

THE PINE BARREN'S STRATAGEM

by Ken Harris

EXCERPT

Rockfish sat in the Scion's passenger seat while Jawnie drove. He wasn't thrilled with the decision, but she was adamant that some of the dirt roads, deep within the Pine Barrens, were no place for a Dodge Challenger. Plus, she didn't feel like playing navigator. In the end, Rockfish decided not to put up much of a fight, considering Jawnie was more than a little familiar with where they were headed, although he had second thoughts with the four cases of whiplash he had suffered before even reaching the highway.

"Do you drive with two feet," he asked. "Because my head can't keep jerking forward and slamming back much more. Unless you're running an insurance scam, and if so, what would be my take?"

"Enough with the backseat driving, and can you put your visor back up? That late afternoon glare off the mirror is killing me."

"Make a deal with you. You drive how you want. I'll keep an eye on our surroundings the way I want. Speaking of which, can you move this right-side passenger mirror a little more to the right, all I'm seeing is the rear fender."

"You got it," Jawnie said, and she played with the mirror control until Rockfish let her know it was right where he needed it. He could monitor anyone approaching from behind without having to turn around.

"I do want to fill you in on something I learned before we left," Rockfish said. "When you went into the house to fix those sandwiches, I reached out to a guy I know in the Baltimore PD, Dan Decker. He's an old friend and helps me out when he can. He's going to have one of their academy cadets do some research for us and see if there is anything more than a current history between the Marini and Provolone families. The Marini's have run Baltimore as long as the Provolone's have this area. If Edward's notation of the two factions working together has anything to it, Decker will let us know. He said currently both families have worked together when it was profitable to do so. Sound familiar?"

“Yeah, same M.O. as our knuckle draggers and kid touchers,” Jawnie replied.

Rockfish was happy to learn Jawnie’s disdain for organized religion matched his own. “Well put. But if there is a history there, what are the odds that some wealthy, non-fertile Baltimore Catholics would be willing to pony up some cash to right the situation. And Edward was witness to it all?”

They drove in silence over the next twenty minutes, Rockfish trying to figure out exactly what he expected to find in a fifty-four-year-old decrepit building in the middle of the woods. He hadn’t arrived at a conclusion yet when something very familiar came into focus.

“Remember when you asked me about knowing when you’re being followed?” Rockfish said.

“Yeah, I just chalked it up to anxiety and paranoia. It comes standard on the Millennial base model.”

“Guess what? We are,” Rockfish deadpanned. “Don’t do a damn thing different and let me think for a second. There’s a Jeep Grand Cherokee, right now, two cars back that’s been with us since we pulled off the highway when I was telling you what Decker said.”

Rockfish pulled out a scrap of paper and jotted down the license plate.

“I’ll ask Decker to run this, if they end up sticking on our ass the whole way. I could be a tad paranoid, but I’d rather err on the side of caution. Just keep doing what you’re doing, and I’ll tell you if evasive actions become necessary. We’ll start you slow and work our way up to the infamous private eye J-turn.”

Ten minutes later, the Scion crossed the Hammonton City line and Rockfish lost sight of the Jeep. He had Jawnie drive a couple of concentric circles around the downtown area, before heading out on County Route 542 which, according to her, would point them towards the southern part of Wharton State Forest and the abandoned orphanage.

Rockfish spotted the Jeep, only a second or two after it turned on Route 542 from a side street.

“Company’s back,” Rockfish said. “I guess when we hit these dirt roads you mentioned, we’ll see how serious they are.”

When the Scion’s tires soon left the asphalt, and began rolling down the slightly larger than single lane dirt road, the Jeep’s true intentions came to light. No longer concerned about being spotted, the Jeep’s speed increased until it was only a few feet from Jawnie’s bumper. Rockfish’s head swiveled from the Jeep and back to his pilot. He needed to stay calm, but Jawnie looked petrified, and while her hands had a death grip on the wheel, they were also visibly shaking.

“Jawnie, listen to me and we’ll be alright.”

She didn't say a word, but Rockfish could feel the car slowing down. Screw her feelings, he thought and began giving orders.

"Put your foot back on the gas. You need to keep a constant speed." And then a minute later. "Stay in the center, don't give them space to get alongside of us." Lastly, he shouted. "The center I said!" His voice gave out with that last outburst and he knew she heard the fear in it.

Rockfish swore as the Jeep slammed into their back bumper. "That a girl, keep her straight! Gas, give it some—"

The rear windshield exploded, shards of safety glass like small pellets peppered the interior of the car. Jawnie screamed and instinctively yanked the wheel to the left. Likewise, Rockfish now yelled in order to be heard.

"Foot off the gas! Steer into it!"

Rockfish wasn't sure how he got through to Jawnie, but she listened, and the Scion straightened back up and they were rocketing straight down the dirt road once again. But before he could congratulate his pupil, the Jeep was now angling to get alongside; the Scion drifting dangerously close to the right shoulder, or lack thereof. Rockfish turned and looked out the driver's side rear window. He could clearly see the Jeep's front end.

In the next instant, they were sliding again, Jawnie's foot slammed on the brake and the Jeep's right fender nudged the Scion's left rear. Brakes squealed, and tires howled as dirt, dust and burnt rubber filled their lungs.

"Hold on, hold on, hold on!" It was all he managed to say, but her eyes told him she was a million miles away. Rockfish closed his and braced for impact.

The car spun violently to the left, a hundred and eighty degrees, and his head whipped left and then right, slamming against the window. The seatbelt dug into his chest and he had trouble breathing. A second later, the earth beneath the car's right side began to give way and the Scion slid into a ditch before coming to a stop.

By the time Rockfish opened his eyes and turned around, the taillights from the Jeep had disappeared into the distance.

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“That settles it, I’m going to the police now! They, someone, fuck I don’t know who just tried to kill us!” Jawnie said. “Look at my car! Who’s going to pay for this? Not like we’re exchanging fucking information with them!” Her mask was around her neck and Rockfish could see the tears.

Rockfish took a second before he replied. His partner was still in shock, borderline hysterical, and he didn’t want to push her over the edge, unlike the car they pulled themselves from. The Jeep had performed a textbook pit maneuver and Rockfish bet Jawnie wasn’t a big fan of Cops or Live PD. Hence, her jumping straight to attempted murder.

“Now hold on Jawnie,” Rockfish said. “You’re not hurt, right? That seatbelt and airbag did their jobs?”

“Of course, but—”

“No buts about it. Your chest might be a little sore tomorrow from that belt, your eyes swollen from the air bag, and more importantly, you’ll never forget your first chase. But seriously, no one tried to kill us. If they had wanted us dead, we’d be bleeding out from gunshot wounds. Your rear window was the victim of a warning shot. When we were in that ditch, no one walked up from behind and pumped a few slugs into the back of our heads.”

Rockfish stopped and looked at Jawnie, he needed to make sure he was getting through. Her breathing had slowed down quite a bit and that was a start.

“This was a warning, pure and simple. All this tells us is that someone thinks you might be sticking your nose somewhere it doesn’t belong. Obviously, it pertains to those boxes. I haven’t been in town long enough to piss someone off yet, at least, I hope. But if they were staking out your place, they’d have my license plate number and know who I am.”

“But I’ve only dealt with Hasty on this,” Jawnie said.

“Look. You might have worked out a deal with Hasty, but odds are he wasn’t the one that went into the very back of the evidence room and pulled those boxes for you. He’s probably recounted your conversation to a few of his ‘trusted’ senior men, and God knows who else might have been in the room when those conversations took place. Was there anything else you mentioned either to him or anyone else at the station that might cause a reaction like what just happened?”

“I d-d-did tell him I had hoped to t-t-take what I found in these boxes, scan what I could, and create a website. One that would ask the public for tips. Anonymously, of course. It would be a way to get the word out and maybe get someone’s attention who might remember something. Hasty asked his secretary to check and see if he had the authority to put the PD’s logo and tip line on this site. He was only trying to help.”

“So, he’s got a secretary. Old bird, I bet?”

“Yeah, Betty Lou Sommers. I’m guessing she’s logged more than a few years there.”

“There’s your problem. Old Betty Lou sees all Hasty’s business that comes and goes out of his office. I’d lay odds her loyalties lie with others she’s worked with or for through the years and not the guy who knocked the latest Ringle out of office.”

“I’d never thought of it that way.”

“If you’re trying to be a junior special agent, I’d advise you to think that way. Someone in that department is crooked and an off-duty cop or on-duty mafioso ran us off the road. Doesn’t matter who, I’m betting they can be one and the same. Now if you feel alright, we need to call for a tow.”

“And an Uber.”

“Do you have any bars?” Rockfish said.

“Nope.”

“We were lucky this was only a warning. We’ve got some walking ahead of us. They shouldn’t be coming back.”

I gotta reach out to Davenport, he thought. The stakes have significantly increased.