

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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THE LAST LINE

A SHORT STORY

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Chapter One

Seattle, Washington

November 20, 1995

If Del Castigliano didn't have bad luck, he'd have no luck at all.

Melodramatic? Hardly.

His first shift as a member of the detective team on call in the Seattle Police Department's Homicide Unit and his first investigation would involve two bodies fished from the water near a marina. A shrink had once diagnosed Del with a form of aquaphobia, an irrational fear of water, and related Del's fear to a near drowning incident as a child—a deduction Del's parents had steadfastly disputed. Regardless, Del didn't like the water.

Not that Del was complaining about catching a homicide investigation just a week after he'd transferred into SPD from Madison, Wisconsin. He preferred to be busy. The alternative was waking up to a sparsely decorated apartment and painful memories. He'd left the furniture and just about everything else in Wisconsin, along with Gianna. In Seattle, he'd bought a bed, a couch, and a television to accompany the folding card table and chair he'd brought with him. The walls remained empty.

As Del quickly dressed, he felt the familiar nerves, like being a rookie again, the new kid on the block looking to hold his own. The homicide sergeant, Gene Hallway, had called just before two in the morning and told Del that a man living on a houseboat spotted two objects floating in Lake Union. The man said he thought the objects might be logs, and worried they could damage a boat in the marina during the pending storm. He went out to investigate, and quickly realized the objects weren't logs. He called the marina harbormaster and together they had pulled the bodies from the water. No easy feat, given these had been dead weight.

In Madison, Del had worked patrol six years before sitting for the detective exam. He'd had stints in narcotics, arson, sexual assaults, and robbery, but his goal had always been homicide. He'd planned to wait for an opening in his hometown city, but then Gianna announced she didn't want to marry a cop. She said her father had been a cop, became an alcoholic, and it destroyed their family. Nothing Del could say could convince her he would be different. With good reason. The father had only

been an excuse. Two days after Del moved out, he saw Gianna downtown on the arm of a lawyer.

Seattle homicide was hiring and offering good money, which Del certainly could use. It was the memories that awaited him around every Madison corner he could do without. He packed up his clothes and moved to Seattle sight unseen. No family. No friends. No memories. A fresh start.

He grabbed his wallet, ID, and keys from the floor beside his bed and headed out, determined not to look like some cherry-ass rookie. Moss Gunderson, the partner assigned to break Del into homicide investigations, was a legend at Seattle PD. Vic Fazzio, also a section rookie, said he knew Gunderson had arrived at the Public Safety Building—PSB, as the officers called it—ten minutes before Gunderson reached his cubicle desk. Half a dozen people called out to greet Moss or to give him crap, for which the veteran detective always had a retort. A guy like that could make or break Del's career.

Del drove from the parking garage into a blustery and cold November morning—cold being relative. In Madison, anything above freezing was balmy for November, though Del was starting to understand what Seattleites meant when they said it wasn't the temperature that chills you; it's the dampness. He could feel the cold in his bones. A stiff wind rocked his metallic-blue Oldsmobile Cutlass. The wind had started blowing late the prior evening; branches of a tree scraping against Del's bedroom window had kept him awake half the night.

He drove from Capitol Hill with the defroster on high and worked his way around the southern edge of Lake Union, noting marinas and water-based businesses. He pulled into a parking lot where Moss stood alongside a black Buick LeSabre, sipping coffee and towering over a uniformed officer. Moss was almost as big as Del, who stood six foot five and weighed 250 pounds.

Del pulled up the collar of his coat against the howling wind and approached the two men. He recognized the green logo on Moss's Starbucks coffee cup, the company name taken from Captain Ahab's first mate on the *Pequod*, the whaling ship Moby Dick sent to the bottom of the ocean. The logo, a green siren, tempted sailors to jump overboard, causing them to drown. Neither was a good omen.

"Look what the cat dragged out. Did we wake you, Elmo?"

“Funny.” Del had heard iterations of Elmo since his teens, when the beloved puppet first appeared on *Sesame Street*. Moss introduced Del to Mike Nuccitelli, the patrol sergeant. “How’d you get here so quick?” Del asked Moss. He understood Moss lived in West Seattle, twenty minutes farther from the marina than Del’s apartment.

“I didn’t take time to do my hair.” Moss rubbed the bristles of a crew cut. “I’m like my name. You know. A rolling stone.”

Del knew. More than once, Moss had told him his parents bequeathed him the moniker because, as a child, he never remained still. Vic Fazzio had said it was more likely Moss gave himself the nickname. His Norwegian first name was Asbjorn.

“Halloway here?” Del asked.

“At this hour of the morning?” Moss scoffed. “Stayaway doesn’t come out this early on a cold morning unless he thinks the brass might show up and he can shine their badges with his nose.”

“What do we got?” Del asked.

“Two grown men. Looks like they drowned,” Nuccitelli said. “We’re waiting for the ME.”

“What more do we know about the victims; anything?” Del asked.

Nuccitelli raised the fur collar of his duty jacket against the wind. “Hispanic is my guess, though the bodies are pretty bloated and their skin the color of soot. I’m guessing roughly late twenties to early thirties, but again . . .”

“They didn’t have any ID?” Del asked.

“Not on them,” Nuccitelli said.

“That strike you as odd—they didn’t have ID?”

Nuccitelli smiled. “Not my job, detective. That’s your job.”

“How far out is the ME?” Moss looked and sounded disinterested.

Nuccitelli checked his watch. “Should be here in ten.”

“We’ll take it from here. No sense all of us freezing our balls off,” Moss said.

“Harbormaster and first responder are on the dock,” Nuccitelli said. “You boys have fun.”

Moss dumped the remains of his coffee on the ground and handed Nuccitelli his cup. “Make yourself useful and throw that away for me,” he said.

Nuccitelli took the cup without protest, which surprised Del. Seniority or not, he would have told Moss to dump the cup his own damn self.

He followed the veteran detective toward three stucco buildings. Two had signs indicating an affiliation with the marina. “Let’s be efficient this morning so we’re not standing out here turning to ice,” Gunderson said. “You get me?”

“I get you.”

They stepped between two of the buildings, catching a short reprieve from the wind. Emerging on the other side, Del looked down on a marina lit beneath pale-yellow light. Boats of all kinds moored in slips at finger piers, some beneath boathouses. The ships bobbed and pitched on the wind-driven waves.

At the end of the concrete path leading to the dock, a uniformed officer spoke to a man who looked to be midthirties, his hair pulled tight in a ponytail.

“I’m Detective Gunderson. This is Detective Castigliano. You’re the first officer on the scene?”

“Dan McArdle. This is the harbormaster, David Slocum.”

Slocum removed his hand from the pocket of a fur-lined jean jacket just long enough to shake their hands.

“What’s a harbormaster do?” Gunderson asked.

“I take care of the marina for the owners, collect everyone’s moorage fees, make sure they adhere to marina rules,” Slocum said over the howl of the wind.

“Like a security cop at a parking lot, except on water,” Gunderson said. “You live here also?”

“Just on the other side.” Slocum pointed to the darkened outline of what looked like dozens of houseboats.

“Were you the one who found the bodies?” Moss asked.

“Me? No. I was asleep. That was one of the other houseboat owners, Bob Nease.”

“Where’s he?”

“In his house. He has neuropathy in his feet and hands and says the cold exacerbates it.”

“Lucky him.” Moss turned to Del. “Get a statement from him and anyone else who knows anything. I’ll send the ME when he gets here. Where are the bodies?” he asked McArdle.

“End of the pier. Same direction,” the officer said.

“Kill two birds with one stone,” Moss said to Del.

The officer started down the dock. Del hesitated at the sight of everything pitching and rolling on the wind-whipped water.

“What?” Gunderson asked Del.

“Huh?”

“Something else?”

“No. Nothing.” Del stepped through the gate to the dock, following the officer beneath the cover of a boathouse and keeping his eyes on the dock. At the end of the dock a second officer stood with his hands thrust deep in his coat pockets. At his feet, beneath blue plastic tarps, lay the two bodies. A gust of wind flipped the plastic against the officer’s leg, and he reached and caught it before it sailed airborne. Del saw the victim’s face. The man did look young, and he did look Hispanic, though his skin was mottled blue, more like marble than soot.

“Any bullet wounds or contusions?” Del asked.

“Nothing at first glance,” McArdle said. “ME might find something we missed.”

The officer motioned over Del’s shoulder, causing him to turn. Paramedics rolled two stretchers single file behind King County medical examiner Stuart Funk. Del had never met Funk, but detectives had described him as both a mad scientist and an odd duck. With the wind blowing, Funk’s hair did make him look like something from a Mel Brooks movie. He peered at Del from behind thick, silver-framed spectacles too big for his head. Blue scrub pants extended from beneath a long down jacket to purple plastic clogs.

Funk didn’t wait for an introduction. “I understand this is not the scene of the crime.”

“We’re just getting started,” Del said.

“One of the houseboat owners found the bodies floating in the water,” the officer said.

“Right. But they weren’t killed on the dock, were they?” Funk said.

“They don’t appear to have been,” the officer said.

“So there’s no reason I can’t take the bodies to a more civilized location to conduct my examination?”

The uniformed officer looked to Del, but Funk didn’t wait for Del to answer. He spoke as he stepped past them. “I talked to Moss. He approved.”

“Okay then . . .” Del turned to the officer. “Take me to the person who found the bodies.”

He hoped the houseboat was more house than boat.

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Chapter Two

Back on solid ground at the Seattle Police Department downtown, Del dropped his briefcase at his cubicle desk and went to use the bathroom. In the sink mirror he examined the road map of red lines crisscrossing his eyes from a lack of sleep, then lowered his head and splashed cold water on his face. He pulled coarse, brown paper towels from the dispenser as the bathroom door swung open.

“You, too, huh? I have to pee like a racehorse,” Moss said. “Got to quit buying the Grande when I’m out of the office.” He stepped to one of the urinals. “Seems all I do now is pee. The joys of getting old. What did you find out?”

Having taken separate cars, Moss and Del had not had a chance to talk or exchange information. “Not much,” Del said. “Pretty much what the responding officer told us. Boat owner is an insomniac.” He dried his face and hands and dropped the paper towels in the garbage.

“Man, that would suck,” Moss said.

Del told him what the owner had said about believing the two bodies were logs.

“Bet that scared the shit out of him,” Moss said.

“He was pretty shaken up,” Del said.

Moss zipped up and stepped around the pony wall to the sink to wash his hands. “You believe him?”

“What’s that?”

“You believe him? Can we eliminate him as a suspect?”

“Yeah, I think we can.”

“You want to handle this one?”

“You mean the interviews?”

“Lead detective.” Moss pulled out several paper towels and dried his hands. “I got a lot on my plate at the moment and could use the help.”

Del hadn’t expected this on his first file. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I can run with it.” He wanted Moss, and the other detectives, to know he was a team player.

Moss tossed the towels into the garbage. “Get the responding officer’s incident report and any statements he took. I’ll type up and send over my notes of my interview with the harbormaster later this morning.”

“What did he have to say?”

“Pretty much what he told us. So where do you go from here?”

Del hadn't given it a lot of thought, but he didn't want to sound totally unprepared for the question. “Talk to Funk. Try to get a cause of death, maybe IDs. Beyond that, try to find out where the two men came from. Figured I'd call the Harbor Patrol and ask if anyone reported a boat going down, or adrift somewhere.”

“With this wind and waves, a boat could have capsized,” Moss agreed.

“Happened all the time back in Madison. I also noticed a lot of marinas and marine businesses in the area when I drove in this morning. Thought I'd ask around, try to find out if maybe they lived at one of them or worked a boat. Maybe they were out fishing when the storm hit, you know? At least check it off our list.”

Moss shook his head. “I'm betting they're illegal.”

That struck Del as too quick a judgment. “Why's that? The lack of identification?”

Moss nodded. “I'm thinking they likely came down from Canada.”

“Canada?” Del said.

“Some of the Mexicans come in from Canada. It's safer and cheaper than crossing the southern border, where the coyotes can charge a fortune,” Moss explained. “I'm thinking these two tried to skirt the border, maybe came down in a dinghy, got caught in the storm, and couldn't get anyplace safe.”

If that were the case, Harbor Patrol might know more.

“Get ahold of Funk. Find out when we can expect his initial report,” Moss instructed. “Toxicology will be important. If they were drinking or doing drugs, it wouldn't take long to drown in water that cold, especially with the wind churning.”

“Yeah, I'll give him a call,” Del said. The theory made sense, though he wondered again why Moss had gone there so quickly.

Moss moved to the door. “Keep me posted. And don't file anything until I've had a chance to review it—make sure you dot your i's and cross all your t's, so the captain is happy. I'll let him and Holloway know this is your case and you're running with it.”

“I appreciate that, Moss.”

Moss pulled open the bathroom door. “Not a problem. Try to get a nap. Your eyes hurt me just looking at you.”

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Chapter Three

Two weeks after his visit to the marina, Del was getting nowhere fast. Moss had sent over his interview with the harbormaster, David Slocum, which Del quickly read, and which coincided with what the boat owner had told Del. He'd checked with personnel at the other marinas on the lake, but the two men had not lived or worked at any of them. The Harbor Patrol had no calls that night of a boat in distress or capsizing anywhere in Elliott Bay, Puget Sound, Lake Union, or Lake Washington, nor had it located any boats adrift or received any reports of two men falling overboard. Funk's toxicology results revealed both men had tested positive for alcohol and cocaine, as Moss had suggested, though not in an amount that would have been fatal. It added yet another wrinkle to an already frustrating case.

In his conversation with the Harbor Patrol, Del brought up the subject of tides. Not being from Seattle, he wondered if the bodies might have drifted into Lake Union from someplace else. The Harbor Patrol rejected that idea outright. The officer he spoke with explained that Lake Union was connected to Elliott Bay and the Puget Sound by passage through the Ballard Locks, which raised and lowered boats to get to or from the saltwater Puget Sound into the fresh waters of the Lake Washington Ship Canal leading to Lake Union. To the east, boats passed between Portage Bay and Lake Washington, but neither had a tide. The officer said it would have been next to impossible for two bodies to get through the locks, and that it was far more likely the two men had gone overboard in Lake Union or possibly Portage Bay to the east, and the bodies had been pushed into the marina by the wind-churned waves.

As to Moss's speculation that the two men might have come down from Canada on a boat, Del's next course of action was to identify boats that entered the locks that evening, but again he struck out. The lockmaster told Del the locks were nothing more than a stop sign. They kept no records of boats passing through in either direction.

Getting nowhere fast, and in need of caffeine, Del ventured into the break room for a cup of bad coffee. Vic Fazzio stood with his back against the counter, staring at the tile floor.

"Hey," Del said.

Fazzio looked up. "You too, huh?"

“What’s that?”

“Trying to jump-start your brain. I hate this time of the afternoon.”

“Mine’s more frustration than fatigue.”

“What’s going on?”

Del told him about the investigation. “One dead end after another.”

Faz sipped his coffee, then said, “You might want to talk to Rick Tombs.”

“Who’s he?”

“Tombs runs the drug task force here in Seattle. If the two men came down from Canada, as Moss suggested, and they had drugs in their system, Tombs might have some ideas. Just a thought.”

Del nodded. “Can’t hurt, I guess. Nothing else seems to be panning out.”

Back at his desk, Del found Tombs in the SPD directory and gave him a call.

“I can talk,” Tombs said. “But I was about to grab a late lunch. How about we talk there?”

Del agreed and Tombs gave him directions to Shawn O’Donnell’s American Grill and Irish Pub on Second Avenue, adjacent to the Smith Tower. Tombs sat on an elevated stool at a pedestal table in the front of the restaurant. He wore his SPD uniform, a bright-silver badge pinned to his thick chest. Tombs stepped down to greet Del, who was a good ten inches taller than the sergeant. Tombs wore a buzz cut that revealed green eyes and pointed ears. He reminded Del of a Doberman.

As he took his seat, Del considered the Irish décor—an array of crests bearing names like O’Donnell, Brannick, and Mullins hung on the walls. At the front of the space was what looked like a library, with bottles of Irish whiskeys among board games and antique books. On the wall were photographs of Irish landscapes.

“You’re new, aren’t you?” Tombs had the gravelly voice of a smoker, though Del didn’t smell cigarette smoke or detect any other telltale signs like nicotine-stained fingers or teeth. Tombs rested meaty forearms on the table. Unlike Del, the sergeant’s stocky build looked to come from hours in the gym.

“Just a few weeks.”

“Where’d you transfer in from?”

“Madison, Wisconsin.”

“Never been. What did you do there?”

“Worked patrol for a stint. Sat for the detective exam and worked my way up the ranks through the various sections.”

“What brought you out here, then? Family?”

Del didn’t want to get into it. First impression, Tombs didn’t come across as a touchy-feely sort of guy.

“Logjam at homicide. Seattle was hiring.”

Tombs sat back as the waitress delivered a corned beef sandwich and fries along with a bottle of malt vinegar. “Didn’t know if you’d already eaten, and I’m in a bit of a time crunch.”

“Just coffee,” Del said to the waitress.

Tombs lifted his sandwich and took a bite, then wiped his hands on his napkin and talked with his mouth full. “You said this was related to a case?”

“Moss Gunderson and I—”

“Moss.” Tombs laughed and shook his head. “He’ll talk your ear off; am I right?”

Del nodded and smiled but didn’t comment. “We caught a drowning. Two men at a marina on Lake Union. I’m trying to figure out where they came from.” He told Tombs the details of his investigation to date.

“Moss thought it could be they fell off a drug boat?” Tombs asked, sprinkling the malt vinegar on his French fries and popping several in his mouth.

“He was speculating they came down from Canada. Toxicology revealed drugs in their systems, so . . . I’m just taking a stab in the dark. I’m running into a lot of dead ends. Was wondering if you’ve heard anything, or had any ideas on what course of action I might take from here.”

“You check with Harbor Patrol? Maybe they intercepted a boat in the Puget Sound?”

“They didn’t have anything.” Del told Tombs of his prior conversations, including the Harbor Patrol officer’s conclusion the bodies likely originated in Lake Union and didn’t drift there from some other place.

“Sounds logical.” Tombs took another bite. “So, the thought is maybe a drug operation in the Lake Union area?”

“Or a drug boat came through the locks and these two guys were on it? Again, I’m speculating at this point, just shotgunning it.”

“Why would the two men have ended up in the water, then?”

“I don’t know,” Del said.

“I don’t either,” Tombs said. “Can’t think of a good reason they would have.” He set down his sandwich and sipped from his cup of coffee. Del waited. Tombs set down the cup. “There’s a battle going on between a couple of Mexican drug cartels for distribution in the Pacific Northwest. I’m just wondering if maybe one got wind of the other making a drug run and could have seized a boat, killed the two men on board, and dumped them overboard.”

“Bodies were clean. No bullet holes. ME said they drowned.”

“This was recent, right?”

“Few weeks ago.”

Tombs nodded. “Then it makes sense. You dump two bodies in the water this time of year, it takes about fifteen minutes for hypothermia to set in. If the two men weren’t strong swimmers, they’d drown quickly. And no bullet holes could have been deliberate, to make it look like a drowning and not a hit. Let me guess—no ID on either body.”

“None,” Del said.

Tombs nodded. “Okay. Let me ask around, see if any of our sources knows anything about this. Sometimes we get lucky.”

“I’d appreciate it. As I said, I’m getting nowhere fast.”

“Yeah, sure. No problem.” Tombs looked to his sandwich, a not-so-subtle hint.

“I’ll leave you to your lunch,” Del said.

Chapter Four

At home that night Del thought about what Tombs had said. He didn't buy the theory about a drug cartel not leaving bullet holes to throw off a police investigation. In his experience working narcotics, a drug hit was all about making a statement to your enemies. And being from Wisconsin, he knew a lot more about hypothermia than Tombs. Lake Union was not that wide, and there were marinas on both sides and boats tied to buoys within swimming distance, unless the two men couldn't swim at all. But if that had been the case, it seemed likely someone would have seen or heard something. Possibly an argument, or the two men shouting for help. Something.

The following morning, Del drove back to the marina to talk to the harbormaster and find out if maybe someone had heard something that night but had not equated it with the two men drowning. He suspected people living in a houseboat community, packed that close together, talked, and two bodies floating up to their marina would certainly be a topic of conversation.

Del checked in with the marina manager, who directed Del to Slocum's houseboat. This morning the lake was calm, the surface like gray glass beneath a winter sky, but Del still felt anxiety creeping in as he followed the manager's directions along piers to a houseboat second from the end of a dock. Several boats had been decorated with Christmas lights and ornaments. Del hadn't given the upcoming holiday much thought. It would only be him. He hadn't accumulated enough time to go home to Wisconsin to visit family. He had decided to pick up some overtime to stay busy and make a little extra money. A poor consolation prize, for sure.

The homes varied in style and size and, Del assumed, cost. Some looked luxurious. Others not so much. Slocum's home was unremarkable. It looked like someone stuck a shingled shed on a floating pier and put a second, smaller shed atop it. The smaller shed had skylights and western-facing windows. Del stepped from the dock to the front door, looked for a doorbell, did not see one, and knocked. The door rattled in the jamb. Slocum answered and Del took in a big whiff of the unmistakable, sweet odor of marijuana.

"Can I help you?" Slocum asked.

Del had his doubts.

He held up his shield. Slocum's eyes widened and the blood looked to drain from his face, leaving him pale. "I'm Detective Del Castigliano. I was at the marina a couple weeks ago with my partner regarding the two men who drowned. You spoke with him, Moss Gunderson."

"I didn't recognize you." Slocum stumbled over his words. He tried to step forward, presumably to close the door, but Del didn't step back.

"You and I didn't actually talk," Del said. "But I'm handling the investigation and was hoping to run a couple things by you."

"Now is not really a good time, Detective," Slocum said. "Maybe we could meet someplace convenient."

"Not a good time because you're high, or not a good time because you're busy?" Slocum's Adam's apple bobbed like a fish had just tugged the hook below the surface. "Listen, I don't care what you do in your spare time." Del considered the shed atop the boat. "Or what you're growing. I'm a homicide detective trying to solve two deaths. I just want to run some things by you."

Del did not mention they would have a problem if the two drowned men were somehow involved in a grow operation Slocum was running, and had stumbled off a boat or the pier into the water, though he thought that unlikely.

"Could we sit out on the deck?" Slocum motioned to the back of the boat.

The deck was a little too close to the water for Del's comfort, but given the aroma inside the house, he thought fresh air might be best and acquiesced. The small deck faced east, with a view across the slate-gray waters to boats moored at other marinas, lakeside buildings, and a double-deck steel truss bridge overhead. A yellow kayak tied to a rope floated off the back of the deck. Del slowly lowered into one of two beach chairs.

"You don't like the water, do you?" Slocum said.

"Not unless it's coming out of a shower head, no," Del said.

"We could go someplace else," Slocum said.

"I'll make do," Del said.

Slocum sat in the second chair. "What more did you want to ask me?"

"I'm still trying to identify the two men," Del said, wanting to ease into the conversation and gauge how Slocum responded. "I've spoken to people who live here, and to boat owners and management at the other marinas. No

one recognizes them. I talked to the Harbor Patrol and they have no report of a boat in distress or of two men going overboard. I'm operating under the assumption they drowned someplace around here, in this lake, and wondered if you might have some thoughts."

Slocum let out a breath of air and studied his bare feet. "Nothing more than what I told the other guy. I don't recognize them, and no one around here has said they knew them or had seen them. Like I told the other guy, I think maybe they could have been aboard the *Egregious*, but I don't really know."

Del had been about to ask Slocum if anyone had indicated they'd heard something—calls for help—but Slocum's answer caught him by surprise and changed his question. "Aboard the what?"

"The fishing boat. The one that got raided. I told your partner about it that night."

Del didn't know what Slocum was talking about, but he also didn't want to look like an idiot. Moss hadn't mentioned anything about a raid, or a fishing boat, and it wasn't in his written report. "Right. I wasn't part of that conversation, so maybe you could go over it again. The *Egregious* is a boat?"

"Seventy-five-foot purse seine fishing trawler."

"What does 'purse seine' mean?"

"Means it uses nets to fish. Really bad for the ocean."

"When was this?"

"The night before the two men floated up to the pier, though that was morning, so I guess it was actually two nights."

Del did a quick calculation. "If the men were found the morning of the twentieth, then this raid would have been the night of the eighteenth?"

Slocum looked up at the low gray sky. "That sounds right."

"Does the boat moor here at the marina?"

"Not permanently. The *Egregious* comes down once a month, sometimes twice, but that's rare. At least it did."

"Comes down from where?"

"Canada. Vancouver, I believe, but I don't really know."

Just as Moss had suggested, Del thought. "Did you see the two men on board that ship?"

"No. Just seemed like a possibility to consider, with everything going on."

“What do you mean, ‘everything going on’?”

“I don’t know. The two men could have jumped ship to avoid arrest.”

Again, the response surprised Del. “Arrest? Who raided the boat?”

“I don’t know for certain, but I’m assuming law enforcement of some kind. I told this to the other guy. What was his name?”

“Moss Gunderson.”

“Yeah, I told him.”

“Tell me. From the beginning.”

Slocum shrugged. “The *Egregious* got in late that night—the eighteenth. It always got in late and docked out at that open-water pier.” He pointed to the end of a finger pier parallel to the shore. “Too big to moor anyplace else. Later that night I heard a commotion and got up to find out what it was. I went outside and guys with guns were moving down the marina dock.”

“Did they identify themselves?”

“Not to me they didn’t.”

It didn’t sound like law enforcement to Del. It sounded like maybe it was as Tombs had suggested, another drug ring. “They didn’t say they were Harbor Patrol, FBI, DEA, anything?”

Slocum shook his head.

“Did they say *anything*?”

“Just said they were taking the boat.”

That was unlike law enforcement. “Did the guys have any accents?” he asked.

“Accents?”

“Hispanic. Mexican.”

“I didn’t hear any accents.”

“What about uniforms? Did you see any labels or patches, anything?”

Again, Slocum shook his head. “They wore those masks over their heads and faces . . . like the skiers. What do you call those things?”

Del had to think for a moment. “Balaclavas?”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

Del thought maybe he’d finally caught a break, that it was as Tombs had speculated, another drug ring fighting for control of the Pacific Northwest. It didn’t, however, explain why Moss hadn’t mentioned any of this to Del. He wondered if Slocum could be making up the story to protect himself or others, but why would he make up something so easy to refute? He sounded

and looked sincere, which brought Del back around to his initial thought. Moss had withheld the information from him.

“If they didn’t identify themselves, and they weren’t wearing any identification, why do you think they were law enforcement?”

“Probably because I heard one of the men call another guy ‘sergeant.’ I think he slipped.”

“Why do you say you think he slipped?”

“Because the sergeant turned on him, quick. I couldn’t see his face, but his eyes were shooting daggers, man.”

Del thought of Rick Tombs. “Can you describe this sergeant?”

“Not really.” Slocum shrugged. “Like I said, it was dark, and they were wearing the face masks.”

“Tall like me? Short? Stocky? Anything?”

“Not tall like you. My height, but thicker. Stocky, yeah. That’s a good word. Though that could have been the clothing he had on. It was cold that night too.”

Del estimated Slocum to be five foot eight, about the same height as Tombs. “Anything else that made you think they were law enforcement?”

“Just the way they came. It seemed coordinated to me.”

“What do you mean, ‘coordinated’?”

“I don’t know. Just that they were in and out of here in minutes.”

“How many guys?”

“Half a dozen?” Slocum sounded unsure.

“And do you know where they took the *Egregious*?”

Slocum shook his head. “Honestly, I tried to stay out of this because of my own situation, you know?”

His own situation. “Are you saying the *Egregious* was a drug boat?”

“I don’t know,” Slocum said, but he broke off eye contact and again stared at his bare feet.

“David, this is important. I need to know what you know.”

Slocum let out another burst of air. “Okay, this is what I know. The *Egregious* came once a month. Always late at night. It docked here after hours, always paid cash, and made it clear it wanted to be off the marina’s books. And it always left early the next morning. In and out.” He shrugged and made a face as if to say the conclusion was inescapable.

“Did you ever see a crew?”

“Just the captain.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Said it was Jack. I don’t know if that was his real name or not. Never did offer a last name and I didn’t ask.”

It fit nicely with what Tombs had proposed, maybe too nicely, and it was too critical a piece of information for Moss to have inadvertently left out of his report, which meant the omission had been deliberate. Del had thought that Moss gave him the investigation to get his feet wet. Now he wasn’t so sure. The problem was, he couldn’t confront someone of Moss’s stature in the detective room. Not yet anyway. Not without something more definitive. Moss could simply deny Slocum told him any such thing, maybe say Slocum was a pothead, that he couldn’t remember what he had for breakfast, or that Slocum was trying to create a diversion for something else that happened. And what evidence did Del have to refute it? None at the moment. Except a belief that Slocum was sincere. Still, he couldn’t very well run to his captain or to Halloway with a “belief.” And what would the rest of the homicide team think of Del if he did? They’d think Del ratted out his partner, which would pretty much end his career in Seattle.

“You told all of this to the other detective?” Del asked.

Slocum nodded. “Yeah.”

Del looked for any tells the young man was lying. He didn’t see any.

One thing was certain, though. Somebody was lying.

About what, and why, Del didn’t yet know.

Chapter Five

Del returned to the PSB just before noon and ran into Vic Fazzio as he exited the building onto Fourth Avenue.

“Hey,” Fazzio said. “You just getting in?”

“Had some witnesses I needed to talk with this morning.”

“You alone?” Fazzio asked, looking past Del.

“I’m handling this marina case on my own.”

“I meant, have you eaten? You want to grab lunch?”

Del wanted to get into the office, but the more he thought about it, running into Fazzio could be fortuitous. Fazzio seemed to have his ear to the ground at the PSB. More so than Del, anyway. “No. No, I haven’t. What did you have in mind?”

“There’s an Italian place on First Avenue in Pioneer Square I’ve been meaning to check out. It looks good, authentic. You up for it?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

They walked down the hill to Antichi Sapori on First Avenue.

“Old tastes,” Del said, reading the name of the restaurant. “I like it.”

“*Tu parli italiano?*” Fazzio asked.

“*Cosa prendi in giro? A casa mia era la prima lingua.*” *What, are you kidding? In my house it was the first language.*

“Yeah, for me too,” Fazzio said.

A maître d’ greeted them and led them outside. Wrought-iron fencing enclosed a section of the sidewalk for outdoor dining at tables covered with white tablecloths. The weather wasn’t perfect, but the sun was out, and Del was learning that you made use of Seattle’s sunny days. The waiter dropped off sparkling water, bread, olive oil, and menus. They eyed the entries for a few minutes, then Fazzio said, “This looks good, huh?”

“Yeah, it does, but in my house, you reserve judgment until you taste the food.”

“Are you a hundred percent Italian?”

“Through and through. You?”

“Same. My wife, Vera, she’s Italian also. She spoils me. Best cook I know. I’m not careful, I’ll put on fifty pounds like that.” Fazzio snapped his fingers. He had the build of a power forward. “I’ve always thought about owning a restaurant, you know? Vera could do the cooking and I’d sample.”

“Sign me up,” Del said. “That’s a job I could handle.”

“Are you married?” Fazzio asked.

“Me? No. Thought I would be. Had a long-term girlfriend but things didn’t work out.”

“Sorry to hear that. Is she from around here?”

“No. This was back in Wisconsin.”

“What brought you out here?”

Del sipped his sparkling water. “Seattle was hiring homicide detectives.”

“They’re not hiring in Wisconsin?”

“The ex lives in Wisconsin.”

“Oh,” Fazzio said. “This was sort of a fresh start, then.”

“Hope so,” Del said.

The waiter returned and Del ordered the chicken parmigiana with a spaghetti side. Fazzio ordered the veal scallopini piccata, then raised his glass of sparkling water. “*Salute*. Welcome to Seattle.”

“*Salute*, Vic,” Del said and took a sip.

“Listen,” Fazzio said. “Nobody calls me Vic except Vera. Around here I’m Faz.”

“Faz it is.”

“So, how’re you liking homicide?”

“It’s okay,” Del said. “Still getting my feet wet.”

“That Moss, he’s something, huh?” Faz said.

“Yeah, he’s something.” Del contemplated how best to broach the subject.

“How’s his temperament been?” Faz asked.

“His temperament?”

“His mood. Is he doing okay?” Faz asked.

“Seems to be. Why do you ask?”

“He hasn’t said anything?”

“About what?”

“Word is he’s going through a nasty divorce. Heard the wife left him for some young guy with a house on the lake, but still took a big chunk out of his ass.”

“Seems fine,” Del said. He saw an opening and took it. “I wonder if maybe he’s been preoccupied, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I wonder if maybe the divorce has thrown him off his game a bit.”

“Something come up?”

“Probably nothing, but . . .” Del told Faz what had transpired at the marina and what he’d learned when he interviewed David Slocum that morning, including Slocum’s belief that the *Egregious* was running drugs down from Canada. As he spoke, he evaluated Faz’s reaction.

“Moss didn’t tell you about this harbormaster discussing a raid?” Faz sounded skeptical.

“Not a word. Not in his written report either. I’ll be honest. It’s too important to be inadvertent.”

“This harbormaster credible?”

“Seemed sincere. Can’t think of any reason why he’d make up a story like that. One so easy to refute.”

“You talk to Moss yet?”

“Just learned of it. But I did talk to that guy you suggested, Rick Tombs. He told me there’s a bit of a turf war going on between two Mexican cartels for distribution in the Pacific Northwest. So what this guy Slocum had to say would seem to fit.”

Faz sipped his water. He looked and sounded tentative. “It does. Maybe this guy Slocum can look at mug shots and identify who raided the boat?”

“No. He said they wore face masks, you know, like the skiers wear.”

Faz set down his glass. “Face masks?”

Del seemed to have hit a nerve. “That’s what he said. Why?”

“What else did this harbormaster say?”

Del told him about the lack of any emblems on the clothing and one man’s use of the word “sergeant” that nearly got his head bitten off. Faz leaned back from the table. His face strained with concern.

“Something more I should know about?” Del asked.

“The Last Line wears those ski masks, so no one can identify the members . . . supposed to protect them and their families from the drug dealers and from bribes.”

“What’s the Last Line?” Del asked.

“That’s Tombs’s drug task force. The name is supposed to mean the last line of defense between the drug dealers and the citizens of Seattle.”

Del felt that familiar twinge in his gut, the one he got when things began to crystallize and make sense.

The waiter returned and set down both their plates, but neither Del nor Faz rushed to pick up a fork or to put a napkin in his lap.

Del looked across the table and said what they were both thinking. “The odds would seem to indicate it was this Last Line that came to the marina; don’t they?”

“You check yet with the Harbor Patrol, or the evidence room, see if they impounded that ship or checked in any drugs that night or the following morning?”

“Not that particular ship, but the Harbor Patrol didn’t indicate they had anything happening either of those two nights. Haven’t yet spoken to the evidence room, but I will.” He threw out a thought, hoping to get Fazzio’s opinion. “I was going to talk to Moss. Now I’m not so sure that’s the right next step.”

Faz shook his head. “I’m not so sure either. Not with what you got at present. Maybe best to wait. See what else you find out first.”

“Something else?” Del asked.

“I’m just thinking. You know, maybe you don’t want to be calling out Moss without something more to substantiate what this harbormaster said. It’ll make him look bad, which makes you look bad, like you’re questioning your partner.”

“Like I’m a rat?”

“Things like that get around is all I’m saying.”

Del knew they did. “I’ll make some phone calls when I get back.” The food was getting cold. He looked at his plate. The food looked good, but then, looks could be deceiving.

Back at his desk, Del called the Harbor Patrol and talked to the officer he’d spoken with previously. The officer had no record of the *Egregious* being impounded November eighteenth or nineteenth. Del then called the SPD evidence room. The detective on duty said no drugs had been catalogued into evidence the evening of the eighteenth or the following day. Del called the DEA and the FBI. Neither had any record of a raid at the marina. On the off chance the raid could have been by another drug ring wearing face coverings to protect their identities, Del asked both the DEA and the FBI if they were aware of any turf wars between rival Mexican cartels for distribution in the Pacific Northwest. They told Del they had nothing specific on their radar.

After some digging, Del found the Canadian agency responsible for registering boats and eventually found a seventy-five-foot purse seine fishing trawler named the *Egregious* with a home port in Vancouver. The boat was registered to a Jack Flynt. The information confirmed David Slocum was telling the truth, at least about the existence of the boat and the captain. Del called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Vancouver and, again, after starts and stops, was put in touch with a drug unit. The sergeant he spoke with had no record of a Jack Flynt, nor had Canadian authorities ever impounded the *Egregious* for running drugs, though he thanked Del for the tip and said they'd check it out.

As Del worked the phone lines, Moss's distinct voice rose over the rest of the bull pen chatter, as it usually did. A second later, Moss dropped a multipage document on Del's desk.

"What's this?" Del hung up the phone and picked up the document, skimming the first page.

"That right there is the names of your two Mexicans."

Del looked up at his partner, then read the document. Ajax Florez Navarro and Juvenal Lucio Ibarra. "How'd you get this?"

"Played a hunch, rookie. Called the Border Patrol and sent them the photographs. They called me back and said they had a file on each man documenting multiple arrests and deportations to Mexico on drug-related offenses. Each is suspected to work for the Oaxaca cartel, one of the smaller drug cartels operating in Mexico but which has recently increased operations in the US, mostly on the West Coast. It's led to a bloody turf war with other cartels."

Which was exactly what Rick Tombs had suggested. Coincidence? Del didn't think so. "Border Patrol told you this?"

"That's right."

"You get a name?"

Moss scoffed. "Of course I got a name. I'll put it in my report. Something else?" Moss asked.

"No," Del said, heeding Faz's words of caution. "Just wondering where we go from here?"

"We go nowhere. This gets turned over to the DEA, and they run with it since it's international and they know more about what's going on down there. Close your file and send it to me. I'll finalize my report and see it gets where it's supposed to go." Moss turned to leave.

“How’d the two bodies end up in Lake Union?” Del asked.

Moss turned back. “Who knows? Somebody dumps these two guys overboard or off a pier, or maybe they jumped ship fearing for their lives, but couldn’t swim. Frankly, I’m surprised they didn’t wash up to the pier with bullet holes in their skulls and missing body parts.”

Again, Moss had parroted what Tombs had hypothesized.

Del studied the names. His instincts told him things were not as they appeared, that Moss was spoon-feeding him a load of crap. “Sounds like what you suggested all along. These guys were working a ship coming down from Canada on a drug run.”

“Sometimes even the old guys can get one right. I’ll ask the DEA to let us know what they find out. If you’re curious.”

Del prodded further. “I know you have a lot on your plate, Moss. I can close the file and send it over. Send me your report and give me the name of the DEA contact.”

“If you’re worried about the credit, don’t be.”

“No, it’s just—”

“I’ll let the captain know you handled this to its conclusion—give you your props.” He knocked his knuckles on the top of Del’s cubicle wall and stepped away. “Send it to me this afternoon.”

Chapter Six

Del put the file together and sent it over to Moss.

After he had done so, he stopped at the Public Affairs Office and told the woman at the counter he was looking for articles on the drug task force—everything and anything she had on the Last Line. She told him she'd have the articles for him in the morning, but Del wanted them before he left for the day, preferring to not read them at his desk. He told her he'd pick them up on his way home that evening. The woman didn't look happy. She called back just before five. She had left a packet in an interoffice envelope on the counter.

At home, Del draped his coat over the back of the folding chair, loosened his tie, and undid the top button of his collar. He grabbed a beer from the fridge and sat at the card table he'd positioned near the sliding glass door to the balcony that overlooked downtown Seattle and Elliott Bay. Christmas lights illuminated the buildings and multiple construction cranes.

He opened the packet and pulled out the articles, which confirmed what Faz had said about the task force being set up under the auspices of Sergeant Rick Tombs from narcotics.

Except for Tombs, the members of that force—the number was not provided—were unnamed, ostensibly to protect them and their families. Several were Gulf War veterans. A photo accompanying one of the articles showed five task force members standing behind Tombs in khaki-colored uniforms and wearing balaclavas. Pistols were prominently displayed in holsters on their hips, and each held an automatic weapon across a bulletproof vest. Del sifted through additional articles and came across a *Seattle Times* story detailing a yearlong operation that had resulted in the arrest of twenty-two drug dealers. Subsequent news stories indicated twenty-one of the twenty-two arrested had pled to charges of drug possession with intent to distribute. The one holdout, Henderson Jones, had refused and, after nearly a year, the district attorney had only recently dropped the charges. A separate article in the *Post-Intelligencer* detailed how Jones, of Rainier Valley, claimed he was innocent, that the charge against him had been fabricated, that he had been out of state visiting a brother at the time of the alleged drug deal implicating him, and he had documentation to confirm it, including gas and restaurant receipts from

Southern California. That caught Del's attention because it was hard evidence, seemingly irrefutable. Neither the prosecutor nor Rick Tombs offered a response, citing the ongoing criminal case.

The *Post-Intelligencer* reporter, however, had written a follow-up article and found the receipts to be legitimate. "I haven't sold drugs in years and the police know it," Jones said in that article. "I've been working a construction crew, bringing in regular checks, getting taxes taken out of my money, making something of myself for my family. And then the police fabricate this [expletive] charge."

Jones said that since his arrest, he had been fired from his job and unable to secure employment. He said the task force's motivation to go after him went back to when he ran drugs in Rainier Valley. "I did things back then I'm not proud of, and people obviously haven't forgotten, but I've been clean since my son was born. I want my children to have a stable home."

Del thought the article provocative and the reporter innovative for pursuing the story from a different angle than all the others. He checked the byline. Lisa Childress. An investigative reporter.

He set down the article and stood from the table. On the balcony the chilled air refreshed him. He looked at the lights of downtown Seattle, including red ones that blinked atop stanchions, a warning for passing airplanes. Del saw warning lights of his own and debated what to do. He thought of traveling to Canada and finding Jack Flynt, but why would he speak to Del? Why would he admit he'd been running drugs? Del looked back to the articles on the table and picked up the story about Henderson Jones. He could go to the reporter, but he'd been down this path before and would likely only get a regurgitation of the article and a refusal to reveal anything obtained in confidence. Better to go to the source.

He went inside and picked up the phone.

Vera, Faz's wife, greeted Del at their home in Green Lake.

"I'm sorry to steal your husband for the evening," Del said.

"Vic says you're new to the team too."

"Just came from Wisconsin about a month ago."

"With your family?"

"No. I'm not married."

"Do you have friends here in Seattle?"

“Not yet, but I’m hopeful.” Del smiled but felt uncomfortable.

Faz came down the stairs and grabbed a leather coat off a hook on the wall by the front door. “You get a chance to meet?”

“Just now,” Vera said.

“I won’t be late,” Faz said, kissing his wife.

“Nice to meet you, Del,” Vera said. “I hope you won’t be a stranger.”

“Nice meeting you too,” Del said.

Outside, Faz eyed Del’s car. “Oldsmobile Cutlass. Nice.”

“You know cars?”

“You kidding? This is a classic. Had a sixty-five Falcon in New Jersey but sold it to buy an engagement ring.” Faz admired the interior, which Del kept spotless.

Del said, “My father has a hunter-green sixty-five Chevy Impala that will be mine someday. He’s always loved the muscle cars. Told me never buy a car that can’t get you out of trouble in a hurry.”

“Good advice. Didn’t think they made the Impala in hunter green.”

“Custom,” Del said. “Thanks for coming with me, Faz. I’m sorry to be taking you away from your wife. You got a nice house. Warm. Inviting.”

“Hey, you’re a *paisan*. This is what we do.” Faz told Del he and Vera had purchased the home within the year and were looking to start a family. “Vera wants four or five kids.”

“That’s a lot of tuition money.”

“Don’t I know it. Okay, tell me more about what you learned.”

Del filled in Faz as they drove I-5 over the Ship Canal Bridge across Lake Union.

“It could be nothing,” Del said. “But I figured I got to find out; you know?”

“I hear you. You think this guy is going to talk?”

“He was pissed off enough to talk to the reporter. I figure he might be angry enough to talk to me too. If it’s a wild-goose chase, I’ll make it up to you, buy you lunch at Antichi Saporì.”

“That’s a deal I can’t refuse,” Faz said.

“You’re a *Godfather* fan?” Del said.

“Who isn’t? I wore out the tape.”

“I’m thinking of getting a dog and naming him Santino. Figured I could call him Sonny,” Del said.

“James Caan. I like it.”

They drove into Rainier Valley and parked on a street across from a darkened schoolyard. The sidewalks were deserted. Christmas lights lit up the rooflines of some of the homes, and there were illuminated lawn decorations. Del knocked on the front door of a rambler-style home with a curtain pulled across the picture window. A bare porch light flipped on over their heads, the bulb flickering as if it were about to go out. A tall, well-built African American man pulled the door open. Del recognized Henderson Jones from the photograph accompanying the article in the paper. He looked to be late twenties or early thirties. He gave them the stink eye.

“Henderson Jones?” Del said.

“Who are you?”

Del and Faz held up their badges but didn’t provide names. “SPD detectives. We’re sorry to come unannounced.”

“I got nothing to say to you. You can talk to my lawyer.”

“We could,” Del said quickly, before Jones closed the front door. “But that’s likely going to cost you a couple hours of his time.” The article in the paper said Jones had been let go from his construction job and was having a hard time financially. “We’re not here to bust your chops, Mr. Jones. We’re here to look into what you had to say about being set up.”

Jones continued to eye them with suspicion. “Why?”

“Because I . . . we think you’re telling the truth.”

From the expression of discontent on Jones’s face, Del thought the man would slam the door, but he pulled it open further and stepped back, allowing them to enter. Inside, a middle-aged man and woman played cribbage at a kitchen table in the corner. Nearby stood a pregnant young woman. She held an infant on her hip and she, too, gave Del and Faz the stink eye.

Del apologized for disturbing their evening.

“You won’t disturb us,” the woman at the table said, considering her cards. “Do what you got to do.”

“I’m going to put the baby down,” the younger woman said and departed the room.

Jones moved to a recliner and sat, scowling. Though uninvited, Del and Faz sat side by side on a couch pushed up against the wall. Jones didn’t look eager to start the conversation, so Del did.

“I read the article in the paper, about what you told that reporter. About the task force setting you up. I’d like to know more.”

“Why? What are you going to do about it?”

Del wasn’t sure what Jones meant by “it,” but he needed to get Jones past being pissed off. “I can’t say for certain until I hear what you have to say.”

“Sounds like a crossroad to me,” the woman at the table said, her gaze behind her glasses still fixed on the cards in her hand.

“I got this, Mama,” Jones said.

“Don’t mind me,” the woman said. “I’m just minding my own business.”

“I don’t want there to be further problems,” Jones said to Del. “I’m clean now. I don’t do that stuff anymore. I got a wife and a kid and another on the way. You all cost me my job. How am I supposed to support my family?”

“Have to find that tree that grows money,” the woman said.

“I’m sorry,” Del said to Jones. “For now, we can keep this conversation just between the three of us—until we figure out what’s going on.”

Jones scoffed. “What’s going on is you got bad cops busting drug dealers and taking their drugs and money for themselves. That’s what’s going on. Are you seriously telling me you don’t even know that much?”

Del consciously didn’t look to Faz, though he could feel his presence beside him. “You know this for certain?” Del asked.

Jones shook his head. “Do I know?” he asked, sounding sarcastic. “I used to be one of them. Yeah, I know it for certain. I know everything that goes on around here.”

“Why don’t you tell me what you know.”

Now he glared at Del. “Some people don’t think I should be saying anything. Don’t think it’s smart.”

“Why then did you talk to the reporter?” Del asked.

“Get it out in the open so if anything *were* to happen to me, there’d be a record of it.”

“A record of what exactly?”

Jones paused, a look of disgust still etched on his face. Then it softened and he said, “Okay. I’ll play along. Here’s what I know. The police started busting drug dealers at some of the bars around here. They’d wait until after the dealers made their deals, then follow them and pull them over on some

bullshit trumped-up charge. They'd tell them to empty their pockets, then go through their cars. What drugs and cash they found they took. Then if the dealer signed a disclaimer form saying he didn't have anything in the car, they'd let him go with a traffic ticket. If the dealer refused, they'd prosecute him for the drugs."

"How much are we talking about?" Del asked.

"Depended on the dealer. I'd say anywhere from three to five hundred to three to five thousand cash, and maybe that much in drugs."

"And you know dealers who will back you up?"

"Hell no, they won't back me up. Come on, man. Aren't you listening? Nobody is going to stick their neck out. Why would they? What's in it for them? More harassment and jail time? They did what they were told, and what did it get them? They all got busted and served time anyway."

"Why would the task force do that? Why not just continue to bust them and take their money?"

"Cause the dealers got smart. Figured the bar owners . . . someone . . . was tipping off the police, so they changed the way they did business. And, I heard the police had set their sights on a bigger, one-time score, worth millions, so they no longer had to mess around with the dealers."

"Do you know what kind of score?" Del asked.

"Rumors. A bust before the drugs got distributed. Something big. They'd then turn around and sell what they took to a buyer and keep the money for themselves."

"Do you know where they'd find that score?"

"Not for certain," Jones said. "But up here . . . Could be a float plane, a boat, trucks. Any number of ways that the drugs come into the state."

Again, Del deliberately didn't look to Faz. "Do you know how they lined up a buyer?" Del asked.

Jones stared at him, just the hint of a smile forming on his lips. "That would sound to me like they had someone on the inside, someone who knew the big-time dealers and could talk to them; wouldn't it?"

"Would that person be you?" Del asked.

Jones laughed and shook his head. "Not a chance."

"Do you know who the person on the inside is?"

Jones looked to Del, then to Faz. "I'll tell you what. I got my suspicions, yeah. You go show me I'm right. Do something with what I'm

telling you, and I might have more information for you. But I've been down this road and gotten burned more than once. I ain't getting burned again."

"More than once," the woman at the table reiterated.

"I got a family now. I have a lot more to risk."

"We could—" Del started but Faz interrupted.

"Okay. We'll see what we get." Faz stood. "Thank you for your time."

Outside the house, Del and Faz kept quiet until they got back inside Del's Oldsmobile. "Christ almighty, what have I gotten into?" Del said.

"I don't know," Faz said. "But if he's telling the truth . . . and that guy Slocum is telling the truth, that's an awful lot of money. Ship that big? Who knows what the score could have been?"

"But what do I do with this information? Who do I tell?"

"You got the word of a drug dealer—"

"Former," Del said.

"Says he," Faz said. "Who's pissed off at the SPD for losing his job. He could just be looking to even the score and using you to do it. This whole thing about him being in some danger, about not having any drug dealers to back up what he's saying, or about an insider at SPD, could all be just smoke and mirrors."

"Do you think it is?"

"No, but what I think doesn't matter. What proof exists he's telling the truth?"

"None," Del said. "Except maybe Slocum."

"Another pothead."

"What motivation does either man have to lie?" Del asked.

"I'm just saying you stick your neck out with what you got and you're likely to get your head cut off. And if you don't, you can kiss your career good-bye. Who's going to work with you? You, my friend, will be persona non grata."

When they reached Faz's house, Del pulled to the curb. Faz didn't immediately exit the car. "I'm sorry I involved you, Faz. I wouldn't have if I had known."

"Hey, I'm a big boy, okay? I do what I think is right."

"I know you got a new house, a mortgage, and you and Vera want to start a family. I'll leave you out of this."

Faz didn't immediately respond, which told Del everything he needed to know. Then Faz said, "Nobody got hurt. That's the one positive that maybe

has come out of this.”

“Except the two crewmen who drowned,” Del said.

“You don’t know they were on board that boat,” Faz said. “And I don’t see any way you’re going to prove they were.”

“I hear you,” Del said, again thinking that the ship’s captain wouldn’t have any motivation to talk. “And don’t worry. I won’t do anything that could come back to bite you.”

“You watch your back,” Faz said. “If Jones is telling the truth, people will go a long way to protect that much money.” He got out of the car, then leaned below the roofline. “You got plans for Christmas?”

Del didn’t, but he also didn’t want to be a charity case. “Just going to take it easy,” he said. “Maybe look to pull some overtime.”

“You don’t have *any* family out here?”

“Got a sister thinking about moving out, but not yet. Haven’t accumulated enough time off to go back home and no real motivation at this point.”

“Then it’s settled. You’re going to come here.”

“Look, Faz, I appreciate it, but you don’t have to do that, okay?”

“Hey, I don’t have to do anything, except what Vera tells me to do,” Faz said. “She finds out I let a *paisan* spend Christmas alone and I’ll be sleeping with the fishes. You’ll come to dinner. And don’t say no. You don’t want to make Vera unhappy. Trust me on this. She prepares a feast unlike any you’ve ever experienced.”

Del smiled. “Well, how do I say no to that?”

“You don’t.”

Chapter Seven

The following morning, Del got into the office early and looked online for the case file on the two drowned men. The department had new computers, and everything was in the process of getting transferred over. The file had been closed and sent to storage. He called up the DEA office in downtown Seattle that served Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington and asked to talk to the special agent in charge, or SAC. A moment later he was speaking to another Italian, Anthony Sciaroni. He asked Sciaroni for an update on the file that had been sent over and gave him the names of the two Mexican men.

Sciaroni said, "When was it sent over?"

"Yesterday," Del said.

"What, you got a fire burning over there?"

"Sorry. Just wanted to find out the agent to which it's been assigned," Del said, playing a hunch.

"Give me the two names again."

Del did. After a beat Sciaroni said, "I'm not finding either one. The file probably hasn't been logged in yet. Leave me a number and I'll call you back."

"That's okay," Del said. "I'll call back in a few days." A pit opened in Del's stomach. Now he was certain.

He walked through the bull pens. Moss was not at his desk. Del left the PSB and stepped outside. A light snow fell, as had been forecast, flakes fluttering on a breeze blowing in from Elliott Bay. Del made his way back to the secure parking structure. He looked for Moss's Buick but didn't see it. It was too cold to stand outside, not to mention conspicuous. He got inside his Cutlass.

He waited half an hour, turning the car on and off to maintain the heat inside and debating whether he should say anything. He couldn't go to the captain, but he could push Moss, let him know he wasn't an idiot, and he didn't appreciate being made to look like one.

Moss's black LeSabre wound its way up the ramp and circled the lot, parking two aisles over. Del met Moss as he got out of the car with a cup of Starbucks and the newspaper. "Elmo? You just getting in too?"

"It's Del."

Moss smiled. "Okay. How about this weather, huh? Not often we see this downtown. They say we might have a white Christmas."

"Need to talk," Del said.

Moss hesitated, then recovered. "Sure. Let's get in out of the cold." He moved toward the stairs.

"I called the DEA," Del said. Moss turned back, put his free hand in his coat pocket. "They don't have any record of a file being sent over."

"No?"

"No."

"Maybe they haven't assigned it yet."

"That's what the SAC said. He told me to call back. Except, I'm thinking I could call back next year, and they won't have a file because a file was never sent over; was it?"

"You got something on your mind?"

"The harbormaster."

"What about him?"

"I talked to him."

Moss displayed the same smug grin. A you-can't-touch-me smile. "And?"

"And, he said he told you about the raid on the *Egregious* the night before we got the call about those two men. He told you about the men who came to the marina wearing balaclavas and confiscated the boat, a drug runner out of Vancouver, Canada."

"Did he?" Moss said.

"Yeah. He did." Del struggled to maintain his composure. He wanted to slap that grin from Moss's face. "What did you do, Moss? Did you go to Rick Tombs and cut a deal? Tell him to cut you in for a piece or you'd blow the whistle?"

Moss lost the smile. "That's a pretty steep accusation, Castigliano. You got any evidence to back that up?"

Del didn't. "I'm working on it."

"Well then, here's something to consider while you're working on it. That was your file. You were lead detective." The grin inched into a smile and Del began to more fully understand what Moss had done. "I gave it to you and told you to run with it. So, if anything didn't get reported, that would be on you, wouldn't it?"

"Slocum told *you* about the raid. I wasn't there."

“Not according to the incident report I prepared. In my report he told us both. Seems you left it out of the official report sent to the captain. Why would you do that?”

“Your report makes no mention of the raid.”

“Really? I got a copy says it does.”

“You typed up two reports,” Del said.

“I keep all my reports of every homicide I’ve investigated. A veteran told me it was a smart move when I first got started, just in case. And the *incident report* I kept clearly states what the harbormaster told both of us. So if the report you turned in to the captain doesn’t mention it, someone must have removed it. That would be the responsibility of the lead detective, wouldn’t it? And I can assure you I made sure the captain knew the lead detective was you, Delmo. I even closed out the file in your name.”

“You set me up, you son of a bitch.”

Moss smiled. “Think of it as the education of Elmo. I’m just passing along what a veteran once told me.”

“Call me that again, Moss, and I’ll take your head off.”

“Tsk, tsk. You don’t bite the hand that can put you in jail, Del.” He slapped Del in the chest with the newspaper. Del made no effort to take it, and the pages fell to the ground. “Think about that, rookie.”

A cold breeze swirled as Moss descended the staircase, then the breeze gusted. The newspaper pages fluttered, several separating and lifted by the wind, blowing across the parking lot, catching on car tires. One page became airborne and blew over the side of the building, briefly taking flight, then falling out of sight, leaving Del standing in the cold, alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Douglas Saunders

Robert Dugoni is the critically acclaimed *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and Amazon Charts bestselling author of the Tracy Crosswhite series, which has sold more than seven million books worldwide. He is also the author of the bestselling Charles Jenkins series; the bestselling David Sloane series; the stand-alone novels *The 7th Canon*, *Damage Control*, *The World Played Chess*, and *The Extraordinary Life of Sam Hell*, *Suspense Magazine's* 2018 Book of the Year, for which Dugoni won an AudioFile Earphones Award for narration; and the nonfiction exposé *The Cyanide Canary*, a *Washington Post* best book of the year. He is the recipient of the Nancy Pearl Book Award for fiction and a three-time winner of the Friends of Mystery Spotted Owl Award for best novel set in the Pacific Northwest. He is a two-time finalist for the Thriller Awards and the Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction, as well as a finalist for the Silver Falchion Award for mystery and the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Awards. His books are sold in more than twenty-five countries and have been translated into more than two dozen languages. Visit his website at www.robertdugonibooks.com.

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