

Back to the present moment, where all is not gloom and doom.

In fact, we've had some good news.

We've just lost Rosey the Chicken Hawk. He gave up on us all, finally. Apparently, we'll never be stalwart foot soldiers in his war against small-mindedness, superstition, and hypocrisy. We won't be helping him usher in a new age of moral, sensual and emotional exploration. We won't be making the world safe for child-fucking and animal-fucking and whatever other wretched fucking Rosey envisioned for all of us. We've disappointed him. So he's left us, in a modest huff.

If a few more of the luckless reprobates upstairs would reach a similar conclusion and follow Rosey out the door, it would really clear the air around here.

Ha, ha. Little late for that, I know.

Rosey never really found his niche here. He was a glad-hander among introverts, a group organizer in a fraternity of loners. Whereas most of these freaks take a grubby, practical approach to their depravities, Rosey brought a whole idealist ethos to the party that never really caught on. Most of these guys want nothing more than a safe place to hide. They scatter like cockroaches when someone hits a light switch.

Not Rosey. Rosey is a climb-on-a-soap-box sort. He wants to change the world. Rosey is short for Roosevelt, by the way. Roosevelt Walker.

Earlier this morning, I was hammering away on the laptop, as usual. Morning sunlight was leaking through the window plastic, here in the garage. The first mowers and trimmers were roaring to life in yards

nearby. The landscaping crews around here hardly wait for the sun to come up anymore. Back in my writing days, it used to drive me batty. While John and Jane Q. Public are off to work Monday to Friday, the neighborhoods they leave behind are fucking artillery zones of cultivation and pruning. Some of these people must get their lawns mowed three times a week. God forbid a stray blade of grass might go unshorn, unfed, untreated for forty-eight hours. Don't even get me started on the leaf-blowers.

I'm usually out of my army surplus cot by six am. I brush my teeth, rinse with warm Diet Pepsi, and then hit the ground typing, trying to get a train of thought going before the grass-shearing blitzkrieg commences. Getting started is a lot easier, I should say, now that I'm in the nonfiction business. This memoir gig is a breeze. I can't believe I wasted twenty agonizing years making shit up. This morning, I was well into an account of my humbling interview with Dr. Stanley Jacobsen, clinical psychologist, when I heard a car pull up in front of the house. The Jacobsen chapter comes later. More hilarious high jinks, rest assured.

Cars pull up in front of my house all the time these days. They're almost always delivering bad news. I'm not nearly as curious about who's in them and why as I used to be. This car idled at the foot of my driveway for what must have been ten minutes before I finally got up and peeled back a section of window plastic to see what was going on. It was a cab.

Rosey always arrives in a cab. He never learned how to drive. Never wanted to, he says. Rosey's one of those charmed self-promoters who's never had to attend to the petty details of life. Like personal transportation. But it was way too early, I thought, for Rosey. Rosey is a late-afternoon riser.

So maybe, I thought, it's a print journalist of some sort. Or an unusually well-heeled felon. Most of the freaks currently squatting here don't have enough money to splurge on cabs. Publicized sex-offender status has an entirely predictable adverse effect on employability and personal wealth. Some of these guys have junk cars, some don't. I get a lot of walk-ups.

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I watched as the front passenger-side door of the cab swung open and a rangy, loose-limbed kid popped out, a large professional-caliber video camera propped on his shoulder. He had a big blond afro and was wearing exaggeratedly flared trousers. That '70s SuperFly look that seems popular with the kids just now. He came around to the driver's side rear door and focused his camera on it. The camera confused me. TV journalists usually arrive here in late-model, station-logoed vans brimming with high-tech doodads. They usually don't film their own arrival, either. Perhaps this was a representative from the low-budget, public-access media. Then the passenger-side rear door opened and I was lifting the garage door and jogging down the driveway, preparing to engage in yet another farcical attempt at damage control.

Rosey assures us that his boyfriend is nineteen. If this is true, his boyfriend has some hormonal issues that need investigating. Nineteen or not, he's highly alarming.

His name is Tim, and he's been here before. Rosey's been told never to bring Tim here again, but warnings have little effect on Rosey. If they did, Rosey wouldn't be here at all. Tim walked around the back of the cab and opened the driver's side rear door, allowing Rosey to exit the car with a regal air. Rosey is three times Tim's age at least, a portly translucent-skinned guy given to dandified suits and fedoras with loud hatbands. He tapped his walking stick on the blacktop, took Tim's hand and started swanning up my driveway. I met them halfway up.

"No way, Rosey," I said. "I told you before. No way."

Rosey's usual aura of genial forbearance dimmed only slightly. "Hello, Fletcher," he said. "You're looking rather frisky and animated, here in dawn's early light."

"Dawn was four hours ago. Get back in the cab and take your boyfriend with you. And this guy."

The camera guy was pointing his camera at me.

"Oh, Fletcher. Really. Lighten up. It's little wonder you can't get the public to empathize with your cause. With our cause."

"I don't have a cause. All I have is trouble."

"Tolerance works both ways, my friend."

“Go peddle your bullshit somewhere else. I told you about him.”  
Meaning Tim.

“How can you expect people to rally to you, when you have so little goodwill to spare for others?”

“I’ve had more than enough of people rallying, thank you. People hate me.”

“You need to develop a common touch. Likeableness.”

“What? Like you? You’re the reason people hate me.”

“Ah. Right.” Rosey patted Tim’s hand reassuringly, as if stroking a nervous pet bird. “I’m the cause of your problems. Keep telling yourself that, if it helps.” He swept by me, Tim and cameraman in tow.

“I’m here!” he called up to the house. “Let the revolution begin, my comrades in arms!” This last bit being solely for the camera. There was no one up there who wanted to see Rosey.

“No. No, no, no, no, no.” I was following them up the driveway. The cameraman turned and recorded my pointless refusal to permit whatever Rosey was intending to do.

“Rosey!” I shouted.

Rosey stopped and turned at the top of the driveway. I could see a couple of faces peering down at us from the front windows of my house.

“Why is this man pointing a camera at me?”

“Because the camera loves you. Why else, my friend?”

“Why?”

“He’s filming a documentary.”

“What?”

“A documentary. Of my life.”

At first, I didn’t know what to say. No wonder Rosey was out of bed before ten am. I settled for “Are you fucking crazy?”

“No.” Rosey was unruffled. He’s never ruffled. “It’s a good story. An epic story. A life lived at ground zero in the cultural and sexual wars that are shaping this infant century. This is a historic time. Ours is a historic cause.”

“Are you . . .” I raised my hand in front of my face. I wished I had a newspaper or an umbrella. “Are you paying this guy?”

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“Of course not. Alex is a grad student at UCLA. This will be his second feature. Alex, what was your first feature?”

“The Breeding Trap,” Alex said, still focusing on me. “It’s an examination of the Total Abstinence Collective in Mesa, Arizona.”

“Well received, wasn’t it?”

“It was shown out of competition at Sundance, last year.”

“See? Alex is a rising star in the film industry. Unlike you, he knows a good story when he sees one.”

The interior door of the garage opened and Sean the Drama Queen appeared. He walked past us, pointing down the hill to where the cab was still idling.

“Hey! You!” he yelled. “Cabdriver! Don’t go anywhere! They’re not staying!” He turned to Rosey. “We don’t need your kind of trouble here anymore.”

“Stay out of this, Sean,” I said. “I’m taking care of it.”

Sean paid no attention to me. He was looking at Rosey.

“We know what you did. How can you even show your face here?”

“What do you know, Sean? Very little, I suspect.”

“This is all a game to you, isn’t it?”

“If it’s a game, it’s one I’m playing to win. If you could see the big picture like I do, you’d see the wisdom of what I’m doing.”

“You betrayed us. You endangered everybody.”

Rosey permitted himself a smirk. “On the contrary. I’m making the world safe for people like you.”

“You’ve pulled your last stunt here. You manipulate both sides to advance your own perverse agenda. You don’t speak for us. People get hurt because of you. You polarize people and it serves no purpose.”

“War is ugly, my friend. If you have no stomach for battle, then get to the rear with the rest of the sissies. You can come out and toss confetti after the real work is done.”

“All you do is enrage people even more. You make us look ridiculous. You make things worse.”

“They would hate us anyway. They hate you and all you want to do is agree with them. All you want is for them to love you. But they never

will. The time for compromise is over. Now, at least, they know we're willing to fight back."

"You're not a fighter. You're a self-promoting parasite. And you're endangering other people. They went after Chad because of you."

"Because of me?" Rosey laughed a theatrical laugh. "Your boyfriend doesn't need my help. He's a lightning rod for outrage. I wish I had a hundred more like him. What this movement needs is a lot more warriors and a lot less self-hating, cultured fairies from polite homes."

This struck me as funny. "Is that what you are? A warrior? I noticed you weren't kicking any ass when the cops were trussing me up like a turkey," I said. "I noticed I wasn't sharing a jail cell with you."

"Free to fight another day," Rosey said, airily. "Someone has to maintain enough distance to see all the chess pieces on the board."

"Go look for your photo ops somewhere else," Sean said. "And take your boy toy with you."

Tim made a rueful face at this. He crossed his toothpick-thin arms over his narrow chest and looked to Rosey for support. All bird bones and staring eyes, Tim looks to be about fifteen. He's tall, droopy, and slender, and always looks like he just woke up thirty seconds ago. He has a kid's way of staring blankly at you for long periods of time, observing you without pretense. He might not be a bad kid, necessarily. Just vapid to the point of utter noncorporeality. And a poor judge of companions.

"We will never take our rightful place in society, if we hate ourselves even more than our enemies hate us."

This, I recognized from experience, was the opening salvo of another Rosey Walker speech.

"We don't hate ourselves. We hate you, Rosey. You're the only thing we can all agree on."

"I'm all about validity, Sean. I'm about validating you, your lifestyle, who you are. I'm about validating us all in the eyes of an intolerant, fear-driven society. And that frightens you, doesn't it?"

"You're not about me. You're all about you. You don't give a shit about us. If you did, you wouldn't betray us to the people who hate us."

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“Are you going to hide all your life? When will you step into the light? When will you say, I am a man, deserving of respect and dignity?”

“Is that why you’ve brought your twelve-year-old fuck toy with you? To make us all look good?” Sean had burst from the garage looking upset, and was growing increasingly manic; he was pale and flustered and pushing his glasses up on his nose every six seconds or so.

“Go back to your warm, comfy closet, sweetpea. We’ll tell you when it’s safe to come out.”

“If you make us put you in that cab, you’ll ride back to town in the trunk.”

“I’m not twelve,” Tim whispered, five beats late, as usual. “I’m eighteen.”

“That’s it! Shut up, everybody!” I opened my mouth to speak again, but then stopped and turned to Tim. “I thought you said you were nineteen.”

“Terrific,” Sean said. “He’s lost a year. He’s eleven.”

Sean, it should be said, is particularly sensitive to Rosey’s perverse ideology because their crimes bear a surface similarity. They’ve both been found guilty of despoiling the innocence of underage men. Now don’t get me wrong, Sean is no Rosey. Rosey is a sociopath, driven entirely by greed, lust, and outsized ego.

And Sean? Sean did it for love, love, love.

Before Sean was Sean the Drama Queen, he was Sean the Drama Teacher, an instructor at the Whitechapel School, a tony private school west of here, in horse-farm country. Those of you who would paint all of the registered sex felons as hedonist provocateurs and depraved radicals—as Roseys—clearly do not have Sean in mind. Sean seems to have been an earnest, principled young man and conscientious teacher who grappled grimly with his sexuality well into his twenties. He dated girls until he couldn’t do it anymore, then compartmentalized his life as best he could. And then he fell for a boy.

Sean never mentions any of this. What I know, I know from Chad the Activist, who told me bits and pieces of the tale back when he still

thought I was worth confiding in. To hear Chad tell it, the whole debacle was the boy's doing. The boy, unlike Sean, was not conflicted at all about his sexuality. He was infatuated with Sean at first sight and sought out roles in every Whitechapel stage production he could ham his way into. Sean was the classic private school archetype — the fey, borderline consumptive, offhandedly charming Sensitive Teacher Guy that all the arty girls (and some of the arty boys) fall for. Sean fended this particular boy off for a year and a half and even considered leaving his teaching position. But plum jobs for drama teachers aren't growing on trees these days, so Sean hung on and held off as the boy turned fifteen. And then he slipped.

Even then, Sean might have escaped censure, had he not compounded one fatal error with another. He tried to cut the boy off. The boy was about as discreet as you'd expect a hammy, flamboyantly gay fifteen-year-old actor would be. Which is to say he carried on like a fire alarm in a church on Monday. Sean, guilt-ridden and terrified, tried to let him down gently again and again. Chad believes that the boy's parents knew all about this illicit romance, and were willing to turn a blind eye to it. I find that hard to believe. Certainly, however, the boy's friends knew what was going on. Sean persisted in his efforts at rejection until he finally provoked an ugly scene. The boy raised holy hell until someone had to do something in an official context. Sean resigned and left Whitechapel in disgrace. A year later, he accepted convictions on two lesser charges, criminal sexual contact in the fourth degree and endangering the welfare of a minor, in order to escape jail time. He got five years of probation, a hefty fine, and an indefinite period of counseling. Oh, and his own sex offender registry listing.

Now I don't condone any of this. I have a boy of my own and, homosexuality aside, I'll be good and goddamned if he'll ever climb into his teacher's bed at age fifteen. Or age twenty-five or frigging forty-five, if I have anything to say about it. I bring all of this up merely to make a distinction between Sean and Rosey. It serves no purpose to see all of these guys as equally depraved. In the Great Batting Order of Evil, Rosey is a slugging first baseman, batting clean-up. Sean is a slap-

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hitting utility infielder, used primarily for late-inning defensive substitutions.

Rosey was addressing the camera. This following stuff may sound canned, like I'm putting words in Rosey's mouth, but the truth is, this is how Rosey really speaks. He can spin this shit off the top of his head, without pause, for hours.

"As long as we permit the forces of intolerance to define us, not simply to the world at large, but even to ourselves, we will never control our own fates. Before we can take control of the message, we have to know what the message is. We have to know who we are. We are polysexuals. Our sexuality is not narrowly defined by conventional standards."

"Shut up," Sean said. He said it in a weird, pinched tone of voice that made me look at him warily.

"This does not make us evil. On the contrary, it makes us more enlightened beings. Sexually, morally, philosophically, we represent the dawn of a new age of human interrelationship."

"Shut up."

"Sean?" I said. "Are you okay?" He was sweating in the mid-morning heat and his hands were clumped into sharp, bony fists. Standing next to him, I could sense him quivering. His glasses had slid to the bottom of his nose and he'd stopped pushing them up.

"As such, we will be feared by those who fear change. Who fear the inevitable evolution of mankind."

When Sean first came here, looking for a night's shelter, he still had the air of a lovestruck, mild-mannered educator. Amazingly, despite all he'd been through—the boy's betrayal, the loss of his career, the hazing at the hands of vigilantes, the loss of at least two apartments and one car—he still seemed more sad than angry.

"Stop it now or you'll be sorry."

"Almost forty years after Stonewall and we're still our own worst enemies. We're still little ugly bugs, cowering in our cocoons, afraid to be butterflies."

"Wrong bug, you fucking leech. You parasite."

More and more, though, Sean is succumbing to the same sickness everyone else is suffering from around here. He's getting angrier. Today is the first day he's completely lost it.

Rosey turned to Alex the cameraman. "We'll cut that part out. You can do that, right?"

The interior door to the garage opened again and Chad appeared. His hair was wet and he was wearing only a pair of loose terrycloth shorts. Despite the debilitating effects of the various AIDS medications he's taking, he still looked pretty sinewy. Water droplets glistened in the fuzz atop his head. His midsection was a blue-and-yellow roadmap of bruises. He sized up the situation and went to Sean's side.

"How many times do I have to tell everybody?" I said. "No one's allowed in the garage. The garage is mine. It's off limits."

"Yo, Sean, fella. Chill out," Chad was saying. "Let's not start the day with a migraine, okay?"

"It's not bad enough, he willfully puts us in danger," Sean said. "It's not bad enough, the world thinks we're part of his circus act. Now he thinks he's going to film us."

"No. He's not." Chad put an arm around Sean's shoulders and gave him a gentle shake. "He's leaving."

"We could've used you in Trenton on Friday," Rosey said to Chad. "The ORPs pushed us around pretty good."

ORP. One Righteous Path. I'd seen them in action for the first time just a few days before, at Rosey's ill-fated Sex Offenders Solidarity meet-up.

Chad shrugged. "I ran into some trouble."

"So I heard. You don't look too good."

"I've been beaten up by better." Chad lifted his chin to indicate Alex. "What's with Camera Guy?"

"Alex is making a documentary about our movement."

"Yeah?" Chad seemed amused at this. "What's it called? The Roosevelt Walker Story?"

"Maybe. It's got a ring to it. You can't tell a story without putting a face on it. You've got to give the public something it can get a grip on."

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“That could be. Good luck with your new film career. But you might as well pack him up. I think you’ve worn out your welcome around here.”

Rosey seemed to sense for the first time that he was facing a united front, that he wasn’t going to be bluffing his way past us. He leaned on his walking stick and made an unhappy face at Chad. “I heard about the little stunt you’re planning. With the signs around town. Seems like a lot of effort for very little return.”

This is the art project I referred to earlier.

“I have a weakness for largely symbolic gestures.” Chad looked at Alex. “That’s a nice piece of equipment you got there. How’d you like to leave here with it intact?”

“I think your new girlfriend is taking your edge off, fella,” Rosey said. “Domesticity is not doing wonders for you.”

Chad the Activist has fallen in with Sean of late, though anyone can tell that Sean’s still carrying a torch for his favorite actor boy. Sean and Jamie, by the way, are the only two squatters who’ve ever received my permission to be here.

“Turn off the camera and go home.”

“I hope you’re using appropriate protection during intercourse. Our movement can hardly afford to lose two good people to such a terrible disease.”

Sean stepped forward, but Chad restrained him. Sean’s glasses slipped off his face and fell to the ground. Chad stooped to pick them up. Alex lowered the camera.

“Pay no attention to him, Alex,” Rosey said. “Keep filming.”

Chad handed Sean’s glasses back to him. “There’s nothing going on here that you’re going to want to save for posterity, Rosey. Just a bunch of people who are tired of your act.”

Rosey grinned broadly at this. “Maybe, for the DVD release, we can tack on some funny outtakes. A little *Where Are They Now?* featurette. Chad the Holier-Than-Thou Activist. Dead of Hyper-Resistant AIDS, 2010.”

Sean extricated himself from Chad's grasp and started walking back to the house. I thought he was going inside, but he stopped by the side of the garage and began to open the spigot there. I keep a water hose wound up in a revolving storage unit on the side wall of the garage. He opened the spigot all the way up and started walking back to us, spray nozzle in hand, hose unwinding behind him.

"Is your camera waterproof?" Rosey said to Alex.

"Yep."

Sean opened up and hit Rosey in the chest with a blast of water.

"Ow!" Rosey raised his hands to shield himself and Sean caught him full in the face. "Jesus! Ow!"

That hose-and-sprayer set is a pricey item. It's a special high-pressure system that I had custom installed when we bought the house. I used to use it to clean the algae off the little sailboat I once kept on the lake. It really packs a punch. Sean seemed pleased with its effectiveness.

Rosey started to backpedal, then lost his footing and fell backwards onto his ass. Sean kept a steady stream going and Rosey rolled back into a fetal ball. "Stop!" he yelled. "Stop it!"

Sean stopped.

"Oh," Rosey said. "Oh. Now you've done it." He sat up and looked down at his soiled suit. "I'm in a *film* here. I can't just . . . oh."

"This is the end, Rosey," Sean said. "Don't come back. We can't afford to have you around here anymore."

"Alex?" Rosey said. "Turn the camera off, please."

Alex backed away a bit, without doing anything that might signify the end of filming.

"I'm going to leave now." Rosey tried to get up, but failed. "Your little self-defeating group here is not nearly the most important front in the war on ignorance and repression. I've got other irons in the fire, believe me."

Poor Rosey. You know the road back to acceptance in polite society will be a long one, when even the outcasts, even the rapists and molesters, can no longer afford to be seen with you.

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“One day, you’ll recognize what I was trying to do for you. You’ll see it in retrospect, of course. By virtue of hindsight. By then, the war will already be won and we’ll be living in a better, more enlightened age.” He beckoned Tim over to him. “Except for you, Chad. You’ll be dead.”

Tim offered Rosey a wispy hand, which offered little resistance or counterweight for upward movement. Finally, Chad went over and hoisted Rosey roughly to his feet.

“I just hope you don’t regret what you’ve done today.” Rosey moved further down the driveway and addressed the blank windows above us. “If any of you are fed up with living in fear,” he shouted, “you know where to find me. Our struggle is just and right.”

He watched the windows for a few seconds, as if expecting someone to reconsider him and his whole nutjob enterprise. Then he turned and walked to the waiting cab. Alex followed, a few steps behind, then Tim.

As he reached the cab, the front door of my house opened and Farmer Jack appeared. He was carrying two bags—a nylon purple gym bag and an old-fashioned corduroy valise with leather handles. I recognized the gym bag. It contained handouts and proselytizing materials for Rosey’s ad hoc advisory group, the Polysexual Institute, and its activist offshoot, *Queer Without Fear*. Rosey had left it here after an earlier visit. The other bag looked like some kind of garment bag. Who knows how many times Rosey has been here without my even knowing it?

Farmer Jack carried Rosey’s two bags to the bottom of the driveway, set them down, and then retreated to the front of the garage. We watched together as the driver pitched the bags into the trunk. Alex was capturing a shot of Rosey getting into the back seat.

Farmer Jack, by the way, is a prematurely grey, slab-muscled, stocky guy, fond of overalls. He seems to have two pairs that he alternates. Farmer Jack lived on a farm for twenty-plus years, though he never did much farming. He made his money by running a foster-childcare scam. For at least fifteen years, he and his wife took in foster kids, collected a state-provided stipend for each one, and raised them on

a bare-subsistence diet of dented-can foods, dumpster-salvaged produce, and state-subsidized tranquilizers. A loophole in the foster-care laws of the state they lived in allowed for—indeed, practically encouraged—the home-schooling of mentally or emotionally-challenged youngsters. So Farmer Jack and Mrs. Farmer Jack each got teaching certificates and made a specialty of providing care for that specific variety of unfortunate child. Most of those kids rarely saw the light of day.

Farmer Jack might still be warehousing foster kids today if his wife hadn't died. After his wife's untimely passing, Farmer Jack took to fucking his charges. Boys and girls, according to newspaper accounts of the time. It didn't much matter to Farmer Jack. Farmer Jack's unique child-care operation was uncovered during a cholera outbreak in his rural county. Medical examiners enforcing a quarantine arrived unexpectedly at Jack's farm and found more than they'd bargained for. Jack plea-bargained down to twelve years and served seven.

"Will you turn the goddamn camera off already?" Rosey yelled. Alex raced around to the other side of the car.

"He won't be missed," Farmer Jack said.

I looked at Farmer Jack for a long moment.

"What?" I said.

"That guy. We're better off without him."

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Jack looked back at me, his face registering mild reproof, and then turned away to watch Rosey's cab move out of sight down the street.

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You're probably wondering, by now, what kind of person shares his house with the likes of Farmer Jack and Rosey the Chicken Hawk.

If he's so damned innocent, you're thinking, why is he providing a convenient home base for these creepy miscreants?

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A valid question.

I've already covered my attempts to remove Jamie and Rosey from the premises. Now let's move on to my encounter with Richard Thorpe. This bit is slightly out of chronological order—I'm getting ahead of myself again—but what the fuck. This particular story illustrates a point that needs making.

Richard Thorpe was my third uninvited visitor. He arrived after Jamie's first visit and after Rosey first showed up, but before Jamie's sixth and permanent visit. I suggested earlier that by the time of Jamie's last visit, I had more pressing problems on my hands than Jamie's rather benign coming and going. Richard Thorpe was one of those problems. In fact, Richard Thorpe was a factor in my decision to let Jamie stay.

One early morning a few weeks ago, I went down to the kitchen in my bathrobe, poured myself a cup of coffee, and went out to the deck, where I found Richard waiting for me. Many of you would find the prospect of stumbling upon an intruder waiting for you in the half-light of dawn a little unnerving. But I'd already found Rosey on my deck two days before and Jamie everywhere else on my property in the previous week, so I was getting to be an old hand at this encounter-the-trespasser thing. I was growing accustomed to the idea that I was newsworthy and, presumably, paying the price for it. I haven't dealt in any detail with my newsworthiness yet, but I will.

I slid open the glass door and peered out at my latest visitor over the rim of my coffee cup. He was slouched comfortably in one of my deck chairs, one ankle propped up on opposite knee. "Look," I said, "I've already called the police."

"Great," he said, unperturbed. "I hope we still have time to talk."

"You don't think you're the first guy to show up here, looking to sell me some line of crazy shit, do you?"

"No, not at all. In fact, I know the routine much better than you do, believe me."

"If you were to leave right now, you might even get away before the cops arrive."

“No need. Come on, sit down. We’ll wait together.”

Bluff called. So I could either go back inside and actually call the police or try to shoo this new guy away on my own. I’d had some measure of success with this second option two days earlier, at the conclusion of Rosey’s first visit, so I decided to try my luck again. I walked to the deck rail and set my cup on it.

“Let me guess,” I said. “We have a lot in common.”

“We do. It’s true.” He beamed at me happily. “Beautiful view you got here.”

“Thank you.”

This house has a large wooden deck in the rear that affords a decent view down into the lake valley. The sun rises through the tree line on the other side of the lake and sets behind the house, behind the ridge top above us, so the darkness seems to rise up out of the valley. We got this house by way of a prodigious down payment provided by Emily’s parents. As a wedding present. They wanted us close by, I think. Emily and I never had any of those difficult-but-romantic, takeout-Chinese, tiny-apartment years. We got married and moved in here. I didn’t have a dime, then. I’d published a few stories in top-drawer literary journals, netted myself about \$7. My agent was shopping my first book—the good one—around to publishers as we were picking out furniture for this place.

“Pity you’ll never get what this place is worth, when you sell.” Thorpe was alternately tapping the toes of his right foot and jiggling his right knee. Toes, knee, toes, knee.

“It’s not for sale.”

“You’ll find that potential buyers will use your precarious legal situation to squeeze you, when the time comes.”

“It’s not for sale. Do you have a name?”

“Of course, that might be your best-case scenario. You could do worse. A lot worse. Your first mistake, fucking that kid, was just a local dust-up. Sometimes you can keep the locals at arm’s length. But this new online heap of shit you stepped into, that’s crossing state lines. The feds are going to take a keen interest in that. You’re going to find

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yourself in the deep end of the pool, with those guys. I've seen the feds walk right in and padlock the doors in situations a lot less dubious than yours."

"Are you here to offer me free legal advice?"

"No, sir. I'm here to welcome you to the club."

"What club is that?"

"The sex offenders' shit-out-of-luck club. We're a select little group of dumb fucks with no prospects, no protections, no basic human rights. Welcome aboard."

"I'm not a sex offender."

He laughed out loud at this. "Me neither. See? We do have a lot in common. Everyone in our club is completely innocent. Except for the really guilty creeps."

The sun was high enough now to compel my visitor to reach into his light canvas jacket and extract a pair of aviator sunglasses. He put them on. He looked to be in his early to mid forties, lean, a little weathered and rough-looking. He had a wide face and an easy smile. Though his dress and grooming were a little off, his hair and mustache a little ragged, his clothes a little soiled and slept-in, his teeth looked expensively capped. Slouched in my chair, he had the look of a well-off guy who might have just spent a few days camping and fishing.

"I lost my house, so I speak from experience. Of course, it wasn't quite as nice as this one. My name's Richard Thorpe. Aggravated sexual assault, four years, four months served in Stockton State Correctional. Pleased to meet you." He looked at me with a pleased expression on his face, though he didn't offer a hand to shake. "You're a writer, aren't you?"

I shrugged noncommittally.

"Sure you are. I was thinking, just now, you might be better off than most of us. For many people, sex-offender notoriety is not necessarily a career-building asset. Not that it matters to me, particularly. Even if I wanted another nine-to-five gig, the state of California would be up my ass like a sailor on shore leave as soon as I appeared on the earnings radar. The straight world's rigged like a jiggered slot machine

for ex-wives and kids.” He stretched elaborately and then clasped his hands behind his head. “Maybe you’re discovering that already.”

“You have kids?”

“Two. Alison and Jason. They’d be . . .” He thought about it. “. . . eleven and eight now.” He waved the idea of them away. “For you, though, in your field, this sex-offender scarlet letter might be a selling point. A publicity angle. You could be like what’s-his-name. From the sixties. Cleaver. Soul on Ice. Remember that one?”

“No.”

“Could be out of print by now. The anti-establishment flag doesn’t fly like it used to. Black Panthers. Easy Rider. But you never know.” Thorpe shrugged. “It still works for these hip-hop stars, right?”

“What did you do?”

“I told you. Aggravated sexual assault.”

“No. For a living. A career.”

“Oh. I was in advertising. I was a creative director with an agency out west.”

“Which agency was that?”

“Do you know the field?”

“My wife’s in the business.”

“Really. Small world. Hanley, Jacobs and LaRue. In San Francisco. We did a lot of pharmaceutical work.”

I shook my head.

“I did twelve years with them, but it was mostly over by the time I came east and got into trouble. Just before I went to Stockton, I was pulling almost two hundred grand a year, with bonuses, plus a million-two in profit-sharing. All gone now, between my wife, the feds, and the state of California.”

“Tough break.”

“You’d think so, but it’s all just as well. It sounds like a lot of money, but with the cost of living in San Francisco, we were barely keeping our heads above water. Day care for two kids was costing us forty grand a year. Yard service, pool service, health care, some Latina to come in once a week and dust the picture frames. Heating and

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cooling this big drafty barn of a house that was well beyond our means. It was all killing us. We were the walking dead, putting ten-dollar cups of coffee on charge cards." He shrugged. "These days, I don't do any charging. I don't do any banking. I don't have any money and I don't owe anyone. You might say that the system is encouraging me to adopt unconventional approaches to living."

"Have you come here to tell me your life story?"

"Partly. Mostly I'm here to shake you down for cash and any valuables I can carry away. But we'll get to that. Where was I?"

"Expenses were killing you." I lifted my coffee cup from the deck rail and started retreating in a leisurely manner toward the glass doors of my house.

"Where are you going?"

"Just over here."

"To call the police?"

"I told you. I already did that." If this guy was a violent lunatic rather than merely a garden-variety lunatic, I was thinking, he could easily break into my house and pursue me. But maybe by then I could have fired off a frantic emergency call.

"Call them again. Here." Thorpe reached into his jacket and pulled out a cellphone, which he set on the glass-topped table beside him. "Use mine."

"No. Thanks. I've got my own." Step, step, step.

"Really, please. I insist." He said this in a colorless monotone that stopped my doorward progress. "Go ahead. It's prepaid."

"Okay," I said, as if accepting a casual favor. I went to the table and picked up the phone. I dialed 411 and got an operator.

"Lake Lenni Lenape Sheriff's Department," I said.

"Is this an emergency?"

"Yes it is," I told the operator.

"Please hold."

"Sheriff's Department," another, male, voice said.

"I have an intruder," I said, watching Thorpe. He grinned encouragingly.

“Address?”

“162 Spindrift Lane.”

“Are you in the house?”

“No. I’m on the deck. The rear deck. With the intruder.”

“Are you in immediate danger?”

“I’m not sure.”

“The intruder is with you?”

“Yes.”

“Can I speak with this person?”

“They want to talk to you,” I said to Thorpe.

“No,” he said. “Sorry.”

“He can’t come to the phone,” I said.

“We’re sending a car. Can you stay on the line?”

“Can I stay on the line?” I asked Thorpe.

“You could, but I think that would be rude,” he said. He took off his sunglasses and I noticed then, in the improving light, that he had the pinched, boiled look of someone who might have lost a significant amount of weight recently. He wasn’t sick-looking or even starved-looking, just kind of reduced, like he’d filled his clothes better not too long before. His eyes were a little red-rimmed, slightly swollen with what could have been a lack of sleep. He extended a hand for his phone.

“I have to go,” I said into the phone. I turned it off and gave it back to Thorpe.

“Where was I?” Thorpe said again.

“Expenses.”

“Right. But enough about that. Once things got untenable at HJ&L, they assigned me out-of-house. They had a satellite office in the Merck headquarters in New Jersey. Probably still do. You’ve heard of Merck?”

I nodded.

“Ostensibly, I was supposed to be overseeing the Merck campaign. Basic production work, mostly. The big-picture creative gets done in California. But really, it was understood that I had six months to use the

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New Jersey office to find another job. I even asked around a little bit out here, but I knew it was no go. In the ad business, your wife could tell you this, every asshole you pass in the hallway is a VP. You've got a five-to-seven-year window to make the jump from VP to Senior VP. If you don't make it, you're just a wide-eyed deer in the road, waiting for the next pack of hotshot college kids behind you to mow you down. I could have freelanced for a while, done some consulting, but it never got to that."

I was listening intently for the sound of far-off sirens. "Why's that?"

"I was tired of the ad business, for one. And it showed. Two, I was tweaking rather more than might be considered wise."

"Tweaking." The knee jiggling. The eyes. The rambling speech.

"Tweaking. Bumping up. Red-lining. You don't tweak?"

"No."

"Shit. In LA, all the writers tweak. How do you get any work done?"

"I don't. Get any work done."

"Oh. No wonder. Anyway, reason three, I'd fallen in with something of a rough crowd. Ad people, at first, but also some music label people, back when there was such a thing as music label people. Artists, that Manhattan club circuit crowd and the kids that travel in that orbit. You'd think I'd know better, at my age, but I'd kind of stepped off into outer space for a while there. No wife, no kids, no professional future to speak of."

Maybe, I thought, the cops were approaching silently, hoping to maintain an element of surprise. Although the dispatcher should have told them that surprise was not a factor here.

"I met a girl at a party and we kind of fell in together. A young girl. Very young. She had a bunch of different schemes going. She did unpaid promotional work for a couple of downtown clubs. She had a performance art thing she did. Some nudity, a toy piano. She was basically a street kid who ended up at my place. She liked me because I had a lot of money and a lot of free time. Anyway, first it was her, then

some of her friends. These kids were all in the same boat, tweaking like lab monkeys, looking for a place to shack up each morning.”

Thorpe got out of his chair and crossed the deck to my house. He slid the deck door open and went inside. When I caught up to him, he was still talking.

“Her name was Tabitha. In no time at all, maybe a couple of weeks, she became a big problem. Not just the usual mood swings and general bitchiness, either. Stuff started disappearing. She was going through a lot of my money. I got the sense that she came from money, somehow. She certainly knew how to spend money, anyway. Speaking of which, you have any money around here?”

He had been opening drawers in the kitchen, but gave that up and walked through the dining room to the stairs that led up to the bedrooms.

“Hey!” I said. “Hey! You can’t go up there!”

But he was already loping up the stairs, two at a time. I followed him up, but by the time I reached the top, he had already reappeared. He’d taken my wallet from where I’d left it, on the table by my bed.

“Give me that!” I said. But he walked right by me and down the stairs. He was still talking.

“She started imagining that I was fucking her friends. She became outlandishly possessive. Of me, no less. Some boring old fuck from advertising. But that’s what speed does, it makes problems were none should be. I was stringing two, three days together at a stretch, without sleep. A lot of fucking, a lot of speed.”

Now he was back in the kitchen, pocketing the cash he’d found in my wallet. I keep a thin stack of IDs and cards tucked into a fold in front of the billfold. He started going through these.

“Give me that!” I said, again.

“Do me a favor. Wait a couple of days before reporting these cards,” he palmed my Amex, “stolen. When your bill comes, just dispute the charges you don’t want to pay. It’s an old scam; you won’t owe any charges you didn’t ring up yourself.” He was tossing the cards

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he didn't want—driver's license, health care ID, AAA card—on the butcher block between us.

“Give me that!” I swiped at the cards in his hand, but missed.

“Eventually the hotel I was in threw me out, so I relocated to a more permissive environment in Jersey City, near the Grove Street PATH. Things got progressively weirder. One of Tabitha's witchier friends was spending a lot of time at my place. Her name was LuAnn.”

There was a knife set built into the butcher block. I snatched out a 10-inch slicer and pointed it at Thorpe. “This is my house,” I said. “You can't come in here and start stealing things.”

“So inevitably, one night it was just me and LuAnn, honking up speed, waiting for Tabitha to come back from some Brooklyn club date. God knows how long we'd been awake at that point.” Thorpe was regarding me without concern. He tossed my emptied wallet onto the block. “Be careful. You don't want to hurt yourself with that thing.”

“It's not me who should be worrying.”

“No? You ever been in a knife fight?”

“Sure,” I said. “All the time. How about you?”

“Enough to know they're no fun. It's not like Shakespeare, professor. It's not one bold thrust and then I say, ‘O Horatio, I am dead,’ and fall over, front stage left. It's more like, even in the unlikely event you win, you're still peeled and cored like a sauce apple by the time it's over. You sure you want to start? Over some plastic?”

I didn't have an answer ready, so Thorpe pocketed my credit cards and rolled up the right sleeve of his jacket. There was a long curving scar that began somewhere above his elbow and ended in a mean hook across the top of his wrist. It didn't look all that old.

“I have another nice one on my ass and thigh. Wanna see it?”

“No thanks.”

“I remember one knife fight in Stockton. I wasn't in it, but I saw it. White guy stabs a black guy in the back, and leaves the knife in. Or can't get it out maybe; it's not always as easy as it looks. Lotta bone and gristle in a guy. Black guy pulls the knife out of himself and chases the

white guy across the exercise yard, carves him up like Cornish game hen. Black guy lost part of a lung; white guy died three days later.”

I raised my eyebrows, as if edified by this tale.

“Where was I?” Thorpe said.

“LuAnn.”

“LuAnn, right. Big-ass Russian Lithuanian girl, with hairy arms like a truckdriver. What I was doing fucking LuAnn, I don’t know. But that’s speed for ya. I think she may have been a lesbian, to tell the truth. She had some kind of long-term psychodrama going with Tabitha, so she may have been trying to shit in Tabitha’s bed somehow. I don’t remember exactly.

“Anyway, I must have passed out. When I woke up, the cops were all over me. It was one of those things where you wake up and start putting two plus two plus two together until you figure out where the hell you are. LuAnn was handcuffed to the bedframe. She was beaten up pretty good, a couple of fairly deep lacerations, one shoulder completely dislocated.” He shrugged. “The cops said I did it. LuAnn, at first she barely knew who she was. Later, though, she came around to the cops’ point of view.”

“Did you do it?” I slid the knife back into its slot in the block.

“To be honest, I may have. If I did, I don’t remember it. I distinctly remember some purely symbolic rough stuff. Consensual rough stuff, it seemed to me. LuAnn had a reputation for that. For liking that kind of thing. They were her handcuffs, not mine. But everyone’s got their own interpretation of events. It was a long night. And a long day before that. There had been some drinking.”

“What else could have happened?”

“Got me. Tabitha was there when I woke up. She could have done something. She was crazy enough. It was Tabitha, called the cops. She got LuAnn to press charges against me. LuAnn might have let the whole thing slide, otherwise. But she owed Tabitha plenty of favors. Seven months later, I’m touching my toes while a prison orderly checks my asshole for contraband. Hello, Stockton State.”

“Tough break.”

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“Well, it was another life, in another time. I got seven years for aggravated sexual assault. Served four plus, as I’ve said. You’ve never done jail time.”

“No.”

“Not yet, right?” He grinned. “It’s bad, but it doesn’t have to be Terror on Cell Block H. Especially if you’re not slavishly devoted to personal dignity or privacy. Don’t obsess about the outside world, is my advice. It’s marching on without you, and there’s nothing you can do about it. Also, do not attempt to befriend or contend with our brothers of different races or creeds. There are no Morgan Freemans inside. Same goes with the guards. Neither friend nor enemy be.”

“Thanks for the overview.”

“No problem. I’d say, there are two things to remember. Aspire to invisibility. Catch up on your reading.”

It was at that moment that I heard the front door of my house open. Finally, I thought.

“Three things, actually,” Thorpe said. “Sit-ups. Don’t let your conditioning go. It’s all high-glycemic carbs, all the time, inside.”

I walked out of the kitchen and into the front parlor to meet my rescuers. There was one rescuer. He was closing the door behind him. I guess I’d been hoping that at that hour—it still wasn’t yet seven am—someone else would have been on duty. The entire Lake Lenni Lenape Sheriff’s office consists of seven officers, counting the sheriff, so I’d had six chances in seven of getting someone else. But my luck has not been good, these days. Not good at all.

“You called for police assistance?” Sheriff Mazzini said. He looked at me stolidly from under his round-brimmed sheriff’s hat. He was wearing sunglasses, which he did not take off though the front of the house was still deep in shadow.

“I have an intruder.”

“Really.” Mazzini is the kind of cop who has meticulously copied all of his mannerisms from cop-buddy movies. One of these mannerisms involves drawing out a moment of tension by making a protracted

business of pulling out a package of gum, peeling open a stick, and placing it in his mouth. This, he did now.

“He’s in the kitchen.”

Mazzini worked on his gum for what must have been a full minute before he replied. “Well,” he said. “Let’s that a look, why don’t we.”

He followed me into the kitchen, his harness leather creaking, his bootheels clump-clumping authoritatively on my hardwood floor. Thorpe was leaning against the kitchen counter by the refrigerator, his arms folded across his chest, looking at us with an expression of mild interest. He’d taken off his jacket and hung it neatly over the back of one of the chairs around the dining room table.

I pointed at Thorpe. “This man was on my back deck this morning, when I woke up.”

Mazzini sized Thorpe up. “That true?”

“Yes,” Thorpe said. “I was. I got here last night.”

“Why?”

“He invited me over.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said. “That’s not true.”

Mazzini wears the kind of mirrored sunglasses that last went out of style some twenty years ago. God knows where he gets them. He took these off and looked at me unhappily. Then he looked at Thorpe.

“You have some ID?”

“Of course,” Thorpe said. He pulled a wallet from a back pocket and thumbed out a driver’s license. He approached Mazzini and handed it to him.

“He took money from my wallet,” I said. “And charge cards. He has them now.”

Mazzini was perusing the license. “How did he get your wallet?”

“He took it off my bedside table.”

Mazzini nodded at this. He hitched his sunglasses into a breast pocket and looked up at Thorpe. “You were in his bedroom?”

Thorpe glanced at me, a glance that could have meant anything, or many things, and then said, “Yes.”

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“Hey, whoa, wait a minute,” I said. “He ran up there on his own. Just a minute ago.”

One side of Mazzini’s mouth hitched up, just a little. “Was this before or after you called the police?”

“After.”

“He stole your cash and credit cards after he knew the police were coming.”

“Yes. They’re in his pocket. The cards. Go look.”

“Is that an order?” Mazzini said.

“No.” The word hung there for a while, until I added, “I’m just saying, that’s all.”

Mazzini turned his attention back to Thorpe. “This license is expired,” he said.

“Yes, it is,” Thorpe said.

“How did you get up here? Did you drive?”

“No, my driving days are over.” Thorpe looked at me smugly. “He drove me here. We met last night.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “Oh, no you don’t.”

“Fletcher also threatened me with a knife.”

“When was this?”

“Just now. A few minutes ago.”

Mazzini looked at me with renewed interest. “You pull a knife on Thorpe here?”

“I have a right to defend myself. This is my house.”

“Is that true? You do?” Mazzini seemed to consider the validity of this statement. Mazzini, I’ve had sufficient opportunity to discover, interprets the rule of law uniquely. He appears to believe that all citizens should have recourse to the law, though in varying degrees. My own claim on the shelter of the law, for instance, is a slender one.

“What really happened here, Geffney? I hope you weren’t trying to impress your new friend with your photo collection.”

“I don’t have any pictures,” I said. “That disgusting accusation will be proven false.”

“Because not everybody has your unique tastes in photography. Some people might be offended.”

“I don’t have any pictures,” I said again.

“Ah. That’s right. We have your computer, don’t we? The lab guys are all atwitter over its contents, I hear.”

“Any fool can see what my wife is doing. I’ll have my day in court.”

“So you say.” Mazzini plucked his radio off his belt. “I think I’ve heard enough. Shut up, both of you.” He pushed a button and said, “Sammy?” After someone replied, he said, “Run a name and number for me.” He read off Thorpe’s name and driver’s license number. Then he retreated to the front parlor, leaving me to glare at Thorpe.

“You’re not going to get away with this,” I said. “You can’t just walk into peoples’ houses and prey on them. There’s still such a thing as the rule of law.”

This seemed to strike Thorpe as funny. He grinned at me.

“I said shut the fuck up in there,” Mazzini called back to us.

After a few minutes, Mazzini came back in. He made an elaborate business of thumbing the leather restraining strap off the butt of the nightstick on his belt. “I won’t say I’m surprised,” he said, at last. “You people, I’ve noticed, have a way of finding each other.”

No one said anything to this.

“Do you fully understand your rights as a registered sexual felon in the state of New Jersey, Mr. Thorpe?” Mazzini said.

“Yes, I do.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I’m hanging with my new friend Fletcher.”

“I am not his—”

“I said *shut up!*” Mazzini roared at me, loud enough to set the china cups in the sideboard trembling. He turned back to Thorpe. He took a breath and started again.

“Do you understand the prohibition against associating with other known sexual felons?”

“The statute specifies other convicted sexual felons, officer. Fletcher is an alleged sexual felon.”

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Mazzini grinned an open-mouthed grin of astonishment. "Are you trying to be funny, Thorpe?"

"No, sir."

Mazzini's grin faded away. He lifted the nightstick off his belt and touched the business end of it to a spot beneath the brim at the front of his hat. He tipped his hat back slightly on his head. "Is that your coat? On the chair?"

"Yes."

"Put it on."

Thorpe did so and Mazzini handed him his driver's license.

"I regard the presence of one sexual deviant in my jurisdiction as a situation to be watched, Mr. Thorpe. I regard the presence of two sexual deviants together as a problem to be solved. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Thorpe said, obligingly.

Mazzini has an imposingly full, broad, black mustache. If it weren't for the several striking grey hairs in it, I'd say he dyed it. He nibbled on this mustache for a moment. Then he turned to me. He raised a full, black eyebrow.

"I've been hearing from your neighbors, Geffney. They're concerned about the state of affairs up here."

"Here? At my house?"

"They say you're receiving visitors at odd hours. They say that your house is attracting a bad element."

The only neighbor I'd had any recent contact with, the only neighbor I knew for sure had noticed unusual events at my house, was Connie Hogan, my neighbor on the left. And I was sure that Connie had not called Mazzini. "I've had some kids up here. Some minor vandalism."

"Are you aware," Mazzini said, "that your neighbors are watching you very carefully?"

"No. I wasn't." I added, "There's no reason for them to do that."

Mazzini affected bemused surprise at this. "Is that true? You don't think so? Given recent developments?"

“No, I don’t. They have nothing to worry about.”

“They’re worried about the safety of their children. They’re worried about the quality of their neighborhood. They’re worried about the presence of rapists and pornographers among them. I’d call those valid concerns, Geffney.”

I shut my mouth. I’d already been down this road with Mazzini. That, as I’ve said, is a story I’m getting to. In the meantime, suffice to say, I knew I had nothing to gain here.

“Mr. Thorpe,” Mazzini said.

“Yes?”

“On behalf of the township of Lake Lenape, I’d like to thank you for paying us this visit. But now it’s time to go.”

“Right. Sure thing.” Thorpe still appeared to be enjoying himself. “Can I go?”

Mazzini tapped his nightstick in his open palm. Tap, tap, tap, tap. Then he stepped aside, providing Thorpe access to the kitchen doorway. Thorpe immediately walked past me into the parlor.

“You want a ride, Thorpe?” Mazzini called after him.

“No, thanks. I can make my own arrangements.” He was almost to the front door.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You’re just going to let him go?”

Mazzini ignored this and followed in Thorpe’s footsteps.

“He has my credit cards. My cash.”

Mazzini stopped and, without turning, said, “If I were you, Geffney, I’d cut down on my socializing. There’s a world of trouble out there, filled with unsavory characters. Oh . . . and Thorpe?”

Thorpe was opening my front door. “Yes?” he said.

“I’m never going to see you again, am I?”

“No, sir. Goodbye forever.” Thorpe left my house, leaving my front door open.

Mazzini resheathed his nightstick on his belt. “I wish I could say the same about you, Geffney. But I have a feeling we’re going to be seeing a lot of each other, this summer.” He put his sunglasses back on and went outside. About ten minutes later, I heard him drive away.

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