

SEE YOU NEXT TUESDAY by Ken Harris

EXCERPT

After a couple of early morning passes for Jawnie to grab a handful of fresh photos, the team backtracked to an abandoned gas station they had passed on the way in. Rockfish parked the van behind the dilapidated building. Jawnie bundled their supplies and they headed out with backpacks bursting at the seams. It would be a two-mile trek to the edge of the woods overseeing Diane's trailer.

The route would take them along the main road for half a mile and then a diagonal cut across fields littered with large, round hay bales before entering the woods for the rest of the hike. As they veered off the road, Jawnie wanted to pick up the pace so that they weren't visible to any curious drivers coming down this open stretch of highway. But one glance at her partner told her he was already looking forward to the first rest stop.

They arrived at their vantage point an hour and fifteen minutes later. Rockfish dropped his backpack and took up position on the ground. "Let me sit here for a minute and I'll be okay, I swear."

Jawnie slid off her pack and patted Rockfish on the shoulder as she walked over to get a better view of their target. The line of sight was perfect. She could use her telephoto lens and look down into the trailer through a window. They were close enough to watch what went on in the backyard without the help of her camera. The field between them and Diane's was also littered with the large round hay bales. *They'll provide more than ample cover if I need to get closer for any reason.*

"Nice job picking the spot, boss. I hope you live to walk another day."

"F**king Bataan Death March had nothing on this hike," Rockfish said and Jawnie could tell he had yet to catch his breath.

They set up their gear and took turns peering through the camera's telephoto lens, down onto the property and sometimes straight through the uncovered window. It wasn't long before Jawnie concluded that the only people at home were Sunny and another woman who she assumed was Diane.

"No sign of Roan unless they're keeping him in some back bedroom and not letting him out. But all these two are doing is eating cereal and watching television. The View was on. Now it's turned to The Price is Right."

“See, now you’re experiencing the glamour side of being a P.I. Not all of it is meeting with Mafia Dons and car chases. I used to love this grunt work, but this old body sure doesn’t want to keep up.”

“Sit tight,” Jawnie said. “You keep providing that wit and wisdom and I’ll take care of the physical stuff. Partners, remember?”

The quiet morning hours slowly turned into an equally uneventful afternoon where Rockfish spent way too long bitching about the Nature Valley pressed cardboard bars that Jawnie had packed for lunch. And she, without hesitation, returned fire.

“If you hadn’t done takeout from the Waffle House this morning, you could have spared us all, and not had to keep making that twenty-minute hike back into the woods every hour on the hour. That stuff isn’t meant for anyone’s stomach, and those cardboard bars are binding. We should all be thankful for that.”

“Maybe it’s the water?”

She looked down at the Dasani bottle at her feet. *Yeah, it’s definitely the water and not seventeen grams of pure grease. I’d better change the subject before this goes any further.*

“We’re going to want to get one of those trackers on that Jeep down there.”

“Yup, hopefully once it gets dark, we’ll draw straws,” Rockfish said.

“I’m letting you know I’m going to do it. I’m quicker, a smaller visual target and won’t need CPR upon my return.”

Jawnie was into the last hour of her shift on the camera, a little after 2pm, when the back door to the trailer opened. The women emerged and walked across the lawn towards the trampoline. *They’re not going to jump on this thing, are they?* She watched them crawl through the netting and lay in the center. *Now they’re not dressed for sunbathing, not to mention the sun isn’t cooperating this afternoon and it’s freaking mid-April.* Jawnie hunched over the camera’s tripod and swung it towards the trampoline. A flash of light caught her attention, and she zoomed in. The flick of a lighter and a hand rolled joint passed between the two. Jawnie wouldn’t need to wait for the cover of darkness when a THC haze would do the trick.

Jawnie turned and waved Rockfish over. “Look at this.”

He glanced through the telephoto lens, and she relayed her plan. Rockfish kept nodding as he agreed. Or is he enjoying the view? I’m going and won’t take no for an answer.

“Okay, no dillydallying. Down and back,” Rockfish said. “Put your phone on vibrate in your back pocket. If it goes off, turn around and head back. That means they’ve moved off the trampoline and I don’t want you taking any chances. You got me? Vibrate equals full stop and start working your way back. No hesitation, get back here, moving from bale to bale to bale.”

“Got it.”

“Come back as careful as you went down. If you hear my voice, then you know shit’s gone sideways. Time to put on your track shoes.”

Jawnie took one of the GPS trackers and carried it in her right hand. She serpented from one hay bale to the next until she had made her way down to where the field met Diane’s property. Jawnie peeked out around the large bale and could see it was a diagonal sprint, twenty yards to her left, to where the Jeep Wrangler sat in the driveway. She peeked around the other side but could not see past the trailer’s back corner. Back on the left side of the bale, she knew her best shot would be to aim for the passenger side rear wheel. *Snap this puppy on and then slide around the back to reassess. F**k, I hope no one drives down the road at that point.*

Jawnie inhaled deeply and took off. If she were wrong and there was a third occupant, who was in the front living room, she’d be f**ked before she got halfway. She reached the Jeep in six long strides and the driveway gravel gave way as she slammed on the brakes. Jawnie landed on her ass and popped right back up. She slapped the tracker up into the wheel well and heard the satisfying clunk. She pulled her hand back. *Well, it didn’t fall out. That’s a bonus. No buzz from Rockfish yet. Time to press that luck he told me not to.* She presumed that if no one had fired a load of buckshot over her head by now, no one was sitting in the living room, looking out over the front yard.

She worked her way around the back end of the Jeep and then forward, along the driver’s side, towards the set of double windows next to the small front porch. Jawnie reached up and stood on her tiptoes to peek inside. The stench of cigarettes hit her senses from the open window before her eyes focused on the inside. A second later, when they did, she wished they hadn’t. The place was a disaster. Domino’s boxes and Big Gulp cups littered any flat surface. And then she saw it. Someone had draped a black leather duster over a wooden chair next to the small dinette.

F**king B-I-N-G-O was her name-o. A fist pump and a game of hay bale Frogger later, Rockfish claimed she resembled the cat that had eaten the friggin canary and went back for seconds.

“He’s here,” Jawnie stammered. “I mean not right now, but he’s been here, and odds are he’s coming back, if not for the jacket, another round of good times. Raffi and Lynn both mentioned that damn coat.”

“And you saw no one else?”

“No one. When I got back to the field, I stopped behind that first bale and looked back to see if I had missed anything, but you saw that.”

“I did. Now let’s make sure this thing actually works after making the trip.” Rockfish pulled out his cell and opened the tracking app. “Good clean signal,” he said. “I believe we’re in business. I hope someone gets in that Jeep and heads out so we can really test this thing out.”

“Based on the Domino’s delivery boxes piled up, I think the only destination you’ll get off that one is 7/11. Cigarettes and Big Gulps runs.” “Don’t forget the rolling papers,” Rockfish said. He put his fist out and she bumped it. That was her attaboy, and Jawnie couldn’t have been happier. She sat back on the ground and her heart continued to beat as if it would come through her ribcage. Jawnie tried to relax but had a hard time settling back into the waiting game. The adrenaline rush from that little ten-minute operation was the first on the job, legit high she had experienced. She couldn’t wait for the Jeep to head out for Earl or for him to show up. It didn’t matter whether the action came at dinner or lunch tomorrow. She’d be ready.

Jawnie’s second opportunity came after ten that night before they were ready to call it a day. Rockfish had tracked the headlights as they came down the road and turned into the driveway, sans blinker. An old Chevy pickup pulled in behind the Jeep and backfired before the engine died. The driver quickly climbed the porch steps carrying a twelve pack of beer in his right hand. The small porch light above the door lit Earl Porbeagle in all his glory. Rockfish knew when he saw him. The man could pass for any Kilingess resident, in a tank top and jeans.

An hour passed before the kitchen and living room lights went off, one at a time. A couple of seconds, later Rockfish could see through the telephoto lens a light from a rear window at the back of the trailer had flickered on. It illuminated the far corner of the backyard.

“Hey, I think we’re primed—”

Jawnie was three hay bales deep into the field before Rockfish could tell her it was time.

She followed the same path as before and stopped again at the last bale that separated the field from the property. Her breathing was calmer on this second trip, and she looked around the left side of the hay bale at her target. The porch light lit little more than the small landing and the front half of the Jeep. Darkness smothered the old pickup. Jawnie counted to three and stepped out into the open. She slowed this time as she approached the driveway and didn’t end up on her ass.

Jawnie crouched down at the right rear wheel and reached up the side of the truck to the bed wall. These old trucks had holes on the top of the bedsides, called stake pockets, or so Rockfish claimed. It would be an undetectable spot; he swore on it. She ran her hand along the top of the bed and easily found the first one. Clunk.

Well, I'll be damned. Old man knows his shit. She turned and bent over, stayed low and sprinted back to the confines of the hay bales.