

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Harry Dobbs sits alone in a booth at The Pebble Bar, a sports bar he has gotten to know pretty well in the seventeen days since he was placed on suspension for sexual harassment. Come to think of it, he had gotten to know it pretty well before the suspension. His favorite haunts are Downtown Social in the East Village and Three Sheets down by Washington Square Park. He knows them all, and they all know him. He is the reporter from UNN who drinks martinis and tequila shots and tips well. Now he lifts the martini glass as if making a toast.

“To me, myself and I. Employee of the month.”

He sips.

It was alcohol that had inspired him to declare his love for the twenty-something intern with the perfect skin and the glasses and the full figure. If only he hadn't groped her during the Reality Check holiday party with a half dozen people watching him and calling for him to stop.

His suspension isn't really about his hands caressing the ass of a young woman. He had explained it to the bartender at Three Sheets a couple of nights ago.

“Gentlemen, I am a victim of abuse by someone in a position of power over me. His name is Jose Cuervo.”

The line had gotten a big laugh from the bartender and a half-dozen well-lubricated listeners, so Dobbs had carried on without missing a beat.

“They couldn’t prove anything about my love for libations, and, of course, I denied it. So, instead, they suspended me for actions that had plenty of witnesses: my caressing the damsel in distress with whom, at that particular moment, I was deeply in love.”

The bartender had played the straight man.

“Really? In love?”

“Yes, a quite lovely young lady. I forget her name.”

More laughter.

He had entertained his small audience for most of the evening and by morning regretted every word that emerged from his loose lips. If news of his suspension appears in a news report on a rival network, his career will be over.

Tonight is different, however. He drinks alone. The staff had let him watch the news on the screen near his booth and the reports had made him angry and depressed. He drains what is left of his martini and places the empty glass on the table next to another empty glass. He waves over the server and orders.

“Let’s follow that up with a shot of Don Julio.”

The waitress withdraws and after a moment the bartender appears and stands looking down at him.

“Harry, you said when you came in to cut you off after two drinks.”

“My dear man. I was in an AA meeting earlier this evening and they tricked me into believing I could not stop after two, or even after one. Well, let’s prove them wrong, shall we? Let’s have a third and then stop.”

The bartender just looks at him.

It amuses Dobbs to try to sound English, like Peter O'Toole in *My Favorite Year*, the charming and heroic drunk, and he is making a half-hearted attempt at the impression as he stands and pulls three twenties from his wallet with a flourish and places them on the table.

"I have managed to fuck myself in my own ass, haven't I," announces Dobbs.

"Have a good evening, sir," says the bartender as he collects the money and clears away the glasses.

Dobbs is able to take it all in stride, to walk out of the bar with only a light buzz, because he knows he has a bottle in the trunk of his car parked across the street. He waves his arms in farewell like Nixon boarding the chopper after leaving office.

He bumps past a man coming in and steps out into the cool night air. He had driven into the city from his home in Scarsdale thinking that having a car meant he would have to stay sober enough to drive home. His thinking now is that he will open the trunk of his black Jaguar and take one good long swig of Don Julio to keep himself warm on his journey home.

"I should be okay," he whispers to himself.

A few seconds later he uses his key fob to pop open the trunk lid and steps in to reach for the paper sack. At that moment his cell phone rings, and he pulls it from his pants pocket. The screen is dark. No, the ringing is coming from his jacket pocket. What the hell? He reaches in and pulls out a mysterious cell phone he has never seen before.

"My oh my. Look at this. What good fortune awaits me?"

The screen indicates unknown caller. He shrugs and answers the call.

“Hello, friend,” says Dobbs. “You have reached a number that is no longer in service at this time.”

A man’s voice comes on the line.

“A ringing cell phone appearing out of nowhere will get you sober pretty quickly I imagine.”

“I suppose you’re right. But sobriety is not on the menu this evening. I’m so sorry.”

“Did you watch the news tonight?”

The question surprises Dobbs.

“Yes, I did. Wasn’t it grand? Thank you for asking. Who is this?”

“The story about the innocent man being released down in Florida. That was a good one. Jack Logan was responsible. He must be Canfield’s favorite ever since Richard North almost got set on fire and decided to retire. The other stories were pretty good too. Too bad your byline was absent.”

Dobbs stands up straighter and lowers the trunk lid a few inches. He waits a moment for the cobwebs in his brain to clear, then he looks around. There is the usual traffic and tourists and shoppers buzzing about. The mention of Jack Logan means this must be a person with inside information. It has been several weeks since Richard North was attacked and his wife killed, and Jack has kept a low profile.

As if reading his mind, the voice goes on.

“Yes, Mr. Dobbs. I have access. For example, I know that you have been suspended from your producer role at UNN.”

Dobbs' carefree swashbuckler persona has completely evaporated, replaced by fear and anger

"That's a false rumor. I'm taking some vacation days right now."

"I even know about your daughter and her trouble at school. Who knew Yale was such a tough place?"

It's as if Dobbs has been punched in the gut. He steadies himself on the car's fender and struggles to catch his breath. No one knows about his daughter, not even the police. She has been insistent that the attack be kept secret.

"Listen to me you asshole --."

"No worries, my friend. Her secret is safe with me. I promise."

"How could you possibly know?"

"The how should not concern you, Mr. Dobbs. You're a reporter, and you live and die by access to information. I have information. Information you have been cleared to receive."

"Who are you?"

"That will remain a secret. But there are other secrets I am willing to bring out into the light of day. Secrets that you will transform into news stories. Bombshells. Isn't that the word you people use? I have a bombshell or two in mind for you. The first one you can have tonight. It will revive your career all by itself. Do you know what Alex Canfield will say if you take this first story to him?"

"What will he say?"

“What do you want him to say?”

Dobbs thinks about it.

“How about you’re back on the job.”

“You and I are on the same wavelength, Mr. Dobbs. If you say yes to my proposition, three things will happen. Your suspension will be forgotten. Jack Logan will take up residence in your shadow. And you will contend for a Pulitzer. Are you ready to listen to my proposition?”

Dobbs closes the trunk of his car and leans against it.

“I’m listening.”

“Take a seat in the car first. Don’t drive just yet. Sit down and get comfortable.”

Dobbs looks around at the busy street, trying to see a man looking at him, a man holding a cell phone. He sees nothing of the sort. He clumsily opens the driver’s door and, once seated with the door closed, he raises the phone to his ear.

“I’m listening.”

“There’s a man sitting in a car across from your lovely home in Scarsdale. If you say yes, he will put a package in your mailbox before you get home. It contains what you will need to start developing the story. We ask that you do some legwork to make it look like you developed it on your own. You cannot attribute this story to a voice on the phone or a package in your mailbox. Do you understand?”

“Yes. What’s the story about?”

“You’ve reported on Syria? Aleppo?”

“I was a reporter on the ground in Aleppo, yes.”

“You’re a Syria expert.”

“I suppose.”

“It’s about something that happened there. Make sure it gets on the network news before one week from today. You and Canfield can run the news magazine version on your show later on.”

“I can’t control what the news editors choose to run.”

“Mr. Dobbs, when they see what you have, what I’m going to give you, you can control whatever you like.”

“What happened in Aleppo?”

“If you say yes, you’ll find out when you get home. Let it suffice to say it’s the story of a government failing its job and a private person stepping in and doing what had to be done.”

“That’s a little vague.”

“Do you want the story or not? Yes or no.”

Dobbs doesn’t think about it for very long. What does he have to lose?

“Yes.”

“Of course, you say yes. Why not, right? But before you give your final answer, let me be clear. We want to be your friend. But if you say yes and then don’t follow our instructions, perhaps you tell someone about this conversation or about the package in your mailbox, then you will no longer have a friend. You will have an enemy, Mr. Dobbs. An enemy who knows

things.”

Dobbs is completely sober now, and he considers the threat while the voice on the phone waits, giving him time to think. Finally, the voice breaks the silence.

“Are we friends, Mr. Dobbs? Amigos?”

Dobbs takes in a deep breath and lets it out. He starts the car. He clears his throat.

“Amigos. Si. Amigos.”

