“Are you afraid I am too much of a woman for you to handle?” she tried to return the conversation to her own topic. This made my decision to remove myself from the conversation that much easier.

“I am afraid of finding myself in whatever briar patch you are trying to pull me into,” I informed her. “Ralph here is more adventurous. Today is his birthday and I am sure he needs a good birthday spanking. Why don’t you two enjoy dinner on the house?”

Alexis reached into the purse slung over her right shoulder and pulled out a silver business card holder. She removed one card and silently placed it beside my last Manhattan of the evening. The embossed card bore her married name, Alexis Paradis,

and addresses on three continents, along with a phone number for each address. She turned the card over to show me a handwritten phone number.

“My cell number,” she explained. “Let’s not waste another decade.”

“Impressive.” I studied the card in my hand, but I was already dismissing her suggestion.

“I am serious,” she stressed and took my hand.

“That is what I am afraid of,” I deflected one last time.

Alexis smiled but she could not conceal the look of disappointment a child has when a parent substitutes their favorite ice cream with an apple. I left the two of them at the bar and retreated to the kitchen. I took a plate of spaghetti Bolognese from the kitchen’s service window and locked myself in my apartment.

**Tuesday**

**June 22, 2010**

**A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.**

**-Walter Winchell**

## Three

Ralph checked in with me the next morning. He had spent the night in Alexis' suite at the Ritz-Carlton and decided to call in sick rather than try to explain why he had missed his morning meetings. He wanted to meet me for lunch to discuss the questions Alexis had peppered him with all night. I felt a bit less paranoid now that someone else shared my concerns that a woman I had not seen in over twenty years was so well informed about my current life.

We agreed to meet at the small booth set in a niche within Napoleon House's bar area when they opened in half an hour. The sunlit barroom promotes the establishment's decades of service as a tavern. Random framed photographs and magazine articles about the place cover remnants of the wallpaper clinging to the former residence's original plaster dating to 1794. The state Supreme Court building fills the next block, and the kitchen was doing a brisk lunch time take-out business with judge's clerks and appellate lawyers. This constant flow of impatient foot traffic provided more privacy than a table on the slower paced patio offered.

Ralph entered through the French doors opening onto St. Louis Street in the same clothes he had worn the night before, minus the necktie. The final bill for his birthday dinner and Alexis's taste in champagne was more than two weeks of his government salary, but it was a small price for me to pay to escape that situation.

We both ordered bowls of gumbo and I added a charcuterie board along with a pair of the bar's signature Pimm's cup cocktails.

"Please do not regale me with any details about last night," I beseeched Ralph once the drinks arrived. He grinned and nodded as he raised the cocktail to his lips.

"That's tasty," Ralph commented as he set the drink atop the wooden tabletop which had been worn smooth by thousands of previous patrons. "There are things you should know about your friend, though."

"Tell me anything that doesn't involve sex," I rephrased my plea. I thought this might shorten the conversation by hours. His hair was matted, and he looked exhausted. He had not bothered to fully button his shirt. His necktie was folded in his shirt pocket. I thought I saw small bite marks on his neck and hairless chest.

“She claims she is here on business, but she refused to tell me the name of her client. All I know is that the guy is an attorney whose client is looking for someone to provide provenance for a sizeable collection of antiquities from somewhere in the Middle East. She seemed a lot more nervous than excited at the prospect. I think she was hoping to rope you into being her bodyguard while she is in town,” Ralph briefed me on what little had been spoken between the two of them over dinner. Ralph told me that he informed Alexis that our own connection was that of a restaurant owner and happy hour regular. He was disciplined enough not to divulge any state secrets in a strange woman’s bed.

“That is not going to happen,” I assured him. “I plan to hide at our place in the Rigolets if she shows up again.”

“Don’t bother. She is wrapping up her business this afternoon and leaving town,” Ralph tried to reassure me.

“Did she give any indication of how she knows so much about me?” I asked him before dipping my spoon into the gumbo the waiter dropped off with our second round of drinks.

“Not really,” he said but I sensed this was the first part of his answer and held off changing the topic. “She seemed to know a lot about Tulip as well, and she told me to tell you that Katie was a coward for leaving you like she did. Neither of us told her your girlfriend’s name, did we?”

“Not once.” I was certain I had not done so.

“She also asked if you were still mad about how some friend of yours set you up in Iraq,” Ralph said in a near whisper. “I know neither of us brought up your work before joining the state police.

“Her brother recommended me for Operation Stoplight,” I informed him to calm his fears over Alexis possibly knowing the details of that disavowed mission.

“Then I wonder why she referred to him as being your friend rather than admit that they are siblings,” Ralph pointed out the linguistic curiosity. “She left me with the feeling that someone else you knew was responsible for what happened to you in Iraq. Any clues to who that might be?”

“I no longer care what happened,” I assured him. “At the time, I was too busy worrying that Tony and I were going to wind up on matching gallows to think about

who tried to kill us. Now I know that the guy I reported to was behind the ambush meant to keep us from interrogating the prisoner we were transporting. We risked upsetting his apple cart.”

“Keep in mind I should not know any details of that operation.” Ralph hurriedly reminded me that his security clearance was not high enough to be told details of the covert operation he was responsible for protecting Tony and me from being extradited to be put on trial over.

Avoiding Alexis during the last hours she was in town struck me as being the best way to contain any damage she might cause. “Did you make plans to get together when she comes back to New Orleans?”

“No,” Ralph said and chuckled mostly to himself. “I don’t think I could survive a second round with her.”

“Let’s just leave it at that,” I said and waved my hands between us. The bartender brought the meat and cheese board at that exact moment and my hand gesture confused him about whether to leave the food or take it back to the kitchen.

I smiled and told him to leave the cutting board and to bring our third round of drinks. Ralph changed the subject so we could enjoy the rest of the meal comparing notes on a couple of new restaurants that had recently opened in the Quarter, because it is a New Orleans custom to discuss both one’s previous meal and next meal over any given plate of food.

“I can understand how her appearing out of the blue would rattle you, so I made a couple of phone calls before I came here.” Ralph’s expression abruptly changed. “I asked around about any large collections of Persian artifacts coming on the market.”

“She mentioned that to me last night,” I interrupted him.

“Did she mention that someone stole a twenty-foot shipping container of antiquities belonging to the Iraqi National Museum last month? They had been recovered from a dozen locations and loaded into the container in a supposedly secure freight yard, but the thieves still managed to drive off with them,” Ralph informed me. This explained his concerned expression. “My contact on this told me to drop my interest in the matter. He says it is a huge political mess that could

seriously damage relations between the Iraqis and us. My understanding is that the Iraqis are accusing American companies and individuals of being behind the theft and that there are counteraccusations by those parties of corruption among the Iraqis conducting the investigation into the theft. It would be a very bad thing if Alexis was involved with any of those antiquities, and even worse if you get sucked in.”

“It would almost be hard to call it a coincidence if she is not involved, don’t you think? She might not know about the theft, but she will surely recognize at least some of the items her new client hands her,” I said and sighed. I paused to take a drink before I added my own troubling piece to this puzzle. “Her brother, Brian, reached out to me early yesterday morning and said his friends had landed him in some sort of legal trouble. He asked me to meet him in Lexington, Missouri this weekend. I didn’t ask what sort of trouble and I told him flat out that I was not going to meet him. He was working in Iraq the last time we spoke. I really hope his troubles are not related to the theft,” I informed Ralph. “Do you think the two of them are in this together?”

“You know them better than I do,” Ralph pointed out. “It seems unlikely that their involvement is not related in some way.”

“They almost have to be connected.” I agreed. I began kicking myself for not letting Brian explain his situation before telling him he was on his own.

“Well, don’t change your mind and run off to meet the guy. The Iraqis will suspect that you are in on the theft if you do. They have almost given up on their demands that you and Tony be extradited over Operation Stoplight. State will let the Iraqis extradite you if it even remotely looks like you are involved in robbing their museum,” Ralph sternly warned me. He could tell by my own expression that I was still lost in thought. “Are you even listening to me?”

“I hear you loud and clear,” I assured him. He studied my face and frowned.

“Do. Not. Go. There,” he said and wagged a finger in my face for emphasis.

“I won’t,” I promised in hopes he would change the subject.

Brian was my former high school roommate, had served beside me for three years, and had done his best to help me find work when I needed it most. Balancing that against reigniting the fury of the Iraqi government over the operation that Brian had recommended I take part in would lead any other person to make a wiser decision than

I was about to make.



## Four

Tulip watched as I placed Alexis Paradis's card on her desk. She took notes as I gave her a recap of Brian's telephone call and my encounter with Alexis, and Ralph's thoughts over lunch. She set her pen down and looked up at me.

"Let me get this straight," she sighed as she straightened her posture in the heavy leather chair. "Your high school roommate might be a thief who has gotten into something way over his head and his slut sister showed up at Strada out of the blue and let slip that she is going to help fence the goods you think her brother stole. Does that sum up what you have gotten yourself into this time?"

"It sounds really bad when you say it," I said. I took a seat on her office sofa.

"Did you run their rap sheets? This pair sound like they should have one."

"I can't access the criminal database until I go back on active duty," I explained my failure to do this basic homework.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Tulip said and stood up. She walked to the fridge and poured herself a glass of wine. "You have already made up your mind to dive into the hole these two have dug for themselves."

"I have not promised either of them that I will get involved in anything they are doing," I lamely protested. We both knew I would not be asking for her advice if I were not already determined to do so. I should have tossed Alexis's business card in the trash and gone on with my life, unchallenging as that life promised to be for the next two weeks. "I am concerned that Alexis was able to tell me things about the two of us that she couldn't possibly know without someone with a very high security clearance giving her those details. I think there is a bigger picture than whatever these two have gotten themselves involved in."

"You're going to Missouri. Just admit that much." Tulip continued to study Alexis's card. "Brian Hollis is counting on your being reckless enough to get rolled up in his legal problems. You and I both know you are an adrenaline junkie, and that you are always going to charge to the sound of gunfire, even if it is your own gun doing the firing. You should have died twice so far that I know about, and I think you decided to continue taunting death rather than avoid it after Katie left."

"Fair points," I grumbled and slouched even deeper into the plush Pottery Barn sofa

across from the wing-backed chair where she sits to interview prospective clients. She has reached an enviable place among the city's preeminent civil trial attorneys. She can afford to pick and choose her cases. She has never billed me for the hours of legal advice that she has provided in any of my past investigations, but she also eats and drinks for free at Strada Ammazarre, so there is at least some sort of quid pro quo.

"Have you tried calling Brian back?" Tulip clearly thought I had not done so.

"Number is no longer in service. He used a burner phone to call me," I replied.

"I will see what I can find out about Alexis," Tulip said and stood up. She was dressed casually and walking around her office barefoot because this was not a court day. I could tell that she had no afternoon appointments by the glass of chardonnay in her right hand.

"What do you plan to do?" I wondered aloud as Tulip pushed Alexis's card across the coffee table for me to take when I left.

"I am going to pick the bitch apart," she said far more casually than her words indicated. "It would be just like you to have a rebound fling with someone this devious."

"I am not having rebound sex with anyone, Tulip. Feel free to pass that along the next time you speak with Katie," I said a bit sharply. "I am storing my sexual energy for her return."

"At least you chose to do that instead of holding your breath. You'd be dead by now," she eased up. "I have been getting reports that you are still a mess over her leaving town."

"I learned how to grieve for the guys in my platoon that died, but I have never had to grieve over an emotion, and I have no idea how to do so," I shared. "The death of someone else's love for you is a lot different than them actually dying."

"Sitting in your apartment blasting Warren Zevon and Tom Waits on your stereo and drinking the bistro out of tequila is not a healthy way to grieve anything," Tulip advised me. I had been asked to turn my music down by Strada's manager more than once in the last month. My repeatedly blaring Warren Zevon's song *Reconsider Me* on my stereo had only added to my alcohol-fueled sullenness, and the song carried

down the elevator shaft to the kitchen, where it depressed the line cooks and wait staff.

“Like I said, I am having trouble with this,” I offered as a lame rationalization for my behavior.

“Tell me this, then. Would you take Katie back if she walked through the door right now?”

“That’s a moot question. We both know she isn’t coming through the door.” I batted her question aside because I did not like the answer that sprang to mind.

“Well, we both know she is coming home, eventually,” Tulip said. “No woman born here can live anywhere else. I should know.”

“You have never left New Orleans, sis,” I pointed out.

“Exactly,” she declared and walked across the room to refill her wine glass. We paused the conversation long enough for her to sit down again and make herself comfortable. “Katie sold her house to Tony and me because she was positioning herself to make a clean start. She got the house in her divorce settlement and selling it got rid of any memories of her ex-husband and you that it holds. I would not say that attitude bodes well for you. I hate to say it, but it is true.”

“I thought you were in my corner.” I could not argue with her conclusions.

“I am, but you need to step out of your own corners.” Tulip used my own words against me. “Being a detective is never going to make either of you any safer living here. She is not going to stop being the most by-the-book state prosecutor either of us knows, and that will always pose a workplace problem for the two of you no matter what she decides about your personal lives. The worst thing is that you are never going to learn to ignore things like this new puzzle.”

“I might have left well enough alone if Alexis had not magically appeared hours after I spoke to Brian,” I lamely offered.

“To me that is even more reason to let this drop,” my sister tried to warn me.

“Probably true,” I conceded. “But aren’t you curious why two people I knew in high school both contacted me on the same day?”

“I could say something about your choice of friends, but that does not answer your question,” Tulip relented. “When are you leaving?”

“I never said I am going anywhere,” I tried to argue about being so transparent.

“You don’t have to. Someone asked for your help, so you are going,” Tulip sighed in exasperation. She had me there. “You would do yourself a big favor if you followed your own advice. You keep telling the kids at the pizzeria that they are only one wrong friend or wrong drug away from ruining their lives.”

“I do not consider Brian to be a bad friend,” I could barely argue. “I’ll slip out of town tonight. Call me if you find anything I should know about Alexis.”

I stood up to leave and Tulip took a sip of her wine before she gave me a disapproving look for having taken this much of her time to ask for advice I clearly intended to ignore.

“You seem to already know you need to avoid Alexis. Do I really need to tell you to not get yourself killed?” Tulip asked.

I shook my head. “That has never worked.”

She stood up and gave me an extended hug and a kiss on the cheek. She saved any crying or shouting until I was out of earshot.

## Five

Tony was far more accepting of my decision than my sister. He turned the kitchen over to his number two and helped me pack. The chef and I had done things far more dangerous and likely to end badly together in Iraq than what this situation seemed to entail. I sensed he was waiting for me to ask him to mount up one more time. Tulip would have put up a formidable argument against her new fiancé risking his life for something she considered to be unworthy of my own involvement.

I added a suit and tie to the pile of clothes I chose to pack. I added them because the rest of my clothing choices were all tactical wear designed to survive combat. I had two sets of lightweight body armor to wear under the loose-fitting polo shirts sitting beside the stack of multi-pocketed dungarees. My military experience had kicked in and I packed more socks than were probably necessary. You can never have enough dry socks. My wardrobe choices fit into a garment bag and a medium-sized duffel bag.

I carried these bags from my bedroom to my office. I opened the heavy gun safe bolted to the exterior brick wall behind it and handed Tony a Kevlar vest with a ceramic chest plate to pack in the open Pelican rolling case at his feet. I selected an Israeli-made Tavor bullpup carbine and filled a bandolier with high-capacity magazines for the rifle and selected a suppressor for it from among the half a dozen in the safe. Tony silently added these to the case. I anticipated any gunfights would be at close range and this compact rifle was designed for close-quarters combat. The Tavor was chambered for the same thirty-caliber cartridge as the Steyr SSG 08 sniper rifle hidden in the trunk of my Cadillac XLR coupe. One round from either weapon could easily take an opponent out of any fight. The suppressor would fit both weapons. I also removed two boxes of ammunition for the compact Springfield Armory .45 caliber handgun I chose over the full-size ten-millimeter Glock I carry as a service weapon. This smaller pistol uses the same round as the Kriss carbine secured in the trunk with the Steyr. I added a nine-millimeter handgun that would not trace back to me and a double-edged combat knife with a seven-inch blade to my arsenal while Tony grabbed the night vision goggles from the top shelf of the safe without being asked. He tested them and made sure the spare battery pack was in the case.

“This should be a fun weekend.” Tony understood what I intended to do by my

choice of weapons. Neither he nor Tulip believed my claim that I was making the trip solely to escape the doldrums from being sidelined by the state police. I repeated it anyway, but we all knew that I felt obligated to help someone I had served with, despite subsequent events. A similar bond connects Tony and me, and these bonds always supersede good judgement or other obligations. Tony said it was unnecessary to justify my decision.

“I just need to track Brian down before he digs himself into too deep of a hole,” I said despite his absolution.

“You should pack a shovel and not a gun then, right?” Tony asked pointedly. “You can dig a grave with both things, but you can only fill a grave with a shovel.”

I was sure that this sounded far cleverer in Tony’s native Italian, but the point was made, and his warning was merited.

Roux had been sitting patiently just inside the door to the office the entire time Tony and I packed. He was familiar with this routine and seemed eager to get back to work, as my mandatory leave was being imposed upon him as well. Our hiatus from taking a bite out of crime likely seemed far longer measured in dog years.

“Sorry, dude, not this trip,” I apologized and knelt to give him a hug. “Uncle Roger is going to let you stay with him while I am gone.”

Traveling with a pit bull posed a logistical problem with only limited benefits. I would have a difficult time finding a hotel that would take him because of his size and the notoriety of his breed. He would need to be walked and fed, which was time I could not spare while racing the situational stopwatch that Brian’s plea imposed. Roger was the skilled dog trainer who had provided Roux’s K-9 training. He sounded happy at the prospect of a week’s paid vacation at our camp in the Rigolets. It overlooks the stretch of water which links two of the large lakes north of the city.

Roux growled unhappily and stalked out of the room. Tony and I exchanged amused looks, but I had no time to soothe Roux’s feelings as I picked up the heavy plastic weapons cases and Tony grabbed my luggage as we headed towards the elevator.

Tulip was seated at the breakfast bar separating my kitchen and living room. She stood up and gave me one last hug before she turned her attention to comforting

Roux. The petulant dog had jumped onto the barstool next to her and flashed me another frown as I walked past him. She would drive him to Roger after I left. Whatever Tulip told Roger about my trip was going to get back to our mother, because Mother and Roger were enjoying some sort of November/December romance.

“So, you are really doing this,” Tulip challenged me. “I wish I understood why. You cannot tell me Brian Hollis is still your friend. You have not mentioned him to me once in the past four years. You are also the least sentimental person I know. There are no photographs of anyone in this apartment. Not even me.”

“I know what you look like,” I barely argued. I knew better than to tell her that I do not carry photos of anyone on my phone or in my wallet, either.

“Are you sure you are not doing this because of Brian’s sister?” Tulip demanded. I shook my head but did not answer her question because I could never convince her how little Alexis mattered to me in deciding to seek out Brian in Missouri. “I am still digging, but your lady friend is not lying about her credentials. She has done a lot of work for museums and auction houses. Some of those clients have sketchy reputations for dealing in stolen antiquities. I called the FBI to ask if she had done any work for them, which they say she has, but they also gave me the line about not commenting on open investigations when I asked about her brother. I get the impression the FBI is aware of the family connection and have gone into damage control mode in case she turns out to be involved.”

“I could have told you that much about the FBI. They will always protect their reputation above all else,” I said and started for the door before Tulip could gnaw on me again.

The cooks briefly looked up when the elevator doors opened. They saw our expressions and the familiar shape of gun cases and hastily turned their backs until we were past the hot line and on our way to the delivery entrance.

I opened the metal delivery door and was relieved to find one of our valets had parked my Cadillac coupe at the curb with its trunk open. I pressed a twenty-dollar tip in his palm. Tony and I both visually swept the street for anyone who might be interested in my departure. Tony unexpectedly gave me a hug rather than a handshake before returning to the kitchen to resume his civilian life while I headed north with a

renewed churning in my warrior's gut. I had thrived on this energy for half my life, across multiple continents and against an impressive array of worthy opponents. Two weeks of sitting on my hands would have driven me insane.

Tulip had identified my defining characteristic. I *am* addicted to the rush I get heading to the sound of firing guns. I was lucky that Dr. Jorgens was nowhere near as insightful as my sister. NOPD would have lost its best detective if she were.



## Six

I paused long enough to plug my phone into the Cadillac's auxiliary jack before I pulled away from the restaurant and sorted through my downloaded music play list until I found Warren Zevon's song *Lawyers, Guns, and Money*. I felt the need for theme music.

There was no sense in taking anything but the most direct route to Lexington, Missouri. There was only one place I was likely to be going if anyone followed me out of town. I hoped to trim the fifteen-hour drive with the judicious use of the lights and sirens tucked into the grille of the supercharged Cadillac coupe. I could get away with the ruse of being a State Police Investigator answering a call only until I was outside of my jurisdiction. After that I needed to rely on the tolerance Mississippi's highway patrol has towards fast moving vehicles which are not weaving through traffic. Arkansas would be a bit less forgiving, but the bootheel of Missouri and most of Interstate 70 would offer plenty of opportunities to trim some time.

I averaged ninety miles an hour between the Quarter and Jackson, Mississippi. Traffic was heavy between Jackson and Memphis, and I lost some of the time I had gained because I was repeatedly stuck behind lumbering RVs and truckloads of freshly cut pine trees. I was stopped twice in Arkansas because of the plates on my car, which read COP CAR, and had to produce my badge and an explanation for using such a sporty ride as a patrol car. My standard story is that the Cadillac was confiscated from a drug dealer, and I drive it to remind the city's younger criminals that crime does not pay well or for long. The patrolmen laughed at this explanation and let me proceed, with a warning to behave myself.

I stopped in Blytheville for a bite to eat and then took a short nap in the first rest area in Missouri. It was nearly one o'clock in the morning by the time I approached the fourth exit in Missouri. I am named after the two towns listed on its exit sign thanks to my father's homesickness. His side of our family traces our roots back our great-great-grandfather's arrival in Cooter from Preston, England.

The irony that my girlfriend was staying with her retired cop father in my own father's hometown, a place I have consciously avoided my entire adult life, was not lost

on me. I overcame the impulse to surprise Katie with a visit at such a dark hour only because she had made it clear that she had her own timetable for our being reunited.

## Seven

The first time I ever made this drive was against my will. My father had enrolled me in Wentworth Military Academy, where his father and grandfather had attended high school, but my father had not, the day after he pulled me out of a Bourbon Street bar at the age of fifteen.

I arrived at Wentworth Military Academy in the middle of the second semester. This is a sure sign that a new cadet had made a huge mistake wherever they came from. I felt a mental vise that I imagined newly incarcerated felons experience the first time their cell door slams shut and they must come to terms with the fact their ability to come and go freely was gone. Fifteen was a late age to adjust to have to adjust to someone else's fiercely dictated schedule, especially a military academy's. It was more than a little humiliating to have to ask for permission to do things I had previously done without parental discussion, even simple things like leaving campus.

Brian Hollis and I made perfect roommates because we were both enrolled after misbehaving once too often. Brian was enrolled at the beginning of his freshman year, after damaging his father's trucking warehouse by getting stoned and trying to teach himself how to drive a forklift. I came in as what the academy called a 'rat' in our sophomore year. Brian patiently coached me through my first year because he had endured being a rat as a freshman and knew the indoctrination I would face.

Peter Yoder and Sean Nicholas roomed across the hall from us. Hank Grainger had a room to himself adjacent to our room because his foreign-born roommate's parents had withdrawn their son shortly after the school year began and room assignments had already been made.

Sean Nicholas was the oldest son of Midwest banking scions. Sean loved to help his fellow cadets make connections that would eventually benefit himself. He used to tell us that his life was mapped out from the day he was born. Sean would graduate from Wentworth, go to Pitt to study finance and then to get his MBA at Wharton before joining his family's bank. He had even picked out the fraternity he would pledge because it was popular among students who went into jobs on Wall Street. I had read that the collapse of the real estate bubble in 2008 had nearly wiped out his family's fortune,

which had likely derailed his plans. I never reached out to him when I knew he could have used a friendly shoulder. I was busy with my own problems at the time, but I was always curious how he fared.

Peter Yoder was always hustling something. He traded tutoring for canteen goods that he sold to other cadets at a steep profit anytime the canteen was closed. Peter's father was supposedly in sales, but Peter never told us the name of the company his father worked for or what it was he sold. Rumor had it that he was a drug dealer, but it was more likely that his father was just a licensed pharmacist.

Every good circle of friends needs an oddball, and Hank Grainger more than filled the role as ours. He was an electronics fetishist, one of those guys who built things to specifications that only existed in his own head. Hank was especially bad about recognizing personal boundaries. It was not uncommon for him to barge into our room without knocking just to demonstrate his latest gizmo. Hank applied to MIT, but I never learned whether he was accepted before we graduated.

I was old enough now to recognize that these were all friendships made when my choices for companions were severely limited. I suspected that most of us would never have become friends had we attended a large public high school where we would have known a broader range of students. This was probably why it had been so easy for me to move on without looking back or staying in touch with any of them after we graduated.

There were undoubtedly many life-long friendships made by other cadets in our graduating class, just not by me and these former acquaintances.

This was not enough to make me question my decision to involve myself in Brian Hollis's problem. I could hardly say I wanted to help a life-long friend out of a bind. It was just an excuse for me to get involved in something that promised to challenge my capacity to solve problems.

I could not deny that my life was in turmoil, but had it truly become so much of a mess that I was willing to come to the aid of an antiquities thief?