



JOHN RECTOR

RUTHLESS

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ALSO BY JOHN RECTOR

Out of the Black
Lost Things: A Novella
Already Gone
The Grove
The Cold Kiss

RUTHLESS

JOHN RECTOR

 THOMAS & MERCER

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PART I

I had time to kill, so I stepped into Mickey's Pub to get out of the rain. It was a nice enough place, clean and warm with a dark cherrywood bar, and a long cut-glass mirror that reflected the soft ambient light of the room.

Mickey stood behind the bar. He had a paperback in his hand and thick-rimmed reading glasses sitting low on the bridge of his nose. When he saw me, he closed the book and set a rocks glass on the bar in front of me.

"Didn't expect to see you tonight," he said, reaching for the Macallan bottle on the shelf behind him. "Big plans this evening?"

"Just waiting out the rain."

Mickey took off his glasses and folded them into his breast pocket. Then he uncapped the bottle and filled my glass. "Never seems to stop, does it?"

"No," I said. "It never does."

Mickey put the bottle back on the shelf, and I sipped my drink, silent. I could hear the whisper of a radio somewhere in the back room, Bob Dylan singing "Forever Young" in the distance. I thought about that as I drank.

"How's your old man doing these days?" Mickey asked. "Feeling any better?"

"About how you'd expect."

"That's too bad. He's a good man."

I nodded, but I didn't say anything.

Behind me, the door opened and several men wearing off-the-rack suits came in, loud and wet from the rain. They stopped just inside the door, looked around, then muttered to themselves and walked out.

"I was thinking about you the other night," Mickey said. "My wife's brother is putting a game together this weekend. I thought you might want a seat."

"Your brother-in-law?"

"And his asshole broker friends," he said. "They're looking for an excuse to get away from their wives and kids so they can get drunk and—"

"Lose their money?"

Mickey smiled. "They'll figure that part out later."

“What’s your cut?”

“Twenty percent. Thirty if we do it together.”

“Have you been practicing?”

“I’m getting there.”

I set the glass in front of me and ran my finger along the rim. “I take it you don’t think much of your brother-in-law.”

Mickey leaned in close. “Tell you the truth, I can’t stand the son of a bitch, but my wife’s been on my ass to be nice to the guy, so . . .” He turned and grabbed a bottle from the top shelf and two shot glasses from the counter. “What can I do? He’s family.”

He set the shot glasses between us and filled them both. “What do you think? Want to make some easy money?”

I’d been around long enough to know that there was no such thing as easy money. Still, hearing the excitement in his voice made me smile. He was right about one thing: the game did sound promising—and I was broke.

“What’s the buy-in?”

“A grand.”

“Jesus.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he said. “I’ll front you, help you build a new bankroll.”

“Bad idea,” I said. “With the way my luck’s been running, I’m not a good investment.”

He waved me off.

“These guys are fish, Nick. Even if you’re off your game you’ll still walk out with more than the buy-in.” Mickey tapped the bar with his finger. “You could be out of the hole after one night.”

“It’d have to be a hell of a night.”

“One for the ages, my friend.” He held his shot glass up, waited for me. “What do you say?”

“Let me think about it.”

Mickey’s eye twitched, and his smile faded. “You need to think about it?”

“It’s been a long time,” I said. “Things didn’t end well for me.”

“I’ll need to know by Friday.”

“That’s fair.”

Mickey watched me for a moment longer. Then he reached out and touched his glass to mine and we both drank.

It burned in the best possible way.

I set the shot glass upside down on the bar. “Wow.”

Mickey was quiet, and when I looked up at him I noticed he was staring past me toward the front of the room. I turned and saw a woman in a black raincoat standing just inside the door. She was alone, shaking the rain from a half-closed umbrella and staring at me.

I turned back to the bar.

Mickey winked at me and walked away.

“Are you him?”

The woman stood a few steps behind me. She was older than me, blonde, and polished to a shine. There was a large designer purse over her shoulder, and she held it tight against her body. I’d never seen her before, but the way she looked at me gave me hope.

I decided to play along.

“That depends,” I said. “Are you her?”

The woman exhaled and glanced back toward the door. Her body seemed to relax and grow tense at the same time, and for a second I thought she was going to walk out, but she didn't. Instead she set her purse on the bar and slid out of her coat.

The move looked practiced, as if for effect.

It was a good effect.

“You're early.” She draped her coat over one of the bar stools and sat next to me. “I was hoping to have a drink before you showed up.”

Her voice was slurred, and the smell of alcohol rolled off her in waves. It was obvious that she had some catching up to do.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn't know.”

“We said eight o'clock.” She looked at her watch. It was a gold Rolex. “It's a quarter till.”

“I've never been good with time.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“A joke.” I shook my head, motioned to Mickey. “Forget it. What are you drinking?”

“Vodka martini.”

I repeated the order to Mickey. He nodded and took a martini glass from the back shelf, set it on the bar, and then reached for the vodka. When he finished the drink he speared an olive with a plastic sword, dropped it in the glass, and set it in front of her.

“How about you?” Mickey said. “Ready for another?”

I nodded and pushed my glass across the bar toward him. He refilled it and pushed it back.

The blonde was quiet until Mickey was gone, then took the speared olive out of her drink and tapped it on the rim of her glass.

“I'm not entirely sure how this works,” she said. “I've never done anything like this. I'm a little nervous.”

“It's easy,” I said. “All you have to do is lift your glass and drink.”

The blonde stared at me. “Another joke?”

“Apparently not.”

This time I thought I saw the hint of a smile.

“You're cute,” the woman said. “I didn't know what to expect when I came here, but I certainly wasn't a sense of humor.”

“Are you disappointed?”

“Intrigued more than anything.” She lifted the speared olive to her mouth, pulled it away with her teeth, chewed. “I don't meet men like you every day.”

“Men like me?”

The woman nodded, then took a paper napkin from the stack on the bar and touched it to the corner of her mouth. “I'm a little out of my element.”

“Don't worry,” I said. “I'll be gentle.”

She laughed, soft but genuine.

“I may be out of my element, but I'm far from delicate.”

“Then I take it back.”

“Are you saying you won't be gentle?”

I felt a low buzz at the base of my spine, and I smiled at her.

She smiled back.

Part of me knew the game had gone on long enough and that I'd taken it too far. Eventually she was going to realize her mistake and leave, embarrassed. I knew that drawing it out was a shit

thing to do, but it'd been a long time since I'd shared a drink with a beautiful woman, and I didn't want it to end just yet.

"Tell me," I said. "What were you expecting?"

"Does that matter?"

"I'm curious."

The woman took a deep breath, then turned and leaned in, studying me. Up close her eyes were dark, and the skin around them was puffed red, as if she'd been crying.

I stared back, waiting for her to answer.

A moment later the softness in her eyes faded, and she pulled away.

"What I was expecting isn't important," she said. "All that matters is that I can trust you."

"Trust me?" I made a dismissive noise and took a drink. "Oh, you can trust me. Just as you are around."

"Believe me, I have."

There was something in her voice that I didn't like, and for the first time since she sat down a warning light flashed bright in the back of my mind.

I ignored it.

The woman lifted her drink and finished it. She set the empty glass on the bar and reached for her purse. I thought she'd finally had enough of me and had decided to leave, but then she opened her purse and took out a thick manila envelope.

I watched her, not looking away.

She held the envelope in her lap, staring at it as if trying to decide. Then she set it on the bar and slid it over to me.

"What is this?"

"Everything you wanted." She stood and shouldered her purse. "It's all in there, including half the money. You'll get the rest when she's gone."

The words seemed to hang in the air.

"You have one week." The woman took her raincoat from the stool and started for the door. "Not a day longer."

"Wait," I said. "What are you . . . ?"

My voice cracked, and the woman kept walking.

I looked down at the envelope and tried to tell myself that I hadn't heard her right. Either that or this was some kind of joke.

Except I had heard her right, and it wasn't a joke.

A small voice in the back of my mind whispered through the noise, telling me that there was still time. I thought if I hurried I could catch her, but when I turned, all I saw was the door closing behind her as she walked out into the rain.

I grabbed the envelope and flipped it over and fumbled with the metal clasp on the back, feeling the weight of the situation settle around me.

I opened the envelope.

There was a banded stack of hundred-dollar bills inside, along with a silver flash drive and a photograph of a young woman in a yellow dress standing on a white pier overlooking the sea.

I took the photo out and held it in front of me.

The small voice in the back of my mind was still talking to me, telling me that I needed to do something to fix this before it was too late.

Except this time it wasn't a whisper.

It was a scream.

I dropped the photo back into the envelope and headed for the door. When I stepped outside

the rain slapped cold against my face, sobering me. There were people everywhere, huddled under umbrellas and moving in a steady wave along the sidewalk.

I stood in the rain, scanning the crowd as the seemingly endless flow of bodies pushed past. I didn't see the woman anywhere.

How'd it go?"

I sat back on the stool and reached for my glass. I finished what was left of my drink, then set the envelope on the bar and tried to think about what I needed to do next.

"Not good, I take it."

I looked up at Mickey. "What?"

"The blonde." He pointed toward the door. "I saw the way she ran out of here. I'm guessing she didn't go the way you expected."

"No," I said. "It didn't."

Mickey laughed under his breath. "Don't let it get you down, Nick. When you lose one there's always another waiting on deck."

Mickey kept talking, but I barely heard a word of what he was saying. I was still trying to make sense of what'd just happened, but I couldn't do it.

I flipped the envelope over, opened the flap, then took out the photograph and held it up in the dim light. The girl in the yellow dress was beautiful and several years younger than me. Her skin was smooth and tanned, and her hair was sun-streaked blonde. There were no worry lines on her face—least not yet—and her eyes looked clear and happy.

And yet someone wanted her dead.

I turned the photo over.

There was an address written in black ink on the back. I made a mental note of it, then slipped the photo back into the envelope and took out the flash drive. There were no markings on the surface and no hint of what might be on it.

All that was left was the money, but I didn't touch that. If I had to guess, and if all the bills in the stack were hundreds, then I figured there was at least ten thousand dollars inside. I wouldn't know for sure unless I counted it, but Mickey's wasn't the place for that.

Also, I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

What I needed to do was call the police and explain what had happened, but I'd been around enough cops in my life to know exactly how that would go. While I didn't like the idea of spending the rest of my night answering questions, I didn't see any other choice.

It was the right thing to do.

I sat for a while longer, finishing my drink and letting the idea of calling the police sink in. Then I opened the envelope and dropped the flash drive inside.

This time, curiosity got the best of me.

I reached in and flipped through the stack of bills. They were all hundreds, and there were a lot more than I'd originally thought.

I can pay Kara back.

The idea came to me all at once, and when it hit, it hit hard. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't my money to spend, but it was too late. The idea dug into my brain like a tick, making it impossible to ignore.

"Ready for another?"

I looked up and saw Mickey holding the bottle over my glass, waiting.

"No, I'm done." I set the envelope on the bar. "What do I owe you?"

Mickey replaced the bottle on the shelf. "Tonight or total?"

"Total."

He told me.

I looked down at the envelope for a long time, then I reached in my pocket and took out my checkbook. I flipped to a blank and started filling it in.

"Do me a favor and don't cash this for a few days."

Mickey nodded, silent.

I tore the check out and handed it to him. He looked it over, then tried to hand it back.

"You can get me later," he said. "After the game, when it won't sting so much."

"I never said I'd play, only that I'd think about it."

"We both know you'll play." He set my check on the bar and pushed it across to me. "But either way, don't worry about this today. I know you're good for it."

"Take it anyway. It's yours."

Mickey shook his head, walked away.

I left the check sitting on the bar, and I didn't say anything else about it. Then I picked up the envelope, closed the flap, and fastened the metal clasp on the back.

"Can I use your phone? I left mine at home."

"If you want privacy, use the pay phone up front."

The walk from the bar to the pay phone seemed long, and the envelope felt heavy in my hand. I knew calling the police was the right thing to do, and usually that would be enough, but this time something was different. This time the answer wasn't as clear.

When I was a kid, my father told me that sometimes opportunities came in unexpected places and that a smart man knew how to spot them and take advantage.

Except I'd never been a smart man.

By the time I got to the pay phone, the idea of keeping the money was all I could think about. All I had to do was keep walking. The blonde didn't know my name or who I was, and there was no way she'd be able to find me again.

Just open the door and walk away.

I almost went through with it, but then I thought about the girl in the yellow dress. If I walked away, the blonde would most likely try again, except next time she'd show up sober and she'd get it right. That would make the girl's death as much my fault as hers.

I knew it was true.

The girl was in danger, and I was the only one who could help her, but I still stood by the pay phone for a long time, trying to decide. It wasn't until the door opened into me and a man came from out of the rain that I snapped out of it.

The man was wearing a dark raincoat with a hood. When he saw me, he pulled the hood back and smiled, flashing a single gold tooth.

“Sorry, pal. Didn’t see you there.”

I told him it was fine and stepped out of the way, letting him slip past me into the bar.

Once the door closed behind him, I reached for the phone and dropped some change into the slot. The number for the police was printed on the front of the phone, but I didn’t need it. I still knew the number by heart.

I dialed and listened to it ring.

As I waited, I watched Mickey through the small window in the door. He took my empty glass and set it in the sink behind the bar. Then he picked up my check and ran a white towel over the spot where I’d been sitting.

He set the check back on the bar.

I shook my head. “Stubborn motherfuc—”

On the phone a woman answered. “Police.”

I turned away from the window and pressed the receiver against my ear. “Can I speak with a detective, please?”

“Is this an emergency?”

“No, but it’s important.”

“What’s it regarding?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I guess . . .”

I glanced back toward the bar and saw the man with the gold tooth taking off his coat and setting it on one of the bar stools. He was wearing a blue button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The skin on his arms was covered in an intricate tapestry of ink.

He sat at the end of the bar, hands folded together in front of him, waiting.

I felt a small knot of panic form in my chest.

“Sir?”

“Yes.”

“What is this regarding?”

I watched through the window as Mickey approached the man in the blue shirt, and I could see his lips moving around his smile. Then the man said something, and Mickey stopped talking.

All at once I heard the blonde’s voice in my head. It was only two words, but they were enough.

You’re early.

“Sir?”

I snapped back. “Yeah, sorry.”

“I need to know what this is regarding.” The woman on the phone sounded tired and impatient. “It’s the only way I can get you to the right department.”

“I understand,” I said. “How about homicide?”

I heard the rapid click of fingers on a keyboard, then the woman said, “Hold, please,” and the line went silent.

I looked back toward the bar.

The man in the blue shirt was still talking, while Mickey listened and nodded. I started to wonder if I was being paranoid, but then Mickey lifted his head and glanced at me over the man’s shoulder.

It was a quick look, but it was enough.

The man turned and followed Mickey’s gaze. For a second our eyes met, and neither of us looked away.

“Homicide, Detective Reed.”

The man in the blue shirt stood up.

~~The voice on the phone said, "Anyone there?"~~

"Sorry," I said. "I made a mistake."

I hung up as the man in the blue shirt started walking back toward the door. He never took his eyes off me.

I stepped back, squeezed the envelope tight, and then pushed the door open and ran outside.

The rain was coming down hard, and it soaked through my shirt, chilling my skin. I cut through the traffic on the sidewalk and ducked under a moving canopy of umbrellas, following the flow of the crowd.

My first thought was that I needed to get home, where I could regroup and figure out a plan, but when I turned onto Sixteenth Street I saw a blue and white city bus slow to a stop halfway down the block.

I ran toward it, weaving through the crowd.

I was a few steps away when the doors hissed shut.

"Shit."

I slammed my hand against the door as the bus started to pull away from the curb. The driver looked down at me, frowned. Then he stopped and opened the door.

"Next time wait for the next one."

I thanked him, then looked back over my shoulder as I climbed on. I didn't see the man anywhere, but I wasn't ready to believe that I'd lost him—not yet.

I paid the fare and sat in the first open seat.

As the bus pulled away, I stared out the window, watching for the man in the blue shirt. At first I didn't see him. Then the crowd parted, and he was there, standing on the corner, scanning the street through a silver sheet of rain.

Then the bus turned, and he was gone.

I rode the bus to the end of the line, then got off and looked around for a phone. The terminal was dark and nearly deserted. The only people I saw were huddled in corners or asleep on the scuffed wooden benches lining the walls.

An old man in a white City Transit shirt was pushing a broom across the linoleum floor. He saw me and nodded.

I asked him where I could find a phone.

The old man stopped sweeping and leaned against his broom. He studied me without making eye contact, then waved a hand in the direction of the ticket window.

“You got pay phones that way,” he said. “If you can find one that works. Don’t you have a cell phone?”

“Forgot it at home.”

The old man shook his head and went back to sweeping.

Before he turned away, I noticed several deep red gin blossoms blooming along the man’s nose and cheeks. Under the terminal’s harsh fluorescent lights, they looked dark and almost alive, like a scattering of spiders.

I followed his directions to a line of pay phones next to the ticket window. I picked the first one I came to, then fished some change from my pocket and dialed.

The phone rang three times before Mickey answered.

“Mickey’s.”

“Hey, it’s Nick.”

For a moment the line was quiet.

“Are you there?” I asked.

“Jesus, Nick. What the hell did you get yourself into?”

It was a good question, but I didn’t have an answer.

“What did he say?”

“Before or after you ran out of here?”

“Both,” I said. “I need to know everything.”

“He wanted to know about the blonde. I told him she came and went and that he should ask you, since you were the one who talked to her.” He paused. “I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.”

“Did he come back after I left?”

“Grabbed his coat,” Mickey said. “What’s this all about? Was that her husband?”

“Did he say anything when he came back?”

“Not much, I—”

“Anything at all,” I said. “It’s important.”

Mickey was quiet for a minute, and I could tell he was choosing his words carefully.

“He asked who you were. I told him your first name when he mentioned the blonde, but I didn’t give him any more than that.”

I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall by the phone. The tension in my shoulders and chest was starting to fade, and for the first time I allowed myself to think that everything was going to be okay. He’d seen my face, but he didn’t know who I was or where to find me. He could look, but tracking me down was going to be nearly impossible.

“Do me a favor,” I said. “Let me know if he comes back or if anyone else shows up asking about me.”

“What the hell is going on, Nick?”

“I can’t talk about it now. Just let me know if anyone starts asking about me.”

“Yeah, of course.”

I looked at my watch. “I’ve got to go, but I’ll call again later.”

“Nick?” Mickey hesitated. “How bad is this? How much trouble are you in?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Can I help?”

Across the terminal, a woman lying on one of the benches stood up and started screaming and kicking the wall, telling it not to push her around. No one else seemed to notice.

“I’m going to go home and lie low for a while,” I said. “Wait for this to blow over.”

Mickey was quiet, and I didn’t like it.

“What is it?”

“I don’t think you should go home.”

“Why not?”

Mickey exhaled into the phone. “He saw your check.”

At first I didn’t know what he was talking about, but then it came to me, and I felt my stomach twist. The check—we’d argued over it, and I left it sitting on the bar.

“What do you mean he saw it?”

“He took it.”

“My name’s on that check,” I said. “My address.”

“When he came back, he asked about you, then grabbed his coat. I thought he was going to leave, and I wasn’t paying attention. I only noticed your check was gone after he left.”

“Did he know it was mine?”

Mickey didn’t say anything.

“Tell me you didn’t tell him.”

“No, not a word.”

“But he knew.”

“Yeah,” Mickey said. “He knew.”

After I hung up with Mickey, I sat on one of the wood benches and tried to figure out my next move. I couldn't go home—at least not yet—and I needed a place to stay.

There was only one option.

I checked the bus schedule and took the number 19 to the Southside and got off a few blocks from my father's place. Capitol Liquors was across the street from the stop. I went inside and picked up a six-pack and a bottle of Knob Creek.

My father was easier to handle if you brought gifts.

As I left the liquor store, I thought about what I was going to say when I got to his house. He was going to know something was wrong, and I wanted to have it all straight in my head before I saw him, but the more I thought about it, the more mixed up I felt.

All I knew was that I couldn't go home until I had an idea of how much danger I was in. The man in the blue shirt had seen my face, and since he had my check he also knew my name and address. All I had were the rain-soaked clothes I was wearing and a stack of hundred-dollar bills that would probably end up getting me killed.

At least the rain had stopped.

My father still lived in the house where I grew up. He bought it when I was a kid, a couple years before my mother died. In all that time I'd never heard him talk about moving. Even after the neighborhood started falling apart around us he went along as if nothing had changed.

That stubbornness was his strength.

Despite everything that'd happened, he kept us together and grounded. We'd had hard years, but through them all he was always there.

When I got to his house, I walked up the steps to the porch and knocked on the door. It felt weird to knock, but he wasn't expecting me, and he was usually armed.

I adjusted the bag from the liquor store in my arms and waited. I didn't hear anything inside, so I knocked again. This time there were footsteps. They stopped on the other side of the door and then there was nothing.

I was about to knock again when I heard a woman's voice say, "Who is it?"

"It's Nick."

I listened as she slid the chain free and turned the bolt locks. When she pulled the door open, she smiled.

"Hey, Penny."

"Hello, Nick." She pushed the screen door open and stepped to the side. "You know you don't have to knock around here. This is still your home."

It was nice of her to say, but she was wrong. This place wasn't my home and it hadn't been for a long time, but I didn't say that to her.

"I didn't know you were here today," I said. "And I didn't feel like getting shot."

Penny leaned her head back and laughed. The sound was full and genuine, and it made me smile despite it all.

"You're a wise man, Nick. Very wise indeed."

Penny had been my father's nurse for the past year. She used to come once a week to check on him, but over the past couple months she'd been coming every few days. Soon she would come every day, and eventually she'd move into my old room and stay for good, but that was something

didn't talk about.

“What brings you all the way out here?”

“Came by to visit,” I said. “How's he doing?”

“Still a shithead.” Penny looked from me to the bag then back, frowning. “What's in the bag?”

If I'd known she was going to be there, I would've planned ahead, but I didn't and now I was caught.

“You're not going to take it away, are you?”

Penny stared at me, still frowning, but I could tell it was a struggle.

“I'll pretend I didn't see anything, but just this once.” She held up a finger. “I was on my way out anyway, so let's just say I missed you.”

“That would've been too bad,” I said. “You know I don't come here to see him.”

“A young man's flattery.” Penny looked at me sideways and grabbed her purse off the table by the door. “You could teach him a thing or two.” She put a hand on my arm and leaned toward the hallway and my father's office. “I'm leaving, Charlie.” No answer. “And your son is here, so don't shoot him.”

I heard a loud cough, then my father's voice. “Can't promise anything.”

Penny patted my arm and started for the door. I held it open for her as she walked out onto the porch.

“It's always nice to see you, Nick,” Penny said. “You should come by more often.”

“You're right,” I said. “I'll try.”

I offered to walk her to her car, but she refused, so I stood at the door and watched her until she was out of sight. Once she was gone, I carried the bag to the kitchen. I took two glasses from the cabinet and pulled the bottle from the bag. Then I set the manila envelope on the counter and stared at it for a while, debating whether or not to show it to him right away.

In the end I decided to wait.

I poured a drink and handed it to my father. He took the oxygen tube from his nose, sipped the drink, and eased back in his recliner. He didn't say anything, but I knew the look, and I could tell he was happy.

"You're not torturing Penny, are you?" I asked. "If you chase her off, you're on your own. Your pension won't cover another nurse."

He waved a hand in the air, dismissing the thought, then pointed to the small television sitting on a tin TV tray against the wall. The game was on, and the camera panned over the home crowd, filling the screen orange.

"Every year it's the same goddamn thing," he said. "They hit the play-offs and they choke. It's unbelievable."

"But you keep watching."

"Of course I do. That's the deal."

I didn't say anything else, and for a long time we sat in silence as the announcers droned on and the crowd roared through a broken three-inch speaker.

When he finished his drink, he held the glass out.

I poured him another.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"As soon as I figure out where to start."

"How much trouble are you in this time?"

"Hard to tell," I said. "Maybe none."

"But maybe a lot?"

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe a lot."

Charlie sipped his drink, then set it on the end table next to his chair and coughed for a long time. When he stopped, he reattached his oxygen and sat with his eyes closed until the wheezing faded and his breath returned, cycling in and out, slow and steady.

I considered asking him if he was okay, but I knew better. Instead, I set my glass on the floor by my chair and said, "I have something to show you."

I walked out to the kitchen and grabbed the manila envelope off the counter and brought it to him. He took it, turned it over in his hands, and looked up at me, waiting for an explanation.

“I met a blonde in a bar,” I said. “She—”

~~“You met a blonde in a bar?” He laughed. “Any story that starts like that isn’t going to end well.”~~

I ignored him and kept going.

“She thought I was someone else, and I let her go on thinking it.” I nodded toward the envelope. “She gave me that before she left.”

Charlie straightened the metal clasp on the back. “What do you mean, she thought you were someone else?”

“She was there to meet someone and she thought I was him.” I reached for my glass on the floor. “She was drunk, and I played along.”

“Why the hell would you do that?”

“I thought it would be fun.”

He shook his head, then opened the flap and looked inside. His expression didn’t change.

“She told me that was half and that I’d get the rest when the job was done.”

“Those were her exact words?”

“She said, ‘When she’s gone.’”

My father reached into the envelope, and I could tell that he was counting. When he finished he closed the flap, set the envelope on his lap, and reached for his drink.

“There’s twenty grand in here.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Who’s the young lady in the photo?”

“No idea,” I said. “There’s an address on the back, but no name.”

“Why didn’t you call it in?”

“I started to, but then he showed up, so I left.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “Who showed up?”

“The guy the blonde was there to meet,” I said. “And that’s the problem.”

Charlie listened as I went over everything that’d happened, and to his credit he didn’t insult me once. I think that worried me more than anything.

By the time I finished, it was dark outside. Another storm had moved in, and the soft rattle of rain against the side of the house made me think of Kara and better days.

“Mickey was right. You shouldn’t go home.”

“I’ll have to eventually.”

“Not tonight,” he said. “Stay here. We’ll figure out something else in the morning.”

“Do you still have friends down at the station?” I asked. “I want to know more about that girl.”

“Why?”

“To warn her,” I said. “I want to help her if I can.”

Charlie looked at me with a strange mix of humor and pity. “What do you think you’re going to do, sweep in and save her, like she’s some princess trapped in a tower?”

I didn’t answer.

Charlie shook his head. “How this shit happens to you, I’ll never be able to figure. I swear, Nick, you are a magnet for trouble.”

“Is there someone down there who can help or not?”

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