

The Hemingway Thief

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For Anne

PART 1

In Another Country

Chapter One

I sat in the cantina at the Hotel Baja, putting away rum with lime and scratching out the crossword in a three-week-old Tijuana newspaper. The crossword was pure hubris. I barely spoke enough Spanish to order coffee. I was just about to pack it in when Grady Doyle arrived for his evening tequila.

“Been looking all over for you,” he said, hanging like an ape from the doorframe with the setting sun surrounding him in a bloody corona. “You still thinking about offing yourself?”

“Authors sell better after they’re dead,” I replied without looking up.

“You’re not really gonna do it though, right?” he said.

“Depends on how this crossword goes.”

Grady sauntered behind the bar and leaned over to look at the paper spread out on the bar top’s chipped lacquer.

“I got bad news for you,” Grady said feigning commiseration. “None of your answers are written in what I would strictly call the Spanish language.”

“Then what the hell is it?” I said.

“Looks like Esperanto. Maybe Apache Indian? Definitely not Spanish.”

“Suicide it is,” I said, and threw my pen across the room.

“You Catholic? Cause Catholics don’t let suicides into heaven you know,” Grady said with a frown.

“Technically it’s murder. When you ice your nom de plume, it’s murder. The Pope got a problem with murder?”

“Not if you’re sorry you did it.”

“Ah, there’s the rub,” I said. “I’ll never be sorry.” I’ve written thirty-two romance novels starring Alasdair MacMerkin, the Scottish vampire detective. All of them were under the pseudonym Toulouse Velour, and I was hoping to publish my thirty-third novel—one bereft of Scots, vampires, and genital euphemisms—under my own name, Henry Cooper. The second part of my plan was to issue a press release detailing poor Toulouse’s gruesome death. My agent was not a great supporter of either part.

I snapped my fingers and pointed at the cooler next to Grady’s feet. He kicked off the cheap lid and sent it careening into the corner, where it scared a gecko that had been offering silent support for my cruciverbal efforts. The gecko flicked its tongue at him and scurried away to the safety of a crack in the wall.

“See what you did,” I said. “That gecko was my only friend.”

Grady fished out my personal bottle of Sailor Jerry and kicked the cooler over, dumping the slushy contents out to mingle with the dust. He scratched his nose and considered the mess he’d made.

“Don’t it bother you the booze here sucks so bad you have to bring your own?” Grady asked.

It did bother me, but it wasn’t something I felt compelled to change. I was only down here on advice from my agent. I was supposed to clear my head and make a decision on my literary future, maybe even find some inspiration for a new book. It was only supposed to have been for a few days, maybe a week. That was a month ago.

“Yeah, but what are you gonna do?” I said.

“Buy the place,” Grady said. He slapped the bar and hopped on the balls of his feet. “Which I did this morning. The hotel too.” He was proud of this, though I couldn’t fathom why. I thought the joint was a shit hole. I turned around on my stool to reexamine the place. Maybe I had missed something.

The cantina hung off the Hotel Baja like a broken ornament on a burnt-out Christmas tree. About the size of a barn and furnished in the same fashion, it was empty save for a young American trying not to pass out in the corner. The hotel was located in the center of Pendera,

Mexico, a town with a population of sixty people and ninety-two stray dogs. The closest city was Ensenada, and that was two hours of mountain-hugging, crumbling road away. Low patronage was common.

The decor consisted of a poster-sized Tecate ad tacked to the wooden paneling behind the bar. A half dozen splintered wood tables and a set of plastic lawn chairs scrounged from someone's porch filled out the floor space. There wasn't a roof, but Butch Wilson, the hotel's erstwhile proprietor, had hung a corrugated-metal billboard precariously above the bar as a jerry-rigged awning. There was a fair amount of garbage on the floor, carried in by the wind or left behind by the intermittent patrons.

I hadn't missed anything. The place was a shit hole.

"You bought the hotel?" I said. "You got that kind of money?" I hadn't pegged Grady for a guy with cash to spare. I hadn't pegged him as anything, really. All I knew about him was he was an ex-pat American, had been some sort of cop in his former life, and liked tequila at sunset. This had been enough to sustain a solid friendship over the past four weeks.

"Oh, I got it for a song," Grady said. "Butch's been trying to get out of here since the cartel wars started heating up in Tijuana. I lowballed him and he took it."

"You're not concerned about what's going on up north?" I asked. Though I couldn't read the article, the front page of the paper had a grisly photo of the latest carnage between the rival cartels near the border.

"That shit'll blow over. And when it does I'm gonna fix this place up nice. Get some of those pothead surfers down here from San Diego. You want some limes?" He bounded out from behind the bar and to the door, where a lime tree stood just outside. It was a homely, gnarled-looking beast, and it pushed against the edge of the doorframe like a medieval siege tower threatening to breach the entire west wall. Still, it had good limes and Grady studied it closely to find a few of the riper ones.

He moved with a lazy athleticism, dulled by years of disuse. He was of the age that I would describe as older, but not old, which put

him somewhere between forty and whatever. His white T-shirt was soiled to a nice dirt color, its V-neck stretched to the breaking point. His skin was tanned into Naugahyde from days spent lying in the sun. His pants had once been chinos but were now simply vestiges of material ending just below his knees. He wore a pair of leather sandals so old and filthy they seemed to sprout from his hirsute, hobbit-like feet. Dark explosions of hair fell out from under his Miller Lite baseball cap and mixed into his unkempt beard. Back home, this man would have gotten thrown out of a McDonald's. Here, he just bought a hotel.

A man with a deep-orange spray-on tan and an absurdly tight sleeveless T-shirt brushed past Grady as he picked the limes. A pasty counterpart in a tailored three-piece followed closely after the first man. They moved predatorily to the table where the drunk American had lost his battle with consciousness. I watched them over my shoulder between sips of rum. The tanned one reached into the impossible mess of the drunken man's hair and pulled his head up. The one in the suit leaned over to examine his face. After a moment of deep consideration, he nodded and the other one let the drunk's head fall back on the table with a hard thud, like a pumpkin falling off a porch. They pulled chairs from a nearby table. The suit brushed his chair with a handkerchief and inspected it thoroughly before sitting. The tanned one turned his around and straddled the back.

"You know them?" Grady asked. He had returned to his place behind the bar and was slicing limes with a hunting knife. Keeping all of his fingers attached to his hand didn't seem to be a concern, as all of his attention was directed at the three men in the corner.

"Butch checked the kid in this morning," I said. I had been using the hotel's only phone, located in a booth in the miniscule lobby, to call my agent for my daily bread of praise and abuse. The kid looked to be in his late teens, dressed in jeans and one of those Army-surplus jackets I'd heard were making a comeback, and moved with a fidgety wariness. He checked in as Richard Kimble, which made me laugh out loud. I never understood why someone would be so clever with a fake name. Just open a phonebook and pick one. Guy should've just called himself

Johnny McAlias for all the good a name like Richard Kimble would do him. It was pretty clear he was on the run, and Butch, smelling the pungent aroma of desperation mixed with fear on the poor bastard, had charged him an extra fifty bucks.

“Kimble?” Grady said. He finished cutting the limes and dropped a slice in my glass before refilling it. There was a swallow at the bottom of the bottle, and he took it for himself. “What the hell kind of name is that?”

“A fake one, I suppose,” I said, taking a smaller sip than usual. I wanted to prolong the hundred-foot Bataan Death March back to my room for another bottle. “He told Butch he’s a writer, but something about him makes me think he’s on the run from somebody.”

“A writer, huh?” Grady said. “He gonna kill himself, too?”

“I hope not. I don’t want the market to get saturated,” I said. Grady slid the hunting knife under the bar and grabbed the empty bottle of rum by the neck. He dropped it down by his thigh and held it there.

“Do me a favor and keep still,” he said. Behind me, I heard a crash and the sound of chairs falling over. There was incoherent muttering followed by a hand slapping flesh and a thud like someone getting punched in the stomach. I kept my head still and shifted my eyes to my right. The tanned man had his arms hooked under Richard Kimble’s armpits and was dragging him out the door into the failing light. I felt and then smelled the man in the suit standing just behind me. He smelled like Listerine and tobacco.

“You guys didn’t see nothing, right?” the man said. His voice was smooth and jovial as if he were asking about the drink specials. Grady didn’t respond. The man chuckled, a cold, mirthless sound, and reached inside his jacket. Grady’s muscles tensed. A massive revolver hung from the man’s shoulder holster like salami in a deli window. He reached past it into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills as thick as my arm. He counted out a half dozen fifties and reached over the bar to stuff them into Grady’s shirt pocket. That was his mistake.

Grady grabbed his wrist, pulled him across the bar, and swung the rum bottle at his head with a forehand shot that would’ve made Roger

Federer stand up and cheer. The bottle erupted in a fountain of broken glass that showered over me like jagged raindrops. Grady spun him around and pinned him against the bar. He grabbed the hunting knife and held the gleaming tip a hair away from the man's eye.

"Get his gun would you, Coop," Grady said. There was blood on the bar and in my rum. "Coop, you there, buddy?" Grady had a serene smile on his face that was somehow unsettling. I didn't look quite so peaceful, but I was able to reach gingerly across the man's chest, unclip the holster, and ease the gun out. It was heavier than I expected and I almost dropped it. I held it out for Grady, but he shook his head.

"Just hold onto it a minute. Keep an eye on the door in case his friend comes back." He grabbed a fistful of the man's hair and pulled his head up while moving the knife to his throat. "I don't like men who throw their money around," Grady growled. "And I don't like people coming into my place and roughing up my customers."

The man let out a groggy groan as blood leaked from his scalp onto the bar. Grady took hold of his oxford shirt, heaved him off the bar, and onto his feet. He held his prisoner in a half nelson, the knife close to his throat, as he walked him around the bar.

"I don't think this one's up to talking. If we want information, we'll have to ask the one outside."

"We need information?" I asked.

"Take the gun and try to look like you know how to use it," Grady said, then waited a moment and started for the door. I followed.

It could have been the four tumblers of rum. It could have been loyalty to Grady, who, even though I had only known him for a few weeks, I considered a friend. It could have been that I felt it was wrong for two armed men to pick on an unconscious drunk. It could have been those things, but it wasn't. It was the story.

I envisioned myself recounting the tale to some gorgeous young blond in a crowded bar. I imagined commanding a boothful of friends and colleagues on the third floor of Chicago's Chop House with a whiskey in one hand and pantomiming the gun with the other. I thought about the countless people who would ask me to regale them

with my “Mexico” anecdote at innumerable cocktail parties for years to come. I followed Grady into the dark, dangerous abyss for nothing more than the story I could tell.

It was dusk when we stepped out of the cantina. “Magic hour,” they call it. Everything took on a blurred, fuzzy quality, like an old photograph found in the bottom of a steamer trunk. The tanned man stood next to a new-looking Ford pickup. The burning red tip of his cigarette danced as he spoke.

“The fuck is this?” he said. It was a Texas accent and it sounded more angry than surprised.

“You’ve got my customer there,” Grady said from over his prisoner’s shoulder.

“Well, that’s my partner there, *amigo*,” the Texan said. “You okay, Dell?” Dell gave an indecipherable groan as he started to come around, and Grady adjusted his grip on him.

“Fucking guy hit me with something, Andy,” Dell said with a horse croak.

“It was a bottle,” Grady said. “Where’s my guy?”

“Right here,” Andy said, and he opened the Ford’s door. Richard Kimble tumbled out and landed face-up and limp on the gravel. There wasn’t a part of him showing that wasn’t bloody or bruised. His breathing was shallow and raspy, like an old man climbing stairs. Andy must have been working him over while we were dealing with Dell inside. Andy flicked cigarette ash onto the poor bastard’s face. Kimble didn’t even flinch. He was done for the night. “You a friend of his?”

“Like I said, he’s a customer,” Grady said. “Fella paid for safe lodging. I’m just making sure he gets what he paid for.”

“And who the hell is this?” Andy said, and pointed at me. “The bellboy?” Grady didn’t answer. Unfortunately, I’ve never been able to stand a silence, especially if there was a question hanging in the air.

“Henry Cooper,” I said. The words fell out of my mouth like Jenga blocks. “People call me Coop. I’m a writer, you know, books.”

“A writer? You write anything I’d know?” Andy said. It may seem like a strange question for someone standing over a beaten and

bloody stranger to ask another man holding a gun on him, but it wasn't really. It's the inevitable question every writer gets asked when he tells someone what he does for a living.

"Does it matter?" I said.

"Look, man," Andy said, and reached inside his jacket. I flinched and almost pulled the trigger. Grady tensed and tightened his grip on Dell. Andy grinned and slipped a second Pall Mall next to the one already in his mouth. He gripped the lit one between his thumb and forefinger and placed its dying ember against the end of the fresh one. He exhaled as he spoke. "I just want to know what I'm dealing with."

"Just tell him, Coop," Grady said, and I could have sworn I saw him smirk.

"I write the *Alasdair MacMerkin* series," I said.

"The what?"

"Romance novels about a Scottish vampire detective," Grady said, and snorted.

"No shit," Andy said, and then tilted his chin up in thought. "Yeah, my girlfriend reads that shit. There's like a thousand of them. You write those?" I nodded in the way a guilty child admits he wet his pants. "But the name on the book ain't Cooper. It's uh, shit, help me out."

"Toulouse Velour," I mumbled.

"Toulouse Velour," Andy repeated relishing each tacky syllable. "Ain't Toulouse a chick's name though?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a guy's name," I said.

"Pretty sure?"

"I never officially checked," I admitted with a shrug.

"Can we focus on the issue at hand, fellas?" Grady growled. Andy placed his boot on top of Richard Kimble's chest, claiming him like a conquistador planting a flag, and leaned down with his forearms crossed over his knee.

"I got paid good money to find this kid," Andy said, "and I'm not about to hand him over to some fag writes chick books."

"Don't let the books fool you, Andy," Grady said. "Coop's not above shooting an unarmed man." Andy laughed.

“I gotta say, I ain’t too convinced,” he said. “He can barely hold the thing straight, let alone shoot. Ain’t man enough to shoot, I bet. Ain’t even man enough to write a man’s book. You know who’s good, Toulouse? You know who writes some real good shit? That guy, aw fuck, who’s that guy. Wrote the thing they made into the movie with the guy who did that other movie. Grisham! You should write something like John Grisham.”

That’s when I shot him.

I have nothing against John Fucking Grisham. I enjoy his books, even some of the movies, as much as anyone else. He’s never done anything to me personally. I’ve never even met the man. The only thing John Fucking Grisham ever did was to catch the literary fancy of my father. Dad was a newspaperman, and when a newspaperman reads for leisure it’s almost always nonfiction. John Fucking Grisham was Dad’s one indulgence in the field of fiction and, according to him, John Fucking Grisham was the pinnacle of not only the legal thriller, but all fiction. When I showed him my first short story, the one that had won first prize in the high school literary contest, he looked it over with barely feigned interest, grunted, and gave a four-word review: “It’s no John Grisham.”

Dad left us that same year. I was fourteen. When I published my first book under my real name a decade later, he sent a Hallmark card—he always cared enough to send the very best—with Snoopy reading a book on the front. Inside, he had scrawled in his epileptic handwriting, “I read your book. It was no John Grisham.” Since then, whenever I publish a book I get a card. Don’t ask me how he knows my pen name. I suspect my mother told him, but I’ve never broached the subject with her. Sometimes Snoopy is on the cover. Sometimes it’s Garfield. Once it was a busty woman in a bikini, reading on a beach. Regardless of the cover, the message is always the same.

Some people grow up in the shadow of a sibling. They have to listen to their parents lament, “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” I didn’t have a brother. I had John. Fucking. Grisham.

It takes exactly five pounds of pressure to pull the trigger of a

.40-caliber semiautomatic Glock 22, which, Grady later told me, was the gun I held in my hand. He also told me the gun had been involved in several lawsuits over its likelihood to go off by accident. I like to think it was an accident, shooting the Texan. I like to think I flinched or panicked, or whatever, but I know better. This wasn't the first time someone had called out my masculinity, or my writing chops, or both together. There had been dozens of cocktail parties where this exact exchange had taken place. The difference was that I had never been holding a gun at the cocktail parties.

I shot Andy in the foot, but not the foot sitting on top of Richard Kimble. This piece of luck had nothing do with my aim—my eyes had been closed when I squeezed the trigger. Andy jumped in the air and fell on his ass, howling in pain and holding his Wolverine boot as blood poured through his fingers. Grady moved fast. He shoved Dell to the ground next to Andy and told me to grab our new unconscious friend. I stood over the poor schlub as I tried to decide where to put the gun. I started to shove it down the front of my pants but thought better of it. I didn't want my crotch to look like Andy's foot. Grady grabbed the gun away.

"Just get this asshole inside and call Digby. Wake him up if you have to," he said. I grabbed Kimble's shirt with both hands and dragged him into the relative safety of the cantina. Ten minutes later Grady entered, wiping the knife on his pants.

"They're gone," he said.

"Where did they go?" I asked. I had pulled the guy onto a chair and was trying to wake him up to take a drink of water. He was moaning steadily, which I took as a good sign.

"I'm guessing Ensenada. There's a hospital there. Dell, the one in the suit, seemed okay to drive. They should make it there before Andy loses his foot."

"You let them go?" I asked.

"They're not in any shape to try anything else tonight."

"But they'll be back, won't they? Shouldn't we have called the cops?"

“Shooting a man is an expensive problem in Mexico. I’m a little short on cash after the hotel and all.” He walked over to the bar sink and turned on the water. There was a plaintive groan from the pipes, but only a trickle of water dribbled out. Grady cursed and used what he could to wash his face and the back of his neck. He dried them both with the hem of his shirt. Our poor friend groaned again and leaned forward in his chair. I caught him just before he fell, and eased him back upright.

“You call Digby?” Grady asked.

“Got his voice mail. I’m not going down to his place in the dark. You don’t know for sure those guys left town.”

“They’re gone,” Grady said, and waved his hand at me to dismiss my fears. “If you can’t get Digby, will you at least help me take him up to Doc’s room?”

“Those assholes are gonna come back for this asshole, Grady,” I said.

“Probably,” Grady said, lifting the man’s feet. I grabbed his arms. “After we drop him at Doc’s, I’m going to bed. I want to get out to the race route early tomorrow.”

“Are you listening?” I said. “Those guys are gonna come back here, and a rum bottle won’t be enough to stop them.”

“What should I have done?” Grady said, walking backward, avoiding the bar and kicking open the rear door with his foot. “Should I have slit their throats and dumped them in a couple of shallow graves out in the desert?”

“No, I guess not,” I said, struggling to lift my half of our comatose charge. Less than a day later, I would be wishing he had done that very thing.