Tender Is the Bite

Halftitle Page

Tender Is the Bite

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Titlepage

Tender Is the Bite

Spencer Quinn

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New York

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Dedication

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Halftitle Page

Tender Is the Bite

Chapter One

One

“I think we’re being followed,” Bernie said.

That had to be one of Bernie’s jokes. Have I mentioned that he can be quite the jokester? Probably not, since we’re just getting started, but who else except Bernie would even think of saying that? We were creeping along at walking speed on the East Canyon Freeway at rush hour, stuck in an endless river of traffic-of course we were being followed, followed by too many cars to count! Not only too many for me to count—I don’t go past two—but also for Bernie. And Bernie’s always the smartest human in the room, one of the reasons the Little Detective Agency is so successful, leaving out the finances part. It’s called that on account of Bernie’s last name being Little. I’m Chet, pure and simple, not the smartest human in the room, in fact, not human. I bring other things to the table.

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Bernie glanced at the rear view mirror. Our ride’s a Porsche, not the old one that went off a cliff, or the older one that got blown up, but the new one—which happens to be the very oldest-with the martini glasses paint job on the fenders. We used to have a top, and also a very cool chain hanging from the rearview mirror, a chain we’d taken off a biker after . . . what would you call it? A dispute? Good enough. But recently we’d had to use it to temporarily cuff—wow! Another biker! How amazing was that? I came close to finding some sort of deep meaning, but before I could get there, Bernie said, “Three lanes over, six cars back, in front of the Amazon truck—see the maroon Kia?”

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I checked the rearview mirror myself. Three? Six? Amazon? Maroon? Kia? Every single one of them not easy for me. But I’ve always been lucky in life, so all I saw in the rearview mirror was Bernie. My Bernie. He has the best face in the world, especially if you like strong noses and eyebrows with a language all their own, and I do. He has plans to get that slightly crooked angle in his nose straightened out after he’s sure it won’t be broken again. But that would mean game over for his uppercut, that sweet, sweet uppercut guaranteed to put perps to sleep, so I hope his nose stays just how it is forever.

“Can’t make out the driver,” he said, “but that Kia was in the back corner of the Donut Heaven lot, meaning whoever it is has been with us for ten miles on a real complicated route.” He turned to me and smiled. “Dollars to donuts, Chet.”

That was a puzzler. Bernie’d had a cruller and I’d gone with the sausage croissant, donuts not even mentioned. Just to make sure, I licked my muzzle, picking up the unmistakable—and wonderful—taste of sausage. But in our business you have to be sure, so I did it again and again and again and—

“Something the matter, big guy?”

Nothing. We were good. I stopped whatever I’d been doing, sat up straight in the shotgun seat, alert and ready for action, a total pro.

“Let’s run a little test,” Bernie said, suddenly crossing several lanes and taking an exit. There was some honking, but I’d heard worse. The point was we were taking charge and naming names! Chet! Bernie! Those are all the names you need to know for now.

We’ve been followed by bad guys more than once, the last time down in a little village south of the border, an incident involving an army-type tank packed with unfriendly cartel dudes and a dead-end alley. That had turned into an exciting adventure, full of all sorts of fancy driving on Bernie’s part—and even for a fun moment or two on mine!—but nothing like that was happening now. Instead we rolled along nice and easy, turning onto one street, then another, and a bunch more, and finally ending up in a shady part of Old Town, with small wooden houses on one side and a park on the other, not one of those green grassy parks that Bernie hates but the rocky, cactusy kind he likes. He didn’t check the rearview, not even once. We pulled over and stopped on the park side and just sat there. A car went slowly by. Was that what maroon looked like? So nice to be learning new things! Meanwhile I caught a glimpse of the driver: a young woman, eyes on the road, baseball cap on her head, ponytail sticking out the back. Ponies are horses, and I’ve had lots of experience with horses, none good. They’re prima donnas, each and every one. So how come some humans want to look like them? A complete mystery. But solving mysteries is what we do, me and Bernie. Life was good. I felt tip top.

Meanwhile the maroon car kept going, made a turn at the next block, and vanished from sight. Right away I got the picture. She’d been following us. Now we were going to follow her! That’s called turning the tables in our business. Here’s a secret: you don’t always need a table to do it, although once we did use an actual table, turning it upside down on the Boccerino brothers and perhaps also on some unlucky folks sitting nearby. That was at the Ritz, where we haven’t been back.

But forget all that, because Bernie wasn’t turning the key, jamming the car into gear, stomping on the gas, burning rubber. He was just sitting there, gazing peacefully ahead, possibly even falling asleep. Bernie? I laid a paw on his shoulder in the friendliest way.

“Ooof!” said Bernie, possibly crashing into—well, not crashing into, more like leaning against his door, most likely what he wanted to do anyway. He gave me a look that could have meant anything. I gave him the same look back. Bernie laughed. Laughter’s the best human sound and Bernie’s is the best of the best, even when it’s a quiet laugh like this one.

“No worries,” he said. “We’re not dealing with a pro.”

Good to know. Were we dealing with anything? Anybody? When was the last time we got paid? I was wondering about all that when the maroon car came by again, this time slowing down, pulling over, and parking in front of us.

“The most amateur kind of amateur,” Bernie said.

We sat. The ponytail woman sat, not once checking her mirror or glancing back at us.

“An amateur and scared,” Bernie said. He made a little click click noise, meaning let’s roll, big guy. We hopped out, me actually hopping right over my closed door and Bernie just getting out in the normal human way, which was our usual M.O. But I’d seen him hop out-for example the time with that whole cluster of sidewinders under the

driver’s seat-so he had it in him.

We walked up to the maroon car. The way we do this, amateur—whatever that happens to be—or not, is Bernie on the driver’s side and me on the other. How many perps have taken one look at Bernie and then dived out the passenger-side door, only to get a real big surprise, namely me? But that didn’t happen with the ponytail woman. Instead she went on sitting there, hands holding the wheel tight.

Bernie leaned down and spoke through her open window. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” he said.

Whoa. We’d met this woman before? One thing about my nose: it remembers the smell of everyone I’ve ever met, and it did not remember this woman. She had an interesting smell, a bit piney, that made me think of New Mexico, which we’d visited on several cases, getting a speeding ticket every time. Through the open passenger-side window, I was getting my first clear look at her face. A young face, but not quite as young as the face of a college kid. In the faces of college kids you can still see a bit of the little kid face that was. There was no little kid left in the ponytail woman’s face, which was turning pink. Her eyes were big and the brightest blue I’d ever seen, actually the color of this morning’s sky, like the sky was shining inside her.

“Sorry,” Bernie said. “Bad joke.”

I’m sure it was a very good joke, although it’s true the woman hadn’t laughed. But I was glad to hear it was a joke and we hadn’t met before, because now I didn’t need to choose between my nose and Bernie’s word, which would have been the hardest choice of my life. Stay away from hard choices if you want to be happy.

The woman looked up at Bernie. Something about her face, turned up like that, made an impression on him. I can feel those impressions happening in Bernie, but what they are exactly is something I find out later or not at all.

‘“No, it was a good joke,” she said, agreeing with me. I was already liking her and now I liked her more. “I feel so stupid.”

“Why?” said Bernie.

The woman’s eyes shifted, the way human eyes sometimes do when the mind is delivering news. “Because I thought I was in control of the situation and I wasn’t,” she said. “The usual story.”

“Not your fault,” he said. “We’re professionals when it comes to following and being followed.”

She shot me a quick glance. “You meaning you and Chet?” she said.

Bernie smiled. “That’s us,” he said. “Chet and Bernie, in that order.” He handed her our card, the one with the flowers. Instead of flowers, why not the .38 Special? But the card was designed by Suzie, back when she and Bernie were together, so that was that. As the ponytail woman took the card, sunlight flashed on a diamond ring on one of her fingers. I knew diamond rings from an unfortunate incident where a former client’s diamond ring had gotten buried somewhere in her garden, the precise location proving a bit elusive. Buried things have a way of changing positions underground, one of those things you learn in this business. But the point was that the ponytail woman’s ring was bigger than the one I’d—the one that had somehow gone missing, I hoped not forever. Meanwhile Bernie, too, noticed the ring, and the ponytail woman noticed him noticing it and quickly withdrew her hand and laid it in her lap.

“And your name, if you don’t mind me asking?” Bernie said.

“I—I’m not ready,” she said. She glanced around. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

Bernie gestured toward the park. There were some benches nearby, all empty. Bench-sitters often chowed down on snacks—or even a whole meal!-meaning under benches is good territory if scraps are an interest of yours. I was already leaning that way when the woman shook her head.

“Somewhere private,” she said.

“We could go to our place,” said Bernie.

“Oh, no,” the woman said. “Isn’t there somewhere where no one . . . ” She went silent.

“Who are you afraid of?” Bernie said.

“I didn’t say I was afraid of anyone.”

Bernie nodded. He has many nods, meaning all sorts of things. This particular nod—just a tiny movement, eyes with an inward look—meant he wasn’t buying it.

“How about you come with us?” he said. “We can just drive around and talk.”

She glanced back at the Porsche. “Where will I sit?”

“In front, of course,” Bernie said. “Chet’ll be happy on the shelf in back.”

Was . . . was there some other Chet suddenly in the picture? What a strange thought! There was only one Chet, and that one Chet, I knew for a fact, would not be happy on the shelf, not now, not yesterday, not tomorrow or whatever other days were out there.

The woman got out of her car and turned toward the Porsche. By that time I was around to her side-to greet her, you might say. She sort of bumped into me, a gentle bump. How anxious she was! I nuzzled against her. Don’t ask me why.

She looked down at me, her eyes big and oh so blue. Then she touched my head, her hand a little unsteady.

“Hop in, um, ah . . . ” Bernie said.

“Mavis.” She climbed in, only to find that I was already in the shotgun seat myself! How the hell had that happened? I had no memory whatsoever of getting in the car. Life was full of surprises, most of them very nice. And here was another: Mavis squeezed past and took her rightful place on the little shelf without a word of complaint. I was liking her more and more, and gave her one of my friendliest looks, showing pretty much all of my teeth.

Bernie sat in the driver’s seat. “Mavis what?” he said.

At that moment Mavis noticed something on the floor. She picked it up: a small rectangle—about the size of a bumper sticker-with writing on it. We already had a Max’s Memphis Ribs bumper sticker on the car, and this one on the floor didn’t look nearly as interesting, lacking a picture of ribs glistening on a hot grill. But this new bumper sticker was a big problem. How had it gotten into the car? I’m in charge of security, and that means I track every single thing in the car, coming and going, and I had no memory of this new bumper sticker.

Mavis didn’t look happy about it either. Her eyes narrowed and then filled with fear. The smell of her fear filled the car, and very quickly. She gazed—almost in horror—at the back of Bernie’s head.

“Meaning what’s your last name,” Bernie said, not turning around.

“Oh my god!” Mavis said. “What the hell am I doing?” She dropped the bumper sticker back on the floor, rose, and jumped out of the car.

“Mavis?”

She ran to the Kia, an unsteady kind of run, almost losing her balance. What was going on? Was she a client? This wasn’t normal client behavior—maybe later in a case, yes, but not at the very start. She got in her car and slammed the door.

“Wait!” Bernie called.

Mavis took off, pulling into the street and speeding down the block. Bernie! Let’s go! On the stick!

But Bernie just sat there. “What happened?” he said. He watched until Mavis was out of sight. “Any point in chasing after her?”

Any point in chasing after somebody? I didn’t understand the question.

“We’ll only scare her more,” Bernie said. “Easy there, Chet.”

Uh-oh. I seemed to be up on my hind legs, my front paws on Bernie’s shoulder, my face kind of in his. I got that straightened out, and pronto.

“She’ll get in touch when she’s ready.” He winked at me. I love the human wink—one of their very best moves—and Bernie’s is off the charts. “And if not, we’ve got her plate number.”

We did? Wow. He took out a pen and wrote on the base of his thumb. That was Bernie. Just when you think he’s done amazing you, he amazes you again.

“Did you notice that diamond ring?” he said as we drove off.

For sure! Am I a pro or not?

“Looked like an engagement ring, but not worn on the ring finger. What’s that about?”

Ring finger? The ring had been in on one of her fingers, no doubt in my mind. How else could she have worn it? I gave Bernie a long look, which he missed, his eyes on the road. No one could be amazing twenty-four seven. I decided we were in a little dip between amazements.

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Home is our place on Mesquite Road, the best street in the Valley, which may be in Arizona, but don’t count on that. On either side live the nicest neighbors anyone could ask for, except for our neighbor on the fence side, old man Heydrich. He’s not a fan of the nation within the nation—which is what Bernie calls me and my kind—and spends a lot of time watering his bright green lawn even though Bernie has mentioned the aquifer problem on more than one occasion. On the other side, the driveway side, live Mr. and Mrs. Parsons—a couple even older than old man Heydrich and maybe not doing too well—and Iggy. Iggy’s my best pal. The fun we used to have, in the days before the electric fence salesman paid them a visit! Their lawn is like ours, the desert kind, or even more so. If you didn’t know better you might think it’s nothing but dirt and rocks, but we know better, me and Bernie. The reason I’m possibly going on a bit about their yards is that both Mr. Heydrich and Mr. Parsons were standing outside as we drove up, a very unusual situation in the late summer heat.

We turned into the driveway and got out of the car. Mr. Heydrich and Mr. Parsons were both hammering signs into their yards, one red, one blue—or possibly one orange and one green, since I can’t always be trusted when it comes to colors, according to Bernie-and as they hammered they exchanged glares and hammered even harder.

“Oh, god,” Bernie said in a low voice. We went into the house. Normally after a hard day’s work or even not a hard one, like today, we’d grab a drink first thing, bourbon or a beer for Bernie and water for me, but now we lingered by the window, me because he was doing it, and Bernie for reasons of his own. Outside old man Heydrich and Mr. Parsons hammered and glared, hammered and glared. Then from the Parsons’ house came Iggy’s amazingly high pitched yip-yip-yip. I trotted over to the side window, and there was Iggy, front paws against the glass of his side window, yipping in fury. I knew exactly what Iggy wanted to do, namely burst out of there and show old man Heydrich what was what, but the Parsons could never get the electric fence working right so these days Iggy stayed inside. Was it up to me as a friend to take care of the old man Heydrich problem? All I had to do was go to the door and Bernie would let me out. I could actually let myself out. Bernie and I had done a lot of work on door opening and I’d finally mastered the round type knob just the other night while Bernie was sleeping. So he didn’t know! Only I knew! What an exciting feeling! I started forming plans for old man Heydrich, but before they took shape Bernie backed away from the window, shook his head and said, “Politics, Chet. And the election’s not for a whole year.”

Politics? A new one on me. Was politics the glaring and hammering or the yip-yip-yipping? Or possibly all at once? Glaring, hammering, yip-yip-yipping? Politics sounded alarming. I hurried into the kitchen and lapped up all the water in my bowl. Bernie refilled it and cracked open a beer. He sat down and put his feet up. I lay down and stretched my feet out. We spend a lot of very happy time like that.

The phone rang. The phone at our place is usually on speaker but I can hear the other end perfectly well even if it’s not. My hearing’s not like yours, no offense.

“Hello, Bernie,” said Mr. Parsons. “Hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Not at all. How are you and Mrs. Parsons doing?”

“Neither hospitalized at the moment,” said Mr. Parsons. “Doesn’t get much better than that.”

Mr. Parsons laughed. So did Bernie. I missed the funny part but I don’t worry about things like that. “Anything I can do for you?” Bernie said.

“In a way,” said Mr. Parsons. “And no pressure, but you may have noticed our sign. It’s for Les Erlanger. He’s running for senate and Mrs. Parsons and I are supporting him. We happen to have an extra sign.”

The look on Bernie’s face—a lovely after-laughing look—changed to no expression at all. “I’ll bear that in mind,” Bernie said.

“Much obliged,” said Mr. Parsons.

They said goodbye. Right away the phone rang again.

“Mr. Little? Heydrich, here. Your neighbor.”

“Yes?”

“Do you have any political affiliation, Mr. Little?”

“Not that I discuss at random.”

Silence. Bernie looked at me. His face changed again, started to look like it did when fun was in the air. I popped right up.

“I’m supporting Senator Wray in the election,” Heydrich said. “I have an extra sign you can have for free.”

“Is Wray charging for his signs?”

“Only the special three-color ones. Which happens to be what I want to give you for no cost.”

“The election’s a year away.”

“In one sense, possibly. But you may have noticed that in a big picture sense we are in a permanent state of election.”

“That’s depressing.”

“Even more depressing is the prospect of an Erlanger victory in the coming battle.”

“We’ll be the DMZ,” Bernie told him.

“That does not exist,” said old man Heydrich. “If the sign is too . . . too vivid, perhaps you’d care to display the bumper sticker I left you.”

“Bumper sticker?”

“I happened to have one with me on my walk yesterday. I took the liberty of dropping it into your car.”

“Thanks,” Bernie said. “I’ll take the liberty of returning it to you.”

“Not necessary,” said Heydrich. “I have a big supply.”

Click.

We went out to the car. Bernie leaned in, fished around in the back, found the bumper sticker where Mavis had dropped it. Bernie read what was on it: “‘Wray’s OK!’” Back inside, he tossed it in the trash and downed a big slug of beer. “Is monarchy better?

I couldn’t help him with that. The sun set at last and things cooled down a bit. We went out to the back patio and sat by the swan fountain, all that Leda left behind after the divorce. We hardly ever ran the water anymore on account of the evaporation issue, whatever that was, but now Bernie turned it on and we listened to the beautiful sounds, a sort of music with water as the instrument. Bernie had another beer. He kept the phone in his lap, kind of unusual, and glanced at it once or twice.

“I thought she’d be in touch.”

Oh? Who would that be? Leda? Not likely. We were more likely to hear from Charlie, Bernie and Leda’s kid, now with us only on some weekends and holidays, or even Malcolm, Leda’s new husband with the very long toes, who’d become sort of a pal. Then there was Suzie, at one time Bernie’s girlfriend and a likely caller, but now married to Jacques Smallian, busy with some startup they were working on, and now unlikely. So who?

Bernie gazed at the writing on the base of his thumb, sipped his beer, gazed, sipped. At last he picked up the phone.

“Rick?” he said.

“Gone for the day,” said Lieutenant Rick Torres, our buddy in Missing Persons.

“I’m a taxpayer,” Bernie said. “I pay your salary.”

“Now you tell me. All this time I had no idea why the wolf was at the door.”

Oh, no! Rick was a buddy. We had to do something and fast!

“Can you run a plate for me?” Bernie read the writing on his thumb.

Running a plate? On a wolf case? I was lost.

A short silence on Rick’s end and then: “Maroon Kia registered to Johnnie Lee Goetz, 1429E Aztec Creek Road, Agua Negra.”

“I owe you,” Bernie said.

“The tab is getting long,” said Rick.

“I can get you a three-color Senator Wray sign.”

“You know him?”

“Nope. You?”

“Not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“Buy me a drink some time.”

“You got it.”

Bernie hung up. Not exactly meant buying Rick a drink? But how would he get outside, what with the wolf? Before I could even start on any of that, Bernie rose in the quick way that meant we were on the move, which is when I’m at my best. Who’s luckier than me? There was some confusion at the door, but I ended up being first.

Chapter Two

Two

“Johnnie Lee Goetz,” Bernie said. “But the name we have is Mavis. So therefore . . . ”

We followed the last of the daylight on the Crosstown Freeway, housing developments going on and on, each one darkening as we passed by, like . . . like we were bringing the night. What a thought, although perhaps a little scary so I hoped it wouldn’t come again. Meanwhile I waited for Bernie to continue with the so-therefore, so-therefores being his department and me bringing other things to the table.

“None of this was here when I was a kid,” Bernie said.

Was that part of the so-therefore? So therefores were pretty much always unpredictable in my experience.

We took an exit and soon went over a bridge. Down below was a dry riverbed. “Agua Negra,” Bernie said. “We used to come out and waterski on weekends.” He pointed. “Where that strip mall is now was the boathouse. Gone. And so is the water.”

Uh-oh. The so-therefore was about water? I should have known. Water was a big problem in these parts. What could I do about it? I searched my mind and came up with only one idea, involving peeing out the window, something I’d actually never tried and might prove kind of tricky, what with the car moving and all. But I still wanted help out so I laid my paw on Bernie’s knee, just letting him know everything would be fine. At the same time we happened to speed up—and bigtime!—just surging like the message about things being fine had gotten through to the car. Wow! The car is a machine, of course—machine smells being some of the most obvious ones out there—but isn’t it sort of alive in a way that-

“Chet!”

Speed always gets Bernie excited. I’m the same way. He steered us back onto our side of the road and gave me a quick look. Hard to read but at least it wasn’t gloomy anymore. Hey! Was speed the solution to the water problem? Well, well. Bringing the night and solving the water problem. I was on top of my game.

We turned onto a street lined on both sides with clusters of low, sand-colored buildings with tile roofs. “Condos, Chet. One day there’ll be condos nonstop from here to L.A.” Was that good or bad? Maybe it would help if I knew what L.A. was, but I did not. The problem vanished from my mind. We pulled into a circular drive and parked at the end of one of the sand-colored clusters.

“1429E Aztec Creek Road,” Bernie said, “although there’s no Aztec Creek and never was.”

We went to the door and knocked, Bernie doing the actual knocking and me standing beside him, nice and tall. Aside from the nice and tall part, you might have thought I was doing zip, but you would have been wrong. I don’t blame you because there was no seeing what I was up to, namely sniffing up all the smells that came from the other side of the door. Not much in the way of cooking or food aromas of any kind, except for yogurt, always a disappointment, and lots of the usual cleaning product smells you always get in these situations, including dry-cleaning smells, which never make me want to stick around. Mixed into that—and quickly unmixed by my nose into separate streams—was lots of the scent of two different women, one of whom I knew—Mavis, the pony-tailed driver of the maroon Kia, the woman with the piney smell and the big blue eyes. When you get lots of someone’s scent at the door you can be pretty sure they live there. But we haven’t even come to the main smell yet, overwhelming all the others, namely a certain strong musky-plus-pee odor that meant a male ferret was in the house. I’ve had some experience with ferrets, both the indoor kind and the outdoor kind, and every single one of them had to be taught a lesson. The fur on the back of my neck stood up, all on its own. I was good to go.

Bernie raised his hand to knock again. Was it possible he didn’t hear someone coming to open it-a woman, actually, not big, barefoot? I glanced at Bernie’s ears: not tiny for a human, not at all, and very nice looking in my opinion, but was that all they were for? Just stuck on his head for beauty? I liked almost every human I’d ever met—even the perps and gangbangers—but I’d never want to trade places with any of them. Well, maybe Bernie. Because . . . because then I’d have me to hang out with! A rather confusing thought. I was still lost in it when the door opened.

A young woman looked out. Not Mavis, a fact I noticed only in passing. What caught my attention was the ferret on her shoulder. And I’d caught his attention, no doubt about that. He showed me his teeth first thing, just like every ferret I’d ever met. I showed him mine. You’d have done the same. His tiny eyes burned hot. Would playing a game of some sort get us off to a better start? For example, how about the grabbing-the-little-fella-by-his-collar—a velvet collar, by the way, velvet being a material I knew well from an incident with a tapestry, best forgotten—and-flipping-him-up-to-the-ceiling game? Who doesn’t like being flipped up to the ceiling? Although I don’t know personally on account of who could flip the likes of me that high, or anywhere at all? Ah, the likes of me! A hundred-plus pounder, by the way. Once I’d flipped a bunny rabbit name of Ursula—true, not a ferret—so high that I’d had time to run over and catch her in midair and flip her up again! The look on her face! So when would be a good time to get things underway with my new ferret buddy? Now, maybe, like right away, this very—

I felt Bernie’s hand on my back, not heavy, just there. Perhaps a slight wait before the gaming portion of our visit was the way to go. The joy is in the anticipation, as a safecracker name of Sneaky Keats, now sporting an orange jumpsuit, had once explained to us.

“Hello?” said the young woman.

This young woman might have been a bit older than Mavis, or perhaps she just seemed that way because her face was harder. It was also tanned, as were her arms, strong arms, and her hands looked strong, too. She smelled of the desert, a smell I like very much. Her hair was long on one side and shaved on the other. You see that kind of look plenty in these parts but Bernie’s still not used to it. He didn’t say or show anything but I could feel a little shift inside him, like he missed a step. Don’t be surprised. We’re partners, after all.

“Uh, hi,” he said. “We’re looking for Johnnie Lee Goetz.”

The woman peered past us to the street, where nothing was going on. Then her gaze went to me and finally to Bernie. He smiled, just a quick, small, friendly smile.

“That’s me,” the woman said, her voice not unfriendly but not friendly either.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Bernie Little and this is Chet.”

I happened to be watching her eyes—sort of greenish. Sometimes when perps have heard of us, their eyes shift when they realize we’re right there in front of them and the end is near. Johnnie Lee Goetz’s eyes did not shift, although I thought I felt something inside her go still. Before I could even try to make sense of that, the ferret, who’d been lying flat on her shoulder, sat up suddenly and squeaked. Did that mean the ferret was a perp and Johnnie Lee was not? Any reason that didn’t make sense? Not that I could see. In my mind I got ready to do what had to be done.

“Griffie’s not comfortable around dogs,” the woman said. “Especially aggressive ones.”

“The cute little guy’s got nothing to worry about,” said Bernie. “Chet’s not aggressive, are you, big guy?”

“Then why is his mouth open like that? His teeth are huge.”

“That’s just his smile. Maybe ease up on it a bit, Chet.”

Ease up? On what exactly? Before I could figure that out I realized I’d snagged my lip on one of my teeth. I got everything squared away and pronto. You’ve got to look the part in a job like mine.

“Better, Ms. Goetz? ” Bernie said.

“Not really.”

Bernie laughed, like Ms. Goetz had made a joke. She wasn’t joining in. “Okay to call you Johnnie Lee?” Bernie said.

Ms. Goetz shrugged.

“Well, Johnnie Lee—a great name, by the way,” Bernie said, “I was wondering if your car’s around. The maroon Kia.”

Despite how—what would you call it? Charming? Close enough. Despite how charming Bernie was being, Johnnie Lee was looking less friendly by the moment.

“I don’t have—” she began, then took another look at us and started over. “Who are you?”

“I told you that already.”

“Those were just names.”

Bernie handed her our card. She gave it a close look, actually seemed to spend quite a long time on it.

“You’re a private detective?”

Bernie nodded.

“Working for who?”

“We keep that between our clients and ourselves.”

What great news! That meant we had a client, exactly what we needed, what with the state of our finances. Don’t get me started on our warehouse packed with unsold Hawaiian pants, or our tin futures play, which came close to making us rich, except for a last-minute earthquake in Bolivia, or possibly an earthquake we were counting on but didn’t happen.

Johnnie Lee’s face turned up in a way that showed she was actually a bit of a tough customer. “Is it someone I’ve heard of?”

“Like who?” Bernie said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe some household name?”

“Such as?” said Bernie.

“Fill in the blank.”

“We’ll try,” Bernie said, his voice quiet.

That got Johnnie Lee angry. It didn’t show but I could smell it. Griffie was also getting angry—I could smell that, too. Johnnie Lee glanced down the street.

“Where’s your car?” said Bernie.

“It was stolen. Nice meeting you.” Johnnie Lee took a step back and slammed the door in our faces. Or almost. Bernie has very quick feet, which comes as surprise to a lot of people, and he stuck his foot in the doorway just in time. But then—oh, no—came a surprise on us. Griffie darted down and nipped Bernie’s ankle.

“Ow,” said Bernie, withdrawing his foot. The door closed all the way. Locks thunked into place.

And now I, Chet, was the angry one. A big part of my job was protecting Bernie from the Griffies of this world. I threw myself at the door, making the whole building shake in a very gratifying way, and was gathering myself to do it again when Bernie held up his hand. I didn’t stop, exactly. Let’s just call it a pause.

Bernie called through the door. “Open up. We’re not going to hurt you.”

No answer. Possibly Johnnie Lee knew that while there were no plans for hurting her—we’d never hurt a woman, me and Bernie—Griffie was a different story.

“When was it stolen?” Bernie called through the door. “Did you report it?”

No answer.

“Do you know a woman named Mavis?”

Silence.

“Is there any reason she’d be driving your car?”

More silence.

Bernie pulled up his pant leg, glanced down. There was a tiny drop or two of blood. Oh, what a disgrace! Biting ankles was what I did! Not Bernie’s, of course, but that wasn’t the point. This was the time to spring into—

Whoa. Bernie was turning away? We were leaving? At the very least I had to bite Griffie’s ankle—or better yet, all his ankles—before we left. Any job worth doing was worth doing well. You heard that all the time, or at least once in a while. Growling started up in the night.

Bernie touched the top of my head and spoke quietly. “Let’s go, big guy.”

The day had taken a very bad turn. Growling followed us back to the car and all the way home.

“What am I going to do with you?” Bernie said.

At first I had no idea. Then I thought of fetch. Soon Bernie and I were playing fetch with a nappy new tennis ball and feeling a lot better. I glanced around before we went inside, security on pretty much all of Mesquite Road being part of my job. No unusual sights, with the exception of a small spotlight on old man Heydrich’s lawn, aimed at his three-color sign.

Chapter Three

Three

Bright and early the next morning—maybe a little too bright, a summer-time thing in these parts—we drove down to Donut Heaven, the same Donut Heaven we’d been to yesterday. There are a number of Donut Heavens in the Valley, but this one, past the airport, was our favorite on account of Mrs. Borbon, the owner, who believed in doing things right, meaning that everything was better than at any of the other Donut Heavens, especially the sausage croissants. Normally we order right away and start chowing down, but now we just sat in a back corner of the lot, Bernie checking out the comings and goings, and me being patient.

“All right, all right, knock it off,” Bernie said after what seemed like a very long time, perhaps talking to himself. “Kind of a long shot that she’d show up anyway.” I didn’t even bother wondering who he meant. Your interests shrink down to just one when you’re famished, as you probably know already.

Bernie got out and went inside to order. A black-and-white pulled into the lot and parked beside us cop style, driver’s-side door to driver’s side door. Rick Torres-our buddy in missing persons, as I may have mentioned already, and a particular buddy of mine since I’d lived at his place when Bernie was in the hospital, a terrible time that followed the terrible ending of the stolen saguaro case, a case I’ve tried and tried to forget but can’t, even though I’m a champ at forgetting—leaned toward me. By that time I’d shifted over to Bernie’s seat.

“Morning, Chet,” Rick said. “Finally canned him?”

Who could he have been talking about? I had no idea. But it was nice to see Rick. We had things in common, for example, a love of Slim Jims. He took one from his pocket, bit it in two, and tossed half to me. I snapped it out of the air and made quick work of it. More? Was there more?

Rick held up both hands, empty.

More? Was there more?

Rick laughed. He reached across and scratched between my ears, not quite as perfectly as Bernie, but close. His hand slowed and the expression on his face changed. “Tell you the truth,” he said. “I love my job. It’s not that. But I’ve got ambitions. Who wants to be a lieutenant forever?” He shook his head. “Sorry to whine at you, Chet. But the bastards made Ellis a captain! Can you believe that? I wanted—”

Bernie came back with a cardboard tray, stood between the cars, gave us a look and then a second one. He handed Rick coffee and a cruller, took a sausage croissant off the tray and handed it to—but no. Instead he flicked it right past my nose and onto the shotgun seat. We were playing fetch in the car? That was new. My Bernie. The next thing I knew I was sitting on the shotgun seat, happily chowing down on a sausage croissant that was even better than yesterday’s, and Bernie was behind the wheel, sipping coffee.

Bernie has a real casual voice he sometimes uses for asking about things he doesn’t seem to care much about. I’m not sure what that’s all about, but it was the voice he was using now.

“What were you guys talking about?” he said.

“Cats,” said Rick.

Cats? Had cats come up? When cats come up, I always get a bit . . . tense. Well, not tense, but more like . . . not quite tip top. And I felt tip top or even better. So therefore cats had not come up. Whoa! Had I just done a so-therefore? So-therefores were Bernie’s department. I knew immediately that I wanted no part of them ever again. Why? Because if cats hadn’t come up why had Rick said they had? Rick was our buddy. This was confusing. Does a buddy bring up cats when there are no cats? I might have even started panting except for the fact of the sausage croissant in my mouth. I’ve been lucky pretty much my whole life, and for sure since we got together, me and Bernie. And—wait for it—a cat was involved that day! Life really is beyond belief, whatever that means, exactly.

Rick took a bite of his cruller. “Get what you wanted off that plate number?” he said, or something like that, hard to tell on account of his mouth being full.

Bernie shook his head. “Any chance that car’s been reported stolen?”

“Search me.”

Bernie glanced at him. “Having a bad day?”

Rick looked down. “Give me the plate number again.”

Bernie told him the plate number. Rick got busy on his screen.

“Nope,” he said.

“Can you run the owner?”

Rick nodded and went back to the screen. He took another bite of the cruller. Bernie sipped his coffee. I polished off the sausage croissant and felt nice and full. But it didn’t last.

“Johnnie Lee Goetz is down for two traffic violations, none moving. No criminal record.” Rick tapped at his screen. “She did take out a restraining order last month.”

“On who?”

Rick checked the screen, wrote on his coffee cup lid and spun it over to Bernie.

Bernie caught the lid the way he catches everything, his hand folding softly around it. He glanced at the writing. “Mickey Rottoni, a PO box in South Pedrioa. You’re sending restraining orders to PO boxes?”

Rick raised his voice. That was a first. “Like I’m in charge of the whole stupid setup?”

Bernie looked surprised. His eyebrows usually take care of the surprised look, and they’re great at it. “Whoa,” he said. “You know I didn’t mean you personally.”

Rick glared at Bernie. Bernie glared right back. It hit me then that maybe they weren’t getting along. That didn’t make sense. Rick was a buddy. I barked a bark I use for letting people know in no uncertain terms.

They both turned my way real quick.

“Oh my god,” Rick said, a hand to his chest. “What’s with him?”

Bernie gave me a close look. “I think he wants another sausage croissant.”

No! I did not. That was not at all what I wanted. And then . . . and then it was! And nothing else mattered. How do you like that?

Meanwhile Rick was working at his screen. “The restraining order was served by Sergeant Weatherly Wauneka. Say thanks.”

“Thanks,” Bernie said.

“You should meet her.”

“Why?”

Rick shrugged. “Just a feeling.”

[blank]

Not much later, Rick had driven away and I was chowing down on fresh sausage croissant, right out of the oven. Mrs. Borbon brought it over personally.

“Don’t you just love someone who appreciates good food?” she said.

“Appreciates is an understatement,” said Bernie.

Mrs. Borbon laughed. Laughing made her jiggle a bit. It was easy to like Mrs. Borbon, and I did.

“Can I ask you a question?” she said.

“As many as you like,” said Bernie.

“You’re a good customer,” Mrs. Borbon said. “I look out for good customers.” She took a quick scan of the parking lot. “Did anything unusual happen after you left yesterday?”

“Why do you ask?” Bernie said.

“Well, Mr. Bernie, I know what you do for a living.”

“Oh?”

“Of course. In the kitchen they call you el cazador.”

“The hunter?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What about Chet?”

“He’s el jefe.”

Sometimes Bernie has this real quick inner look, there and gone, which I saw now. I think it means he’s seeing something in a new way, but don’t take that to the bank, certainly not our bank where there’d recently been an unpleasant discussion with Ms. Mendez, the manager.

“My question,” Mrs. Borbon went on, “is what happens if the hunter is hunted. I don’t know the answer. But a woman drove in first thing yesterday morning, parked over in that back corner and just sat there. After a while, she came inside and ordered a macchiato with extra sugar. I served her myself, a pretty young woman—beautiful, really, with a ponytail. I’d never seen her before. And while I was serving her I happened to notice—over her shoulder, if you understand?—”

Bernie nodded.

“—an unusual thing. A van pulled up beside the woman’s car, and a man jumped out. He unlocked her trunk, dropped something inside, and drove away. I thought-should I speak up to the woman? But maybe he was her husband and she’d forgotten her phone, something simple like that?”

“Then why the trunk?” Bernie said.

Mrs. Borbon hung her head slightly, a human thing when they disappoint themselves. I didn’t like to see that from such a nice person as Mrs. Borbon, and neither did Bernie. He touched her arm and said, “But you might be right. Are you sure it was a phone?”

“Or some sort of gadget, from the size and shape,” Mrs. Borbon said. “Then the woman went back to her car. You and Chet came soon after that and she watched you the whole time you were here. When you left, she followed. It was no coincidence. I saw her face through the windshield. It had a sneaky look.”

Was this a worrisome story? I was wondering about that when Bernie smiled, and I stopped worrying at once, even if I hadn’t quite started. “You’d be a good investigator,” he said.

“Is there any money in it?” said Mrs. Borbon.

Bernie laughed. What was funny? No humor that I could see, absolutely zip.

“I’m assuming you’d never seen the man before,” Bernie said.

“That’s right.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Kind of big. Shaved head. I—I was more interested in what he was doing than in how he looked.”

“I know that one,” Bernie said. “What about his van?”

“White, like all those white vans you see.”

“Any writing on it?”

Mrs. Borbon shook her head. “And if you’re going to ask about my video system, when the temperature hits one ten it gets—what’s the word?”

“Wonky?”

“Exactly. So there’s no video since last Tuesday. I apologize.”

“Nothing to apologize for—you’ve been very helpful.”

“So there’s meaning to all this? Maybe you know the woman?”

“We’re getting to know her,” Bernie said.

“And?” said Mrs. Borbon.

“Too soon to tell.” Bernie handed her some money.

“What’s this?”

“For the croissant.”

“It’s too much.”

“Plus a tip.”

“You don’t tip the owner, Mr. Bernie.”

“That’s what my mother always said.”

“Is she still alive?”

“Oh, yes.”

“She must be proud of you.”

Bernie’s mom—a piece of work-was suddenly in the conversation? She lived in Florida but had visited us last Christmas, bringing her new husband. He wore a white leather belt and said that bad times were the best times for making money. Bernie’s mom had told Bernie to give that some thought. The subject of being proud of him hadn’t come up.

[blank]

Back on the road, Bernie was very quiet for a while and then he said, “Do we find ourselves at the edge of the dark forest?”

Not from where I sat. We were actually in one of the most treeless parts of the Valley, where the Automile went on forever.

“So easy to lose the straightforward pathway,” he went on.

I gave him a close look. The Automile was as straight as it comes, nice and wide, pretty much impossible to get lost on. Plus anyone traveling with me can never be lost. My nose will always get you home. Maybe Bernie was dehydrated. He had that problem in the heat. I leaned down and pawed at a water bottle on the floor.

“Thirsty, big guy?”

No. Not me. You. What was the best way to get him to drink? I still hadn’t figured it out when he said, “How about we settle for the most obvious step? Let’s look into that restraining order.”

[blank]

We walked up to the door at 1429E Aztec Creek Road. Before Bernie could knock, the door opened and out came a round little dude carrying a mop and a bucket.

“Uh, yeah?” he said.

“Hi,” said Bernie. “Is Johnnie Lee around?”

“Nope.”

“When will she be back?”

“Never.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She vacated the premises.”

“You work for the landlord?”

The round little guy stood as tall as he could. “I am the landlord.”

“Ah,” said Bernie. “This must be a headache for you.”

“Not really,” the landlord said. “She was paid till the end of next month.”

“Any idea why she left?”

“Nope. But it was in a hurry. That goddamn ferret got loose when she was packing the car and she didn’t even stick around to find him.”

Interesting. I wandered off to the trash can enclosure at the side of the building. The plywood door was slightly open, and in the doorway stood Griffie, holding the remains of a pizza slice in his cute little paws. Random pizza slices found here and there are mine as a rule. First I made sure that Griffie would be aware of that from here on in, and then I escorted him nice and gently around to the front.

“The name Mickey Rottoni mean anything to you?” Bernie was saying.

“Nope,” said the landlord. “When it comes to the tenants, I keep my nose—”

Then they were both staring at me, so I never found out about where the landlord kept his nose, which actually seemed to be in the normal place.

“Chet?” said Bernie. “What you got there?”

Chapter Thirty

Thirty

Up and up we climbed on a trail that twisted through a green and silvery forest, the trees smelling nuttier the higher we got, the feel of the air growing lovelier and lovelier. We came to a clearing with a stream flowing on the other side, not a muddy little trickle but bubbling water on the move. The next thing I knew I was standing in the middle of it, the water almost up to my shoulders. I gave it a taste. Ah! Delicious, some of the best water I’d ever sampled. Were we in New Mexico? I thought so. Not a very nice place in the matter of speeding tickets, but I had no complaints about their water. I lapped up some more.

Bernie sat on the bank, dipping his bare feet in the stream. He opened the backpack, took out his water bottle and his notebook, the one no rat had ever been near. He studied the notebook and drank water. I studied him. He looked a bit worried. Did we have anything to worry about? Not that I could think of. For one thing, the .38 Special was in that backpack, as well as a tuna sandwich for Bernie and a Slim Jim or two for me. Can you lose with a combo like that? We never had. Tuna sandwich, Slim Jims, .38 Special. Remember that and you’ll come up roses. Just watch out for the thorny parts, which can mean a trip to the vet.

Bernie gazed over my head, past the stream, the hills rising on the other side, all the way to some red-gold cliffs in the distance, cliffs with spiky rock towers at the top.

“The Hole in the Wall’s somewhere up there, big guy.” He closed the notebook, got everything put away, crossed the stream with the backpack slung over one shoulder and his shoes in his hand. My Bernie! But he looked more worried than ever. “Let’s see if we can pick up the pace.”

I was off like a shot.

[blank]

“Smell Olek, Chet?”

I did not. We were climbing a steep hill on one of those trails that was not always visible. Fine with me. No Olek smell, no human smell at all other than Bernie’s, always a comforting one to have nearby. Also we had scents of elk, snake, fox, bear, bighorn sheep, wild turkey, coyote, on and on. What a highly entertaining hike from the nose’s point of view!

We reached the top of the hill, which turned out to be the last hill on the hike. Ahead a rocky plain extended all the way to the base of the red cliff. The cliff wasn’t totally straight up and down until almost the very top. I thought I could make out a trail switchbacking up the not totally straight up and down part, but I wasn’t sure. Above the end of the trail, if that’s what it was, I saw a black hole in the face of the cliff.

Our own trail led across the plain, but a sign was posted on the very last tree in the forest. Bernie read it: “‘Trail closed. Do not proceed under penalty of law. By order of the USDA Forest Service.’” We kept going. Bernie gave me a glance, a certain kind of glance that means, Anything up, big guy? Was this about Olek again? There was no Olek scent in the air. There might have been a whiff or two of other human scent, but it was a bit confusing at the moment because of a vinegary smell streaming in on the breeze. Up ahead the sun, getting lower in the sky, dipped below the top of the cliff, and put us in shadow.

Sometimes in our part of the world you can see where you’re headed—in this case, the tall red cliff with the black hole in its face—but it won’t come any closer, even might try to move farther away. That was what we had happening now, me and Bernie. He began to jog. I trotted along beside him. How worried he was, and what a hurry we were in! I suddenly thought of Gail. Bernie sped up a bit. I trotted along beside him.

[blank]

The sky was purple with orange streaks, and the shadow of the cliff was almost as dark as night when we finally reached it. Bernie gazed up at the cliff face, not straight up and down until you came to a ledge quite a way below the black hole. From here I could see something I hadn’t been able to before, namely a rope ladder dangling down and down from the mouth of the black hole to the ledge below.

We started up the steep zigzagging path, me first, but when I glanced back and saw Bernie had to go down to all fours on the toughest parts, I moved behind him, just in case. Bernie on all fours is not at his best. He was dusty and sweaty when we reached the ledge, and there was a line or two on his face that I’d never seen before.

It was as close to silent on this ledge as the world ever gets. A little green lizard with a yellow head ducked under a rock part way down the switchback trail and I heard the scramble of its tiny, hard feet. But other that that we were soundless. Bernie gave me another of those searching looks. The air began to smell of vinegar. There were other scents, too, but with vinegar around they just wouldn’t line up for me. Bernie took the .38 Special from the backpack and stuck it in his pocket. He lay the backpack beside me, crouched down, rubbed the top of my head. “Sit,” he said. “Stay. Guard the backpack for me.”

I sat. I stayed. I guarded the backpack. Bernie gave me the silent signal—finger across his lips-walked over to the rope ladder, got a grip with his hands, and started up. We’d done lots of ladder work, me and Bernie, and I was not bad on them, not too bad at all, but we hadn’t gotten to rope ladders. This one swayed and wobbled as Bernie climbed. That didn’t slow him down in the slightest. Higher and higher he went at the same steady pace, hands and feet, arms and legs, his whole body in beautiful motion. He reached the lip of the back hole, pulled himself up, gave me a quick glance—even a quick little wave—and disappeared inside.

After that, nothing. Well, perhaps a faint thump or footstep. I rose. Still staying, of course, as Bernie had suggested. I thought about the faint thump or footstep. I edged over toward the rope ladder, still staying on the ledge, meaning my obedience was beyond question. From above came not a sound, no thump, no footstep. I gazed up at the black hole and placed one paw on the first rung of the rope ladder. It swung away from me. I tried again, and again, and was about to try once more, when a figure appeared up above, on the lip of the black hole. A very small figure, but one I knew. It was Griffie.

I barked, not loudly, a bark partly surprised, partly annoyed, and partly just hi. Then I remembered the silent sign and barked again, much more softly. You wouldn’t have heard it, but perhaps Griffie did. He backed away, out of sight.

I got a paw—a front paw—on a rung of the rope ladder, not the lowest as before, but the next one up. That was more or less an accident, but a good one, because one of my back paws got involved with that lowest rung and the next thing I knew I was sort of on my way up! This was nothing like the wooden ladders of my experience, but definitely doable, as long as I—

A figure appeared on the lip of the black hole. Not Griffie, not at all a very small figure, but a very large one. It was Olek. Olek! I hadn’t sniffed a trace of him—hadn’t sniffed a trace of Griffie, either, whose smell was much stronger. There was no time to think about any of that. Hateful looks are usually hot, in my experience, but Olek’s was cold. He drew a gun from a shoulder holster he was wearing, leaned out over the lip, and fired.

The bullet went by my head, oh so close, the whizzing sound and the bang of the gun happening at the same time. I leaped off the ladder, or maybe fell, stuck my landing and sprang right off the ledge. Bang! Bang! Bullets tore up the steep slope beyond me even before I landed on it. I hit the ground, not caring whether I was on the switchback trail—trails seldom making much of a difference to me-and darted behind a big round rock that looked like it might start rolling down at any moment.

No more gunshots. But was Olek still watching for me? I took a quick glance. No sign of Olek. The rope ladder no longer hung down, at least not all the way. A rung or two dangled from the lip.

I stayed where I was, hearing nothing. The vinegary smell began to fade away. Up above purple changed to black and the stars began popping into view. A faint yellow glow flickered at the mouth of the black hole, but no one came in sight. I moved out from behind the rock and was waiting for an idea, even a bad one, when a familiar smell cut through the night air. From the other direction, meaning the back side of this mountain, came Griffie.

I looked down at him. He looked up at me. I looked down at him some more. He wandered off, past the big round rock and out of sight. I gazed at the flickering yellow light at the mouth of the black hole.

Griffie returned. I looked down at him. He looked up at me. He wandered off, past the big round rock and out of sight. This time I followed him, for no particular reason.

A starry night, the stars shining in Griffie’s eyes whenever he turned back to look at me, which was more than once. He headed down, then up, but mostly around the mountain, and so did I, Griffie for reasons of his own and me not because Griffie was doing it. Don’t think that for a moment.

This was not an easy hike, very steep at times, some shifting scree along the way, and a surprising number of small round cactuses, very spiny. Griffie had no trouble with any of it so neither did I. After what seemed like a long time, we stood at the very top. I went to the front edge and peered out from between two rocky towers. Not far below lay the lip of the black hole, with the coiled up rope ladder, and below that the ledge with our backpack, still lying there.

Griffie was not interested in the view. He stood close to the center of this flat little mountaintop, his attention on a hole in the ground. This was a man-sized hole of a type I knew well from our explorations—mine and Bernie’s—of old desert mines. Griffie popped down the hole. I stood at the edge. Lots of smells rose up from the hole. One was Bernie’s. I popped down myself.

Bernie always brings a flashlight on our tunneling expeditions, but I don’t really need the light myself. This particular tunnel would have been pretty easy even without having Griffie to follow. And I wasn’t actually following him. He just happened to be ahead of me. We went mostly down but turned sideways at the end, the only tricky part. These bends can get pretty narrow and sometimes you get stuck, which I did now. The tricky part is not being able to move and the feeling of no air to breathe. But then you hear a voice in your head—namely Bernie’s—saying We’re good, big guy, just wriggle a bit. You wriggle and presto! You’re free.

We came to the end of the tunnel, me and Griffie. The end of the tunnel seemed to be fairly high up the wall of a sort of cave. The cave was lit by a camping lantern on the floor—we had one just like it—and by the light of the lantern I saw Bernie! He lay on his back, asleep on the hard-packed dirt floor, his chest slowly rising and falling. Seated on the floor over to one side, hands bound behind their backs, were two women I knew, namely Mavis and Johnnie Lee. Mavis’s face had no color in it at all. Johnnie Lee looked a little better but not much.

Olek sat on the other side of the lantern. Between sips from a vodka bottle—the same magical kind he’d given us—he was building a bomb. I was familiar with bombs because Bernie had spent a lot of time studying bombs and I spent a lot of time studying Bernie. We’d even built a couple for practice, Bernie handling the actual building.

Mavis started to cry. “Why are you doing this if Mickey’s dead? I’ll never tell anyone anything, I promise.”

“Shut your mouth,” Olek said.

Mavis shut her mouth. That was when Griffie decided to leap—well, more of a glide, like he knew how to fly—down to the cave floor. He pitterpattered over to Mavis, crawled up and sat on her shoulder.

Olek glanced at the cave entrance. “Where the hell were you, my pretty little souvenir? Come to tato.”

Griffie didn’t move.

Olek patted the floor. “Come!”

Griffie stayed on Mavis’ shoulder. Did his presence there give Mavis the courage to open her mouth again? I had no idea, but that was what she did. Johnnie Lee saw what was happening and gave her head a quick little shake. Mavis didn’t see, or else she ignored her.

“Please,” she said. “I’m begging you.” She sobbed. “We’re so young. How will you live with your conscience if—”

“Come!” Olek shouted. “Come!”

Griffie did not come.

“You don’t obey?” Olek said. He whipped the gun from his shoulder holster, aimed at Griffie and shot him right off Mavis’s shoulder. Well, almost. Just before Olek pulled the trigger, Mavis screamed a terrible scream and the gun barrel wavered the tiniest bit. The sounds of the shot and the scream and the ricochet of the bullet off the rock wall echoed and echoed. Griffie leaped into the shadows.

Bernie moaned and sat up. There was dried blood in his hair, but not a whole lot.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Olek said. He rose, fished plastic cuffs from his pocket, and moved toward Bernie. I sprang out of the tunnel and soared through the air, striking Olek with all my strength and power. He fell and—

But not quite. It was mostly a stagger. I bit his arm with everything I had, our faces so close. Did he hate me? Oh, yes, and I hated him just the same. I shook my head back and forth, trying to rip that arm right off him, trying to throw him to the ground, but none of that happened. Instead Olek raised his other arm. He still had the gun. Olek pointed it right at my face and—

And that was when Bernie tackled him, so hard he swept Olek right out of my grasp. They landed on the ground, crushing a metal canister, from which rose a huge invisible vinegary cloud. Bernie and Olek rolled over and over, ending up near the lantern with Olek on top. He drew back his huge fist and grinned a horrid grin at Bernie. Taking the time to do that was a mistake. Bernie grabbed the lantern and swung it against the side of Olek’s head. The horrid grin froze on Olek’s face. Bernie hit him again, much harder. Olek toppled over. The lantern went out and we had total darkness in the cave.

I heard Bernie rise. “You okay, Chet?”

I was fine. Maybe not quite back to fine and dandy, but fine.

I heard Bernie go over to Mavis and help her to her feet. I heard Johnnie Lee coming the other way. She stopped nearby. I heard her stomp on something, very hard.

[blank]

“Griffie? Griffie?”

There was a lot of calling for Griffie—more than necessary, in my opinion-but Griffie did not appear. The rest of us hiked out of the forest by starlight, and toward the end we had moonlight, too. I was first, Bernie last, Mavis and Johnnie Lee in the middle. Mavis cried a lot.

“It’s all my fault! None of this would have happened except for me.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Johnnie Lee told her. “Like he’s some wallflower? The asshole’s old enough to be your father—grandfather, even.”

“That’s what I mean! I’m just a stupid, no-good, whore.”

Bernie spoke up, although not loudly. “You’re none of those things. And here’s how we’ll handle this. No one’s going to find out from us. I’m talking about your involvement, Mavis. If they find out they find out, but it won’t be from us and it won’t be easy to prove, not without those pictures, which I’ll send you today. My advice is to destroy them.”

Mavis touched Bernie. “I should have trusted you.”

“Well,” said Bernie. “Um.”

We walked on. After a while, Johnnie Lee said, “So he ends up getting away with it?”

“Who?” said Bernie.

“Wray,” Johnnie Lee said.

“Depends what you mean by getting away with it,” Bernie said. “And I’m not so sure he was the one in charge.”

There was a lot of silent walking after that. Then Johnnie Lee said, “The bumper sticker on the butt pic should be on the cover of every poli sci textbook in the country.”

Bernie laughed. Mavis laughed, too, although it quickly led to tears. And back again.

“I turn out to be the funny one,” Johnnie Lee said.

But maybe she was wrong about that, Griffie ending up as the funny one after all. There was certainly a lot of delighted laughter when he popped up out of nowhere and glided onto Mavis’ shoulder. On Mavis’ shoulder yes, but giving Bernie one of those adoring looks—completely unacceptable from a certain point of view.

“Should I keep him?” she said.

“Why not?” said Johnnie Lee. “The bastard gave him to you.”

“And he seems pretty happy where he is,” Bernie said.

So Griffie would be living with Mavis from here on in? I felt a quiet and quite relaxing moment of—what would you call it? Relief? Something like that.

[blank]

Suzie called. “Your name is coming up.”

“Yeah?” said Bernie.

“Supposedly you were up on stage with Senator Wray the other day.”

“Kind of weird.”

“So I hear,” said Suzie. “From multiple sources. The retiring Senator Wray, as it turns out. He won’t be running after all.”

“No?” Bernie said.

“Allegedly for health reasons. What do you think of that?”

“Well, he is getting on, and—”

“Bernie, please. It’s crap. What’s going on?”

“I didn’t even know he’s retiring until you just told me.”

“There’s also talk that he and Caroline are splitting,” Suzie said. “And that she might run herself. Any thoughts on that?”

“Um, she’s a formidable person,” Bernie said.

“Can I quote you?”

“I don’t see why not but—”

“Bernie! For god’s sake! What’s going on?”

“Can’t say.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Suzie said.

“Yeah,” said Bernie.

“What about the Ukrainian thing? I told you Jacques and I are working on that. Do you think it’s worth pursuing? Is there a McGregor angle?”

“Try a guy named Scott Kyle, in that order.”

“What else?” Suzie said.

There was a long silence. Then Bernie said, “For you, anything, Suzie, but not this.”

[blank]

We had some other calls, all sent direct to voicemail, one before lunch from the chief of Valley PD, one after lunch from the new chief of Valley PD, and one from Les Erlanger.

“Bernie Little? Les Erlanger, here. I’m running for Senate, as I’m pretty sure you know, heh heh, and I’d love to take you to lunch any time at your convenience.”

Bernie gave me a long look after he listened to that. “Heh heh,” he said.

[blank]

A diamond ring that looked familiar arrived by messenger. We sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Singh and for some reason failed to pocket the money. I believe it ended up at the South Pedroia shelter. Rick Torres sent a case of the bourbon with the roses on the label that Bernie likes, plus a squeaky chewy for me, unfortunately misplaced by Bernie.

[blank]

We took Charlie to Buckets and Buckets O’Balls, Cheapest Driving Range West of the Mississippi, Come Knock Yourself Out for his very first golf lesson.

“Hold the club like so,” said Shaky Insterwald. “Feet this way. Club head back to right here. Load up your power. Feel your power loading up?

Charlie nodded a vigorous nod.

“How’s your eyes?” Shaky said. “Work pretty good?”

“I think so,” said Charlie.

“See the dimples on the ball?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m gonna make a red mark on a dimple.” Shaky bent down with a red marker. “With them pretty good eyes of yours you’re gonna watch that dimple and you’re not gonna look up until I say so. Got it?”

Charlie nodded another vigorous nod.

“Now load up, feel the power and knock that son of a—son of a gun to kingdom come.”

Charlie swung. Crack. The ball took off.

“‘Kay,” Shaky said. “Look up.”

Charlie looked up.

“There’s your ball,” said Shaky.

He pointed. The ball was surprisingly far away, still rising, straight and true. A lovely look appeared on Charlie’s face, an even lovelier one on Bernie’s.

[blank]

We went for a nice walk with Weatherly along the bank of the Arroyo Seco, although we could have walked right in it, the Arroyo Seco being dry, as usual. She’d been reinstated and smiled a lot, also gave Bernie more than one kiss on the cheek. After a while her face got more serious.

“I’ve been looking into the Gail Blandina case a little more,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Officially unsolved.”

“That’s my understanding,” Bernie said.

“There were a number of potential suspects in the early part of the investigation but none panned out,” Weatherly said. “One was called Melvin Ellis. He didn’t have much of a record—just the one conviction, for animal cruelty. The last name caught my eye. Turned out to be a distant cousin of our Ellis. They hadn’t kept up with each other but had lived in the same house as children.”

Bernie nodded and said nothing.

“I tried to track him down,” Weatherly said. “Got nowhere. Like he disappeared off the face of the earth.”

Bernie nodded and did more of saying nothing. Weatherly gave him a close look, then shook her head and took his hand.

Meanwhile I came upon what looked like a brand new tennis ball, all fluffy the way I like it, just lying there on the path. I grabbed it and brought it to Bernie. He hurled it far down the arroyo.

I took off after it. And what was this? Trixie taking off after it, too? Did I mention that Trixie, now coneless but supposedly still taking it easy, had tagged along on our walk?

Now comes something you’re not going to believe, so please stop right here.

Trixie got to that tennis ball first! Some might almost say she beat me to it! I knew you wouldn’t believe me.

Acknowledgments

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TK