

## THROWING SHADOWS

### CHAPTER ONE

The man ran, rabbit-fast and rabbit-scared, through the trees. His pack pulled on his shoulders as he scrambled over rotting logs and gouged the moldy sponge of fallen leaves with his boots. He couldn't hear what was behind him over his own frantic sprinting, the racket of an inexperienced fool. His foot hit a hole and he went tumbling down an incline, landing hard in the Ozark dirt. He got to his knees and tried to catch his breath. If he could only make it to the road. Maybe he could find help. Safety. He started to move, but his knees wouldn't stay steady enough for him to stand. He tried to crawl and got nothing but a few yards' progress and a stab in the thigh from a dead branch. He bit his lip to keep from yelling out as blood started to seep through his pants. He slumped down on his elbows and swore.

It was time to face facts.

He sat back on his haunches and shrugged the pack off his back. The wind hit his sweat-soaked shirt and sent a chill along his spine. He twisted around, searching for a hiding spot. Nothing. He forced himself upright and stumbled forward. He made it over the next rise, dragging the pack behind him, and saw what he needed. He concealed it as completely as he could. Maybe it would work. Nothing else during this whole calamity had.

He backed away and took in the lay of the land. He still didn't know where he was, but there were no longer sounds of pursuit. He chose to continue downhill. If he didn't hit the road, chances were good he'd at least hit a creek. That might lead to a lake, which might lead to people.

He limped along as quickly as he could. The puncture wound started to burn and he could feel the blood running down his leg and into his sock. The darkness was almost complete, and all the obstacles he'd been able to see and avoid were disappearing in the gloom. He tripped again, going down hard and cutting his cheek. He lay there inhaling the scent of fungus spores and animal piss and his own fear. He curled his hand over dry leaves, taking their last bit of sunbaked warmth and turning them to dust.

A nearby tree worked as support for him to regain his feet. He wiped blood and tears on his sleeve and pushed off. Then a glimmer of moonlight showed a sliver of flat surface, flat like a God-sent, man-made road. It was off to his left and he veered in that direction, heading past a stretch of blank blackness on the right. His step started to lighten and his lungs loosened with each breath. He quickened his pace.

He never saw them coming.

Hank Worth spread the paperwork out over his desk. There was a comfortingly large amount of it. It would take him a long time to sort through everything, which meant he'd need to stay here longer. And not go home. He didn't need to, not really. The kids were fine, on a back-to-school shopping trip with Maggie. They'd probably come home late with new lunchboxes and sneakers, and ice cream on their faces from the bribe their mother had to pay in order to get them into that last store for glue sticks and Ticonderoga pencils.

He'd be home in time to put them to bed. And then he could go work in the garage. And think about what to do about these catalytic converter thefts. He pulled the latest theft report out of the pile. A used-car dealership out on Highway 76 had had seven of the car parts stolen sometime in the past week. Hank looked around the dreary office he'd been stuck with since becoming the Branson County sheriff almost two years ago, then out the window at the beautiful fall day. Maybe the owner was at work today. He grabbed his keys and quickly left the building.

Twenty minutes later he was walking through the not-so-gently-used collection of cars at Combs Car Emporium. A man built like a snowman emerged from the office and watched him approach.

"Yeah, I'm the owner. Wendall Combs." He was wearing a polo shirt and slacks and had skin and hair so white he would've been impossible to spot in a blizzard. He shook Hank's hand and ushered him inside. "Brian told me you all asked about my security when he filed the report." He shut the door firmly behind them. "The employees don't know what I got. Keeps them honest."

"So what do you have, sir?" Hank asked. He hadn't been able to pick out any surveillance cameras as he walked across the lot.

"I got a camera in the light pole by the entrance."

Hank waited. 'Is that everything?' he finally said.

"Well, yeah.' Combs shifted self-consciously.

"How much of the lot does that camera cover?"

"All of it.' Frosty was indignant.

"Excellent. May I see the video? You can orient me and then I can take a copy of the recording of the past week?"

The footage turned out to be even worse than Hank expected. A high-wattage security light washed out the view of most of the lot. The remainder was pockmarked with impenetrable shadows.

"It's real high up, now, so it's hard to see down in between the cars, like," Frosty said defensively. "I'm watching for thieves moving big-ass cars. Not small-ass parts. How the hell should I be expected to know they'd come for that kind of stuff?"

Hank gave what he hoped was a soothing nod, and made a few recommendations about camera placement and studies that showed visible cameras actually did act as a deterrent and perhaps Mr. Combs could consider it? The owner grumbled a while before saying he would think on it.

“Do you have any idea when the converters were taken?”

“No, son, I don’t know when. We just noticed it. The last time someone drove one of the cars was last Tuesday. So had to have been after that. But just ’cause I can’t sell a 2003 sedan doesn’t mean I want to offer it up for parts, free of charge.”

He had a point. They went outside and Frosty showed him which cars had been targeted. All were parked on the edges of the lot, where access was the easiest and the video’s pockmarks were the blackest.

“So your employees don’t know about the camera?”

“Nope.”

“And they’ve never seen video from it?”

“Nope.”

“Keep it that way. But add some more cameras, like we talked about, Okay?”

He got grudging agreement and an icy handshake before Combs disappeared into his office. Hank thought for a minute and headed down to the next used-car lot, Briscoe’s 76 Cars, where he ruined that manager’s day in sixty seconds flat.

“What? Converters stolen at Wendall’s place?” The manager hadn’t heard and immediately sent his two hapless twenty-something salespeople crawling under every vehicle on their patch of asphalt. They found four missing. They also had no usable surveillance video. While they had three times the number of cameras as Combs did, it turned out they became ineffective when colonized by birds and covered in what birds tended to output at high rates.

The manager was furious and spent ten minutes stomping around before Hank could get another word in. Multiple swear words and a stale cup of coffee later, Hank had repeated his security improvement recommendations and gotten the list of Briscoe cars now missing catalytic converters. He left the manager dialing his boss with a look of dread, and walked back to his squad car, carefully skirting the cameras’ drop zones on the way.

Chief Deputy Sheila Turley limped into the Pickin’ Porch Grill, fingers curled lightly around the handle of her cane. She tried swinging it with a jaunty air, but her fifty-two-year-old body wasn’t quite ready for that. She planted it back on the floor and made her way to the table. Her gait was

slow but no longer torturous. Compared with her appalling wheelchair-bound immobility for the past several months, this stroll was equivalent to tap dancing into the restaurant and finishing off with a cartwheel.

A tall, trim white man in a suit and tie rose to his feet as she approached. He waited until she settled herself before resuming his seat. Wisely, he did not offer her any assistance. Their many phone conversations seemed to have schooled him on enough of Sheila's personality to know that would be unwelcome.

"It's nice to finally meet you in person," Malcolm Oberholz said.

"You, too." She propped her cane against the wall and eyed the prosecutor. "You really are older than you sound on the phone."

He laughed. "I told you so."

"I do wish you'd let me meet you halfway. There was no need for you to drive all the way down here from St. Louis."

"Oh, I don't mind at all. It gives me an opportunity to see the area. Which is important." He looked around. "If I'm going to try to convince twelve Branson County residents that Eddie Fizzel, Junior, is guilty, I need to not seem like an outsider."

Then the man needed a cheaper suit. She'd save that advice for later, though. Instead, she asked how they could possibly get an unbiased jury in this county.

"That's a very good question. I'm going to assert that we can't, and ask the judge to change the trial venue entirely. Move it to my county, ask the good people of a nice big metro area to decide."

"Will a judge go for that?"

He shrugged. "It depends on who we get. It will be a while before we know who it'll be, since it has to be someone who also has no connection to this county."

Sheila nodded. It would be just semi-complicated if it were only her, Branson County's African American chief deputy sheriff, involved. But the man who assaulted her – in addition to being an unemployed, entitled little shit – was the son of a county commissioner. Edrick Fizzel, Senior, had been in office since God was young and the devil just fallen. He knew everyone. Half of the electorate loved him, and the other half he had dirt on. Combine that with people's strong opinions of law enforcement – both pro and con – and this citified white boy had his work cut out for him.

"So that's going to be one of my first moves," Oberholz said. "But it's a motion that's going to need to be argued in your courthouse, even if it is in front of an out-of-town judge. So I'd like to get my feet under me, so to speak."

"A good place to start is with a fried chicken sandwich with extra chipotle aioli," she said. Oberholz ordered two at the counter and had the waitress come back with their drinks. Sheila took hers, shifting slightly to ease the ache in her torso. Thankfully, Oberholz didn't notice.

"No matter where it's tried, though, we're going to have a problem with the ER doctor's report of your injuries."

Or maybe he had. She sighed.

"That ER doctor is a friend of yours. They're going to allege that she's biased in your favor."

Sheila snorted with laughter. "The only thing Maggie McCleary is biased toward is an accurate diagnosis."

Oberholz's lips turned into a thin line. Sheila looked straight back at him and calmly put her napkin in her lap. "I'm not making light of how hard this is going to be. In Maggie's case, there are multiple surgeons and specialists who back up her initial opinion about all of my abdominal injuries. And the broken ribs. And the concussion. And my lacerated hands and knees. I know you like those."

The second time they'd talked, he'd asked specifically for the photos her husband Tyrone had taken the night of the attack that showed her raw and bloody palms and kneecaps. Now he shook a straw at her before plunking it into his iced tea. "Those two things tell a story. The story of a woman who had to crawl four hundred yards through the woods at night in order to save herself. Jurors will see your X-rays and it won't matter. To laypeople, that's just a bunch of shadows on a screen. But everybody can relate to scraped and bloody hands. And they only got that way because you knew you were going to die if you stayed there lying in the dirt. So you dragged yourself to the road in order for paramedics to find you. You saved your own life. Your palms might've been beat all to hell, but Edrick Fizzel, Junior, is the one with blood on his hands."

Sheila sat back like she'd been smacked. Oberholz took a sip of tea. "The facts matter. I'm not one of those lawyers who pretends they don't. But a trial usually comes down to who's the better storyteller. And ma'am," his voice suddenly slowed and rounded into a drawl, "ain't no one can tell a story like me."