

CHAPTER ONE: BROTHER RAT

“A dog? You want me to find a dog?”

“That’s right.”

The head lifted, and eyes the color of Windex evaluated me. The slice of light from the streetlamp through the curtains behind him revealed a revolver on the armrest and a pair of pliers in one hand, which he squeezed to strengthen his grip. He used them to extract teeth from his victims. Whether he did it when they were alive or dead added to the legend and menace of Southie’s most infamous son. Another man stood near him.

I’m told life serves you the same lesson over and over until you learn what you need to learn before the next thing comes along. I’ve also been told that karma never forgets an address. Jimmy was proof of both. He almost killed me but didn’t. I should’ve killed him, but I couldn’t because he was protected, and not by the mob. A stained badge shielded the man sitting in my chair, in my apartment in Union Park.

My landlady had called me at Bonnie’s place. She told me I had visitors, and they wanted a word with me. She said Jimmy made a point to pet her two Corgis and offered her some advice. The thug recommended a brand of dog food so her dogs wouldn’t gain more weight. He emphasized canine physical fitness, which was pure Jimmy since he was a fitness nut.

Jimmy had muscles because like most of the young lions in Southie, he lifted weights. He sported a veined neck, muscular arms, and a thick chest trapped inside a tight polo shirt. I knew if I couldn’t take him, I was confident he’d feel me for days. We both weighed about 165 pounds, but I had a smidge more height to his five-eight. I had one more advantage over Jimmy, I could stand my ground and take a hit. Jimmy, like most jockeys of the weight room, walked around with toothpicks for legs because he neglected to train them. His pant leg rode high enough for me to eyeball pasty shins, black socks, and sneakers. No ankle piece there.

I read the room as I came in. The situation would play out in one of two ways. One is someone pulled a trigger, and my last thought was either part of the hardwood floor or, my brains were spaghetti against the wall and ceiling. The second option was I lived, forced to listen and learn how to avoid the same situation again. Like I said, a lesson in life and karma.

Jimmy murmured something to his bodyguard. It was low and slow, the kind of soft and secretive Irish whisper you’d expect in a bar’s last hour. I assumed he’d told his man to wait outside because the guy moved past me. The door to my apartment opened and closed. I didn’t see his face but caught a glimpse of the feet. Construction boots.

The pair of pliers indicated the chair near me. “Sit.”

“I prefer to stand.”

“Suit yourself.”

I peeled my jacket off, so he’d know I was armed. His eyes admired the holster. I knew what he was going to say, so I said it before he did. “Same rig as Steve McQueen in *Bullitt*.”

“Cross-draw don’t seem bright or effective.”

“Want to test me?”

His right hand pulsed with the pliers. A blued steel .357 slept on the left armrest of my favorite chair. His choice of firearm was an older model, not the kind Dirty Harry would carry, but it got the job done. Jimmy was right-handed, but that wasn’t the point. His eyes flashed, as a way to taunt me, and then focused. “Nah, I don’t feel lucky today, and all I want is for you to find my dog.”

“On second thought,” I said, “I think I’ll take that seat.”

“Excellent, we can have a civilized conversation then.”

I get all kinds of crazy for clients because my retainer and daily rates are reasonable. Paranoid businessmen hire me because they suspect a partner or a favorite employee is a thief. Neurotic spouses hire me because they see a frequent-flyer for a phone number on the bill from Ma Bell, or odd charges on their dearly beloved’s statement from American Express. Bonnie told me family law was the worst, and I agreed, but it pays the bills.

I’ve listened to more sob stories and provided more free advice than Ann Landers. In short, I’ve handled embezzlement, fraud, infidelity, and on occasion, missing persons, in addition to arson, murder, and narcotics. But this pitch to find a canine—a variation on a missing person or property—was new.

Jimmy, who didn’t like to be called Jimmy, was an extortionist, a murderer, and South Boston’s premier gangster, so it was hard for me to picture him heartsick over the absence of man’s best friend.

He said, “Don’t you have a cat?”

“Delilah.”

“Delilah, that’s right. You would be upset if she went missing, wouldn’t you?” His hand waved, pliers and all. “There’s a name...Delilah, as in Samson and Delilah. A female dog is called a bitch, but I never did learn what they called a female cat.”

“A molly.”

“You know, I’ve never cared for cats. Loyalty issues, moody and temperamental.”

“Rather ironic coming from you. Cats are excellent judges of character.”

“And what do you think your Delilah would say about me, if she could talk?”

“You wouldn’t want to know. Can we wrap this up?”

Delilah, he didn’t know, could talk. Sort of. She blinked once for Yes, twice for No, and meows were extra for emphasis. If she’d seen Jimmy now, she’d turn banshee and caterwaul profanities.

“You want me to find a dog?”

“A dog.”

“Your dog?”

“My dog.”

Jimmy had never been talky, or loud, but he commanded every room he was in with an unnerving silence. He neither drank nor smoked or used drugs. His mother was alive, and he looked after her like a doting son. His brother was successful on the other side of the tracks, in politics, and Jimmy went out of his way not to cast a shadow on *frater eius*.

“I’m aware that Shane Cleary doesn’t need my money. I know he does all right as a landlord for his Greek friend, with steady income from tenants, and this PI thing is something he does for kicks, to try to make life interesting.”

Those blue eyes sparkled in that truant light while he talked about me.

“Are you suggesting all that could vanish if I don’t take the case?”

“Not at all,” he said. “All I’m saying is I know things about you; things you might not know about yourself, things like personal history, and I don’t mean your falling out with the Boston Police Department.”

“Good to know, but I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“You were too good for them, like you’re too good to work for that dago in the North End.”

“And there it is. I earn my money, and you know it, Jimmy.”

“Yeah, you do. I had to say it before you tell me my money is no good.”

“Money makes the world go round,” I added.

“That’s right. Money does, and it’s all-American as apple pie.”

“I know your story, and you say you know mine. What if I don’t care what you know?”

“I do, and you will care about what I know. Speaking of I do, how come you haven’t asked that lawyer broad you’ve been seeing to marry you?”

“She doesn’t believe in marriage, and none of your business.”

Jimmy was a career criminal, and not someone I would associate with domesticity. Women close to him have disappeared, and yet there was little to nothing in his jacket for other misdeeds, thanks to his agent friend. Any priors going back to his teen years—like larceny, a spatter of robberies with a dash of assault and battery—was smoke on the water.

“Work this one case for me, Shane. It’s all I ask. I’ll pay you your rate and throw in the personal history as a bonus, if you’ll find my dog.”

“Personal history?”

“You haven’t read or seen it. Trust me, this is something you don’t know.”

“You said it yourself. I don’t need the money. As for your teaser about history ... what if I don’t care?”

He stared at me. He was Windex and I was dirty glass.

“You will, I promise. That’s your problem in life, Shane Cleary. You care, and this one time, Jimmy is gonna set you straight.”

Jimmy was volatile as a bucket of gasoline, he liked to test boundaries. All he needed was fumes and a lit match. Like the time someone called him Old Blue Eyes in one of the taverns on Broadway. The poor souse probably meant it as a compliment after one too many beers. Jimmy didn’t see it that way. He especially hated Sinatra, the way he detested all Italians, so he stomped the guy’s face in.

His eyes glanced down at the weapon under my arm. The holster was such that the gun pointed up at the armpit. His eyes met mine. “Did you know my old man lost an arm? Crushed between two rail cars. You would’ve liked him, Shane. He was a quiet, proud man, what we would call socially conscientious today. He’d clerk here and there at the Naval Yard, but he never worked a full-time job after he lost that arm.”

“Tough break.”

“Our fathers had something in common.”

Being Irish was my first thought, but I waited for it through tight teeth. I wanted to punch him in the face for making any comparison between us. I thought, I should’ve killed him when I had the chance. I wouldn’t lose sleep over it, either.

“We’re alike, you and I,” he said.

“First the teaser and now, flattery. I’ll bite. How do you figure we’re similar?”

“We’re both damaged. You came home from the war changed, like your old man.”

I couldn’t resist. “I went to Vietnam. What’s your excuse?”

That made him smile and say, “Know how we’re alike?”

“Don’t know, Jimmy. Maybe, some people would call us rats: me for my time with the BPD and you, well, you know.”

His face didn’t flinch or register emotion.

“We’re alike because we both believe we’re doing the right thing.”

I waited for the rationalization, how what he was doing with the FBI helped South Boston, his people, the maligned Irish. Jimmy was a psychopath, and his line of thinking was a special aisle at Toys “R” Us.

“I’m doing my part to clear this town of those wop bastards. No different from you cleaning the stables at the Station House, like when you testified against that crooked cop.”

“People within the department were crooked, Jimmy. He killed a black kid and staged the scene. There’s a difference.”

“‘Potato, potahto, tomato, tomahto.’ Say what you will. Call me an informant. A snitch. Call me a rodent with whiskers and sharp teeth, but go look in the mirror, and tell me what you see, Brother Rat. Tell me how we’re not alike.”

“For starts, I was an only child. You weren’t.”

“You’re right. My brother, the smart one, helped me as best he could, like that teacher, that professor helped you.” He snapped his fingers. “What was his name?”

“Lindsey. Delano Lindsey.”

“Did you know I taught myself the classics? I did it, with a library card. See, we’re both strong on initiative and self-education. You look to me like you’re a man hot for Shakespeare. I bet you can quote something from the Bard. How ’bout it?”

“‘The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman.’ *Lear*.”

Jim wagged a finger. “That’s good, but let’s talk shop now.”

“Talk about your dog?”

“No, personal history. Your old man went the way of Hemingway, didn’t he?”

My blood rose. Several long seconds died between us, about the amount of time it took for one of Ray Guy’s punts to land downfield.

“I’ll let you in on something you didn’t know about the day he did a Hemingway.”

Through clenched teeth, I told him, “I know all I need to know about my father, thanks.”

“Do you? ‘To you your father should be as a god.’ *Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”

Jimmy rose and took his jacket. He dropped the pliers into a pocket and hung the jacket over his left arm. He inserted the gun into his waistband behind him. I sat there numb, confused, and intrigued. He said his man was outside, waiting in the car. Jimmy drove a black Mercury Grand Marquis.

He reached the door when, against my better judgment, I asked the question that betrayed my interest in the bait, his lure about personal history, “Where was the last place you saw the dog?”

“Roxbury. Dog groomer.”

Jim rattled off the address while my mind tried to picture him dropping off his pet in the black section of town. I had to ask him. “This dog have a name?”

“Boo.”

“As in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

“Righto.”

“One last thing,” I said. “Breed?”

“Poodle. Standard. Black. Studded collar. No tags.”