

GEORGE PELECANOS

AWARD-WINNING WRITER-PRODUCER OF *THE WIRE*

RIGHT AS RAIN

GUIDE
READERS' PICK
INSIDE

"One of the very best young mystery writers. . . . Pelecanos is the poet laureate of the DC crime world." —*Esquire*

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Chapter 1

WHAT Derek Strange was worried about, looking at Jimmy Simmons sitting there, spilling over a chair on the other side of his desk, was that Simmons was going to pick some of Strange's personal shit up off the desktop in front of him and start winging it across the room. Either that or get to bawling like a damn baby. Strange didn't know which thing he wanted to happen less. He had some items on that desk that meant a lot to him: gifts women had given him over the years, tokens of gratitude from clients, and a couple of Redskins souvenirs from back in the 1960s. But watching a man cry, that was one thing he could not take.

"Tell me again, Derek." Simmons's lip was trembling, and pools of tears were threatening to break from the corners of his bloodshot eyes. "Tell me again what that motherfucker looked like, man."

"It's all in the report," said Strange.

"I'm gonna kill him, see? And right after that, I'm gonna kill his ass again."

"You're talkin' no sense, Jimmy."

"Fifteen years of marriage and my woman's just now decided to go and start taking some other man's dick? You're gonna tell me now about sense? *God damn!*"

Jimmy Simmons struck his fist to the desktop, next to a plaster football player with a spring—mounted head. The player, a white dude originally whose face Janine's son, Lionel, had turned dark brown with paint, wore the old gold trousers and burgundy jersey from back in the day, and he carried a football cradled in one arm. The head jiggled, and the Redskins toy tilted on its base. Strange reached over, grabbed the player, and righted it before it could tip over.

"Take it easy. You break that, I can't even charge you for it, 'cause it's priceless, hear?"

"I'm sorry, Derek." A tear sprang loose from Simmons's right eye and ran down one of his plum cheeks. "Shit."

"Here you go, man." Strange ripped a Kleenex from the box atop his desk and handed it to Simmons, who dabbed tenderly at his cheek. It was a delicate gesture for a man whose last day under three hundred pounds was a faded memory.

"I need to know what the man looked like," said Simmons. "I need to know his name."

"It's all in the report," Strange repeated, pushing a manila envelope across the desk. "But you don't want to be doing nothin' about it, hear?"

Simmons opened the envelope and inched out its contents slowly and warily, the way a child approaches an open casket for the first time. Strange watched Simmons's eyes as they moved across the photographs and the written report.

It hadn't taken Strange all that long to get the goods on Denice Simmons. It was a tail—and—surveillance job, straight up, the simplest, dullest, and most common type of work he did. He had followed Denice to her boyfriend's place over in Springfield, Virginia, on two occasions and waited on the street until she came out and drove back into D.C. The third time Strange had tailed her, on a Sunday night when Jimmy Simmons was up in Atlantic City at an electronics show, he had waited the same way, but Denice did not emerge from the man's apartment. The lights went out in the third—

story window where the man lived, and this was all Strange needed. He filled out the paperwork in the morning, picked up the photographs he had taken to a one—hour shop, and called Jimmy Simmons to his office the same day.

“How long?” said Simmons, not looking up from the documents.

“Three months, I’d say.”

“How you know that?”

“Denice got no other kind of business being over in Virginia, does she?”

“She works in the District. She’s got no friends over in Virginia —”

“Your own credit card bills, the ones you supplied? Denice has been charging gas at a station over there by the Franconia exit for three, three and a half months. The station’s just a mile down the road from our boy’s apartment.”

“You think she’d be smarter than that.” Simmons nearly grinned with affection. “She never does like to pay for her own gas. Always puts it on the card so I’ll have to pay, come bill time. She’s tight with her money, see. Funny for a woman to be that way. And though she knows I’ll be stroking the checks, she always has to stop for the cheapest gas, even if it means driving out of her way. I bet if you checked, you’d see they were selling gas at that station dirt cheap.”

“Dollar and a penny for regular,” said Strange.

Simmons rose from his chair, his belly and face quivering as if his flesh were being blown by a sudden gust of wind. “Well, I’ll see you, Derek. I’ll take care of your services, soon as I see a bill.”

“Janine will get it out to you straightaway.”

“Right. And thanks for the good work.”

“Always hate it when it turns out like this, Jimmy.”

Simmons placed a big hat with a red feather in its band on his big head. “You’re just doing your job.”

Strange sat in his office, waiting to hear Simmons go out the door. It would take a few minutes, as long as it took Simmons to flirt with Janine and for Janine to get rid of him. Strange heard the door close. He got out from behind his desk and put himself into a midlength black leather jacket lined with quilt and a thin layer of down. He took a PayDay bar, which Janine had bought for him, off the desk and slipped it into a pocket of the jacket.

Out in the reception area of the office, Strange stopped at Janine Baker’s desk. Behind her, a computer terminal showed one of the Internet’s many sites that specialized in personal searches. Janine’s brightly colored outfit was set off against her dark, rich skin. Her red lipstick picked up the red of the dress. She was a pretty, middle—aged woman, liquid eyed, firm breasted, wide of hip, and lean legged.

“That was quick,” he said.

“He wasn’t his usual playful self. He said I was looking lovely today —”

“You are.”

Janine blushed. “But he didn’t go beyond that. Didn’t seem like his heart was all that in it.”

“I just gave him the bad news about his wife. She was getting a little somethin’—somethin’ on the side with this young auto parts clerk, sells batteries over at the Pep Boys in northern Virginia.”

“How’d they meet? He see her stalled out on the side of the road or something?”

“Yeah, he’s one of those good Samaritans you hear about.”

“Pulled over to give her a jump, huh.”

“Now, Janine.”

“This the same guy she was shackin’ up with two years ago?”

“Different guy. Different still than the guy she was running with three years before that.”

“What’s he gonna do?”

“He went through the motions with me, telling me what he was going to do to that guy. But all’s he’ll do is, he’ll make Denice suffer a little bit. Not with his hands, nothin’ like that. Jimmy wouldn’t touch Denice in that way. No, they’ll be doing some kind of I’m Sorry ceremony for the next few days, and then he’ll forgive her, until the next one comes along.”

“Why’s he stay with her?”

“He loves her. And I think she loves him, too. So I guess there’s no chance for you and Big Jimmy. I don’t think he’ll be leaving any time soon.”

“Oh, I can wait.”

Strange grinned. “Give him a chance to fill out a little bit, huh?”

“He fills out any more, we’ll have to put one of those garage doors on the front of this place just let him in.”

“He fills out any more, Fat Albert, Roseanne, Liz Taylor, *and* Sinbad gonna get together and start telling Jimmy Simmons weight jokes.”

“He fills out any more —”

“Hold up, Janine. You know what we’re doing right here?”

“What?”

“It’s called ‘doing the dozens.’ ”

“That so.”

“Uh—huh. White man on NPR yesterday, was talking about this book he wrote about African American culture? Said that doing the dozens was this thing we been doin’ for generations. Called it the *precursor* of rap music.”

“They got a name for it, for real? And here I thought we were just cracking on Jimmy.”

“I’m not lying.” Strange buttoned his coat. “Get that bill out to Simmons, will you?”

“I handed it to him as he was going out the door.”

“You’re always on it. I don’t know why I feel the need to remind you.” Strange nodded to one of two empty desks on either side of the room. “Where’s Ron at?”

“Trying to locate that debtor, the hustler took that woman off for two thousand dollars.”

“Old lady lives down off Princeton?”

“Uh—huh. Where you headed?”

“Off to see Chris Wilson’s mom.”

Strange walked toward the front door, his broad, muscled shoulders moving beneath the black leather, gray salted into his hair and closely cropped beard.

He turned as his hand touched the doorknob. “You want something else?” He had felt Janine’s eyes on his back.

“No ... why?”

“You need me, or if Ron needs me, I’ll be wearin’ my beeper.”

Strange stepped out onto 9th Street, a short commercial strip between Upshur and Kansas, one square block away from Georgia Avenue. He smiled, thinking of Janine. He had met her the first time at a club ten years earlier, and he had started hitting it then because both of them wanted him to, and because it was there for him to take.

Janine had a son, Lionel, from a previous marriage, and this scared him. Hell, everything about commitment scared him, but being a father to a young man in this world, it scared him more than anything else. Despite his fears, their time together had seemed good for both Strange and Janine, and

he had stayed with it, knowing that when it's good it's rare, and unless there's a strong and immediate reason, you should never give it up. The affair went on steadily for several months.

When he lost his office manager, he naturally thought of Janine, as she was out of work, bright, and a born organizer. They agreed that they would break off the relationship when she started working for him, and soon thereafter she went and got serious with another man. This was fine with him, a relief, as it had let him out the back door quietly, the way he always liked to go. That man exited Janine's life shortly thereafter.

Strange and Janine had recently started things up once again. Their relationship wasn't exclusive at least not for Strange. And the fact that he was her boss didn't bother either of them, in the ethical sense. Their lovemaking simply filled a need, and Strange had grown attached to the boy as well. Friends warned him about shitting on the dining room table, but he was genuinely fond of the woman and she did make his nature rise after all the years. He liked to play with her, too, let her know that he knew that she was still interested. It kept things lively in the deadening routine of their day-to-day

Strange stood out on the sidewalk for a moment and glanced up at the yellow sign over the door: "Strange Investigations," the letters in half of both words enlarged inside the magnifying-glass illustration drawn across the lightbox. He loved that logo. It always made him feel something close to good when he looked up at that sign and saw his name.

He had built this business by himself and done something positive in the place where he'd come up. The kids in the neighborhood, they saw a black man turn the key on the front door every morning and maybe it registered, put something in the back of their minds whether they realized it or not. He kept the business going for twenty-five years now, and the bumps in the road had been just that. The business was who he was. All of him, and all his.

STRANGE sat low behind the wheel of his white-over-black '89 Caprice, listening to a Blackbyrds tape coming from the box as he cruised south on Georgia Avenue. Next to him on the bench was a mini Maglite, a Rand McNally street atlas, and a Leatherman tool—in-one in a sheath that he often wore looped through his belt on the side of his hip. He wore a Buck knife the same way, all the time when he was on a job. A set of 10 X 50 binoculars, a cell phone, a voice-activated tape recorder, and extra batteries for his flashlights and camera were in the glove box, secured with a double lock. In the trunk of the car was a file carton containing data on his live cases. Also in the trunk was a steel Craftsman toolbox housing a heavy Maglite, a Canon AE-1 with a 500-millimeter lens, a pair of Russian-made NVD goggles, a 100-foot steel Craftsman tape measure, a roll of duct tape, and various Craftsman tools useful for engine and tire repair. When he could, Strange always bought Craftsman — the tools were guaranteed for life, and he tended to be hard on his equipment.

He drove through Petworth. In the Park View neighborhood he cut east on Irving, took Michigan Avenue past Children's Hospital and into Northeast, past Catholic U and down into Brookland.

Strange parked in front of Leona Wilson's modest brick home at 12th and Lawrence. He kept the motor running, waiting for the flute solo on "Walking in Rhythm" to end, though he could listen to it anytime. He'd come here because he'd promised Leona Wilson that he would, but he wasn't in any hurry to make this call.

Strange saw the curtain move in the bay window of Leona's house. He cut the engine, got out of his car, locked it down, and walked up the concrete path to Leona's front door. The door was already opening as he approached.

"Mrs. Wilson," he said, extending his hand.

“Mr. Strange.”

WILL you help me?”

They sat beside each other in the living room on a slipcovered sofa, a soft, crackling sound coming from the fireplace. Strange drank coffee from a mug; Leona Wilson sipped tea with honey and lemon.

She was younger than he was by a few years but looked older by ten. He remembered seeing her at church before the death of her son, and her appearance since had changed radically. She carried too little weight on her tall, large—boned frame, and a bag of light brown flesh hung pendulous beneath her chin. Leona wore a maroon shirt—and—slacks arrangement and scuffed, low—heeled pumps on her feet. The outfit’s presentation was rushed and sloppy. Her shirt’s top button had been lost, and a brooch held it together across a flat chest terraced with bones. Her hair had gone gray, and she wore it carelessly uncombed. Grief had stolen her vanity.

Strange placed his mug on the low glass table before him. “I don’t know that I can help you, ma’am. The police investigation was as thorough as they come. After all, this was a high—profile case.”

“Christopher was good.” Leona Wilson spoke slowly, deliberately. She pronounced her *r*’s as *ah-rah*s. She had been an elementary teacher in the District public school system for thirty years. Strange knew that she had taught grammar and pronunciation the way she had learned it, the way he had learned it, too, growing up in D.C.

“I’m sure he was,” said Strange.

“The papers said he had a history of brutality. They implied that he was holding a gun on that white man for no good reason when the other police officers came upon them. But I don’t believe it. Christopher was strong when he had to be, but he was never brutal.”

“I have an old friend in the department, Mrs. Wilson. He tells me that Chris was a solid cop and a fine young man.”

“Do you know that memorial downtown, in Northwest? The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial?”

“I know it, yes.”

“There are almost fifteen thousand names etched on that wall, the police officers in this country who have been killed in the line of duty since they’ve been keeping records. And do you know that the department has denied my request to have Chris’s name put on that wall? Do you know that, Mr. Strange?”

“I’m aware of it, yes.”

“The only thing I have now is my son’s memory. I want other people to remember him for the way he was, too. The way he really was. Because I know my son. And Christopher was *good*.”

“I have no reason to doubt what you say.”

“So you’ll help me.” She leaned forward. He could smell her breath, and it was foul.

“It’s not what I do. I do background checks. I uncover insurance fraud. I confirm or disprove infidelity. I interview witnesses in civil cases for attorneys, and I get paid to be a witness in court. I

locate debtors, and I have a younger operative who occasionally skip—traces. Once in a while I'll locate a missing child, or find the biological parent of an adopted child. What I don't do is solve murder cases or disprove cases that have already been made by the police. I'm not in that business. Except for the police, nobody's in that business, you want to know the plain truth."

"The white policeman who killed my son. Did anyone think to bring up his record the way they brought up my son's record?"

"Well, if I recall... I mean, if you remember, there was quite a bit written about that police officer. How he hadn't qualified on the shooting range for over two years, despite the fact that they require those cops to qualify every six months. How he was brought onto the force during that hiring binge in the late eighties, with all those other unqualified applicants. How he had a brutality—complaint sheet of his own. No disrespect intended, but I think they left few stones unturned with regard to that young man's past."

"In the end they blamed it on his gun."

"They did talk about the negatives of that particular weapon, yes — the Glock has a light trigger pull and no external safety."

"I want you to go deeper. Find out more about the policeman who shot my son. I'm convinced that he is the key."

"Mrs. Wilson —"

"Christopher was proud to be a police officer; he would have died without question ... he did die *without question*, in the line of duty. But the papers made it out to seem as if he was somehow at fault. That he was holding his gun on an innocent man, that he failed to identify himself as a police officer when that white policeman came up on him. They mentioned the alcohol in his blood... Christopher was *not* a drunk, Mr. Strange."

Nor an angel, thought Strange. He'd never known any cop, any man in fact, to be as pure as she was making him out to be.

"Yes, ma'am," said Strange.

He watched Leona Wilson's hand shake with the first stages of Parkinson's as she raised her teacup to her lips. He thought of his mother in the home, and he rose from the couch.

Strange walked to the fireplace, where a slowly strobing light shone behind plastic logs, the phone fire cracking rhythmically. An electric cord ran from beneath the logs to an outlet in the wall.

He looked at the photographs framed on the mantel. He saw Leona as a young woman and the boy Christopher standing under her touch, and another photograph of Leona and her husband, whom Strange knew to be deceased. There were a few more photographs of Christopher, in a cap and gown, and in uniform, and kneeling on a football field with his teammates, the Gonzaga scoreboard in the background, Christopher's gaze hard, his eyes unsmiling and staring directly into the camera's lens. A high school boy already wearing the face of a cop.

There was one photo of a girl in her early teens, its color paled out from age. Strange knew that Chris Wilson had had a sister. He had seen her on the TV news, a pretty, bone—skinny, light—skinny girl with an unhealthy, splotched complexion. He remembered thinking it odd that she had made a show of wiping tears from dry eyes. Maybe, after days of grieving, it had become her habit to take her sleeve to her eyes. Maybe she had wanted to keep crying but by then was all cried out.

Strange thought it over, his back to Leona. It would be an easy job, reinterviewing the players, retracing steps. He had a business to maintain. He wasn't in any position to be turning down jobs.

"My rates," said Strange.

"Sir?"

He turned to face her. “You haven’t asked me about my rates.”

“I’m sure they’re reasonable.”

“I get thirty dollars an hour, plus expenses. Something like this will take time —”

“I have money. There was a settlement, as you know. And Christopher’s insurance, his death benefits, I mean, and his pension. I’m certain he would have liked me to use the money for this.”

Strange went back to the couch. Leona Wilson stood and rubbed the palm of one hand over the bent fingers of the other. She was eye to eye with him, nearly his height.

“I’ll need access to some of his things,” said Strange.

“You can have a look in his room.”

“He lived here?”

“Yes.”

“What about your daughter?”

“My daughter doesn’t live here anymore.”

“How can I reach her?”

“I haven’t seen Sondra or talked with her since the day I buried my son.”

Strange’s beeper, clipped to his belt, sounded. He unfastened the device and checked the readout.

“Do you mind if I use your phone?”

“It’s right over there.”

Strange made the call and replaced the receiver. He placed his business card beside the phone.

“I’ve got to run.”

Leona Wilson straightened her posture and brushed a strand of gray hair behind her ear. “Will you be in church this Sunday?”

“I’m gonna try real hard.”

“I’ll say a prayer for you, Mr. Strange.”

“Thank you.” He picked his leather up off the back of a chair. “I’d surely appreciate it if you would.”

STRANGE drove down South Dakota to Rhode Island Avenue and hooked a left. His up mood was gone and he popped out the Blackbyrds tape and punched the tuner in to 1450 on the AM dial. Joe “the Black Eagle” Madison was on all—talk WOL, taking calls. Strange’s relationship with OL went back to the mid—sixties, when the station’s format had first gone over to what the newspapers called “rhythm and blues.” Back when they’d had those DJs Bobby “the Mighty Burner” Bennett and “Sunny Jim” Kelsey called themselves the Soul Brothers. He’d been a WOL listener for, damn, what was it, thirty—five years now. He wondered, as he often did when thinking back, where those years had gone.

He made a left turn down 20th Street, Northeast.

Leona Wilson’s posture had changed when he’d told her he’d take the job. It wasn’t his imagination, either — the years had seemed to drop off her before his eyes. Like the idea of hope had given her a quick shot of youth.

“You all right, Derek,” he said, as if saying it aloud would make it so.

He’d been straight up with Leona Wilson back at her house, as much as anyone could be with a woman that determined. Her temporary hope was a fair trade—off for the permanent crash of disappointment that would surely follow later on. He told himself that this was true.

Anyway, he needed the money. The Chris Wilson case was a potential thousand—, two—thousand—dollar job.

Down along Langdon Park, Strange saw Ron Lattimer's Acura curbed and running, white exhaust coming from its pipes. Strange parked the Caprice behind it, grabbed his binoculars and his Leatherman, climbed out of his car, and got into the passenger side of the red coupe.

Lattimer was at the finish line of his twenties, tall and lean with an athlete's build. He wore a designer suit, a tailored shirt, and a hand-painted tie. He held a lidded cup of Starbucks in one hand and his other hand tapped out a beat on the steering wheel. The heater fan was blowing full on, and jazzy hip-hop came from the custom stereo system in the dash.

"You warm enough, Ron?"

"I'm comfortable, yeah."

"You doin' a surveillance in the winter, how many times I told you, you got to leave the motor shut down 'cause the exhaust smoke, it shows. Bad enough you're driving a red car, says, Look at me everybody. Notice *me*."

"Too cold to leave the heat off," said Lattimer.

"Put that overcoat on you got there in the backseat, you wouldn't be so cold."

"That's a *cashmere*, Derek; I'm not gonna wear it in my car. Get it all wrinkled up and shit, start looking like I picked it up at the Burlington Coat Factory, some bullshit like that."

Strange took a breath and let it out slow. "And what I tell you about drinking coffee? What you need to be doing, you keep a bottle of water in the car and you sip it, a little at a time, when you get good and thirsty. Coffee runs right through you, man, *you* know that. What's gonna happen when you got to pee so bad you can't stand it, you get out the car lookin' for some privacy, tryin' to find a tree to get behind, while the subject of your tail is sneaking out the back door of his house? Huh? What you gonna do then?"

"The day I lose a tail, Derek, because I been drinkin' an Americano —"

"Oh, it's an *Americano*, now. And here I was, old and out of touch like I am, thinking you were just having a cup of coffee."

Lattimer had to chuckle. "Always tryin' to school me."

"That's right. You got the potential to be something in this profession. I get you away from focusing on your *lifestyle* and get you focused on the business at hand, you're gonna make it." Strange nodded toward the faceplate of the stereo. "Turn that shit off, man, I can't think."

"Tribe Called Quest *represents*."

"Turn it off anyway, and tell me what we got."

Lattimer switched off the music. "Leon's over there in that house, second from the last on the right, on Mills?"

Strange looked through the glasses. "Okay. How'd you find him?"

"The address he gave the old lady, the one he took off? He hadn't lived there for a year or so. One of the neighbors I interviewed knew his family, though — both of them had come up in the same area. This neighbor told me that Leon's mother and father had both passed, years ago. Got the death certificate of his mother down at that records office on H, in Chinatown. From the date on that certificate, I found her obituary in the newspaper morgue, and the obit listed the heirs. Of the family, only the grandmother was still alive. Leon didn't have any brothers or sisters, which makes him the only heir to g—mom. I figured Leon, hustler that he is, is counting on the grandmother to leave him everything she's got, so Leon's got to be paying regular visits to stay in her grace."

"That the grandmother's house we're looking at?"

"Uh—huh. I been staking it out all this week. Leon finally showed up today. That's his hooptie over there, that yellow Pontiac Astra with the rust marks, parked in front of the house. Ugly—ass car

too.”

“Sister to the Chevy Vega.”

“People paid extra for that thing ’cause it had the Pontiac name on it?”

“Some did. Nice work.”

“Thanks, boss. How you want to handle it?”

Strange gave it some thought. “I think we need to brace him in front of his grandmother.”

“I was thinking the same way.”

“Come on.”

They got out of the Acura, Lattimer retrieving his overcoat first and shaking himself into it as they walked alongside Langdon Park toward Mills Avenue. A couple of young boys, school age, were sitting on a bench wearing oversize parkas, looking hard at Strange and Lattimer, not looking away a moment. Strange glanced in their direction.

“Hold on for a second, Derek,” said Lattimer, putting a little skip in his walk and side—glancing at Strange. “I got to find me a tree... .”

“Funny,” said Strange.

They were past the park and onto Mills. Lattimer said. “You want me to take the alley?”

“Yeah, take it. I don’t feel like running today if I don’t have to. My knees and this cold aren’t the best of friends.”

“I don’t feel like running, either. You know how I perspire quick, soon as I start to buck, even in this weather.”

“I don’t suspect he’ll be going anywhere, but you never know. Speaking of which ...”

Lattimer saw Strange pull the Leatherman tool from his pocket and flick open its knife as they neared Leon’s yellow Astra. Still walking, Strange drew change from his pocket and dropped it on the street beside the door of the car. He got down on one knee to pick it up, and while he was down there, he punctured the driver’s—side tire with the knife. He retrieved his change, closing the tool and replacing it in his pocket as he rose.

“See you in a few,” said Strange.

He took the steps up to the porch of the row house as Lattimer cut into the alley. He waited half a minute for Lattimer to get behind the house, and then he knocked on the door.

Strange saw a miniature face peer around a lace curtain and heard a couple of locks being turned. The door opened, and a very small woman with prunish skin and a cotton—top of gray hair stood in the frame. The woman gave Strange a thorough examination with her eyes.

She looked back over her shoulder toward a nicely appointed living room that spread out off the foyer. Then she raised her voice: “Leon! There’s a police officer here to see you.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Strange. “And tell him not to run, will you? My partner’s out back in the alley, and he’ll be awful mad if he gets to perspiring. The sweat, it stains his pretty clothes.”

STRANGE took Leon Jeffries out the kitchen door to a small screened—in porch. The porch gave to a view of a gnarled patch of backyard and the alley. After Strange got Leon out to the porch, he waved Lattimer in from there. Leon confessed to bilking the old woman from Petworth with a pyramid investment scheme shortly thereafter.

“What y’all gonna do to me now?” asked Leon. He was a small, feral, middle—aged man with pale yellow eyeballs. He wore a pinstriped suit jacket with unmatching black slacks and a lavender, open—collar shirt.

“You need to give our client back her money, Leon,” said Strange. “Then everything’ll be chilly.

~~“I planned on gettin’ her money back to her, with interest. Takes a little time, though. See, the way I worked it, I used the next person’s investment to pay the, uh, previous person’s investment, in installments. Sort of how some folks stay ahead of the game with multiple credit cards.”~~

“That’s a *legal* kind of scam, Leon. What we’re talking about here is, you were taking off old ladies that trusted you. How you think that’s gonna look to a jury?”

“A jury trial for a small—claims thing?”

“You got a sheet, Leon?” asked Lattimer.

“I ain’t never been incarcerated.”

“So you got a sheet,” said Lattimer. “And this goes before a judge, forget about a jury, you get a judge on a bad day he ate the wrong brand of half—smokes for breakfast, some shit like that, they gonna put your thin ass *away*.”

“We need the money for our client now,” said Strange. “That’s all she wants. She’s a good woman, which you probably saw as a weakness, but we’re gonna forget about that, too, if you come u with the two thousand you took from her straightaway.”

“I’d have to get me a job,” said Leon. “Cause currently, see, I don’t have those kind of resources.”

“You gonna wear that outfit to the job interview?” said Lattimer.

Leon, wounded, looked up at Lattimer and touched the lapel of his lavender shirt. “This right here is a designer shirt. An Yves Saint Laurent.”

“From the Singapore factory, maybe. Man your age ought to be wearin’ some cotton by now, too instead of that sixty—forty blend you got on right there.”

Strange said, “How we going to work this out with the money, Leon?”

“I ain’t got no got—damn money, man; I told you!”

Some spittle flew from Leon’s mouth and a bit of it landed on the chest area of Lattimer’s overcoat. Lattimer grabbed Leon by the lapels of his jacket and pulled Leon toward him.

“You spit on my cashmere, man!”

“All right, Ron,” said Strange. Lattimer released Leon.

“Everything all right over there?” said an elderly man from the backyard of the house to the left. An evergreen tree grew beside the porch, blocking their view of the man behind the voice.

“Everything’s fine,” said Strange, speaking loudly in the direction of the man. “We’re officers of the law.”

“No, they ain’t!” yelled Leon.

“Go on inside now,” said Strange. “We got this under control.”

Strange squared his body so that he was standing close to Leon. Leon backed up a step and scratched at the bridge of his dented nose.

“Well,” said Leon haughtily.

“Well *water*,” said Lattimer.

“Look here,” said Strange. “What me and my partner are going to do now, we’re going to go back inside and talk to your grandmother. Explain to her about this misunderstanding you got yourself into. I think your grandmother will see that she has to give us what we need. I’m sure this house is paid for and from the looks of things around here, it won’t be too great a burden for her to write the check. I know she doesn’t want to see you go to jail. Shame she has to settle up the debt for your mistakes, but there it is.”

“Won’t be the first time, I bet,” said Lattimer.

“What ya’ll are doin’, it’s a shakedown. It’s not even legal!” Leon looked from Strange to Lattimer and drew his small frame straight. “Not only that. First you go and insult my vines. And now you’re fixin’ to shame me to my granmoms!”

“Sooner or later,” said Strange, “everybody’s got to pay.”

STRANGE split up with Lattimer, drove down to the MLK Jr. library on 9th Street, and went up to the Washingtoniana Room on the third floor. He retrieved a couple of microfiche spools from a steel drawer where the newspaper morgue material was chronologically arranged. He threaded the film and scanned newspaper articles on a lighted screen, occasionally dropping change into a slot to make photostatic copies when he found what he thought he might need. After an hour and a half he turned off the machine, as his eyes had begun to burn, and when he left the library the city had turned to night.

Outside MLK, Strange phoned Janine’s voice mail and left a message: He needed a current address on a man. He gave her the subject’s name.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on, Strange?” said a guy who was walking by the bank of phones.

“Hey, how you *doin’*?”

“Ain’t seen you around much lately.”

“I been here,” said Strange.

Strange headed uptown and stopped at the Raven, a neighborhood bar on Mount Pleasant Street, for a beer. Afterward he walked up to Sportsman’s Liquors on the same street and bought a six—pack then drove to his Buchanan Street row house off Georgia.

He drank another beer and got his second wind. He phoned a woman he knew, but she wasn’t home.

Strange went up to his office, a converted bedroom next to his own bedroom on the second floor, and read the newspaper material, a series in the *Washington Post* and a *Washington City Paper* story, that he had copied from the library. As he looked them over, his dog, a tan boxer named Greco, slept with his snout resting on the toe of Strange’s boot.

When he was done, he logged on to his computer and checked his stock portfolio to see how he had done for the day. The case for *Ennio Morricone: A Fistful of Film Music* was sitting on his desk. He removed disc one from the case and loaded it into the CPU of his computer. The first few strains of “*Per Qualche Dollaro in Piu*” drifted through the room. He turned the volume up just a hair on his Yamaha speakers, sat back in his reclining chair with his hands folded across his middle, closed his eyes, and smiled.

Strange loved westerns. He’d loved them since he was a kid.

Chapter 3

HE locked the front door of the shop and checked it, then walked up Bonifant Street toward Georgia Avenue, turning up the collar of his black leather to shield his neck from the chill. He passed the gun shop, where black kids from over the District line and suburban white kids who wanted to be street hung out on Saturday afternoons, feeling the weight of the automatics in their hands and checking the action on guns they could buy on the black market later that night. Integras and Accords tricked out with aftermarket spoilers and alloy wheels parked outside the gun shop during the day, but it was night now and the street had quieted and there were few cars of any kind parked along its curb. He passed an African and a Thai restaurant, and Vinyl Ink, the music store that still sold records, and a jewelry and watch—repair shop that catered to Spanish, and one each of many braid—and—nail and dry—cleaning storefronts that low—rised the downtown business district of Silver Spring.

He crossed the street before reaching the Quarry House, one of two or three neighborhood bars he frequented. About now he could taste his first beer, his mouth nearly salivating at the thought of it, and he wondered if this was what it felt like to have a problem with drink. He'd attended a seminar once when he had still worn the uniform, and there he'd learned that clock—watchers and drink counters were drunks or potential drunks, but he was comfortable with his own reasons for looking forward to that first one and he could not bring himself to become alarmed. He liked bars and the companionship to be found in them; it was no more complicated or sinister than that. And anyway, he'd never allow alcoholism to happen to him; he had far too many issues to contend with as it stood.

He cut through the bank parking lot, passing the new Irish bar on the second floor of the corner building at Thayer and Georgia, and he did not slow his pace. He neared a black man coming in the opposite direction, and though either one of them could have stepped aside, neither of them did, and they bumped each other's shoulder and kept walking without an apology or a threatening word.

On the east side of Georgia he passed Rosita's, where the young woman named Juana worked, and he was careful to hurry along and not look through the plate glass colored with Christmas lights and sexy neon signs advertising Tecate and other brands of beer, because he did not want to stop yet, he wanted to walk. Then he was passing a pawnshop and another Thai restaurant and a *pollo* house and the art supply store and the flower shop ... then crossing Silver Spring Avenue, passing the firehouse and the World Building and the old Gifford's ice—cream parlor, now a day—care center, and across Sligo Avenue up to Selim, where the car repair garages and aikido studios fronted the railroad tracks.

He dropped thirty—five cents into the slot of a pay phone mounted between the Vietnamese *pho* house and the NAPA auto parts store. He dialed Rosita's, and his friend Raphael, who owned the restaurant, answered.

“Hey, amigo, it's —”

“I know who it is. Not too many gringos call this time of night, and you have that voice of yours that people recognize very easily. And I know who you want.”

“Is she working?”

“Yes.”

“Is there a *c* next to her name on the schedule?”

“Yes, she is closing tonight. So you have time. Are you outside? I can hear the cars.”

“I am. I’m taking a walk.”

“Go for your walk and I’ll put one on ice for you, my friend.”

“I’ll see you in a little bit.”

He hung the receiver in its cradle and crossed the street to the pedestrian bridge that spanned Georgia Avenue. He went to the middle of the bridge and looked down at the cars emerging northbound from the tunnel and the southbound cars disappearing into the same tunnel. He focused on the broken yellow lines painted on the street and the cars moving in rows between the lines. He looked north on Georgia at the street lamps haloed in the cold and watched his breath blow out into the night. He had grown up in this city, it was his, and to him it was beautiful.

Sometime later he crossed the remainder of the bridge and went to the chain—link fence that had been erected in the past year. The fence prevented pedestrians from walking into the area of the train station via the bridge. He glanced around idly and climbed the fence, dropping down over its other side. Then he was in near the small commuter train station, a squat brick structure with boarded windows housing bench seats and a ticket office, and he went down a dark set of stairs beside the station. He entered a fluorescent—lit foot tunnel that ran beneath the Metro and B & O railroad tracks. The tunnel smelled of nicotine, urine, and beer puke, but there was no one in it now, and he went through to the other side, going up another set of concrete steps and finding himself on a walkway on the west side of the tracks.

He walked along the fence bordering the old Canada Dry bottling plant, turned, stood with his hands buried in his jeans, and watched as a Red Line train approached from the city. His long sight was beginning to go on him, and the lights along Georgia Avenue were blurred, white stars broken by the odd red and green.

He looked across the tracks at the ticket office as the passing train raised wind and dust. He closed his eyes.

He thought of his favorite western movie, *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Three gunmen are waiting on the platform of an empty train station as the opening credits roll. It’s a long sequence, made more excruciating by the real—time approach of a train and a sound design nearly comic in its exaggeration. Eventually the train arrives. A character named Harmonica steps off of it and stands before the men who have come to kill him. Their shadows are elongated by the dropping sun. Harmonica and the men have a brief and pointed conversation. The ensuing violent act is swift and final.

Standing there at night, on the platform of the train station in Silver Spring, he often felt like he was waiting for that train. In many ways, he felt he’d been waiting all his life.

After a while he went back the way he had come and headed for Rosita’s. He was ready for a beer and also to talk to Juana. He had been curious about her for some time.

JUANA Burkett was standing at the service end of the bar, waiting on a marg—rocks—no—salt from Enrique, the tender, when the white man in the black leather jacket came through the door. She watched him walk across the dining room, navigating the tables, a man of medium height with a flat stomach and wavy brown hair nearly touching his shoulders. His face was clean shaven, with only a shadow of beard, and there was a natural swagger to his walk.

He seated himself at the short, straight bar and did not look at her at first, though she knew that she was the reason he was here. She had met him briefly at his place of employment, a used book and

vinyl store on Bonifant, where she had been looking for a copy of *Home Is the Sailor*, and Raphael had told her that he had been asking for her since and that he would be stopping by. On the day that she'd met him she felt she'd seen him before, and the feeling passed through her again. Now he looked around the restaurant, trying to appear casually interested in the decor, and finally his eyes lit on her, where they had been headed all the time, and he lifted his chin and gave her an easy and pleasant smile.

Enrique placed the margarita on her drink tray, and she dressed it with a lime wheel and a swizzle stick and walked it to her four—top by the front window. She served the marg and the dark beers on her tray and took the food orders from the two couples seated at the table, glancing over toward the bar one time as she wrote. Raphael was standing beside the man in the black leather jacket and the two of them were shaking hands.

Juana went back to the area of the service bar and placed the ticket faceup on the ledge of a reach-through, where the hand of the kitchen's expeditor took the ticket and impaled it on a wheel. She heard Raphael call her name and she walked around the bar to where he stood and the man sat, his ringless hand touching a cold bottle of Dos Equis beer.

"You remember this guy?" said Raphael.

"Sure," she said, and then Raphael moved away, just left her there like that, went to a deuce along the wall to greet its two occupants. She'd have to remind Raphael of his manners the next time she got him alone.

"So," the man said in a slow, gravelly way. "Did you find your Jorge Amado?"

"I did find it. Thank you, yes."

"We got *Tereza Batista* in last week. It's in that paper series Avon put out a few years back —"

"I've read it," she said, too abruptly. She was nervous, and showing it; it wasn't like her to react this way in front of a man. She looked over her shoulder. She had only the one table left for the evening, and her diners seemed satisfied, nursing their drinks. She cleared her throat and said, "Listen —"

"It's okay," he said, swiveling on his stool to face her. He had a wide mouth parenthesized by lines going down to a strong chin. His eyes were green and they were direct and damaged, and somehow needy, and the eyes completed it for her, and scared her a little bit, too.

"What's okay?" she said.

"You don't have to stand here if you don't want to. You can go back to work if you'd like."

"No, that's all right. I mean, I'm fine. It's just that —"

"Juana, right?" He leaned forward and cocked his head.

He was moving very quickly, and it crossed her mind that what she had taken for confidence in his walk might have been conceit.

"I don't remember telling you my name the day we met."

"Raphael told me."

"And now you're going to tell me you like the way it sounds. That my name sings, right?"

"It *does* sing. But that's not what I was going to say."

"What, then?"

"I was going to ask if you like oysters."

"Yes. I like them."

"Would you like to have some with me down at Crisfield's, after you get off?"

"Just like that? I don't even know —"

"Look here." He put his right hand up, palm out. "I've been thinking about you on and off since

that day you walked into the bookstore. I've been thinking about you *all* day today. Now, I believe in being to the point, so let me ask you again: Would ... you ... like ... to step *out* with me, after your shift, and have a bite to eat?"

"Juana!" said the expeditor, his head in the reach—through. "Is up!"

"Excuse me," she said.

She went to the ledge of the reach—through and retrieved a small bowl of chili *con queso*, filled red plastic basket with chips, and served the four—top its appetizer. As she was placing the *queso* and chips on the table, she looked back at the bar, instantly sorry that she had. The man was smiling at her full on. She tossed her long hair off her shoulder self—consciously and was sorry she had done that, too. She walked quickly back to the bar.

"You're sure of yourself, eh?" she said when she reached him, surprised to feel her arms folded across her chest.

"I'm confident, if that's what you mean."

"Overconfident, maybe."

He shrugged. "You like what you see, otherwise you wouldn't have stood here as long as you did. And you sure wouldn't have come back. I like what *I* see. That's what I'm *doing* here. And listen, Raphael can vouch for me. It's not like we're going to walk out of here and I'm gonna grow fangs. So why don't we try it out?"

"You must be drunk," she said, nodding at the beer bottle in his hand.

"On wine and love." He saw her perplexed face and said, "It's a line from a western."

"Okay."

He shot a look at her crossed arms. "You're gonna wrinkle your uniform, you keep hugging it like that."

She unfolded her arms slowly and dropped them to her side. She began to smile, tried to stop it, and felt a twitch at the edge of her lip.

"It's not a uniform," she said, her voice softening, losing its edge. "It's just an old cotton shirt."

They studied each other for a while, not speaking, as the recorded mariachi music danced through the dining room and bar.

"What I was trying to tell you," she said, "before you interrupted me ... is that I don't even know your name."

"It's Terry Quinn," he said.

"Tuh—ree Quinn," she said, trying it out.

"Irish Catholic," he said, "if you're keeping score."

And Juana said, "It sings."

Chapter 4

Where's your car?" asked Juana.

"You better drive tonight," said Quinn.

"I'm in the lot. We should cut through here."

They went through the break in the buildings between Rosita's and the pawnshop. They neared Fred Folsom's sculpted bronze bust of Norman Lane, "the Mayor of Silver Spring," mounted in the center of the breezeway Quinn patted the top of Lane's capped head without thought as they walked by.

"You always do that?" said Juana.

"Yeah," said Quinn, "for luck. Some of the guys in the garages back here, they sort of adopted him, looked out for him when he was still alive. See?" He pointed to a sign mounted over a bay door in the alley, a caricature drawing of Lane with the saying "Don't Worry About It" written on a button pinned to his chest, as they entered an alley. "They call this Mayor's Lane now."

"You knew him?"

"I knew who he was. I bought him a drink once over at Captain White's. Another place that isn't around anymore. He was just a drunk. But I guess what they're trying to say with all this back here, with everything he was, he was still a man."

"God, it's cold." Juana held the lapels of her coat together and close to her chest and looked over at Quinn. "I've seen you before, you know? And not at the bookstore, either. Before that, but I know we never met."

"I was in the news last year. On the television and in the papers, too."

"Maybe that's it."

"It probably is."

"There's my car."

"That old Beetle?"

"What, it's not good enough for you?"

"No, I like it."

"What do you drive?"

"I'm between cars right now."

"Is that like being between jobs?"

"Just like it."

"You asked me out and you don't have a car?"

"So it's your nickel for the gas." Quinn zipped his jacket. "I'll get the oysters and the beers."

THEY were at the bar of Crisfield's, the old Crisfield's on the dip at Georgia, not the designer Crisfield's on Colesville, and they were eating oysters and sides of coleslaw and washing it all down with Heineken beer. Quinn had juiced the cocktail sauce with horseradish and he noticed that Juana had added Tabasco to the mix.

“Mmm,” said Juana, swallowing a mouthful, reaching into the cracker bowl for a chaser.

“A dozen raw and a plate of slaw,” said Quinn. “Nothin’ better. These are good, right?”

“They’re good.”

All the stools at the U—shaped bar were occupied, and the dining room to the right was filled. The atmosphere was no atmosphere: white tile walls with photographs of local celebrities framed and mounted above the tiles, wood tables topped with paper place mats, grocery store-bought salad dressing displayed on a bracketed shelf... and still the place was packed nearly every night, despite the fact that management was giving nothing away. Crisfield’s was a D.C. landmark, where generations of Washingtonians had met and shared food and conversation for years.

“Make any money tonight?” said Quinn.

“By the time I tipped out the bartender ... not real money, no. I walked with forty—five.”

“You keep having forty—five—dollar nights, you’re not going to be able to make it through school.”

“My student loans are putting me through school. I wait tables just to live. Raphael tell you I was going to law school?”

“He told me everything he knew about you. Don’t worry, it wasn’t much. Pass me that Tabasco, will you?”

He touched her hand as she handed him the bottle. Her hand was warm, and he liked the way her fingers were tapered, feminine and strong.

“Thanks.”

A couple of black guys seated on the opposite end of the U, early thirties, if Quinn had to guess, were staring freely at him and Juana. Plenty of heads had turned when they’d entered the restaurant, some he figured just to get a look at Juana. Most of the people had only looked over briefly, but these two couldn’t give it up. Well, fuck it, he thought. If this was going to keep working in any kind of way — and he was getting the feeling already that he wanted it to — then he’d just have to shake off those kinds of stares. Still, he didn’t like it, how these two were so bold.

“That’s not fair,” said Juana.

“*What* isn’t?”

“You been asking about me and you know some things, and I don’t know a damn thing about you. You *been*. He liked the way she said that.

“That accent of yours,” he said.

“What accent?”

“Your voice falls and rises, like music. What is that, Brooklyn?”

“The Bronx.” She shook an oyster off her fork and let it sit in the cocktail sauce. “What’s yours? The Carolinas, something like that?”

“Maryland, D.C.”

“You sound plenty Southern to me. With that drawl and everything.”

“This *is* the South. It’s south of the Mason—Dixon Line, anyway.”

He turned to face her. Her hair was black, curly, and very long, and it broke on thin shoulders and rose again at the upcurve of her smallish breasts. She had a nice ass on her, too; he had checked it out back at the restaurant when she’d bent over to serve her drinks. It was round and high, the way he liked it, and the sight of it had taken his breath short, which had not happened to him in a long while. Her eyes were near black, many shades deeper than her brown skin, and her lips were full and painted in a dark color with an even darker outline. There was a mole on her cheek, above and to the right of her upper lip.

He was staring at her now and she was staring at him, and then her lips turned up on one side, a kind of half smile that she attempted to hold down. It was the same thing she had done back at Rosita's with her mouth, and Quinn chuckled under his breath.

"What?"

"Ah, nothin'. It's just, that thing you got going on, your *almost* smile. I just like it, is all."

Juana retrieved her oyster from the cocktail sauce, chewed and swallowed it, and had a swig of cold beer.

"How do you know Raphael?" she said.

"He came in the shop one day, looking for Stanley Clarke's *School Days* on vinyl. Raphael likes that jazz—funk sound, the semi—orchestral stuff from the seventies. Dexter Wansel, George Duke, like that. Lonnie Liston Smith. I knew zilch about it, and he was happy to give me an education. I call him when we buy those old records from time to time."

"You always worked in a bookstore?"

"No, not always. What you want to know is, am I educated, and if so, why haven't I done anything with it. I went to the University of Maryland and got my criminology degree. Then I was a cop in D.C. for eight years or so. After I left the force, I thought I was ready for something quiet. I like books, a certain kind, anyway... ."

"Westerns."

"Yeah, and there's nothing quieter than a used book and record store. So here I am."

She studied his face. "I know where I've seen you now."

"Right. I'm the cop that killed the other cop last year."

"It's the hair that's changed."

"Uh—huh. I grew it out."

Quinn waited, but the usual follow—up questions didn't come. He watched Juana use her elbow to push the platter of oyster shells away from her. While he watched her, he drank off an inch of his beer.

"How about me?" asked Juana. "Anything else you want to know?"

"Not really. What I know so far I like."

"Not a thing, huh?"

"Can't think of anything off the top of my head right now."

"Let me go ahead and get it out of the way, then, all right? My mother was Puerto Rican and my father was black. I'm comfortable in a few different worlds and sometimes I'm not comfortable in any of them."

"I didn't ask you that."

"You didn't ask me *that yet*."

"What I mean is, I don't care."

"You don't care tonight. Tonight there's only attraction and do we connect. But this world we go out here and the people in it, right now, they're not gonna let us *not care*. Like those two guys over there, been staring at us all night."

"How about we deal with it as we go along?" Quinn signaled the barrel—chested man with the gray mustache behind the bar. "Sir? You wanna shuck us a dozen more?"

"Thanks, Tuh—ree," said Juana.

Tuh—ree. He liked the way she said that, too.

On their way out the door, Juana noticed Quinn glance over his shoulder at the two men who had been staring at them all night and give them both a short but meaningful look.

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