



Don Pendleton Copp On Ice

A Joe Copp Thriller

By The Creator of The Executioner Series



COPP ON ICE

Don Pendleton

**A Joe Copp, Private Eye Novel
by the creator of
The Executioner: Mack Bolan Series**

Reviews of Don Pendleton's Joe Copp, Private Eye Series

Kirkus Reviews: "Pendleton is the master."

Publishers Weekly: "Reads like an express train...a throwback to the vintage Spillane years...Pendleton knows how to keep us turning pages."

St. Petersburg Times: "Pendleton has a great new character in Copp. His style is fresh, the pace brisk, and there are enough twists to please any mystery fan."

Library Journal: "Pendleton, author of the long-running paperback Executioner series, shows his first hardcover that hardboiled writing can be insightful as well as action-packed."

Milwaukee Sentinel: "Pendleton is a master of action and dialog and 'Copp' is a taut detective story."

Booklist: "Action filled...Copp is a likable tough guy...An exciting, satisfying read."

Flint Journal: "Pendleton proves again he is the equal of Mickey Spillane when it comes to the hard-boiled mystery."

ALA Booklist: "This is the real thing, the hardcover debut of the author of the perennially popular 'Executioner series'...the charm of the Executioner books."

Books by Don Pendleton

Fiction

The Executioner, Mack Bolan Series

The Joe Copp Mystery Series

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Nonfiction Books by Don and Linda Pendleton

To Dance With Angels

Whispers From the Soul

The Metaphysics of the Novel

The Cosmic Breath

Copp on Ice

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First Kindle Edition, February 2010.

ISBN: 1-55611-235-1

Donald I. Fine, Inc. First Printing Hardcover, 1991.

First HarperPaperbacks printing: August 1992

BackinPrint/iUniverse Edition, 2000.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Linda Pendleton and Judy Bullard

For Jay and Lillie, who know how to take charge and are doing so. Keep on.
dp

"They who are of the opinion that Money will do everything, may very well be suspected to do everything for Money."

—George Savile, Marquess of Halifax

"I regard sex as the central problem of life."

—Havelock Ellis, Psychologist

"If it were not for money and sex, we would not need cops."

—Joe Copp, American Private Investigator

COPP ON ICE

CHAPTER ONE

She was very pretty, with long golden hair and a dazzling smile, tall—about five-ten—beautifully tanned and outfitted in a tight denim skirt and silken blouse unbuttoned to an enticingly shimmering décolletage—very graceful in her movements. I figured "dancer or athlete" in my instant appraisal. It was my business to appraise people, all kinds of people—not just beautiful women—so it's like a conditioned response for me to get a size on people in that first look. Not that I'm always right, but usually close enough.

I did not have this one sized, however, in the Most Important Perspective. That MIP tries to differentiate between friend and foe, danger and pleasure, truth and fiction. I saw only a very attractive woman—maybe a dancer or athlete—approaching with a dazzling smile as I wrestled a few sacks of groceries into my car outside the supermarket. It seemed that she intended to accost me. I admit that I am readily accostable in such circumstances, especially so in the warm sunlight of a beautiful day at a peaceful shopping center, and of course I had no idea...

"Aren't you Joe Copp?" she asked me in an interestingly accosting voice from about two paces out.

I have never tried to deny it. But then I am also no celebrity. I was doing a quick scan of memories and finding nothing familiar there as I closed the car door and turned to meet that greeting. "That's me. Have we met, I hope?"

Her smile instantly lost its dazzle then vanished completely. Out of the corner of an eye I saw a car moving slowly toward me along the traffic lane in a way that definitely registered a negative on my MIP scale while the blonde assaulted it from the front. She ripped her blouse open with a quick jerk that sent suddenly unfettered boobs into a freedom dance, let out a shriek, and flung herself onto me. Hell, I was trying to push her away but it must have looked like just the opposite—and, of course, that was the intention.

This is a very popular shopping center. There were people all around. I'm surprised I didn't get mobbed, then and there. Maybe I would have, because I couldn't get her off and she was raising a hell of a ruckus. I'm thinking, "Jesus ..." when this car swerves in alongside and two big guys jump out. They're cops, I know they're cops because I've been a cop all my life and I know a cop when I see one no matter how he's dressed. I'm trying to tell them that the thing is not the way it looks—will they please take this crazy woman off me? But they just put me in an armlock while the blonde is still trying to knee me. Next thing I know, I'm in handcuffs and being stuffed into the back seat of their car while one of the cops is talking to the woman. A crowd has gathered and I am getting curious looks from every quarter.

There is not time for much of that, though, because very quickly—entirely too quickly—both cops are in the car and we are driving away.

I knew already—or suspected very strongly—that it was a setup. I was being hustled. But why? The guy at the wheel kept giving me glances through the rearview mirror. The other sat sideways in the front seat and kept me fixed with a hard stare. I didn't intend to play that game. After a couple of blocks, I said, "Police station's the other way, guys."

"Shut up," said Sidewise.

"Get screwed," I said back. "You've no intention of booking me so let's get it settled quick. A gallon of ice cream is melting on my groceries. So give me the message while you're taking me back to my car."

The driver swerved abruptly toward the curb, stopped the car, swiveled about to give me a long hard stare before telling me, "You'll fucking walk back to your car, asshole. This's no taxi service."

"Maybe you'd better tell me what it is, then."

His partner showed me a thin smile, said, "Maybe we'd better take you out to the gravel pit and teach you some humility."

These are both big guys. I'm six-three and way beyond two hundred pounds, but these guys were bigger. Of course, size advantage is mainly in the mind. My Judo master is roughly the height and weight of an average American ten-year-old, he's seventy-five years old, and he'd already taught me a lot of humility.

"I'm humble enough," I told these guys. "Forget the gravel pit. The point is made. I'm vulnerable. Any one of you guys can get my license any time you want it. I understand. So who's mad at me now?"

The guy at the wheel smiled suddenly and told me, "Nothing personal, Joe. Hey, we respect you. That's the whole point. We respect you enough to tell you in advance, see. There's enough trouble in Brighton already. A celebrity-type P.I. nosing around will just muck things up even worse."

I'd been called many different kinds of private cop but never that one. I said, "Thanks for the casting but we're a long way from Brighton right now and I probably don't see the town twice a year. So thanks. I can safely assure you that I will not be nosing around any time soon."

"That's good, because if we were in Brighton right now you'd be on your way to the dungeon right now. Anything can happen to a guy, any time. Right? Like right out in front of the grocery store. Never know. It sometimes comes from nowhere. Blam! You're in the pokey. Never knew what hit you."

I tried to smile as I replied, "Two big shiny jugs hit me, pal. Give the lady my regards. Where does she work? Maybe I'd like to see more of what she's got."

"Nah, you wouldn't. Lila wears handcuffs on her belt and a sap in her panties."

"So you're telling me where she works. Same place you work."

"Sidewise" produced an ID and held it up for my inspection. Brighton Police Department. "We're just trying to take care of business, Joe. You know the routine. Just don't get caught up in it."

I said, "Yeah ... you do have problems in Brighton."

So they did. Hardly anyone living in Southern California could have escaped notice of the something new in the press almost daily for months. Mayor murdered with a prostitute in a sleazy motel. Chief of Police fired amid rumors of rampant corruption in his department. City Attorney resigned. City Administrator resigned, recall petitions being circulated to remove councilmen. Political turmoil in every area of city government—it had been a mess for a long time. It's one of the old foothills cities at the eastern edge of the Los Angeles basin, sleepy little village for most of its life before the population boom sent the big city developers scurrying for virgin lands to convert into housing tracts. Now even these relatively remote areas are bursting at the seams and struggling for stability in the face of continuing pressures for further development. When I first came south a mere ten years ago, Brighton had a population of about thirty thousand. Now it's close to a hundred thousand. And, yeah, hurting.

I told my new pals from Brighton, "I have no clients in your town. So I don't know why you guys drove all the way over here to tell me your troubles. Not that I don't sympathize. I simply have no interest there. So . . . my ice cream."

"Can't do that yet," Sidewise told me.

"When can you?"

~~"When you tell us who your client is."~~

I tried to spread my hands in a gesture of innocence, and was reminded that they were still cuffed behind me. "I'm working two cases right now," I confided. "One is for a public defender in Pomona who thinks his client is innocent on a drugs-related murder charge and hopes I can produce evidence that he is. He's guilty as sin but you guys would have no interest. The other case is an insurance scam with nothing to do with the problems in Brighton. Now can we rescue my groceries?"

"Why are you lying to us, Joe?" asked the guy at the wheel, in a friendly tone. "We know you've been retained. Our information is solid. So why are you treating us this way?"

"Maybe it's these cuffs," I replied in the same friendly tone. "I don't think well with my hands behind my back."

"Oh, shit!" Sidewise exclaimed. "Forgot all about that!" He slid outside, opened my door and pulled me out, spun me around and pushed my head onto the roof, took off the cuffs, hit me in the small of the back with a knee and took me in a choke-hold, spun me out onto the sidewalk and kicked me in the side as I was going down.

He was back inside the car and it was moving away before I raised my head off the cement.

I wasn't mad. I was thankful that it came out so easy. Had a couple of sore spots and a somewhat shaken sense of dignity, but all in all... not so bad, not so mad.

The mad would come later, after I'd had awhile to think about it.

I hoofed it on back to the supermarket, got in my car, and got the hell away from there. I live only five minutes away, in the hills overlooking the urban sprawl known as the San Gabriel and Pomona valleys, east of Los Angeles. Brighton is about twenty minutes farther east, toward San Bernardino. I really had no interest in that town, never had, never expected I would.

But now I did.

Those guys could not have done a better job if they'd been trying to lure me there. I may have told you that I've been a cop all my adult life. A public cop for more than fifteen years, with some damn big departments—San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Worked it all, did it all—traffic, burglary, vice, narcotics, homicide, SWAT—learned it all but never really got comfortable with the politics that go with it, finally decided to do my own thing my own way, went private, pick my own jobs now and make my own way. It's not always fun, not always challenging, and it's never

secure. But it's my life and I'm in charge of it, and I like it that way.

Never expected to be in charge of a department. The mere suggestion of any such possibility would be a laugh, for sure.

I had told those Brighton cops the truth. I had not been retained to do anything in or concerning their town. But they'd set me up for it, sensitized me to it. So when the new city administrator for Brighton called me at home that night and offered me the job, I took it without thinking twice.

Not a retainer, no. A job. He wanted me to take a temporary appointment as Chief of the Brighton Police Department.

I took it.

And then I laughed. Which shows how dumb I can be sometimes.

Chapter Two

Carl Garcia is a quality guy. We'd never been what you'd call friends, exactly—not in the sense of visiting in each other's homes or hitting the town together, hadn't been anything like that. But I guess we'd always liked and respected each other, and a friendship like that can sometimes be more compelling than the other kind.

We met in San Francisco while I was on the force there and he was a civilian police administrator. Within that year I was walking out the door and heading south in a graceful exit to join LAPD with my good record intact, thanks to a courageous stand by the good Garcia when all around him we were howling for my scalp. I think that cost him, though he never said anything about it, because he was out the door himself a few months later and working for one of the smaller Bay Area cities in a similar capacity. That usually means smaller pay—so, yeah, it cost him.

We hadn't actually made an effort to keep in touch across the years—wasn't that kind of friendship—but circumstances kept us crossing paths now and then during the course of business. He'd moved around some too. That can happen to a quality guy who won't play the games some would demand of him. Somewhere in those years he'd picked up a master's degree in government administration; last I heard of him, I was with L.A. County and he was City Manager for one of the inland Northern California towns. I sent announcements around to everyone I've ever known when I set up my own shop as a cop for hire, so of course I sent one to Garcia, too, but never knew if he'd received it because we'd been out of touch for a couple of years.

You can imagine my surprise, then, when Carl called me that Friday evening from the Brighton city hall and offered me a job. Temporary job, he hastened to point out, good for probably no more than seventy-two hours, or until the city council could bury their own differences long enough to get together and shoot down the appointment. And of course they would. Candidates for a job like this are screened very carefully, qualifications weighed and re-weighed, salaries negotiated and all that. They'd shoot it down.

But there was big trouble in Brighton, for sure. Carl had been hired by the council just a few days earlier. His predecessor had resigned at the height of a political firestorm which also took the police chiefs job, one week after the death of the city's mayor. I'd never known Carl Garcia to be afraid of anything but he sounded nervous and maybe even a bit scared. "I have to emphasize, Joe, that you'll be walking into a pressure cooker that no man in his right mind would want to contend with. And it could be dangerous. The whole thing here is thoroughly rotten. I'm actually afraid of the cops here, and I believe a couple of the councilmen are certifiably insane."

"Why hire me," I managed to ask, "when you know I'll be fired almost immediately?"

"Well, I guess you must know that I'll expect you to come over here and kick some asses in line in your usual direct approach to problem-solving. I—"

"You know that I've gone private."

"Yes. I received your announcement. Took awhile because you sent it to the wrong place. By the time it caught up with me it was too late to send congratulations, so what the hell, congratulations. I guess if that's the way you want it. I'm not asking you to give anything up. It's just that I can't call a private eye in here to kick ass in the police department—not as a private eye, that is. You've always been a lightning rod, Joe. I figure you'll draw enough lightning over the weekend to at least get a feeling for who can and cannot be trusted in this town. Just give me a handle, even a very short one."

"Who's running the department at the moment?"

"I am," he said ruefully.

"You don't have an acting chief?"

"They're all Indians here, Joe; no chiefs."

I didn't like the sound of that. "I couldn't go along with a sham appointment," I told him.

"Neither could I," Garcia assured me. "It's strictly legal. I get to run the city until the council unleashes veto power. They're so disorganized it will take them awhile to do that. If I want you to run the PD, then by God you'll run it your way until someone yanks both of us out. Will you do it?"

"You want me to kick ass."

"That's what I want, yes."

"Cops too."

"Cops especially."

"You sound worried."

"I am worried. There have been death threats, Joe."

"Against you?"

"Against my wife and kids. They're still up north and that makes it even worse. I haven't found a place to live down here yet, still in a hotel."

"Stash them."

"Right now?"

"Soon as you break this connection, yes. Put them into cool storage, right now. Tell no one where they're at, not even Grandma, and use a public phone to send them there. Once they're stashed, don't let them use a credit card or a telephone. They are to get cool and stay that way. Understand? Maybe it's an overreaction, and let's hope it is. But do it."

"Okay, yes, I'll do that. Does this mean you're taking the job?"

"That's what it means, yes. When do I start?"

"I was hoping you could come right now. The timing is important. I figure we need the weekend to sneak you in past the council."

I sighed, checked the clock, and told him, "Give me a couple of hours."

The relief was evident in his voice. "Right. I'll be waiting. Come straight to city hall, Chief."

After I hung up I sat there for a couple minutes, staring at the telephone. Chief, eh? It was a laugh. The rest was not. It all sounded a bit nutty and unbelievable, but I'd been hearing things out of Brighton and I knew it was all entirely ominous too. But I laughed anyway, remembering Sidewalk Taxidriver, and Lila Boobs.

It was worth a laugh, sure.

I could cry later. . . and I would.

Brighton sits low in the foothills with a view of Mt. Baldy and several other towering peaks of the San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains. In the winter, they're snowcapped peaks and nothing prettier. Rest of the time they just stand there shrugging off the desert heat and smog rising from below, sometimes shrouding themselves with cooling clouds when conditions are right—and sometimes the Santa Anas whistle down their slopes and scream through the canyons of the foothill communities like angry spirits from some long gone Indian tribe hoping to discourage the steady encroachment of the squatters filling the broad valleys and blotting out the hills, but nothing would discourage that except maybe a couple of well-timed 8.2 quakes arising from the numerous faults that crisscross the area.

The city was founded by agricultural pioneers before the turn of the century. They brought year-round water to the desert and transformed it into garden oases of citrus and avocado, date and olive and grape, built packing sheds and rail lines and roadways, tamed the wilderness and prepared it for the urban onslaught that would follow a hundred years later. Gone now are most of the crops, the

packing sheds, the farm laborers camps and most everything else related to agriculture, replaced by broad boulevards usually choked with endless streams of cars and trucks, square mile upon square mile of houses and apartments and restaurants and service stations, liquor stores and theaters, shopping malls to stupefy those early pioneers, and problems no suburban city ever thought it would have to face.

Ten years ago the Brighton Police Department numbered thirty sworn officers and four civilian employees. Police excitement in those days would involve little more than a fistfight in a local bar, fenderbender on Main street or a rowdy drunk beating up his wife. Today you can count nearly a hundred badges, a civilian bureaucracy almost as large as the sworn force ten years ago, and they deal routinely with gang drive-by shootings, armed robberies and burglaries, a homicide rate that has doubled in two years, drug dealers large and small, rapes and violence of every type, prostitution, sophisticated white-collar crimes and cons and swindles; name it, they got it at Brighton just as in any big city in the land, and all in a dizzying ten years.

What they did not have at Brighton at the time was an effective police department. What they had was a department in shambles, no clear direction, no morale, no faith in their ability to police the town. And of course it goes without saying, in such a situation, they had some *baaad* cops on the force. I could smell them all over the place, like stinking garbage that's hidden away and you can't see it but God you know it's around somewhere close.

I hit town about an hour before midnight, traveling light with only a suit bag and a few changes of underwear, and met briefly with Carl Garcia in his office. He swore me in, gave me my badge and gun, walked me over to the PD and introduced me to the watch captain, and then he left town for parts unannounced.

The captain's name was McGuire, they called him Pappy, and he clearly did not like me for some reason. Which was okay, I didn't like him either and it meant not a thing either way. He had twenty officers coming in for the graveyard shift and a few more than that going off; I ordered them all to stay put and told McGuire I wanted a general muster of every sworn badge within the hour, no exceptions except for those presently engaged in sensitive duty operations. He gave me a nasty look and I thought for a quick staredown minute there that he was going to disregard the order, but finally he blinked first and passed the command along to the dispatch office.

It was a modern, clean, and spacious building outfitted with all the latest technology. These cops obviously wanted for nothing that money could buy. They had a workout gym and a couple of handball courts, luxurious lounge, all the employee trappings of an enlightened and prosperous city. What had gone so sour?

My office was a marvel. The desk was as big as a double bed. Had a long leather couch, a little alcove with tables and four overstuffed chairs—a television and a VCR, for God's sake—even a full bath with glassed-in shower stall. A snazzy hi-tech communications unit was built flush into the desk; you could audit all the telephones from there and record conversations, patch in directly to the dispatcher's console and record there too. I'd never seen anything like it, certainly had not expected to see it in Brighton, of all places.

I decided I could live there, at least for the weekend, brought my stuff in from the car and set up my shop, then went out for a word or two with Pappy McGuire. He's a guy about forty, long and lean with frown wrinkles rumpling the forehead, all the negative elements of a cop's eyes—suspicion, fear, worry, hostility—you can't miss it and you can't overlook it.

He asked me right off the top, "You been certified by the research and academic council for this job?"

He was referring to a state organization that establishes training criteria and qualifications for police management positions as an aid to local governments. "Not lately," I replied. "You?"

"Two years ago. Why do they always want to go outside the department for a new chief? I'll have uproot if I want to go any higher in this line of work. Not that it wouldn't be better after a considering the loonies at this city hall."

"They didn't even appoint you Acting Chief," I said, watching for his reaction. "Why not?"

McGuire shrugged, picked at his nose, examined his fingernails. "They appointed nobody Acting Chief. It's been a revolving situation, with each Watch Commander as the badge in charge reporting directly to the City Administrator, except that we had no C.A. until your friend Garcia arrived. It's no job for a civilian, I guess even you know that. We figured Garcia to do something stupid. Looks like he's done it. Where'd you come in from? What's your background?"

"San Francisco," I replied casually. "LAPD, L.A. Sheriffs, cop for hire. What's yours?"

He gave me a startled look. "I've been here my whole career."

"That's steady," I said. "Or dumb. Which is it?"

"More and more I think it's dumb," McGuire told me quietly. He scratched his nose and gave me a direct stare as he asked, "How long d'you think you'll last?"

"Long enough," I replied, "to kick some butt. Do I need to start with yours?"

He looked away, inspected his fingers, replied in a muffled voice, "I doubt you'll last that long."

The place was beginning to fill up. A lot of disgruntled faces, some sleepy ones; it was midnight, time to talk to the troops.

Copp was in charge, yeah, but in charge of what?

Maybe he'd last the night.

Maybe not.

CHAPTER THREE

These were mostly young faces here, as you would expect of any department undergoing rapid growth, and the mix was pretty good with minorities reasonably represented, including eight female officers. They were crowded into the overflowing squad room which had seats for less than half of them, the others layered along the walls on three sides in disgruntled anticipation of the midnight meeting with their new chief. The brass were characteristically huddled in the front corner to the right of the podium, captains and lieutenants with folded arms and blank faces determined to reveal nothing of what was going on in the gray matter behind them.

I spotted Sidewise and Taxidriver in a solemn group along the wall about halfway to the rear. Lila Boobs was not there when I opened the meeting but came in about halfway through, taking an inconspicuous position at the rear. Our eyes met briefly across that charged atmosphere and I was pleased to note some discomfiture there. She'd done some thing to the long blonde hair to make it appear much shorter and she was now wearing designer jeans and an oversize sweatshirt but there was no problem with the recognition.

I hit that group with both barrels, mincing no words and making no bid for popularity, wanting to wake them all up with a figurative slap in the face and inviting an angered reaction. .. but I got none. "Your town," I told them, "has become the laughing stock of the entire state, your politicians lampooned regularly in the Los Angeles Times and your bureaucrats ridiculed in Sacramento. And you people. . . you call yourselves cops? Your streets are totally out of control. Your citizens are terrified. The common street wisdom throughout this valley is that crime pays and pays big inside the Brighton city limits. Nobody respects you. Nobody likes you. Nobody feels comfortable with you people on the streets—nobody but the hoods and punks. You terrorize your own citizens who are jaywalking or driving a bit too fast but look the other way when the gangs swagger through. Cops? You call yourselves cops? There's a hell of a difference, you know, between a cop and a mere neighborhood bully."

I didn't want to give any comfort to the idea that I would be around short-term. So I told them, "Maybe I'm here today and gone tomorrow, and that's okay, maybe that's the way I'd prefer it, but I was brought here to kick butt and I want you to know that I am going to kick butt until someone takes me out. Who knows how many of you will still be here when that happens, or how many of those who have their same rank? I didn't bring a broom with me, people. I brought a baton as big as a baseball bat, and I'm going to lay it against the head of any officer who makes me feel disgraced by this association."

I said a few other things, and I guess I scowled a lot and grimaced a lot—which didn't seem to matter much because

not many were meeting my gaze anyway—and I ended the "get acquainted" meeting by telling them: "I'll be calling you in one by one for personal talks over the next few days. Meanwhile my office is open at any time to any who would like to initiate that talk. Now get out of here and go take charge of your city, but not until I get to the door. Each of you is going to look me in the eye before you get out of here."

And each one did. I even got a few smiles and here and there an enthusiastic handshake. One of the female cops even flirted with me. Not Lila Boobs, though. Turns out she is Detective Delilah Turner, Vice Squad. She gave me a cool, level stare as we shook hands. I told her, "You look better with your hair down."

She murmured, "Sorry 'bout that. I'll explain later."

"Can hardly wait," I replied, and went on to the next in line.

The brass were the last to leave, the three captains and six lieutenants. They'd remained near the podium in a huddle with a dozen or so other guys, including Sidewise and Taxidriver, until the line of cops was nearly exhausted, then all straggled forward as a group with the brass bringing up the rear.

Taxidriver was Detective James Manning, Burglary Detail, and Sidewise identified himself as Sergeant Grover Peterson, Investigations Unit. Both were grinning, maybe a bit self-consciously, so I grinned too and told them, "Joke's on you boys."

"Guess it is," said Peterson. "Or maybe it's on all of us."

"No, I think it's on us," Manning said with a chuckle. "Ice cream get home okay?"

"Hardly a drip," I replied, and went on to the brass. I closed the door on those guys and gave them a private ripping, told them, "You guys have been here through all of it. What the hell's the story? How'd it get so bad so quick?"

McGuire turned away from that one but another captain who identified himself as Rog Williamson badmouthed me right back. "If all you know is what you've read in the papers, then you don't know a God damned thing," he told me, but the tone was mild enough. "Maybe you should reserve your criticism until you get on board and see the problems up close. Hell, anybody can shoot a rabbit with a shotgun."

"Bullshit," said the other captain, a guy named Ralston. "Chief Murray was removed because he was flat on his ass and couldn't find the ground with either hand. I support everything you said, Cops. But I can't support you. You're no chief of police and you never will be."

"Correction," I said quietly, happy to have the honest feedback. "I am the chief of this department and I'll stay the chief until it becomes a real department. Test that, and you'll be on the sidewalk outside on your own ass before anyone can notice you're gone. You guys can think whatever you want to think, but you damn sure better toe the mark and take everything I say as gospel until some other chief comes along, otherwise you won't be here to greet him."

I addressed my final remarks to the lieutenants: "You guys be ready to fill vacant spots upwards or downwards, in case anyone is still wondering who's in charge here. Copp is in charge. He's going to shake this department out and stand it on its feet within seventy-two hours, and he's starting the shake at the top. So get ready for it."

I walked out, leaving some very sober faces behind in the squad room. Those guys all had numbers, knew who I was and what I was about. And I could almost sympathize with them. I'd never risen above the rank of sergeant after fifteen years of public service, so who the hell was I to be reorganizing the entire police department of a midsize city? Worse than being a nobody, I was a failed cop in their eyes, a guy who could not or would not work within the system.

But, of course, that was the whole point of my being there. Carl Garcia knew my history, knew me well, knew me well enough to know that I had very little respect for the system that had produced this mess, well enough to know that I was not afraid of these guys or their system and that I would go straight for the jugular in dealing with the problems there.

I had a charter to kick ass.

That was exactly what I intended to do.

She was waiting for me outside my office, sprawled in a chair at my secretary's desk and nervously twirling a stray lock of hair. She stood up quickly at my approach and tried a smile that did not quite work, told me in a husky voice, "I feel like such a fool."

I opened the door to my private office and ushered her inside, went in behind her and closed the door, waited until she'd settled into a chair in front of the desk before I went around and took my own

chair. Hell, she was half a block away, on the other side of that massive desk, so I got up and went to the alcove, asked her, "Could you scare up some coffee?"

She murmured something and left with that same graceful stride I'd seen outside the supermarket earlier, returned a moment later with a steaming glass pot, took some cups off a sideboard in the alcove and poured the coffee.

"Sit down," I commanded gruffly.

She settled onto a chair at the opposite side of the alcove, tasted the brew, said, "Not bad for graveyard coffee."

"I always liked it the best," I told her. "Matter of fact, I always liked graveyard the best."

She wrinkled her nose in a smile that was genuine this time as she replied, "I have a hard time sleeping days."

"Me too. So I never slept much on graveyard."

We'd run quickly out of small talk. We stared at each other for a moment, then she said, "Uh. . . those guys recruited me for that little detail this afternoon under false pretenses. Said you were a smalltime private eye hired to poke around in the city's business. I—"

"Partly true. I am a private cop. But I have not been retained in that capacity."

She looked confused, but went on with her explanation. "Stings have become my specialty lately. Vice stings. We've been going for the Johns and seeing that their names are printed in the newspaper. Manning and Peterson approached me and asked for my help in setting up this private eye who has been hired to cause trouble for the department. Said they just wanted to roust the guy and give him some discouragement." She frowned. "I didn't much like the idea, but..."

"But you went along."

"I went along. I honestly believe that Manning and Peterson had been deceived too. They're good guys, good cops." She gave me an oblique smile. "Despite what you may have been led to believe, there are some good cops in this department."

I said, "Of course there are. Most are, I'd guess. The problem is at the top. Help me fix it?"

She squirmed briefly, replied, "I'd rather be a cheerleader than a player. I don't know from politics, I don't know the game. I just want to be a good cop."

"Good cops," I reminded her, "don't look the other way when shit is happening. They dispose of it. You can't do this job alone, Turner. Help me pick up the dog shit."

She stared gloomily into her coffee for a long moment then lifted troubled eyes to mine and said, "Okay. You can count on me. I'll do what I can. Just don't ask me to be a snitch, please. I have to work with these guys, maybe for the rest of my life. Don't ask me to..."

"I'm asking that you be a good cop. That's all. When you see shit going down ..."

She showed me a sober smile, finished the statement for me. "Pick it up."

"Right. And deposit it here, in this office."

Something passed in our locked gazes, I don't know what it was but it was nice, and it was warm, and I liked it. Detective Turner set her coffee down and stood up. "Thanks for not holding me out this afternoon against me."

"I like you better with your hair down," I told her. "And, uh, I didn't mind what you held me out against me."

She actually blushed, started to say something but changed her mind and went on out. I followed her to the door just to see that walk again, but immediately the walk became a run and I joined it.

Two loud gunshots had come from directly outside, and everyone in there was running toward the sound.

Someone yelled, "Call the paramedics!" just as I stepped outside. There was a lot of confusion

in the vehicle yard, uniformed cops milling about and a sergeant shouting orders.

~~Taxidriver and Sidewise were slumped in the same car they'd taken me for a ride in earlier.~~

Each had a bubbling bullet hole in the forehead.

Good cops? Maybe. Maybe not.

Dead cops, for sure.

The first bolt of lightning had struck already.

CHAPTER FOUR

The difference can be wafer thin between a good police department and a bad one, hardly noticeable at all from the outside because of the procedures and protocols that have evolved to produce the modern police machine. Even a terribly bad department can look like a good one if what you are looking at is the machine itself. If it's modern, it's a good machine.

This one was entirely modern, having been built almost entirely over the past decade with all the proper materials in place. It was not that these people did not know how to police; the problem was that they had lately lost the will to do so.

In the immediate aftermath of the execution-style slaying of two of its officers right outside its doors, this department at least momentarily regained that will, the machine hummed, and all the right things happened as if by magic. I was witness to admirable efficiency. The scene was secured, order restored and evidence preserved, the proper teams assembled and the investigation launched with a smoothness I'd ever seen anywhere—and yet this was a department in shock. You could see it in the faces and feel it in the surrounding atmosphere as trained responses took over to guide stunned officers in their duties.

All that should have been done was being done, and well. This is the way it works when it's working right; there is nothing for a chief to do when all the Indians are doing their parts. Police chiefs are largely administrators, which is largely why I'd never had any ambition to run a department. I'm a cop and I always loved the work itself, not the administration of it.

I'm trying to explain why I was not directly involved in the official investigation of the murders on my front porch. The machine was humming, and there is no place in the machine for an administrator. I could see that it was humming and that the best thing for me to do was to stand clear and let it hum. I'd sized it all up in a single look anyway. The victims had been among the last to leave the midnight meeting. They were not on duty, not even assigned to the same units. The car in which they'd died was the only unofficial vehicle in the yard. It was Taxidriver's personal car, registered to him. The key was in the ignition, engine idling in parking gear. Each victim had been shot once in the head at close range.

My personal, snap conclusion was that they had been waiting out there for a third party who someone familiar and trusted had approached and fired without warning. Their weapons were undisturbed in their holsters and one of the detectives had been smoking a cigarette when he died. I could leave it to the machine to develop all the hard facts and work out an official theory of the crimes. What was left for me were gut feelings and a personal theory which I had to deal with by myself and for myself.

Possibly those guys had died as a direct result of the little roust they'd pulled on me earlier that day. I felt that I had to look at it that way. The machine itself would be looking at the alternative explanations: grudge killing, random violence, whatever. I was not there to solve incidental crimes; I was there to discover why the city of Brighton was falling apart, what was wrong inside the police department, and who would have reason to try to intimidate the new city administrator.

I figured that the best way to accomplish my personal objectives would be to follow up on the anger arising from the hostile actions by and against the two dead detectives. Who'd sicced them on me? Why? And were the answers related to their own deaths?

So I followed Detective Turner when she left there that night. What the hell, why not? She was the only visible link I had, and there was no compelling reason whatever to believe anything she'd told me.

during that interview in my office moments before her erstwhile partners were gunned down in the very shadow of that office.

There was another thought too.

Maybe she was in danger herself.

She was an easy tail, driving a jeep-type vehicle with distinctive lights and high profile.

I was in the unmarked official car reserved for the chief and I kept well back, giving her plenty of play, secure in the idea that I could keep her in sight and well within closing range at that time of night without giving away the tail.

The older sections of Brighton have narrow, tree-lined streets with few thoroughfares and a stop sign at virtually every intersection, inspiring me to get almost too cute with

my footwork. I started turning off the track to run a parallel street every other block or so, pacing my speed to hers and checking her through the intersections from the parallel course—which was okay except that I was not that familiar with the territory and we hit the big east-west boulevard. Foothill, which marks the beginning of the spread of the city into the higher elevations, while I was running parallel.

The street plan changes at that point so I could have lost her if she'd squirted across Foothill and into the maze of new development. The intersections up there are sometimes half a mile apart and separated by intricate patterns of odd-shaped subdivisions with circular streets and cul-de-sacs narrow enough to drive you batty; you don't want to venture into those areas at night without a guide.

I got lucky. She'd pulled into a donut shop on Foothill. A police cruiser was parked there also, two uniformed officers were seated inside, and Turner was standing at the table conversing with them when I eased past.

I went on down to a 7-Eleven just beyond the donut shop and waited for her there. It was a short wait, only a couple of minutes, then she barreled east right past me along Foothill. Even at that time of night the traffic along that boulevard is respectable, which made it easier to tag closer to the jeep without fear of discovery.

Used to be, back before the freeways were built, that section of Foothill was the famous Route 60 immortalized in song, the main passage in and out of Los Angeles for folks back east wherever. Still has a few small motels and eateries but mostly now the old boulevard has been caught up in the development fever and offers an almost endless array of upscale shopping centers and other commercial establishments, glitzy restaurants, fast food joints, service

stations and all the other requirements of a bustling population center.

Generally, the homes above Foothill are priced in the three to four hundred thousand dollar range; those south of the boulevard beginning to age and give way to apartment complexes and other lower range alternatives which tend to present the larger police problem for such a city.

Brighton even has its own version of the barrio. It also has a redlight district, drive-by shootings—mostly the result of gang activity—and an adjacent unincorporated section where anything goes and usually does.

To the people located north of Foothill, though, all of that is out of sight and largely out of mind, and north is where most of the people and practically all of the influential people of Brighton live. A three hundred thousand dollar home can be hard to swing on a cop's salary, so I doubt that many of the cops in this town live north; I suspect that most of them live somewhere outside of Brighton.

I had no idea where Turner was leading me, of course, but I'd assumed that she was headed homeward and I wanted a look at where she lived and how she lived, so I was a bit surprised when she eventually swung north and began climbing into a ritzy area above Foothill. But now I had to lay back a bit too much and play games with my headlamps, and I could not always keep her insight in the tumble

hills, curves, and switchbacks. Finally I lost her entirely, had to rely on my prowling instincts, four her car five minutes later tucked onto a hillside drive below a veritable mansion.

Forget three or four hundred thousand; this one was a cool mil at market bottom, and it was blazing with lights at two a.m. I knew she could not live there, unless Daddy was a millionaire. Looked like three levels of mostly glass front, overlooking the valley like some baronial estate, walled grounds with security decals on the gates and conspicuous Guard Dog warning signs. I jotted the address and cruised on by, parked around the next curve and hiked back for a closer look.

The jeep was parked outside the gates. There was also a pedestrian gate equipped with a CCTV Intercom device. I kept out of camera range, couldn't see anything anyway. Wondered, too, about the Guard Dog. Not for long. Didn't see him but heard his presence just beyond the gate, a deepthroat growling, then heard a handler shushing him.

I went on back to my car, turned around and re-parked where I could keep the driveway in view. I waited. Again, not long. I'd been on the scene for about ten minutes when three quick gunshots broke the peace up there. Sounded like a handgun and almost certainly on the grounds, not within the mansion.

Before I could react, the jeep backed out of the drive and headed down the hill with its lights off. I went after it, heard yelling and cussing followed immediately by alarm sirens as I passed the driveway, turned on my headlamps then and tried to close on the jeep.

Didn't even find the jeep.

A police cruiser tore past me wailing and flashing as I approached the boulevard. Quick response. Turned on my radio, then, and tried to catch the play but there was no play. So I picked up the mike and checked in. "This is Copp. What's the play above Foothill?"

A female dispatcher responded, "Gunfire report, Chief, Ellenmount area. I've dispatched a patrol unit to check it out."

"Back 'em up," I ordered. "The disturbance is at 726 Craggy Lane."

"Got that," responded a cool male voice. "Unit four- oh-one responding."

"Beware of guard dog," I told him.

"Ten-four."

I waited while another unit was dispatched to the scene, then I requested a spot on the jeep and gave the license number. The dispatcher replied, "That's, uh, a restricted."

I said, "Right. I just want a location spot."

Another car checked in: "She just passed me on Montezuma, headed into Helltown."

"Helltown?"

"Zone Four." the dispatcher explained.

Zone Four or Forty made no difference to me, I was a stranger in town, but you have to be careful what you say on a police radio these days. Anyway, I could guess about Helltown—a place where anything goes, and usually does, a place outside the jurisdiction of the Brighton PD.

I could leave it to the police machine to determine who had shot at what, and why. I wanted to know why Lila Boobs had run from that shooting and gone from the sublime to the ridiculous—the mountainside to the cesspool.

So I went to Helltown too.

CHAPTER FIVE

A city, you know, is legally defined by its geographical boundaries as a political subdivision of a county, and a county is usually regarded as a political entity that is composed of cities, towns, villages, and rural areas. The latter distinction does not always hold true, of course. The county of San Francisco, for example, contains nothing whatever outside the city of San Francisco. Some years back the city of Indianapolis extended its political boundaries to include the entire county of Marion and the two governments merged to form a single entity.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area involves more than thirteen million residents, no less than fifty counties, and hundreds of cities. I meet people all the time who do not know which county they live in and there are even those who are confused about which city they live in. Some do not even live within a city and are not aware of that. There is a blending and homogeneity within this area that blurs political distinctions for those who are not politically minded, as well as for some who are very much so.

You can live in a highly developed section of Glendora, for example, that is almost indistinguishable from most other neighborhoods in that city—and your neighbor across the street in the same neighborhood as you but he lives in Azusa, and most of the neighborhoods in Azusa are virtually indistinguishable from yours. You'll find in both towns the same names for theaters, supermarkets, drugstores, department stores, restaurants, and what have you. You will even find common streets which move serenely from city to city without changing names.

Start in Azusa on Foothill Boulevard and drive east to San Bernardino—a distance of some thirty-five miles—and you will pass through the cities of Glendora, San Dimas, La Verne, Pomona, Claremont, Upland, Rancho Cucamonga, Fontana and Rialto as well as Brighton without ever touching a rural area and with virtually the same street scene from beginning to end.

But you have passed through a lot of police jurisdictions and you have briefly encountered several unincorporated zones between cities, some in Los Angeles County and some in San Bernardino County. The unincorporated zones are policed—well, sort of—by the respective county sheriff's departments.

"Helltown" is one such zone, and it represents the worse result of conflicting political and jurisdictional responsibilities. None of the neighboring cities want any piece of Helltown, and of course Helltown does not desire any notice by those cities. There are no zoning or development restrictions, no police presence of any consequence, and of course no local government interference whatever. You can drive through Helltown in twenty seconds flat—it's just a narrow strip of boulevard separating two cities—or you could get stuck there for the rest of your life, which can be very short on that strip.

I'd never worked in this area—L.A. County ends at Claremont, a few miles west—but I'd spent of my duty time there now and then just to catch the color. There's plenty of color, if you don't care what you catch. It's a tumble of sleazy, room-by-the-hour motels, porno shops, saloons, nudie dives and liquor stores—yet the briskest business going down at any time of night or day is along the curbs and sidewalks where you can catch anything from rock cocaine to AIDS and syphilis without even getting out of your car.

All I wanted to catch, this time, was a gorgeous female vice cop who'd helped set me up for a fall even before I knew what I was falling into. And I caught her there, yeah, all the while wishing that I had not.

I looked for the jeep and found her in a joint calling itself The Dee-light Zone, a whiskey and pizza emporium featuring topless (and largely bottomless) waitresses and two naked girls in a cage suspended above the bar who, one would have thought, were crazy in love with each other. I wondered how boring it must get for those kids to stand there and paw each other all night long, but they didn't seem to have reached that point yet.

There were other cages to the rear, bathed in flickering blue light and offering opportunities for patrons who could afford it and loved to be teased to "Cage Up" with a naked kid of their choice—the sex is facsimile rather than the real thing, but for some I guess it's sex enough for the moment. Joint like these learned long ago that they're better off policing themselves. House rules are usually strict en-

forced by brawny bouncers with ever-watchful eyes and eager instincts, so the action usually stays within the legal limit.

Things were winding down in The Dee-light Zone when I got there, thanks to the two o'clock liquor curfew. Not even a joint like this one—especially a joint like this one—is willing to flout the liquor laws—because a suspended license is the quickest way to shut them down. So they typically announce a "last call" at the bar at about one-thirty. You can stack your drinks then if you want but it all has to be down the gullet by two, at which time all unfinished drinks are whisked away and you are stuck with non-alcoholic beverages and whatever food may be available, if the house remains open. The house never closed, it just shifted gears a bit during the dry hours.

So the bar was dry when I got there but the pizzas were still coming out of the kitchen. There was a sign behind the bar promising "Breakfast From 4 a.m." for the all-nighters and/or early risers, but no booze between two and six.

Place was still about half full, thirty to forty patrons, probably almost that many employees if you count bouncers and all. Seemed to be a hangout of sorts, much talk back and forth between tables though everyone knew everyone else, and certainly the technically naked waitresses seemed at home and comfortable with the patrons, making a lot of eye and body contact whenever circumstances allowed.

Detective Turner sat in a booth along the back wall with a man of about fifty. Solid looking guy, casually dressed but very neat. They were sipping coffees and the conversation was very sober. I grabbed a chair and placed it at the end of their table, sat down with a smile, said, "Got here as fast I could."

I could read nothing in Turner's face—not surprise, not joy, not sorrow, not anything. She was a total blank. The guy looked from her to me, put a spoon in his coffee and stirred it as he asked, "What the hell are you?"

"Here, I'm nobody," I replied, still smiling. "Two blocks west I'm the chief of police."

He spilled it in two soft words, delivered without feeling: "Joe Copp."

"That's the one. Which one are you?"

He was a blank too. "I'm Tim Murray."

"Ex-chief of police," I acknowledged quietly, hoping my surprise wasn't showing.

He replied, "That's the one."

I looked at Turner. "That was a quick run from Craggy Lane."

I got a flare there. A nostril quivered as she replied, "What were you doing on Craggy Lane, Chief?"

"Keeping an eye on you," I told her soberly.

Another flare. "You were behind me?"

"All the way up, all the way down—yeah. Who fired those shots?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"Self-defense. I warned them, tie the dog or he's a dead dog."

"You were there in an official capacity?"

Thoughtful pause, then: "No."

"Want to tell me about it?"

"No."

I looked at Murray. "Do you know what we're talking about?"

He replied, "Craggy Lane, I'd say Harold Schwartz- man's place." He smiled faintly at Turner.

"You shot one of his Dobermans?"

She shrugged.

I asked Murray, "Who is Schwartzman?"

"Very rich man. Owns maybe half of Helltown. Owns this place. Owns me too, now, I guess. run this place for him."

"Why?"

"Man has to eat, pay his bills. I didn't even get severance, not anything. Looks like I'll have some legal expenses coming up somewhere down the line. Couple of councilmen want blood from me."

"How much blood?"

"Enough that I'll need a damned good lawyer. Know one?"

"Don't you?"

He smiled, shook his head. "City Attorney always advised me."

"I hear he resigned. Over this?"

The ex-chief nodded. "A certain member of the council demanded that he bring criminal charges. City Attorney knew it was nothing but a vendetta. But the pressure was on, and he refused to go along with it."

"Why the vendetta?"

"Couple of my officers busted this councilman's spoiled brat last year. Kid was dealing crack and dust in the high school. Father appealed to me, wanted us to look the other way. Couldn't do that. Got 'im off anyway. Bought himself a judge, I suspect."

"Which councilman is this?"

Murray sighed, played with his coffee, replied, "Look it up. You'll hear other things too. Don't believe it all. How long d'you think you'll last at that desk?"

"No longer than Monday," I admitted.

"Uh huh. So why'd you come?"

"I was asked to come."

"I'm asked to do lots of things. Doesn't mean I have to do them. Why'd you come?"

I showed him a faint smile. "Maybe I'm old-fashioned."

"That's what I figured. I've heard about you, Joe. Maybe too much. And maybe it's not all true. If I was you, I wouldn't wait 'til Monday."

"If I was you," I countered, "I wouldn't be running a dive in Helltown."

"Well... wait and see where you land, then make those decisions. I have kids in college. I have a mortgage, too damned many credit cards, and I have a wife who cannot tolerate public humiliation."

"But then you have Delilah," I suggested.

He frowned, and she glared, and I apologized. "Sorry. That's out of line. Even in a murder case."

"Who was murdered?"

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