

A Blind Eye

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Mama says we all got a kernel of meanness inside us. A place to go and hide where there are no brothers and sisters and mamas and papas and nobody matters but us. A place where we don't ever have to share the cake or ever have to smile when we don't mean it. Where all we gotta do is what we want, and we don't have to answer to no one about nothing. All we gotta do is make sure we're the ones who survive. 'Cause not everybody makes it. Nope. Not everybody can find that hard place in their hearts. And for those who can't . . . well then . . . it's gonna be a long row to hoe. Life's gonna chew 'em up and spit 'em out. Leave 'em nothing but a shell with the nut gone, until, by the time the end rolls around, they're ready to go, 'cause they ain't lived nothing but lies, so nothing they got left at the end is worth fighting for. Might as well be gone is what I say.

"I see." The woman sighed and forced her face into an uncomfortable smile. "You haven't been listening to me, have you, sir?"

"I've been listening," Corso said.

"Then you've heard me saying noon tomorrow, sir." She hesitated. "At the very earliest."

"I really need to get out of here."

She stopped fanning the pile of tickets and reluctantly made eye contact.

"As I've told you *before*, sir, all flights are canceled indefinitely."

"I've been stuck in this . . . this . . . facility for two days."

She sighed. "Sir . . . pleeease. It's inconvenient for all of us, sir, but I assure you there's absolutely nothing that can be done about it." She gestured toward the windows, shook her head disgustedly, and again used her square white fingernails to pick through the paperwork. Corso jammed his hands into his pants'

pockets, turned away from the Courtesy Desk, and walked to the window.

Outside, a thin curtain of snow and ice blew in from the west at a thirty-degree angle. Nothing moved. Daylight's footprints and tire tracks lay buried beneath yet another foot of freshly fallen snow, leaving the tarmac a solid, wind-whipped blanket of white.

Inside, O'Hare International Airport looked like a refugee camp. Every flat surface held either a stranded traveler or his baggage. Fifty yards away, at the far end of the concourse, a pair of soldiers, automatic weapons slung over their shoulders, criss-crossed the floor, stopping here and there to check a lock or gaze into the face of a sleeping citizen.

The helmets turned in unison as Meg Dougherty came striding around the corner, her tall laced boots clicking over the floor and her black cape fanning out behind her like a pair of ebony wings. She said something to the boys, but Corso couldn't make it out. The taller of the two gave her a small salute and then dug an elbow into his buddy's ribs. The buddy leaned over and whispered something in his partner's ear. They smiled and bumped shoulders as she walked past.

In the harsh overhead lights, she looked like a vampire queen. Or maybe the angel of death. Pure Goth. Black all over. Cape, tights, boots, nails, lips, and hair. Better than six feet. Betty Paige on steroids, she cut through the artificial air like an arrow.

A muffled groan pulled Corso's attention to the window ledge on his right, where an elderly woman stirred in her sleep, sliding her wrinkled cheek into the small puddle of drool her mouth had deposited onto the side of her plaid Samsonite suitcase.

Dougherty came to a stop at Corso's side. She looked out the window at the winter wonderland. Then turned and threw an angry gaze Corso's way. He noticed, averted his eyes, and began to survey the icy night with renewed interest.

"You enjoy your little jaunt?" he asked.

"Nothing like a jog around an airport to clear the lungs."

He walked three steps closer to the giant pane of glass separating them from the blizzard. Put his hand to the surface for a moment. She followed him.

"It was a most informative interlude. It really was."

Something in her tone alerted him.

"How so?" he asked.

"Well, first off, I found out we're probably not going anywhere."

Corso eyed her. "Since when are you the weatherman?"

"Weather person."

"Whatever."

"Since I met a meteorologist in the bar."

"Oh, really."

"Nice guy . . . named Jerry."

"Jerry?"

"Says this weather pattern is what they call a static

low-pressure inversion. Says it's got Chicago surrounded."

"Hmmm."

"Says the weather pattern is stalled right here over the Midwest."

"That so?"

"Yep. According to Jerry, the storm's about a hundred miles across and not moving a muscle anytime in the foreseeable future."

"A hundred miles, huh?"

"That's what he said."

Corso turned and walked back to the Courtesy Desk. The woman's eyes were weary and rimmed with red. "You're not going to be a problem, now are you, sir?"

"What kind of a problem?"

"I'm not going to have to call security, am I?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Because, sir, you seem to be the only one having difficulty understanding the situation."

"I've got to get out of here."

Her face said she didn't give a shit. "As I've told you every fifteen minutes for the past six hours"—she shrugged, showed her palms—"nobody is going nowhere."

Corso opened his mouth, but the woman cut him off. "Unless, of course, you'd like to discuss the matter with security."

"Why do you keep bringing up security?"

"What with the terrorism and the increase in vigilance and all," she said, nodding at the approaching soldiers, "I'm given to understand that security checks can be quite lengthy and unpleasant these days."

Corso heard the scratch of boots and felt the presence of the soldiers. A voice asked, "Trouble here, Annie?"

She put on a wry smile and looked to Corso for an answer.

Corso held up both hands in surrender. "No trouble," he said.

She arched an ironic eyebrow at the soldiers and then turned back to Corso. "Then what can I do for you, sir?"

"I just wanted to ask a question."

"What question is that, sir?"

"Where's the nearest airport that's still flying?"

She set the pile of paperwork on the counter and began clicking on the keyboard. Each of her thick white nails had a different Christmas design painted on it. A Santa. A Christmas tree. A candy cane. A reindeer. And a wreath.

"Madison," she said after a moment.

"How far away is that?"

"Coupla hundred miles," she said.

Corso thanked her and walked back over to the window where Meg stood, gazing out at nature's carnage. The old woman on the ledge stirred again.

"Let's go," Corso said.

"I've got a few ideas about where *you* can go," she said, without turning his way.

He ignored the jibe. "We'll go to Madison."

"What's in Madison?"

"Planes that fly."

Courteous Annie and the soldiers had formed themselves into a tight muttering knot, alternately whispering and casting furtive glances at Corso and Dougherty.

A dry, humorless laugh rolled from Meg's throat. "A guy with your problem really should try not to attract so much attention."

When Corso continued gazing out the window, she walked around him. Stood right in front of him, looking up at his expressionless face. "That was a conversational gambit, Frank. You're supposed to ask me what problem it is I'm talking about."

His face did mock surprise. "I didn't know there was a script."

"I didn't either . . . until about a half hour ago. There I was sitting at the bar, drinking Irish coffee and watching CNN."

He met her glare. "With Jerry."

"Right there on the stool next to me. Hip to hip, as it were." An uncomfortable silence settled in around them.

"Guess whose face is all over the news," she said finally. He tried to look bored. "Homey don't do the guessing thing."

"Seems reclusive author Frank Corso's got a warrant out for his ass."

"Really?"

"Bestselling author Frank Corso. Fugitive material-witness Frank Corso."

"Who says?"

"CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS. Pretty much the whole alphabet soup is in agreement. All that's missing is Tommy Lee Jones and the relentless pursuit."

"Interesting." He raised his eyebrows and folded his arms across his chest. "Do I detect an issue here?"

She stepped in closer, shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and strained the words through her teeth. "Of course I've got an issue, you asshole. You hired me under false pretenses . . . on no notice . . . saying you needed me for some more photos of the Manderson thing. Gotta have 'em . . . right away. I need to drop everything I'm doing and get my butt to the airport."

"You're being paid for your time."

"That's not the point, Frank," she growled. "The point is that I'm a professional photographer. That's what I do. You need pictures for your books, I'm happy to have the work." She shrugged. "You overpay me, and I let it happen. I tell myself the extra money is in deference to our former . . . more intimate relationship. But . . . I am not your keeper." She paused for a long second. "Remember? This is a discussion we've had lots of times before." Corso didn't answer. She went on, her voice rising. "So

you'll have to excuse me if I'm a bit miffed when I have to find out from TV that our business trip to buttfuck Minnesota is about avoiding the law . . . and that I'm just along as camouflage."

Corso swiveled his head, checking the nearby seats. "It was just going to be for a few days," he whispered. "Then the whole thing would be over and we could go back home and everything would be status quo."

"A few?"

"The Grand Jury's term expires next Sunday. After that, it's all over."

"That's nine days." She stomped the floor. "You thought you could drag me all over the map for nine days and not have me notice we weren't accomplishing a goddamn thing?"

Corso shrugged. "I figured you'd last a week," he said. "Maybe a little less."

She shook her head in disgust. "I should have listened to my voice," she said. "The minute I got off the phone with you, I had this voice asking me how in God's name you could possibly need any more pictures from Justine, Minnesota. I was like, 'Jesus, what else can that maniac want? I've got pictures of every damn thing in that one-horse town. Hell, I've got pictures of that guy what's-his-name's lungs, still connected and slung over a ceiling beam. I've got pictures of—'"

"It was just supposed to be—" he insisted.

"And your hair . . ." She poked him in the chest

with a long red fingernail. "That's why you cut off your ponytail." She made a rude noise with her lips. "And here I was thinking you might have finally grown up."

"Shhhhhh."

Her voice began to rise. "So . . . let me see if I've got this story straight," she began. "You gotta excuse me, but I'm a couple of books behind."

Corso winced. Put a finger to his lips. "Keep it down," he whispered.

"In that last book of yours . . ."

"Death in Dallas."

"Yeah."

"You claimed you knew where that rich guy . . . what was his name?"

"Harding Coles."

"Yeah, Harding Coles. You claimed you knew where he buried his ex-wife's body."

"I thought I did, yeah."

"Thought?"

"Things have eroded."

"Eroded how?"

"Abrams," he began. "A. J. Abrams. The guy who swore he knew where Harding had planted his wife."

"Yeah?"

"He turned up missing."

"So? Call that number you call when you really need to find somebody or something. From what I've seen, they can find anything."

His tone suddenly got serious. "I've told you before. For both our sakes, you need to forget all about that. That was an emergency. A onetime thing."

"So . . . you've already tried them?"

He remained silent.

She was momentarily taken aback. "Really? Even those guys drew a blank."

"As it stands, I don't have a thing."

"So make up something, share it with the Texas cops, and get this foolishness over with."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Think about it. What if they go tramping out to where I tell them to go, and come up with nothing?"

She considered the question for a moment, before pursing her lips and emitting a long low whistle. "You really don't have a clue where that poor woman's buried, do you?"

"Nope," Corso said. "So . . . if I go back to Texas, I either spend six months in jail, or I make up something and end up looking like Geraldo Rivera coming out of Al Capone's basement with nothing in his hand but his dick." She started to speak. He held up a hand. "And when it's over, I get sued for the national debt and lose."

"Again," she added.

"Thanks for the reminder."

"You should have thought of that before you started claiming you knew where the bodies were buried."

"I was on deadline. I thought I was on my way to finding out." He made a face. "What can I say?"

"So all this time you've had your platoon of lawyers keeping the Texas folks at bay. Keeping you in Seattle."

"Yeah."

"So how in hell did things get so ugly so quick?"

"Barry called," Corso said, naming his lawyer Barry Fine. "Seems they're a mite pissed off down in Texas. They decided to send somebody up to get me."

"They can do that?"

"Only if the local authorities cooperate." He waved a hand. "Barry said King County was cooperating with the extradition, and I better get lost until the grand jury's term expires."

She laughed. "Because you're such a popular figure with the King County authorities."

"They're still pissed off about Walter Himes."

She walked in a slow circle. "So you decided to hide out, but you didn't want to be alone, so you decided to drag me all the way to Justine, Minnesota, on a fool's errand, where I might end up stranded"—she began to sputter—"up to my ass in . . ."

Over Corso's shoulder, Courteous Annie and the soldiers were no longer bothering to disguise their curiosity. "I ought to turn you in," Dougherty said. "I ought to march right over there and tell those soldiers who you are. There might be a reward or something."

Corso pretended not to hear. "We can drive to Madison and catch a red-eye."

She gestured toward the window. "In this?"

Corso inclined his head toward the sleeping woman, then checked the Courtesy Desk, where Annie now had her eyes locked on Corso as she whispered into the phone.

"I can't spend another night here."

As Dougherty thought it over, the old woman groaned again and turned her spit-glazed cheek toward the ceiling. Dougherty winced at the sight. "Drive?"

"We'll get an SUV. Four-wheel drive. It'll be an adventure."

Her eyes remained on the old woman. Unconsciously she brought her hand to the side of her face. "I don't drool when I sleep . . . do I?"

"Buckets," he said.

"I hate you for dragging me into this."

"I'm sorry."

"Well now," she sneered, "at least *there's* something we agree on."

"You wanna rent the car or fetch the luggage?"

"What I want is to go back to Seattle," she said. "You don't need a playmate, and I don't take fugitive gigs. You're gonna have to dodge the cops on your own, Frank. I've got a life to live."

He started to speak but changed his mind. After a moment he said in a low voice, "Soon as we get to Madison, I'll put you on the first flight to Seattle."

"For real? No speeches? No messy scenes in the airport?"

He held up two fingers. "For real."

"I still think it would serve you right if I turned your ass in."

"The car or the bags?"

"I'll get the car," she said.

Corso dug into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and extracted a credit card.

"On me," he said.

"Damn right," she said as she snatched it from his fingers and strode away.