

Officer Down

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Published by Quercus

Extract

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1

Normally, I avoid domestic disputes, but this girl is standing in the middle of my hallway, and she's hitting herself in the head. With her own shoes. I could turn around, take the elevator back down to the lobby, and notify the doorman. But Omar knows I'm a cop. He'd send me right back up here.

She's my next-door neighbor, unit 1612. Her name is Katie or Kathy or something cute that doesn't quite fit, especially now. She's a small girl with a lot of blond hair and a mouth even worse than mine. She lived here by herself when I moved in two years ago. The first time her late-night partying kept me up, I tried to be reasonable: I slipped a friendly note under her door. The next few times, I made official com-

plaints to the Association. The last time, about a year ago, I invited my co-workers over. They busted her snorting coke with a couple suits from the Board of Trade. Since then, she never says hello.

“You’ll be *fucking* sorry when I’m *fucking* dead, you *fucking* asshole,” she yells, the profanities accentuated with a swift heel to her head. A forearm full of gold bracelets clinks, echoing her swing. I figure she’s high, but when she sees me she pauses, her arms midair, and her eyes are clear with conviction. I try to think of something to say. “Excuse me” doesn’t seem appropriate. I feel like I’m in *her* way.

She takes a step back, politely allowing me to pass, like this is an everyday thing. I stand there like an idiot. How can she be so serious when she looks so ridiculous? When I don’t take the opportunity to make a break for my place, she turns her attention, her yelling, and her shoes to the door.

“Did you hear what I said, you son of a bitch? Do you even care if I die?”

The door couldn’t care less.

I’ve heard her arguing with this guy through my adjoining living room wall for a few weeks now. Senseless, hurtful arguing. Arguing about arguing. One night after a double shift I thought I could sleep for a week and I didn’t sleep at all because I could hear them. *What did you just say? Say it again. I dare you.* I felt like a kid back home with my parents in the next room. And just like when I was a kid, I tried not to listen. I closed my eyes and tried to think about other things. I told myself it wasn’t my problem to solve. Back then it became my problem. Now, it’s right in the middle of my hallway.

“You think you can find someone better than me?” the girl asks. “Besides your *mother*?” Ouch.

When the girl gets no response, she starts assaulting the door with her shoes. I'm comforted it stands between them.

I look both ways. There's no one else around, though I'm sure they're all listening from inside their condos. Granted, that's where most of them solve their own crises.

By now, the humor of the scene is wearing thin, even when one of her French-manicured fingernails pops off. It just adds insult to insult.

The girl keeps at it, and part of me wants to join her and yell at the guy too. I'm sure he's guilty of something. I work with men. My best friends are men. I know how they operate. The guys who play games can go play them at a bowling alley as far as I'm concerned.

On the other hand, this girl hasn't exactly worn a halo since we've been neighbors. It might not be my best move, but I decide to give this guy the benefit of the doubt. I get behind her and grab her arms to stop her from whacking me in the head. Surprisingly, she doesn't resist me. Maybe she wanted me to stop her. The shoes slip out of her hands and into mine. Maybe she's tired. Maybe she's ready to talk.

Or maybe she wants me to hold her shoes so she can bang her head directly against the door.

In her defense, I know sometimes there's no reasoning with a woman in love. My dad ran around with every woman from here to Gary, Indiana, and my mom always accepted his lame excuses. No matter what he did, she'd always take him back. I guess the good times must have been good enough for my mom. Of course I haven't discounted the possibility that she stayed with my dad just to make him miserable. I'm the first to admit she might have been a little nuts. To her credit, though, I never saw her yell at a door.

“You better let me in, Jerry, or I’ll do it!” the girl in the hallway yells, and to this, she gets a response. The door opens, and Jerry, a surprisingly calm-looking individual, tosses a bottle of pills at her. He catches her off guard, and the bottle ricochets off her rib cage like a poorly lobbed whiffle ball. It doesn’t make a sound when it hits the carpet.

“Do it, then,” he says. “You’re crazy.” Then he acknowledges me with a neighborly nod and closes the door as quietly as he opened it. The lock clicks. She looks over at me like she wants to confirm we just witnessed an atrocity, then snatches her shoes from my hands.

I pick up the pills. They’re alprazolam, a generic anti-anxiety drug. When the girl resumes her raucous battle of footwear versus door, I think Jerry might be on to something.

At this point I decide I’m going to stick with my first instinct and find an acceptable way out. When we get a domestic violence call, the guys usually want me to deal with the woman, like we have some allegiance. It generally doesn’t work. In fact, I tend to make women more hysterical, and that’s about the last thing this girl needs.

I know I should keep my mouth shut, go home, and get ready for my date. I don’t.

“Maybe you should take a break. This whole hysterical thing isn’t getting you anywhere.” I shake the bottle of pills like a maraca.

She tucks the shoes under her arm and takes the bottle from me. “Asshole,” she mutters as she reads the label. “These won’t kill me.”

“He knows you’re not going to kill yourself,” I tell her. “You want him to respond to you? You put those shoes on your feet and walk away.”

“This is my place. If I kill myself, he’ll have to move out.” She’s clearly not listening, but at least she’s talking herself out of it. “He can’t afford the rent.” She smacks the door a few more times before she runs out of steam and slumps to the carpet.

“Do you have somewhere else you can go?” I hope she says yes.

“Why should I have to leave? He’s the one who left the goddamned tickets in his pants pocket. He expects me to be psychic. I spend all day at the Laundromat while he’s God knows where, and when he comes back he acts like I deliberately ruined his big plans . . .”

Wait a minute. “You’re threatening suicide over a load of laundry?”

Her answering glare is as close to a *fuck you* as you can get without saying it.

I am really no good at this. If I ask about the tickets, I’m acting like a cop. Actually if I ask her anything she’ll be defensive. What I really want to do is tell her to take one of those pills so I can get on my way. I can see my door from here, and I can hear my phone ringing. I’ll bet it’s Mason, wondering where I am. He’s not going to believe this.

I stand there and stare at the wall, waiting patiently for her to make the next move. I notice a subtle leafy pattern in the wallpaper. Did they remodel? This is the longest I’ve ever spent in this hallway.

“Do you have a cigarette?” the girl asks me, though she’s not really asking. She knows I smoke. She also knows I’m a cop. And she thinks I owe her.

I hand her my pack of Camels and a lighter.

“I can go get Omar,” I offer.

She hands me one of my smokes like she didn’t hear me. Great. Two years of successfully avoiding each other, and now she wants to bond.

“Have you ever been in love?” she asks me as she reaches up to light my cigarette.

I make the first drag of my smoke a long one. I’m deciding if honesty will be helpful or the beginning of a conversation that’ll have me stuck here all night.

“Yes,” I finally answer. I sit down next to her. I knew I’d feel guilty for busting her someday. If I can make sure she’s not going to off herself right here, though, I’ll be on my way after this cigarette with a clear conscience. She looks so vulnerable, sitting cross-legged in her pink socks. I wonder if they’re supposed to be that color. Maybe she screwed them up in the wash, too.

“Are you in love now?” she asks.

“Yeah.” It feels good to admit it.

“Does he lock you out of your own damn condo?”

“No. But I don’t do his laundry.”

“Does he make you think you’re crazy? Like everything’s your fault?”

“No.” There’s something so childlike about the way she looks up at me, anticipating the rest of my answer. I give it some thought. “You know, you should think about why you two fell in love in the first place. Was it the way you folded his T-shirts? Or how you cook spaghetti?” I’ve smelled things burning over there, so I say, “I doubt it. You probably devoted every free minute you had to each other. But now you live together, and everything is reversed. Instead of anticipating what could happen next, you expect things to happen. Instead of making an effort to be together, you resent the time you spend on the couch. And love gets lost in the details. In the bills. The dishes. You take that stuff away, and you still love each other . . .” I’m even impressing myself with this theory, and I think I can get through to her, but then I smell something else

burning, and I notice she's using my lighter to singe her arm hair.

Jerry's right, this girl is crazy. I take away the lighter and she starts to giggle. I can't tell if she's laughing at me or at the fact that she's burned off a lengthy trail of hair. Childlike is right.

"Good luck." I give up. I get up.

"Can I ask a serious question?" she asks before I can take a step past her.

I wait for it.

"How do you do it? How do you make it work?"

Just then, her door opens about six inches and hangs there. Looks like Jerry has had a change of heart.

The girl jumps up, leaving her shoes and her pills, forgetting all about me and how I make things work. The funny thing is, she wouldn't believe me if I told her. She'd think *I* was crazy.

The door closes behind them as I approach my place, feeling smart, and also regretting the fact that I've never given anyone the power to lock me out.

2

This is your personal 911. Leave a message.”

Sounds cheesy, right? Not coming from Mason Imes. I wait for the beep.

“It’s Sam,” I say, “and it’s ten after ten. Detective, where are you? I’m hungry. Hurry up. Call me.”

I hang up and check myself in the hall mirror again. I’ve been ready to go for too long, and I’m second-guessing my outfit. Do I really expect a forgiving black dress and knee-high boots to hide the fact that I haven’t worked out in a month? Keeping up with the cop lifestyle has been hard lately. There’s no such thing as a diet when you’re on duty. The caffeine, the nicotine, the fast food, the alcohol; sometimes I feel like I belong in detox with the junkies. I try to combat my in-

take with exercise, but since the weather has been bad, I've nixed my lakefront running routine. I was up to six miles when the cold hit. Tomorrow, I keep saying. Tomorrow I'll bundle up and get back to it.

I adjust the underwire in my bra. I'm counting on my cleavage to serve as a distraction from my ass, but that doesn't help the rest of my sub-par appearance. My hair looks like it's been pulled back all day (it has) and my makeup looks like a second coat rather than a fresh one (it is). Good thing we're going to Iggy's; at times like these, I live for bad lighting.

Mason is the one who planned dinner; he knows Iggy's is one of my favorite late-night places. It's low-key, unadvertised, and out of the way, and it's been around for too long to be trendy. The regulars are anonymous, and cool enough to know so. The lights are candles, the booths in the front windows depend on Milwaukee Avenue's streetlights, and the bar is barely lit by blue neon bubbles overhead. It's a speakeasy of sorts, at least for people like Mason and me, where the only one watching is the waiter—and that's just to make sure your plate is empty and your drink is full. I've never had a better steak after 10 P.M. I think most people come for Iggy's martinis, poured in at least thirty different candied variations; I don't experiment because I drink whiskey and I don't like dessert.

Mason knows this too, so I'm sure he has promises planned for dessert: whispers that will lead to a night-cap and a long night somewhere nearby, where I'll wake up tomorrow and hail a cab back to my boring life, daydreaming through other people's problems.

At this point, though, I'm starting to feel reluctant. Maybe that episode in the hallway put a damper on the whole dating thing. I don't know if I really want to go out anymore. If I had any food in the fridge I would

have already eaten it straight from its carton, put on my pajamas, and settled into bed.

Mason must be held up at work. He knows I hate waiting.

I'm about to make myself a drink when the phone finally rings. I hesitate to answer. I could have a night alone, a break from what Mason is trying to make too serious, but that also means passing up that steak. My stomach growls. I answer.

It's not Mason. It's my boss, Sergeant MacInerny, Twenty-third District, Chicago PD.

"Samantha Mack, Sarge here. Can you come in? William Wade's out with the flu."

Fuck. I can't say no. I mean, I could, but I can't. Wade is a hypochondriac, but he always covers for me and he never asks questions.

"Smack?" Sarge asks, with enough punch in his voice to sound like a command.

"Yeah. I'm on my way," I say and hang up. My night of passion over before it started, without so much as a protest. I put down the bottle of Jameson and head back to the bedroom to change.

The ride north is quick—not many people out on a Tuesday night this time of year. Once winter gets ahold of the lake, it clings as long as it can, offering only a few flirtatious days of warmth. Come April, people get fed up waiting for spring: they ignore the elements, put away their full-length wools and wear windbreakers, and hope it doesn't snow one last time.

I actually like nights like these, when the air is clear and the city lights seem to heat the sky. I take the Inner Drive all the way up to Addison even though there are at least a dozen stoplights. The buildings on Lake

Shore are beautifully coexistent, I think, like people. I take my time before I have to deal with the ugly things.

I get to the station and nobody's in front. I figure I missed roll and head for the locker room. On my way I notice a box of Dunkin' Donuts in the break room so I stop and scarf down two chocolate-iced rings. They're approaching stale, and I hate sweets, but there's nothing worse than starting a shift on an empty stomach.

The coffeepot is empty, so I get a Coke from the vending machine and take it with me. Some dinner.

In the locker room, the guys are all suspended in various stages of undress, listening to Officer Flagherty tell some new dick joke. Flagherty's naked, hairy belly hangs over his belt in a jovial way, just like his bearded chin hangs over his neck. He stops mid-sentence when he sees me, but not because he thinks I'll be offended by his humor. Paul Flanigan, a rookie with dimples cute enough to keep him from a promotion, hides his lower half behind his locker door even though he's in his boxers. He's not used to me. Everyone else is only mildly annoyed because I interrupted the joke. So I say,

"Wade's tummy hurts. Who am I on with?"

They all look around like I just announced the apocalypse.

"Anybody?" I ask.

After everyone's avoided my gaze, Flagherty finally says, "Wade was scheduled with Fred."

"You're joking," I say.

"I was, Smack," he says, "but that wasn't the punch line."

One of the guys stifles a laugh.

"Ha-ha," I say. When he called, the Sarge failed to mention that I'd be spending the night with my ex.

♦ ♦ ♦

“Hey, stranger,” Fred says. He’s waiting for me outside his squad even though it’s so cold the wind could tear your face off. His own face has weathered a few winters, though his expressions suggest otherwise. If it weren’t for the crescent-shaped scar that frames one of his true blues, you’d think he worked a crosswalk in the suburbs.

“Just like old times, eh?” Fred asks, and the scar, like cold wax, resists moving with his smile.

“Not quite,” I say and get in. Valiant effort, but I don’t want to reminisce. I strap myself into the passenger seat and straighten my hat.

“What’s with Wade?” Fred asks as he gets in the car.
“Flu.”

“Going around, I think. Deb’s been feeling bad.”
Deb. Deborah. Debbie. Yuck.

“If you’re gonna try to make conversation, you might want to leave her out of it,” I say, and stare ahead. My breath gets short, reminding me I need a cigarette. I pull out my pack of Camels and light one. I know Fred wants to protest, but he doesn’t. We ride up Lake Shore Drive from Addison in what I hope he would call an uncomfortable silence.

Fred parks the squad outside the Fireside Tap, a little dive on Lawrence where Uptown meets the Edgewater neighborhood and nobody seems too happy about it. I wouldn’t call it dangerous, but I carry a gun.

“We slumming for drunks?” I ask.

“Got a snitch, paged me to meet him at the stop across the street. A guy who’s trying to get himself out of a little trouble,” Fred says.

“You just described the plight of nearly every guy I’ve ever met.” I wonder if he thinks he’s included. I

light another cigarette with the butt of the one I'm smoking.

"You know that's bad for both of us," he tells me.

"One night's not gonna kill you." I blow a puff of smoke at him.

He cracks his window.

I blast the heat in retaliation.

"It's always a battle with you. I'm starting to think you do it on purpose," he says and waves an exaggerated hand at my smoke.

"You're right, Fred. We ride together once a year now and you know me better than I know myself."

"I'm still your friend."

I take a dramatic pause.

"A friend doesn't ditch his partner." I had that one rehearsed.

"I didn't ditch you."

"No, you got married," I say. To a money-grubbing bitch disguised as a blonde with self-esteem issues, I don't say.

"Deb's not the reason we're not partners and you know it."

"You're going to tell me it was your idea to work overnights? Wasn't it you who said you'd rather check bags at O'Hare than stay up past ten?"

"People change."

"That's one way to put it," I say, and I'm about to give him another way when he cuts me off—

"There he is."

I assume he's talking about the snitch, a little bastard with a big walk who's appeared just outside the El station. You can always tell the ones that work both sides. They act like they can't get in any more trouble. And they'd all stand out in a crowd of morons. Like this guy: it's maybe twenty degrees and he's wearing a

slim leather coat, no hat, no gloves. Homeless guys have more layers. And this guy looks right at us—right at our squad, before he jumps over the turnstile and disappears up the steps. Without paying. I'm surprised he didn't kick up his heels.

"Jesus, did he do that just to spite us?" I want to pull my .38 and shoot the guy from my window just to make a point. I reach for my door handle, but Fred stops me.

"I'll go, Smack. You stay here and wait for your claws to retract."

Before I can reply, he gets out of the car and follows the snitch.

Not five minutes go by—I mean, I'm not even done with my smoke and I'm still pissed about the claw remark, and I have every right to be: It was Fred who got me through my rookie year and then dumped me like a one-night stand. It was Fred who said I was his best friend and then didn't even invite me to his wedding. And Fred's the one who taught me how to be a true partner. Then he switched to overnights and left me without one. So I'm formulating a pretty valid argument about the way things turned out when Fred jumps in the squad and says, "It's on!" He hits the gas and heads for Clark Street. His adrenaline is palpable and I can tell it's time to put all the personal shit aside, though I still want to comment on the fact that Deb's not a real blonde.

"Where we going?" I ask.

"You remember Marko Trovic? That scumbag we arrested up in Rogers Park last year? The one who had the hots for his girlfriend's kid?"

"Yeah," I say. How could I forget. Trovic has a problem with women—particularly nonvirgins who

dare to leave the house for more than groceries. He didn't much like being collared by me.

"I arrested him again a couple weeks ago," Fred says. "This time I caught him with his hands *in* the kid's panties. She had those day-of-the-week jobs where it says it right there on the undies? Told her she was wearing the wrong day. Sick fuck."

"Great," I say, "now the kid'll have all kinds of issues. She'll grow up to be a stripper who won't work Wednesdays." I actually amused myself with that one, but Fred's not even listening.

"I did it by the book, but he jumped bail. Girlfriend and the whole rest of his neighborhood aren't talking—in English anyway. But Birdie says he's back in town to finish some business."

"Birdie?" I ask.

"My snitch," Fred says. "And if he's right, and we find that son of a bitch Trovic and I get my hands on him, he's gonna need more than some little girl's underwear to figure out what day it is."

I assume this will not be by the book.

I have to admit I'm as excited as Fred about nabbing this asshole. I'll never forget the day we arrested him, though I'd like to. I put the cuffs on Trovic; that was my first mistake. He wasn't about to take orders from a woman. He made his opinion of me known, spewing profanities in my face. His words slurred between English and Serbian, held together by an imprecise "m," like "Jebem ti mmm'majku . . . mmm'merican bitch." I remember his breath smelled like sarma, the pork rolled in pickled grape leaves he was in the middle of stuffing his face with when we showed up. I took as much as I could of his foul mouth, but then I made my second mistake: I asked why he went after little girls, or women at all, if he hated us so much. I suggested he

might swing the other way. And I might have said something about him preferring sheep. Fred thought it was funny, but Trovic didn't. And even though he was cuffed behind his back, he managed to grab a kitchen chair and broadside me with it. I hit the ground, and then so did Trovic—thanks to Fred and his billy club. Fred went off on him. I could hear the blunt contact of metal on Trovic's ribs. Trovic didn't fight back, but he kept his lips pursed in a defiant smile, his black eyes locked on me, and not another word was necessary to convince me of his absolute hatred. For weeks I saw his face when I closed my eyes at night. I don't know what bothered me more: that I mistakenly thought I had the situation under control, or that I knew there was no way to diffuse his hate. I guess some arrests stay with you.

We sneak up, lights off, outside a two-flat in Rogers Park. It doesn't look any better or worse than the other houses on this street, but I wouldn't exactly drop my guard. Not just because of Trovic. This neighborhood is tricky: it's bordered by Loyola University on the south and a state-run group home for mental patients on the north. I wonder if Trovic is shacking up with a college girl or a schizo.

It's quiet, the kind of quiet where you know you should just wait a minute, take a second to think—

"2318," Freddy radios in.

"Go ahead 18," says the dispatcher.

"Request backup at 1431 West Jarvis."

"I've got unit 2320 on a stop at Pratt and Western," says the dispatcher, "en route in five minutes." As her voice rips through the air I sink in my seat, afraid we've been found out. A single car a good twenty blocks away won't get them here that quickly.

“Ten-four.” Freddy hangs up the radio and sits so still that not even his jacket makes that familiar comfortable squeak when it rubs against the vinyl seat, and I remember all the times we’ve had like this, when the silence was our bond. I finally look over at him, and he’s looking at me, and suddenly he’s not the asshole cop who put his love life over the job. He’s my old partner, my buddy, my safety net . . .

“Let’s go,” he says.

I take back what I just said about safety.

I’d attempt to reason with him, but Fred’s already getting out of the car, and I have to follow. Just like old times.

I catch up with Fred as he’s casing the front of the place, his gun drawn, held close to his leg. I take cover against the white aluminum siding that looks yellow from the glow of a single streetlight. I check my gun even though I know it’s loaded. I can see my breath so I hold it as I take a quick peek inside a window to my left. It’s dark; all I see is my own reflection. Fred tries the front door and it’s unlocked. I know he’s going in and there’s no time to argue; I’m going in too. I put my hand on his shoulder to let him know I’m ready. He pushes the door open and we rush in together. I button-hook right; he goes left.

Once we’re in I expect Fred to announce our arrival, but he just stands there in the dark, listening, getting a feel for the place, so I do the same. I didn’t expect to be handed a map, but the silence in this place makes me feel completely lost. Something isn’t right. I feel like someone will flip on the lights and all the guys from the station will yell *Surprise!* because it’s an elaborate joke for Fred’s birthday. Too bad they already marked last week’s occasion with a cake from the Jewel and a group card.

I hear something at the end of a long hallway that runs to the back of the house, some kind of accidental movement. I check for Freddy's go-ahead and with one look he says, *Yes, I heard it too, we're close, someone's back there; go, Sam.* He stays behind double-checking, watching, waiting for the right person to make the wrong move.

Shadows from the wind-blown trees outside bounce around through the windows in the hall and fool me into aiming at nothing. It's like hide-and-seek and my .38 is a heavy toy. There are doorways to my right and I pause at every one, aiming quickly inside as I dart to the other side and listen for some reaction. I don't move again until I'm sure—I'll be damned if I'm gonna miss anyone. When I get to the back, the floorboards creak under my feet. I stop and press up against the wall, away from the worn part of the floor, and pull my flashlight from my coat. I shine the light around the empty kitchen and stop on the back door. It hangs open on rusty hinges. I can feel the cold air just beginning to work its way into the room. Trovic must have gone out that way. Right?

I make for the door, following my instinct. As soon as I move, I hear something just behind me and in a panic I remember there's always one corner you missed or one shadow that moved when you weren't looking, so I whip around, ready to put a round in someone hiding by the refrigerator—but it's Fred standing there, and he pushes the tip of my gun down like I should have known better. I let myself breathe, finally, heavily, but then Fred puts one finger to his lips and another to the ceiling and I hear a subtle shift of the floorboards upstairs, just like the ones in the hall.

Fred takes my hand like a child's and directs my flashlight to the foot of a staircase. Then he turns off

the beam and lets go of my hand. As my eyes readjust to the darkness, he disappears. I follow in what I think is his direction and I think I hear him going up the stairs. I cross the room carefully, and slightly on my tiptoes.

I climb the stairs more confidently than I feel, one foot over the other, with the rest of me wanting to turn around and get out of there. I feel like Trovic is waiting for us. Why couldn't we wait for backup?

I don't dare turn on my flashlight, though it's aimed straight ahead with my left hand just as my gun is with my right. I see a faint light at the top of the stairs, the night sky outlining a window, and I make that my destination. I pray nothing gets in my way.

Just as I reach the top, I hear a gunshot.

Before my brain catches up with my body I drop to the floor. I'm on my elbows, trying to get my bearings. I'm crawling away from the steps and away from the light of the window toward the pitch fucking black. I feel along the molding, navigating my way down a hall, and then I come to a break that must be the entrance to a room. I get on my knees and aim my gun around the corner. I can't see shit and I can't hear over my own damn breath so I back up and hold it. Then another shot is fired. I can't place exactly where it came from or where it went but I know I'm close. I know I'm right around the corner. That light from the window behind me only tells me where I was, not where I need to be. I need to be in that room.

I call out: "Fred!"

I don't get a response, so I cut around the corner, keeping my back against the wall, aiming my gun into the darkness. I wait and I wait and I wait and my eyes are peeled but I can't see a fucking thing in front of me. Time stretches like a rubber band. I wait for it to

snap. I wait for another shot. I wait for something, anything besides this silence and its horrible implications. I think about screaming, about firing my gun, about turning on my stupid flashlight and standing up and saying, "Okay, you win."

Then I hear Freddy call out: "Smack?" But without the usual conviction.

"Fred," I say, relieved to know he's there. "Where are you?"

"Right here . . ." Which doesn't tell me anything, but I follow the sound of his voice and I can hear him straining to breathe, so I say, "Are you hit?"

At the same time he says, "I got him."

"Trovic?" I ask, and just saying his name in the dark is enough reason to turn on my flashlight. I find Fred right away: he's on the ground only five feet in front of me. I crawl to him.

"I got him, I got that dirty son of a bitch. You'll see."

He grabs my arm and makes it hard to aim my flashlight and my gun from corner to corner of the room, working toward the middle, looking for "him." I hope I'll find Trovic's body. I hope we aren't sitting ducks. We're in a bedroom, and it's pretty much empty except for an unmade bed. I should check the other side of the bed. I should check underneath the mattress. I see a lamp on a nightstand. I should turn it on. I should move, but Fred won't let go of my arm.

"Fred?"

"I'm hit," he says. Shit.

I kneel beside him and open his coat. I feel around his chest, but there's no blood. He's wearing a vest. I go for my radio, but he grabs my hands and says, "You'll thank me."

"No time for that," I say. I've got to get him out of here. With just this flashlight I can't get a feel for the

whole room, and I don't know if we're safe. "Get up," I tell him.

He doesn't, so I set the flashlight on the floor, its beam aimed at the bed. I get behind Fred and put my left arm around his chest, my right still free to fire my gun. I press through my heels and heave, trying to pull Fred back to the wall. He doesn't budge.

"Jesus, it hurts, I think it went through." He grabs my arm and pulls my gun down so I stop because I think he's really hurt and I shouldn't move him. I holster my gun and move back around him so he can show me where he's hit.

He squeezes my arm, the slightest indication for me to move closer, and suddenly I don't think this is about getting shot. I get close enough to see him by the glow of the flashlight on the floor behind us. I think he is crying.

"Fred?" is all I say, though I want to whisper I'm sorry, sorry for all the shit we did to each other, and I wish we would have said what we meant before it was too late . . . Is it too late? Can we ever be like we were?

Then Fred says, "Did you ever call John?"

God knows why.

In the middle of what I thought was a moment. In the middle of what he said was a bust. I can't believe, in the middle of all this, he's trying to fix me up with one of his friends. An attorney from Northbrook, of all people. Why is he saying this to me now?

I get on my knees and feel around his chest again. He wheezes. I check his neck. I can't find any blood.

"Jesus, Fred, I didn't call John and I don't want to hear it. Help me. Tell me where you're hit."

"Guess I'd have to be an asshole for you to listen to me," he says, and he coughs a little. Does he think these are his last words? He won't let go of my arm.

“You are an asshole. And I wouldn’t be caught dead running around with someone who makes a living keeping criminals in business.” I’m trying to get a rise out of Fred, to keep him going. I don’t know what’s wrong with him. I pray the guys from car 20 are just outside.

“Come on, he’d be good for you.” Fred holds his breath, then says through his pain, “He’s a great guy. Single, stable . . .” It’s more than pain; his voice sounds heavy with regret.

“How about we discuss my love life once we get out of here?” I think he knows about Mason and me, and I’m sure he doesn’t approve, but this is ridiculous.

“You have no idea who he is . . . what he can do . . .” Then Fred’s voice breaks and he frantically tries to push me away. His eyes plead for help.

I think he’s in pain, so I try to calm him. “Relax,” I say, “you’re going to be fine.” But I realize how stupid that sounds when I figure out Fred is looking over my shoulder, at whoever is behind me. I feel the floorboards shift beneath my knees and I know we’re fucked. He didn’t kill Marko Trovic. And I didn’t check under the bed.

“Leave her out of this,” Fred says with the courage of a dead man.

I know any move I make will be futile, but I draw my gun just as whoever’s behind me pushes me, a two-handed shove so powerful I feel my neck snap as my knees hit the floor next to Fred. I’m off balance, but that doesn’t stop me; I turn and fire. The blast from my gun knocks me on my ass and I slide along the hardwood, past Fred. I kick the flashlight and it rolls in an arc. The beam ends up shining on me like a spotlight for Trovic, and I can’t see past the light. I know Fred is in front of me just to my left so I fire over him in the

perp's direction. I don't know how many shots I get off, but I keep pulling the trigger until all I hear is the click-click-cick of my gun's hammer falling on an empty chamber.

And then, nothing.

I don't move. No one does. I must have hit Trovic.

I scramble to grab the flashlight. I shine it toward the bed. I scan the room, but I don't see anyone.

I suck some air into my lungs. "Freddy," I say. He doesn't answer. I'm afraid to take my eyes off the room. The flashlight's batteries rattle with my shaking hand.

I let go of my empty gun and feel around for Fred's when suddenly a slick, warm liquid trails down my forehead into my eye. I touch it with my finger as though it's someone else's blood. Then a split second later a sharp pain registers in the top of my head, and as I fall to the floor, I think that Trovic must have hit me too.

I lie there and wonder if I'm dead.