

Chapter 1

Saturday Morning, May 19th, 1979

The steam was already rising from the black asphalt under the early morning Biloxi sun.

It was going to be a hot one, or as his father used to say, hot as horseradish. The parking lot was surrounded by clean white sand beaches. It was too early for the usual joggers and sun

worshippers. He couldn't see a soul, but the feeling of being watched came over him. You could almost taste the salt in the warm sea breeze. The ocean was calm today, its waves gently licking

the shore like a kitten lapping up milk. A squadron of brown pelicans was perched on the

wooden pilings of the pier, looking down like judges as he made the short walk to the solitary car in the parking lot. It was a navy blue Chevrolet Caprice, exactly as expected. A sense of

foreboding came over him, sending shivers up and down his spine. As he approached the car, a sporadic pattern of bullet holes in the trunk was the first indication that something was wrong.

The clinging, smothering smell of whatever was in the trunk was overwhelming. He moved to

the driver's door and found it unlocked. The car was empty, except for some papers left on the black leather passenger seat. Empty that is, if you didn't count the black revolver sitting on the

driver's seat. Opening the door, he picked up the gun and sat behind the wheel. He smelled the gun and examined the barrel for copper and lead fouling. Someone had used it recently. Maybe

the same person who also left the left the keys in the ignition?

Taking both the gun and the keys, he decided to check out who, or what, was in the trunk.

Before he could move, he heard the sirens. Looking into the Caprice's side mirror, three police cars appeared on the boardwalk with lights flashing.

Chapter 2

Gabriel-Monday morning, 18 days earlier

My name is Gabriel Ross, and I was running late for a client meeting. That's what prompted the mad dash for the elevator. Holding the doors apart, I wrestled my way in like I was Samson. A pimply kid of about sixteen was standing next to the panel. He smiled, having enjoyed my predicament rather than holding the door. I asked him to press the button for the 7th floor. Just to irritate me he pressed #6. I huffed in frustration and reached over a couple of people, and pressed the correct floor.

I looked around the old and poorly maintained elevator. Whatever carpet it had was now threadbare, its color long since faded away to nothing. One bulb flickered on and off, in its last throes, working hard to illuminate the tiny elevator. A lens covering the bulb had become a mausoleum for hundreds of dead flies. Rose coloured wallpaper hung from the walls. Near the ceiling the paper started to curl, with one section hanging down like the pink tongue of a salivating dog. A scratchy version of Barry Manilow's "At the Copa" crawled out of the ancient speakers. Like some sick joke, the speakers only ever played "At the Copa" over and over again. As the door closed, I saw everyone looking up at the floor indicator, no doubt praying to the God of Elevators that the ride end as quickly as possible. I made a mental note to talk to my partner about relocating our struggling detective agency to better premises. The elevator made a clunking sound, signalling its slow and painful climb. The air was stagnant with the fan having long quit the job.

While everyone else was looking up, I decided to look down. Apart from my sneakers, I saw a selection of loafers and dress shoes, some sandals and a pair of Winnie the Pooh bedroom slippers. The latter worn by a little girl, no more than four, playing peek-a-boo behind her mother's tree trunk of a leg. I thought there was an old Chinese proverb that signalled playing

peek-a-boo with a little girl this early on a Monday morning was a good omen. The girl was probably there to help plead her mother's case to the welfare people on the 4th floor. I also spied a pair of red ladies pumps, the kind with the stiletto heels. Further, the shoes were attached to beautiful legs, which were attached to... a fine looking Asian-American brunette, wearing a tight fitting red dress that hugged her body like a Ferrari on the coastal highway. I wondered what a dish like her was doing in this dump. As if reading my thoughts, she turned and eyed me suspiciously. We made eye contact; her eyes shielded behind thick lenses. I smiled, which prompted her to look away in disgust.

Everyone had exited by the time the elevator climbed past the 6th floor, leaving just doll face and myself. I found this to be a bit odd since the 7th floor was the top of the building. The only other room being a broom closet that Larry the cleaner liked to call his office. My mind scrambled trying to remember the client I was scheduled to meet. The elevator finally creaked to a stop on 7. I looked over, and said with my most suave, gentlemanly tone, "After you, Mrs. Cooper."

I made a show of holding the elevator door for her. She was standing back at the rear of the elevator eyeing me suspiciously. While we looked at each other, the doors repeatedly tried to close. Open-close-open-close. Finally, an alarm sounded. Embarrassed, I retreated down the hall to my office. I looked back and saw Mrs. Cooper walking towards me down the hall. She had a signature walk, feline and graceful. Her stride measured; one stiletto placed delicately in front of the other, like a prowling tigress stalking her prey. Behind her glasses, her eyes met mine.

"What are you looking at?" she challenged, interrupting my reverie. After mumbling something unintelligible, she hit me with a triplex of questions. "Are you some pervert? How did you know my name? Do you work for Gabriel Ross, the private detective?"

Taken aback for a brief moment, I calmly extended my hand, "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Cooper - my name is Gabriel Ross, and I own the "Eye on You Detective Agency. As for how I came to know your name, I saw a Caddy parked in the lot as I drove in. The personalized plates read, "I Cuff Um". I put two and two together, once I remembered seeing your picture in the local rag last week."

She tentatively allowed me to shake her hand, which was small and dainty, her grip limp like an uprooted weed. "Well, you're smarter than you look." she said dismissively.

"Uh, thanks," I replied, unlocking the door. A flick of the switch illuminated a small office devoid of unnecessary things like a waiting room, secretaries, paintings, coffee, diplomas... My silent partner Ben O'Shea and I had rented this space about three months ago and let's just say business was as slow as a hot summer day here in Biloxi.

"Couldn't find a smaller office?"

"I'm currently negotiating for a much larger space in the new Drayton Tower," I lied.

"Sure," she said with a look that left no doubt she didn't buy it for a second.

"Please have a seat?" I said pointing to one of the two chairs adjacent to a small wooden desk.

Ignoring me, she moved about the tiny office looking out the window, inspecting the spectacular view of the red brick of the apartment building next door. "Nice" she said sarcastically. "Do you know you have a cat on your fire escape?"

"Yes, that's Bourbon. He came with the place," I replied, opening the window to let in the orange tabby. "He thinks he works here. I pay him in tuna fish."

"Cute, Mr. Ross," she said, continuing to stand. She was almost as tall as a 6 foot street light, overshadowing me by the better part of twelve inches.

"Call me Gabriel," I replied, offering her a cigarette from the pack of Camels I kept in my desk. I don't smoke; I kept them around as a courtesy. I figured it might help people relax and open up.

"No, thank you Mr. Ross, smoking stunts your growth; didn't your momma tell you?"

Bourbon jumped up on the desk purring as I put the pack away. "Have a seat Mrs.

Cooper, and tell us what "Eye on You Investigations" can do for you."

She finally sat down and crossed her legs, causing her red dress to rise up mid-thigh.

Bourbon and I were riveted.

"It's a strange name for a detective agency? It sounds more like you're some ...stalker."

I smiled, wondering how many more shots Bourbon and I would have to endure.

"So what exactly do you do as a "Private Detective," Mr. Ross?"

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I didn't care for her accentuating "Private Detective." She struck me as a spoiled brat. I had half a mind to put her over my knee and give her a spanking, but I didn't think our relationship had developed that far yet.

"It's Gabriel, and I do a variety of jobs ranging from finding missing people, stalking... I mean surveillance, investigating insurance fraud, doing background checks, that type of thing.

Were you referred to me?"

"I called the local police about my... situation and a gentleman there said you were the best in town."

No doubt she was referring to my silent partner Ben. "Great! I love referrals, how can we help?"

"We?" she said, looking around the office as if some associate might have snuck in behind us.

“I have a partner, but he’s more of a silent partner. Of course, there’s always Bourbon.”

As I said this, I noticed Bourbon had already chosen sides. He had jumped down and was doing his normal “rub up against a beautiful girl’s leg” routine.

"Mr. Ross, you obviously know who my husband is. He’s a very powerful man in Biloxi and has a reputation as someone who gets what he wants. I’m here to ask you to expose the affair he’s having." I was momentarily distracted. To think anyone would cheat on the doll sitting across from me was as big a stretch as a fat lady in ski pants.

“Mr. Ross?”

"It’s Gabriel. What makes you think he’s having an affair?"

"Let just say I have my suspicions. I need you to follow him, and get me some proof."

"So what happens if I get you proof? Will you ask for a divorce?"

"I won't be asking for anything, and divorce is the least he can expect," she replied putting emphasis on the word asking.

I made a note on my pad; *Speak to Ben about the quality of his referrals*. The potential for disaster here was enormous; William Cooper was more than just a man who got what he wanted. In his position as Sheriff of Harrison County, he was rumoured to be involved with some pretty shady characters. If he was crazy enough to step out on doll face, then he was crazy enough to get rid of a nosy detective.

Bourbon was now perched on her lap, making a purring noise like a 67 Ford Mustang. I put a lot of stock in Bourbon’s opinion. Even so I had decided to send her packing. I had just opened my mouth to give her my decision when I saw a tear fall from those beautiful brown eyes. I put all reason aside and fell for her like a blind roofer.

Before I could say anything, she recovered. “Is a \$2000 check sufficient as a retainer?”

I was right, the Winnie the Pooh slippers were a good sign. “So tell me, how did you meet your husband?”