

PART I

Like a flat rock on a still pond, the first bullet skipped twice across the windshield and flew off, harmlessly, into the night. The second, aimed just slightly lower, broke through, but deflected by the liquid power of angled glass, merely left a long tear in the brim of Mark Barstow's Red Sox cap. In the split second before his view was obscured by the spider-web of sympathetic fissures radiating all across the glass, Barstow saw two dark figures standing on his front lawn, both in the stance of practiced shooters. He aimed the Range Rover at them and floored it.

Mark Barstow was not accustomed to being shot at; he was a businessman, an experienced financial advisor, a husband and father, and a weekend hunter. Two years in the navy, twenty years earlier, had done nothing to prepare him for this situation. However, he had seen enough action movies to recognize that he was at the wheel of a much more lethal weapon than either of the handguns aimed at him. And he had expected something like this. From the moment he and his lawyer had left the prosecutor's office, he had known it was coming.

Bluestone gravel spewed from beneath the rear tires and the big vehicle sped forward up the driveway. The left front tire hit the raised Belgian block border at an acute angle, immediately blowing out the nearly bald tire, and slewing the big car hard to the left. The right tire made it over the stone border, but the damaged left wheel acted as an anchor. The car began to pivot.

After an initial panic as the SUV came at them, the two shooters were quick to recover. Both fired multiple shots, shattering both right-side windows. Barstow, his car now sunk into the lawn on the driver's side, threw open the door, rolled out, and came up running. Neither of the

assassins trusted automatics, sometimes subject to jamming at inopportune moments, for what they had expected to be “detail” work, requiring no more than a bullet or two, and they quickly emptied their six-chambered .38 revolvers, spurring their quarry into an even greater burst of speed. Barstow ran around the corner of the house and out of sight.

The first call to 911 came almost immediately from a woman two doors down, who reported that “kids” were “letting off firecrackers” and “knocking over trashcans.” A commotion resulting from either would have been highly unusual in the quiet Great Neck community. Homes were, of necessity, close together, but they tended toward the palatial, and a staid quiet was the norm. The second call, three seconds later, from the owner of the house across the street, correctly identified the first sound as gunfire. Nassau County Police Squad Car Number 336, patrolling eight blocks south of Mark Barstow’s house, answered the call.

Neither officer had ever fired a weapon while on duty. That was about to change.

Barstow felt one of the last bullets pass behind his head as he ran for the darkness on the far side of the garage. Not noticing the ‘click’ of the hammer landing on the empty brass shell of a previously-fired bullet, he simply ran faster. He slipped in the side door of the garage, locking it behind him. For once, he blessed his wife’s insistence that no guns be kept in her house. His locked gun safe -- containing a .30 caliber hunting rifle, and two over-and-under shotguns, one a twelve gauge, and the other a lighter twenty gauge bird gun -- was stored in a locked closet built into the back wall of the garage. He opened it and removed the twelve gauge and a box of Winchester Xpert 3 #2s -- lethal on ducks and geese out to forty or fifty yards and remarkably destructive of human flesh at lesser distances. He loaded the gun and waited.

Except for the hum of the freezer on the far wall near the kitchen door, the house was silent. His wife, Vera, and their daughter, Valeria – ten months after graduation from the College of Charleston, still unemployed and living at home – were, at his insistence, visiting Vera's mother in St. Petersburg Beach. They had left that morning and wouldn't be back until Sunday night. The outside door rattled as someone tried the locked doorknob.

The two gunmen -- realizing that their plan for a straightforward assassination as Barstow pulled into his driveway had now gone wildly off script, veering into the dangerous and unpredictable field of improvisation -- made one last attempt at fulfilling their mission. They reloaded and followed Barstow around the side of the garage. The back yard was dark but apparently empty and the side door of the garage beckoned. Rather than take the point, and charge into an unknown situation with the hunted on his home turf, Francesco (Little Frankie) Vigundio stood to the side of the door and tried the knob first. Gently. It was locked. He gave it a hard shake and was rewarded with the sound of an explosion. A hole the size of a basketball blew out of the top panel on the door, sending jagged wooden splinters out in an ever-expanding cone across the side yard.

Little Frankie stuck his hand and firearm through the hole and loosed three quick shots. The empty garage responded like a snare drum, the sharp sounds reverberating and rattling the walls, the bullets ricocheting erratically, but ultimately harmlessly.

Barstow saw the hand with the revolver, and watched the short-barreled gun flash three times. Ignoring the whine and ping of the bullets as they careened off metal shelving, concrete floor, and the frame of his daughter's Kawasaki motorcycle, he stepped forward and fired the second barrel of his shotgun at the wall just to the right of the doorway, aiming for chest height.

A second hole appeared. A man screamed – a most satisfying sound. Willing to take his victories in small stages, Barstow ran for the kitchen door. He fumbled briefly with the jangle of keys on his chain, cursing in short barks as his panic rose, finally finding the right one and unlocking the door. But before he could squeeze inside, a second hand pointed a gun through the same hole in the door and fired twice.

Framed in the gray light from the kitchen windows, silhouetted against the blackness of the garage, Barstow was an easy target. The only target. Both bullets hit, the first severing his left pinky finger, the second hitting him in the back breaking his left scapula, before shearing upward and exiting, tearing a golf ball-sized hole through his trapezius. He fell forward, dropping the shotgun and spinning as he fell, so that he landed on his back in the middle of the kitchen floor. Without any conscious thought, he began kicking wildly until his foot connected with the still swinging door and he forced it closed. The click of the lock as it fell into place was the most reassuring sound he could have imagined. He was bleeding, in great pain, crippled on his left side, deafened by the gunshots in the confined space of the garage, and still outmanned and outgunned. But for the moment he was safe. He found the gun, reloaded, and aimed at the solid, metal-covered, heat-and-flame retardant door. In the background, he could hear the measured beep of the security system. If he failed to activate the code in another ninety seconds, help would be on the way.

The two gunmen reassessed. The second shotgun blast had plowed lateral stripes across Little Frankie's back, destroying his black leather sports jacket and planting wooden splinters, bits of siding, and half a dozen tiny number two shot-sized BBs in the shallow furrows. The wound was far from lethal, but it was painful and would require professional medical attention. Frankie stopped screaming and began to curse fluently, switching effortlessly from his native

English to the mixed Neapolitan Italian of his paternal grandfather, and the Sicilian of his maternal grandfather. They would have been proud.

“Fuck’s the matter with you?” the other man asked.

“I’m hit, Gino, you fucking *stunad*. I need a doctor.”

Gino would rather have dropped his less-than-useless partner off the bridge at Captree than take him to a doctor, but he was facing a full-out disaster. The odds of attaining success had dropped dramatically. Rather than ambushing an unsuspecting, unarmed victim, they were now pursuing a shotgun-wielding, very dangerous opponent, in a fortified position on his own turf. The sound of an approaching siren decided the matter.

“We’re outta here. Follow me,” Gino said. He turned back once as he ran for the back of the yard. “And shut the fuck up or I put a bullet in you myself and leave you here.”

“Fuck you,” Frankie said, but he said it quietly and stopped talking immediately after.

They ran, after a fashion, lurching and limping through the neighboring backyards, tromping through recently turned gardens, and tripping over various decorative shrubs and leafless privet hedges. Their car was parked two streets over in the driveway of a darkened house. Though they set off motion sensors in two yards, not one of the three security cameras they passed managed to capture an identifiable photo of them. Minutes later, they jumped in the car and slowly pulled out, avoiding any display of sudden flight. They disappeared into the night.

The two policemen pulled up in front of a dark, silent house. A Range Rover sat half on the lawn, half in the driveway. The vehicle had a flat tire, smashed windows, and bullet holes in

the side panels. The only other sign of the recent disturbance was the faint lingering scent of gunpowder in the damp night air.

The younger of the two called in a 10-34 S2, though it appeared the shooting was over. He added a 10-13, as per SOP. It looked quiet, but back-up might still be welcome. "We should see if there's anyone hurt," he said to his partner.

"What's ETA?" the older man replied.

"Car Three-Two-Seven in four minutes. The security company sent an alert."

"We wait."

"Someone could bleed out in four minutes."

The older cop thought for a moment. The decision was all his. "All right. I take point." He drew his Glock and started for the front of the large house. He went up the front stoop – a granite structure that would have been more at home in front of a college library -- and attempted to see in through the large bay window. Though the curtains were light gauze, the room was too dark. He looked back at his partner and shook his head.

The younger cop was crouched by the abandoned car. He motioned for searching around behind the house. His partner shook his head. He preferred waiting. Back-up would be there in another minute or two. He held up a hand for caution, but the younger man was already moving.

"Aw, hell," he whispered. He followed around the far side of the house. "Hold up," he hissed as they reached the rear corner.

“There’s no one here,” the other man replied aloud, giving up altogether on trying to communicate silently. “Whoever was involved here has vacated the premises.”

“We don’t know that. Now, do as I say. Follow me.”

He stayed low and moved slowly, ducking below the windows. A wide unfenced wooden deck, only a foot and a half off the ground, covered a portion of the yard leading down to a pool, still hidden beneath winter cover. On the far side was a small pool house and a mammoth stone-and-steel construction that seemed to combine a barbecue grill, a sink and countertop, and a built-in pizza oven. On the deck were tables and chairs in various arrangements, with white cushions that gleamed in the half-light of the quarter moon. Sliding glass doors gave entry into the rear of the house. The garage was on the far side. It was all very quiet. Leading with his gun, he stepped up onto the deck, hugging the wall of the house, and peered in through the glass doors. Darkness. Faint shapes. A long dining room. Then a kitchen. Nothing moving. He moved on.

Mark Barstow didn’t see him at first. He had been staring into the blackness, his ears still ringing from the shots inside the echoing garage, waiting for that door to open and for the two shooters to make another attempt at him. The last two shots had punched holes through the door, that now looked to him like a pair of unblinking black eyes observing him indifferently as he sweated and bled, barricaded behind the working island in the center of the kitchen. He kept the shotgun aimed at the door. His back was soaked with his blood, but shock was already taking over and he barely felt the wound in his back. The missing finger, however, stung like a thousand wasps all attacking at once. He wrapped the hand in a dish towel and for a moment saw explosions of stars behind his eyelids as he almost passed out. He shook his head. He

wanted water. The faucet was only a few feet away. As though entranced, he found that his thoughts were focused solely on reaching that sink. He could wash the blood from his hand and the cold water would help kill the pain. And he could drink. If he could just drink a little cold water, he knew that he would live. Keeping the shotgun aimed at the door, he rose up and took a step toward the counter.

The older cop was already on the far side of the deck when he heard his partner yell, “Freeze!” The word was picked up quite clearly by his chest microphone, as was the next, “Police!” He looked back and saw the younger cop in the approved firing range stance. He was aiming at the gray glass doors to the kitchen.

It was unlikely that Barstow heard the words. No doubt he heard a sound, but what he saw was a man with a gun stepping into the thin shaft of moonlight that made it down through the stand of tall cyprus trees in the backyard. He did not register the uniform; he saw a threat.

“Damn!” His mind returned to crystal clarity. He should have known they would try to flank him – to surprise him again. He whirled and fired once, barely aiming, firing from the hip like some TV hero. He was surprised to see that he had apparently hit his target. The glass exploded outwards, the whole sliding door shattering at once, and the tall man – or the shadow of the tall man – fell to the ground.

The policeman felt the blast of the pellets go by and, too late, leaped out of the way of the shards of glass. They ripped through his shirt and sliced the side of his neck, missing the carotid artery by millimeters. The pain was sharp, biting, acidic. He hit the ground and rolled onto his back, too much in agony even to think about returning fire.

The other cop relied on his extensive training. His partner was down, hurt, and vulnerable to further attack. The suspect was still armed and had, despite a warning, fired and hit a police officer. By law and by training, he was allowed – expected – to use whatever force he deemed necessary to defend himself and other police personnel, and to subdue the shooter. He fired three times, placing all three bullets in the center of Barstow's chest.

Barstow was dead before he hit the floor.

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The center lane of the Long Island Expressway was a solid line of steel all the way to the horizon. One large truck after another, all rolling along at ten miles over the speed limit. The right lane was reserved for the undocumented immigrants driving landscaper's rigs, the not-quite-legally blind, and senior tax-dodgers in cars the size of small yachts with Florida tags. The far left lane held everyone else. From the guys who just want to get where they're going to the truly insane who drove as though possessed of a death wish. I didn't count the HOV lane where minivans maintained a steady sixty, while SUVs and the Hampton Jitney did eighty. My shoulders were aching from the strain of keeping every other car on the road at something more than arm's length and my knuckles were so white they would have glowed in the dark. I have always had a special hatred for the Long Island Expressway.

I was there on a long shot. My job was not— usually — a taxing one. After serving two years of a five-year sentence in federal prison for an accounting mistake that I had let snowball — if they don't get you for the crime, they'll get you for the cover-up — my job prospects back on Wall Street were limited. Most of my old acquaintances wouldn't take my call. But I had carved out a niche as a freelance fraud investigator and done quite well. One thing had led to another, and now I worked directly for the CEO of a mid-sized investment bank, conducting the kind of investigations that the Legal and Compliance departments found inconvenient. Virgil Becker ran the firm his father had almost destroyed. I had been instrumental in salvaging some of the pieces and thereafter I collected a ridiculously large annual paycheck for performing what was, in

effect, a part time job. Occasionally, someone or other would object to having their felonious secrets unearthed and I had found myself fighting for my life, or mourning the loss of another. But more often, the greatest danger I faced was the threat of backache and eyestrain from staring at a computer screen for hours on end. Sometimes I just needed to get out of the office and do a bit of field investigating. Which is how I found myself stuck in the center lane on the LIE.

Every week I ran a random search through all of the firm's trades looking for any pattern that looked unusual. There were always dozens. That's the nature of the business. Then I had to sift through all the anomalies to see if there were any that warranted further investigation. There were surprisingly few. That's also the nature of the business. Most Wall Street crime stays hidden simply because of the massive volume of legitimate trades that happen every day. The program that I had devised wasn't any better than the ones the SEC used – and they had a lot more manpower – but if I waited for them to discover the malefaction, I wasn't doing my job.

The week before, I had come across one of those pesky patterns. One of the firm's brokers had, some months earlier, executed a flurry of trades in penny stocks. Penny stocks are, as one might imagine, stocks that sell for less than a dollar. They are rarely worth even the pennies paid, but every once in a while a stock might pay off with a miraculous new product or discovery. However, it wasn't the kind of business that the firm encouraged – there were too many opportunities for fraud. The dollar amounts were small enough that my program had ignored them until, on a whim, I widened the parameters. The penny stock trades all jumped to the head of the list. There was no obvious evidence of misdealing, but on a slow week, I had the time to dig a little deeper. It had taken me all week to pull together the documents that I needed. When I began researching the stocks in depth – all blue collar types of businesses, like plumbers, electricians, and cesspool companies, that depended heavily on the use of trucks – I found that

twelve of the twelve companies all had long-term leases on the same property out on Long Island. That was the kind of coincidence that could go from agita to heart attack. When I looked it up on Google Earth, I saw a barn the size of three or four airplane hangars surrounded by a grassy field, a few hundred acres in size. It was either a sod farm or pastureland, isolated in the middle of the wilderness of Pine Barrens out there. It was odd enough to get me out of the office for a closer look.

I began my drop down to the exit ramp a mile in advance of the exit and still almost missed it, thanks to a woman wearing those over-sized sunglasses that fit over regular glasses. She sped up when I tried to merge in front of her and slowed down when I dropped back. The trucker behind me finally hit his horn in frustration, which scared the woman into hitting her brakes, and I scooted through. Less than a quarter mile after the exit ramp, I was driving through a landscape of scrub oak and dwarf pine. The edges of the asphalt roadway had crumbled away on both sides, so that if another car had come from the other direction, one of us would have had to veer off onto the salt-and-pepper sandy verge.

The break in the wilderness was abrupt. One moment I was surrounded on both sides by an eight or ten foot tall wall of evergreen and grey-brown scrub oak, the next I was passing fence posts as tall as the stunted trees enclosing a grassland resembling a western prairie. I slowed down to examine the territory.

The fence around the property was a grid of thick strands forming four-inch squares supported by tall thick posts six or eight feet apart. It looked like it would keep out a tank. It also looked solid enough to support half a dozen big men if they wanted to climb over. I thought that it must be for containment rather than security. This idea was bolstered when I saw the

inner fence, a single bare wire about four and a half feet off the ground that ran through insulated fixtures on bare wooden posts. An electric fence. It looked harmless from the seat of the rental car, but the wire was heavy enough to carry quite a charge.

Across the field loomed the building I had seen on Google. It was as tall as an airplane hangar, twice as wide, and it had to be the length of two football fields. There were no windows or doors on the side facing me. It was just a long expanse of weathered gray.

I drove along a little farther until I could see the corner of the property and the convergent road, then I pulled off to the side and stopped the car. The sudden silence was disorienting. There was no breath of wind, no birds calling or insects buzzing, no hum of distant traffic or rush of airplanes overhead. I wanted to turn on the radio just to hear some sign that civilization still went on just over the horizon. The sudden ping of the engine as it cooled almost made me jump.

I left the car unlocked and walked along the fence, careful to avoid the bright green poison ivy and the low thistle bushes that shared the roadside with the sparse grass and occasional fern. It was hot.

Around the corner, I came upon the gate – or gates, for there were two, an inner and an outer forming an enclosed lock the length and double the width of a long semi cab and trailer. The gates were each double-door affairs with electronic locks, counter-weighted pulleys, and rolls of razor wire. Signs on both gates announced in both English and Spanish that trespassing was forbidden, and that it was too dangerous even to think about coming in. I decided that the restrictions did not pertain to someone who had driven most of the length of the Long Island Expressway to get there, but I wasn't going to attempt entry through those fortifications anyway.

There were no signs on the fence, only on the gate, therefore the prohibition ended where the fence began.

I walked back fifty yards or so and began to climb. The metal wires did not sag or buckle. They were made to support weight. Even so, I was sweating by the time I reached the top and swung a leg over. The change in perspective gave me a different view of the fields below and an idea began to form in my mind. I looked for more evidence and found it almost immediately. The remains of multiple fences crisscrossed the gently rolling property. Now almost all rotted away, they had once broken the huge pasture into smaller parcels. Sections where horses could be raised, stallions and mares kept separate until such time that the breeder wanted them together. Enclosures where colts could learn to run with their dams. All this had once been a horse farm. Or ranch. The precise nomenclature escaped me. I was born and raised in Queens.

However, among the now defunct agricultural industries that had once dominated half or more of Long Island was the business of raising horses. American quarter horses. Used for everything from dressage to rodeo. I knew this because of a brief fascination with a girl in middle school who had a less brief, and much more intense, fascination with horses. She and her mother would drive out east every weekend, where they rode hired horses while wearing little leather helmets, black blazers, tall boots, and funny pants. My fascination with her arose because she was almost as good in math as I was, which gave me the impression, ultimately very wrong, that we might have something to talk about. I listened to her talk about horses and she listened to me rattle on about differential equations. The relationship did not flourish as I had hoped.

There were no longer any horses gamboling about, but the long building now made sense to me. One end of the barn – and I now felt comfortable calling it that – would have held stalls for the horses, as well as storage for feed and equipment. The wider end with the curved roof would have been the indoor riding arena where rider and horse could train together to do the maneuvers required for dressage, or jumping, or even barrel-racing or calf-herding.

What interest Keegan Cesspool Services --Roto-Rooter's number one competition on the East End -- and the other companies would have in an old horse farm, however, was still a mystery.

I climbed down the inside of the fence. No alarms went off. No armed guards arrived to escort me off the property. No thrashing helicopters hovered overhead. Therefore, I wasn't really trespassing.

The grass under the electric wire was about two feet high. I ran my hand through the top leaves to see if there was any leakage from the fence. I had seen the third rail on the subway arc at times when a train passed by. There was that same electric train smell of ozone in the air. I didn't want to duck under the wire only to find that there was enough current leaking that I became a quick-fried grounding post. But despite the smell, there was no sharp sting when I touched the grass. I went all the way down to hands and knees to crawl under.

I was about three hundred yards from the barn, most of it through long grass. I was a city boy. Long grass meant man-eating lions, like in that Val Kilmer-Michael Douglas movie, or poisonous snakes, despite the fact that I knew on a purely intellectual basis that there were neither on Long Island. But there were probably ticks, and I could contract Lyme disease or spotted fever, whatever that was. Or at the very least, I might get a spider bite. I cut over toward

the packed earth drive, where the grass was beaten down to a sparse Mohawk-fringe. The road led from the gate directly to the barn.

Beyond the barn was a grove of three ancient catalpa trees, each one six or eight feet around. Lazing beneath them in the shade were what I took to be cows – large dark-brown lumps. They were far away, resting, and, even to a New Yorker wearing a custom-made suit and Allen Edmond wingtips, a relatively minor threat. I resolved not to step in any cow pies.

The remaining posts from the old fencing, lined up like pensioned sentinels along the side of the dirt road, were all slightly askew, as though the earth had reshaped itself in undulating waves, or, more likely, something heavy had pushed against them repeatedly. The significance of that escaped me until it was almost too late.

Once on the driveway, I could see the barn much more clearly and from end on. The wall facing me had a single enormous sliding door with the same kind of electronic lock and pulley contraption as the main gate. If that were not enough security, someone had wrapped a thick padlocked chain through the pulley system. If I'd had a hacksaw, I could have gotten through it in not much more than a day or two.

I didn't need a hacksaw. In the middle of the huge door was a smaller door. An Alice-in-Wonderland-sized door with no lock and nothing but a simple lever-handle door knob. It was too easy. I opened the door and heard the shrill screech of rusty hinges. I paused, waiting to see if I had somehow raised an alarm. Nothing. I walked in and stepped into darkness.

The fact that there were no alarms or hi-tech locks should have been a warning. The owners of the property were either painfully ignorant of modern security techniques or they were arrogantly confident beyond all reason. Or, they knew something that I did not.

I began to explore the dark space. Almost buried under the overwhelming assault from fumes of diesel and other petroleum distillates, there was the faint scent of horse. Certainly not a recent smell, but impossible to ignore. I felt my way to the nearest wall and searched for a light switch. Instead I found a big metal switch box with a long handle on one side. I gripped it and pulled down. There was a loud thunk that sounded more like an axe hitting a stump than anything electric, but it worked. Banks of fluorescent lights began to buzz and flicker overhead the length of the building, revealing a single open space – the stalls and tack rooms had been gutted and removed – that was now filled with trucks and heavy equipment of every description. Panel trucks, flat beds, dump trucks, refrigerator trucks, monstrous semis, and tow trucks that dwarfed them, septic trucks, a long line of oil delivery trucks, even a half dozen beverage distributor trucks. The heavy equipment was all earth-moving machinery of one kind or another. There must have been tens of millions of dollars' worth of vehicles there, most in pristine condition.

I walked the length of one row to the far end of the barn where the arena had been. The overhead lights there were still dark. The space seemed to hold vague geometric forms and dark amorphous blobs. I searched the wall until I came to another switch box. I pulled the handle. This time, the lights suspended from the high ceiling were all powerful floods. The floor of the arena lit up like an operating room.

It was an operating room. For trucks. Three trucks in the center of the floor were in various stages of being dismantled – or reconstructed -- their engines wrapped in thick chains and suspended with block and tackle from steel girders. Parts, some cleaned and labeled, others bathing in tubs of cleaning solvent, were organized neatly around the edges of the space. Along the far wall was a packaging area and loading dock. It was all a factory. But they didn't make

things there, they took them apart and sold the pieces. The trucks came in at one end, and if they weren't held for use by D & Y Hauling, McFee Plumbing, L.I. Ice, or one of the other companies on the list, all of whom depended on trucks of various kinds to make their businesses work, they were taken to the far end where they were reduced to their most saleable parts, which were then boxed and shipped and sent out through the single small door at the far end. It was possibly – probably - the world's biggest truck chop shop.

I took out my phone and started snapping pictures.

There were too many vehicles to record each; I would have been there all afternoon. Instead I took samplings and a few long shots for both scale and sheer numbers. Every few minutes I stopped taking photos and emailed them to myself. The moment that I realized what this very private piece of property was being used for, I felt an urgency to be on my way back home. The collection of evidence was a necessity, but I did not want ever to have to come back. I had enough to bring to Virgil; he could pass the matter on to the compliance department. My part was done.

I had just turned out the floodlights, casting that end of the barn back into a murky darkness, when I realized what was missing. Guard dogs. I had never seen an auto junkyard without a huge bloodthirsty mastiff or pit bull, or even a short-haired shepherd. By some luck I had arrived on a day when no one was there working, stripping parts or packing them up. But surely, they must have had some kind of security. The fencing might have kept out army tanks, but it hadn't stopped me. The urgency to be on my way increased by a factor of ten.

The thump of the lights going off sounded much louder than turning them on. I made my way along to the small door and pushed it open. The hinges sounded their shrill protest again.

The sudden changes from light to dark and back again left me blinded as I stepped through the doorway. I was in a hurry, but I stopped and took a second for my eyes to adjust.

The realization that I was not alone came in strobe-light flashes. The first was a sound – a cough. Not exactly a cough, but definitely an exhale. A human could have made the sound, but probably didn't. There was also a smell which hit me just a moment before my eyes focused. It was a wild smell, like what you might get if you crossed a cow with a bear.

My eyes cleared. I was facing a herd of bison. American buffalo. Four very big fellows with horns were standing in a semi-circle not twenty feet away. They were blocking my access to the road. My line of retreat. One of them made the coughing sound. It could have been an expression of anger, or merely impatience. He stamped a hoof on the ground. Anger, I decided. In a group, more to the right and slightly farther away, were eight female bison. Though they were slightly smaller and the horns they wore just a tad less lethal-looking, the real clue to their gender was that six of them were swollen and gravid, while the other two hung back protecting two spindly-legged calves, who watched me with both fascination and fear out of slightly protuberant eyes.

I tried to convince myself that I was in no danger. I was no threat, therefore they had no reason to treat me as anything other than an oddity. An amusement. I would have to pass between two of the bulls to make my escape, but if I showed no hostility they would let me go unmolested. I took a step forward.

The cough this time was considerably louder and its intent and meaning quite clear. I froze. The doorway was just a few steps behind me, but I had read somewhere – probably *Outside* magazine while waiting in the dentist's office – that bison were among the fastest land

creatures, able to run for some distance at forty miles an hour or more. And, they could reach full speed instantly. I turned and ran. I must have hit full speed instantly, too. I was through the door and back inside in a flash, the door hinges screaming.

I let my breath come back slowly. I had been holding it from the moment I saw the bison. My hands were clammy and I smelled like fear. I peered out the door. There had been no movement. The little herd was still there. I watched them for a few minutes and realized that I could easily see them, but they could not see me and so I relaxed. But if I let the door make the slightest sound, they became immediately alert and the bulls took turns coughing in my direction. We were at a standoff. I was stuck until they lost interest – and I would still have the problem of opening the door without making a sound to tip them off – or someone showed up to assist me. Or arrest me. Or worse.

In the waiting game, I had the advantage. The bison were out in the sun on the hardpack in front of the doors. The nice grass and the shade were elsewhere. I had nothing to do but wait. They had to wait and wonder why they weren't waiting somewhere more comfortable. Eventually, the difference began to tell.

The bulls went first. The male of the species always has the shorter attention span. This is why football has halftime. The biggest went first -- the one who had first snorted at me and stamped his hoof. He walked a few paces off, and began to trot down the field to a bare sandy spot, where he rolled over, legs in the air, and enjoyed a dust bath. The other three bulls looked like they wished they had thought of it first and a few minutes later they trotted along after.

There were some huffs and snorts from the cows when the bulls left. They weren't happy about it, but no one went down and tried to shame the boys into coming back. I eased the door

open bit by bit, knowing they couldn't see me. If there came a moment where I could escape, I was going to take it.

The calves went next. The two began to stroll back toward the shade. Their mothers, instead of herding them back to the group, followed them. That left six hungry, hot, very pregnant females alone on guard duty outside the barn. A few minutes later, as though by unspoken agreement, they all left at once and headed back to the trees.

I inched the door open a bit more and put a leg through.

I almost made it.

OOOOOOOGA! OOOOOOOOGA! A loud horn, the kind you hear on a ship leaving port, sounded twice, sending my heart into my throat and my testicles up into my stomach. I leaped back inside and heard a loud buzzing from an alarm. What the hell had I touched to set that off?

The front gate swung open, red lights flashing, and the buzzer still making a racket, revealing a long flat-bed truck that began to come up the road toward the barn. But before I had time to fully panic, or to look for a hiding place, the truck rumbled past the doors and continued down into the field beyond. I heard a muted rumble of hoofbeats and poked my head out. The bison were all following the truck, which slowed after it passed the sandy wallow. The passenger door opened and a lanky man in a denim jacket and ball cap swung out and up onto the truck bed. It was loaded with bales of hay, which he began unloading off the back. The bales hit the ground and broke up into square pallets. The bison followed and began to eat.

That was my chance. The men were busy. The truck and the bison at least three football fields away. With a bit of luck I could get to the fence before they even noticed me. I pushed the door open, dashed through and began to jog down the road. And let the door swing to behind me. The hinges shrieked. I began to run.

I was not a sprinter, never had been, but I was sure that I could cover two hundred yards in thirty seconds. Thirty-two max. A voice called out and I ignored it. There was no way those farmhands would have been able to get the truck turned around and cover the distance to catch me up in time. My fear was the bison.

I did the math. There were too many variables, too many possible rounding errors, but numbers had been my life. If I was going to die, trampled to death by a vestige of the Old Wild West, then I was going out counting.

The truck was a long way down the field from the barn. At least three hundred yards, and more likely four hundred. So I used four hundred because with the two hundred yards from the barn to the fence, that added up to six hundred yards, or just over one third of a mile. If the bull started running the moment he saw me – and I knew his eyesight sucked – and traveled at a speed of forty-five miles an hour, he would arrive at the electric fence at the same time I did. My heart was threatening to burst out of my chest and I was gasping for air. I still had half the distance to cover.

That was my worst-case scenario – at the full four hundred yards. If the distance was even a bit shorter, I was going to be roadkill any moment. On the other hand, forty-five was a good clip for a healthy bison on the open range. How fast would one of those lazy Long Island bisons move? Over rough, pitted, and rolling terrain? At thirty-five mph, I'd have been able to

slow up and jog the last few yards, laughing over my shoulder. The front brain thought this was very funny. The back brain, the place where all the primitive stuff resides, found nothing to laugh about. I ran faster.

The gate was coming up and was, of course, closed. I made a slight turn and ran through the long grass for the fence. That's when I heard the sound of hoofbeats on the roadway. I didn't want to look, but I couldn't help myself. Two of the bulls were already passing the barn and the truck was finally turned around and was barreling after them. I found that math had abandoned me. I could not do the estimates or calculations. My brain had joined the rest of my nervous system in focusing on one thing only. Keep running.

The electric fence was a dozen strides in front of me. Then ten. Eight. Six. Would the damn animals stop? They must have weighed a ton each. Why would a single strand of wire stop them regardless of the electric charge? Four. I could feel the pound of those hoofs on the ground behind me. Two. I dove under the wire, sliding through the tall grass, imagining I could hear the crackle of thousands of volts running over my head. I scrambled to my feet, took the last three strides to the outer fence in two hops and a jump. I jammed my feet between the links and climbed as fast as I could.

One of the bulls managed to stop before hitting the fence, skidding to a halt, hoofs grinding a pair of parallel trenches in the dirt. The other bull, less experienced or merely more aggressive, hit the wire at full speed. I was already approaching the top of the fence and still climbing, but from the corner of one eye I saw the animal hit. The wire gave way like a rubber band, but there was an immediate crack of discharged electricity and the two thousand pound

bison flew backwards as though fired from a giant slingshot. Every hair on my body stood on end and the mixed odors of ozone and burned flesh were overwhelming. But I kept climbing.

The bison was down and on the ground, but it was moving. As I threw my leg over the top and started down the far side, I saw it roll up onto unsteady legs. A long red welt ran all down one side of its body. The other bull was already racing away back up the field. But the guys in the truck hadn't quit.

The truck was racing down the drive. It would take precious minutes to open the two gates and follow me. I could be in the car and long gone before they would be out. I jumped the last three feet to the ground and turned to run for my car. I thought I was safe.

Halfway to the car, I looked back over my shoulder. The truck had veered and was now leaping and bucking over the field, headed straight for me. I knew they wouldn't be able to plow through the fence, but that ranch hand would be able to climb it and chase after me. I had a good lead, but the truck was eating it up quickly. I had seconds to spare.

Of the few things that I did right that day, the most important may have been to leave the car unlocked. I jumped in, started it up, and swung the car into a U-turn, bouncing on, off, and back on the pavement, fishtailing slightly in the sand. The truck was coming up inside the fence, but I was on firm smooth asphalt. In seconds I was pulling away, as they continued to bounce through the field, keeping just clear of the electric fence. The end of the property line – and the corner of the fence – approached. I kept my right foot to the floor and raced away back through the woods toward the lesser hazards of the L.I.E.

The usual westbound slowdown at exit 39 had caused a backup to 41. Creeping along at an average of eight miles per hour gave me time to readjust my adrenaline levels. Fear and

aggression became annoyance and exasperation and, finally, acceptance. I could think. I marveled that a spray of relatively small trades had led to being chased, and nearly exterminated, by a creature almost extinct in the wild. Too bad I couldn't also read the future and see the long list of ills that were to come. That in just a few months my son would be lost in the desert, and that I would face death saving him. And, once again, there would be a death on my conscience.

-2-

Skeli, the light of my life, the woman of my dreams, and the mother of my unborn child, was sitting across from me in a booth at the Athena Coffee Shop on Amsterdam. She was having a Greek coffee shop version of a Salad Nicoise – no potatoes, red onion and cucumber instead of green beans. Skeli was plucking the curls of onion out and putting them on her bread dish. She was long past the morning sickness stage of her pregnancy, but food in general had become an issue. Smells and textures had become strange, and things she had once loved had turned toxic. Raw red onion was one of the most virulent of past loves. Mostly she got by on yogurt, lettuce, and a few bites of fish or chicken. And midnight binges of chocolate-hazelnut gelato.

“Buffalo?” she said, with a teasing grin.

“Bison,” I said. I had just finished telling her of my adventures that day.

“I’ve always pictured them as noble and stoic.”

“They’re also territorial, protective of their offspring, and really big.”

“Why would someone use buffalo instead of guard dogs?”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re not taking this seriously? I could have been killed.”

“When I told you that I didn’t want you to be involved in anything dangerous, I meant no guns or people trying to drown you, and stay away from people who want to beat you up.”

“It’s not like I seek them out, you know.”

“You climbed over the fence, Jason. Weren’t there warning signs? Like ‘Keep Out’ or ‘Danger – Guard Buffalo?’ You invaded their space.”

I was beginning to feel surrounded. “Guard bison.”

I waved at the Kid. My son was having dinner in a separate booth across the dining room, accompanied by our good friend, Roger. Roger was a retired clown, a practicing alcoholic, and an often rude and uncouth companion whom I had met and befriended years before my troubles with the law began. When I got out of prison, he picked up the friendship as though there had never been a break. I owed him a lot, not least for introducing me to a woman named Wanda Tyler, whom I had nicknamed Skeli. She had been his sometime assistant, when he performed at Park Avenue birthday parties or corporate sales meetings. Jacques Emo and the Wandaful Wanda.

The Kid did not wave back. He blinked. That may have been an important message, but I couldn’t be sure. My seven-year-old son, named for both his father and grandfather, had unusual methods of communication. And he refused to be called Jason. The sobriquet was his idea. He occupied a block on the autism continuum, shifting his exact location often enough to keep me and his teachers on constant alert. His mother, my ex, had never been able to connect with him and it broke her fragile heart. She died protecting him.

It was the autism that defined where we dined. The Athena had demonstrated an acceptance of some of my son’s more bizarre eccentricities, such as screaming “Poo” at the top of his lungs when he saw me put mustard on my corned beef, or flying into a screaming tantrum whenever James Taylor’s *Fire and Rain* played on the radio, a reaction that, in my opinion, was

a tad operatic but thoroughly justified. I had frequently contributed to the waiters' retirement funds with hundred dollar tips to ensure our subsequent welcomes. So far, it was all working.

Roger was performing an act of supreme generosity by eating dinner with the Kid in order to give Skeli and me a few minutes to enjoy each other's company. Dinner with the Kid could be harrowing to the uninitiated – it could be harrowing to the experienced, too.

“I outran a maddened, wild creature to be here with you,” I said, giving in to the spirit of her taunts.

“I thought you said you had a quarter-mile head start,” she said deadpan.

“Not quite.”

She laughed. I liked her laugh. It was free and uncomplicated and I wanted to make her laugh all the time just like that.

“I'm sorry,” she said, though not sorry at all. “I'm sure it was scary, but I'm having too good a time picturing you doing the hundred yard dash and scaling a ten-foot fence in five-hundred-dollar shoes while being chased by a cow.”

“Bull,” I said. “And it wasn't a bovine, it was...”

“A bison. I know. Isn't a bison a bovine?”

“I have no idea,” I said.

“What's the difference?”

“Cows commit murder a lot less frequently than buffalo.”

“Ha! Even the world’s greatest expert can slip and call a bison a buffalo.”

She was having fun and I was having fun watching her. She could tease me forever as long as she kept up that laugh.

She switched gears on me. “You haven’t asked me about my day.”

“True. But I thought being chased by a bison trumped the breathless excitement of a physical therapy clinic.”

Skeli had been working on her doctorate when we first met. It was the beginning of a second career – or third if you counted the time she spent as Roger’s assistant. With backing from me and other moneyed friends, she had opened an office in Soho, which now took up a lot more of her time than I had expected. That wasn’t exactly a problem – I was happy for her success – but I did miss lazy Saturdays and long, relaxed dinners together.

“No, there were no mad bison running around the treatment rooms. We did get another new celeb client today, though.” She dropped a name even I recognized. New Yorkers try hard to be unimpressed with fame, but a few signed celebrity photos in the waiting room were good marketing. People would flock to Skeli’s office on the slight chance of running into a Broadway legend with sciatica, or an opera diva with a twisted ankle.

“How did she find you?”

“Another referral from Paddy.”

Patrick Gallagher was both a Wall Street wizard and a theater producer. He was also one of the friends who I had convinced to back Skeli’s business.

“Very nice. So business is booming.”

“Do I hear a touch of mixed feelings there?”

“Not really. I’m very happy for you.”

“And you know it won’t always be this way, right? The start-up is the hardest part. Six months from now, the place will almost run itself. I’ll have normal hours and we’ll have lots more time together.”

I laughed in spite of her earnest wish for me to believe. “No, I don’t know that. You love being fully engaged. You love helping people. You feel important and that’s a good thing. I don’t mind. But in six months, you are going to have a baby to add to the mix and life will get exponentially more complicated. And that’s a good thing, too.”

We smiled at each other in contemplation of our lives being turned upside down by the arrival of another family member.

“Maybe we should just get a dog,” I said.

“Too late, bud. You should have thought of that months ago. What kind of cheese is that?”

I was eating a grilled chicken Caesar salad. When Skeli had started gagging at the smell of coffee or the sight of a rare and bloody steak, I had stopped eating anything that she wouldn’t eat – when she was present. If I needed a pastrami fix, or a good burger, I found it on my own time.

“It’s parmesan. Isn’t that what you put on a Caesar?”

“That’s not parmesan. It’s Asiago. It smells.” She gave a half grimace-half smile.

“Sorry.”

“No problem,” I said. “I’ll have them wrap it up. Maybe they’ve got some saltines I could munch on.”

She laughed again and my heart soared.

“No. Eat. Eat your dinner. Please. If you send it away, I’ll only feel like a crazy pregnant lady and start crying – or screaming. Oh, damn, Jason. I’ve been sitting on bad news all afternoon and I’ve got to tell you or I’m going to explode.”

Roger and the Kid, with the impeccable timing that good friends and children always seem to have, arrived at our table. “We’re heading out,” Roger said. “The Kid wants ice cream and I been sitting long enough. We’ll meet you back at your place, okay?”

“Nilla,” my son said.

“That’s great, Roger. Thanks. You’re sure?”

“I got it,” he said.

I held out my hand for the Kid to sniff. He gave a rare smile and held his hand out to me. He did not like to be hugged, kissed, or even touched, usually, but we had discovered this mutually acceptable form of communicating affection. “You take care of Roger, okay? Don’t let him eat too much ice cream.”

His brow furrowed as he processed this. Roger never ate ice cream. Therefore this gave onto two possibilities: (A) I was losing my mind; or (B) I was making a joke. He weighed these for a moment and responded. “Funny.”

They said their goodbyes, and Skeli and I watched them trundle off together.

“That’s so great,” she said. “He’s learning to trust Roger.”

The Kid did not give his trust easily, but his circle was expanding. It *was* great.

“Ahhh,” I sighed in a descending coda. “So tell me your news. You heard from the co-op, right?”

She nodded. “They called. The secretary. Whatshername? She didn’t have to. She said there’ll be a letter.”

The realtor had warned us. We had been denied by the co-op board. For the past two months we had been using every spare hour – and there had been few and those hard-won – to hunt for an apartment that would hold our combined family. The Kid and I shared a large one-bedroom with alcove in the Ansonia, a co-op run like a residential hotel. Skeli lived in a rambling wreck on 110th Street in a building that was owned by her ex-husband. She fully expected an eviction notice to arrive within weeks after the birth. Neither apartment would work. The Kid had to have his own room. We needed a three bedroom.

“Did she say why?”

Skeli didn’t exactly answer the question. “She was nice. She voted for us, but it didn’t matter.”

It wasn't financial. I was being paid close to a million a year and I had an ironclad contract. We had references from Wall Street, Broadway, and even a letter from an FBI agent. The fact that Skeli and I were not married – we had both been married before and shared a distrust of the institution -- would not have mattered in twenty-first century Manhattan, nor would it have if we were multi-racial, gay, or members of a Satan-worshipping cult. They didn't know about the Kid's condition, because I had not considered it to be any of their goddamn business, and it would have been illegal for them to consider it anyway. But the one line on the application that asked, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" had been inescapable. And damning. In some circles, I was famous. Or infamous.

"We could look at condos," she said. "Or check out Queens."

"I grew up in Queens," I said. "I've got nothing against it, but I'm not going back."

"Or farther out on Long Island."

The devil's choice. The Long Island Rail Road or the Long Island Expressway. I would rather be drowned in Asiago cheese.

"Or New Jersey," I said.

She laughed. "Now you're being mean. Cut it out. We'll figure this out."

Real estate in Manhattan. The shared obsession that binds us all. I wondered if people in Hong Kong, or Singapore, or Paris spent as much time as New Yorkers did sharing horror stories of finding, maintaining, losing, or surviving in the quest for the perfect two-bedroom. They probably did, I thought. Paris, for sure.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s catch them up. I’ll buy you a frozen yogurt.” I signaled for the check.

“You sure know how to treat a girl,” she said.

-3-

When Virgil Becker's father ran his investment bank over the cliff, I was called upon to help his son pick up the pieces. Virgil now owed me large. The contract said he had to pay me whether I showed up or not, but I was old school. I showed up.

“What are you working on?” Virgil asked.

“Penny stock trading. There's a broker out in Stony Brook who's been putting his clients into some micro stocks. Compliance cleared it, but I didn't like the way it smelled. I did some looking into it, and now I think it stinks.”

“See Aimee when we're done. She can handle it.” He tapped a few keys on his computer. “I've got something else I want you to focus on.” The computer beeped at him – politely. “She's expecting you.”

“Listen, Virgil, this thing with the penny stocks could be toxic.”

He wasn't convinced. “How much money is involved?”

Commissions on the trades had run to just over two million dollars. I did some quick math. “Proceeds of around one hundred mil.”

He could tell that I wasn't being entirely forthright. “How badly did the account get burned?”

That was the oddest thing about the trades – the clients were making money. “It's complicated.”

“What’s the hit?”

“Actually, they’re up around ten percent. Two years running.”

“Well, that’s intriguing.” His delivery was deadpan.

Penny stocks did not produce steady returns. Each one was like a lottery ticket. And they paid off a lot less frequently.

“I know,” I said, “it sounds like I’m chasing moonbeams.” I took out my cell phone and opened the file of photos. “But take a look at this before you make any quick decisions.” I quickly scanned through the shots I had taken of the trucks, looking for one that might best sell my point. One dark, hurried, often blurred picture after another. Either the flash had not gone off, or when it had, the resulting image showed nothing but starbursts of reflected light. If you squinted and used your imagination, you could see that they were pictures of trucks. They could also have been outtakes from some moody noir movie filmed at night in downtown Detroit. “Never mind,” I finished lamely. I vowed to look up how long I had before I could get a cellphone upgrade.

“Hand it over to Aimee.” It was an order, but he said it kindly.

“Aye, aye.” Aimee Devane was head of Compliance for Becker Financial. We did not always play well together. She tended to treat me like the pet cobra – I was convenient for getting rid of rats and mice, but she would have preferred a cat.

“Now do I have your complete attention?” Virgil said it with a smile, but with just a bare hint of impatience.

“I’m with you,” I said. “What do you need?”

He checked his watch. "I have just a few minutes to bring you up to speed, then I have another meeting."

"Sorry. The holdup is my fault."

He waved a hand to change the subject. "You've no doubt heard the rumor going around that the firm is in play."

I had not heard it, but then I was not a welcome member of the rumor circuit. Conversations tended to stop mid-sentence as I approached. My nickname on the trading floor was Darth Vader.

"Who's the buyer?" I asked.

"That's why I need you. Whoever it is, they are being very careful not to reveal themselves. Large blocks of shares trade, but the buyer is always a cloaked account. Offshore, or in the name of a trust or a law firm."

There would be willing sellers out there, too. When the father's firm was broken up and Virgil took the reins of the remaining brokerage and investment banking businesses, many of the creditors and investors who had been scammed out of their savings by the father, received shares in the new firm as partial compensation. Now that Virgil had turned the place around and made it a viable business, the stock price had recovered substantially. Those who had held on through the whole maelstrom were now being rewarded for their patience, having been made whole, or almost so, by the rebound. It was found money.

"No one's approached you?" I asked.

“Not exactly. I had a rather clandestine meeting with a lawyer who claims to represent a consortium of buyers. I said I wasn’t interested in selling, but I’m always willing to listen. I suggested we have our bankers sit in on the next meeting.”

“What’d he say?”

“It spooked him. ‘No bankers,’ he said. This is a private matter.’ It was the strangest pitch I’ve ever heard of. We were having dinner in a private room at the Waldorf, and he stood up and walked out between the salad and the entrée.”

“How much does the family own?”

Virgil’s family made the Borgias look normal. His older brother James, known by his friends and enemies as Binks, had become a permanent resident in a rehab facility out in Sedona, Arizona, where it was easier to keep his heroin habit in check; their sister, Morgan, was serving time in a minimum security facility in Rhode Island. The youngest brother, Wyatt, was an Aspy with limited interests. He lived with his mother on the family estate in Newport. The mother was a powerful and protective New England matriarch whose main caloric intake was high-end vodka.

“Like most of the top employees, I own some shares. Ninety percent of my pay is in stock. A much bigger block sits in a trust. Mother is the trustee – she set it up after putting up a sizable portion of the cash I needed to get the firm up and running again. The beneficiaries of the trust are the four siblings. The trustee votes the shares. There may be ways around the restrictions that I don’t know. All told, however, it comes to less than a third of the outstanding float. Anyone making a play could end-run all of us, if they had enough capital.”

“It would be a lot easier if they had one or more of you on their side.”

“If it’s family, that makes it...” He paused searching for the right word.

“Complicated?” I said.

“Venomous,” he replied.