

Change of Address

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Chanhasen, Minnesota

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Chapter 1

When I awoke, the room was no longer filled with sunshine. The dingy furniture looked even more so in the sickly, late-afternoon light. I had fallen asleep again in my swivel chair, arms folded across my chest and legs crossed on top of my desk. There had been no knock on the door to wake me up. I uncrossed my legs and helped the left one down to the floor. It had fallen asleep. After rubbing out the pins-and-needles feeling, I walked over to the lighthouse calendar hanging on the wall and checked off another day. It had been more than a month since I had put the ad in the paper and there hadn't been one call, not one single knock on the door. I was beginning to wonder if I should take Uncle Lou up on his offer to make me a meat packer in Philly.

I had come back to Chicago not really knowing what I had wanted to do or why I was coming back. I had gone to college and graduated with a double degree in Psychology and Law Enforcement. Dad, a captain on the Chicago police force, had always hoped I would follow in his footsteps, and, after college, that seemed like the best bet. So, I took the exam and headed for the Police Academy. I was near or at the top of my class in everything, including firearms. When I was five, Dad taught me how to use a gun and how to respect it. The only problem was, when I left the academy I wasn't sure I wanted to be a cop so I joined the army.

That indecision came from three fronts. One, I didn't know if I could deal with the system. I knew I couldn't handle the frustration of arrest-

ing someone on Monday and seeing him back on the streets on Tuesday. Dad said that was just part of an overcrowded system and all he could do was to just keep doing his job. Two, even though I could put as many shots as I wanted in the center of a bullseye, I didn't know if I could pull the trigger if my gun was pointed at a person. Dad said that was something no one liked but, again, it was part of the job and, if the time came, training would take over and the trigger would be pulled. If it was part of the job, maybe I didn't want the job. Third was a woman.

When I got out of the army, Dad suggested I take some time off and decide. So, I'd packed my camping gear and headed for the back woods of Yellowstone.

I had been gone for six weeks when a park ranger found me and handed me a telegram. My folks had been killed in a car accident. Two weeks had gone by since then. Suddenly, my decision was not so important.

I called Aunt Rose in Wisconsin and found out she and Sergeant Powolski had taken care of everything. According to their wishes, Mom and Dad had been cremated. They were waiting for me to hold the police service.

After the service, a group of people gathered at Antolini's, Dad's favorite Italian restaurant. After three hours of listening to people say they were sorry, Stanley Powolski, Aunt Rose, and I were the only ones left. Aunt Rose invited me to come up to Door County, Wisconsin and spend some time at her inn. I kissed her good-bye and told her I would even though I knew I wouldn't—at least for awhile. There were some memories up there I wanted to avoid. Stosh and I moved to the bar and spent another two hours talking about old times.

Some of my earliest memories were of Stosh Powolski, a big, tough man who got me addicted to hard candy. He was as close to an uncle as I'd ever have. And he was the only one I could have talked to about the accident. Both of us spent a few minutes quietly staring at our glasses before I brought it up.

“How did it happen, Stosh?”

He didn't seem surprised. It was like he had been waiting for me to ask. He took another sip of his beer and answered, “Drunk driver, young kid.”

“What happened to the kid?”

“Physically or legally?”

“Both.” I raised my eyes and met his. His look was hard and official. It had to be. So did mine. Because just behind that hardness was a lot of pain that may not have stopped had it gotten started.

He looked down and sighed. “Physically, same old story. The impact must have thrown him sideways. There was a bump on the left temple and a bruised left shoulder. The kid at least had enough sense to put on his seat belt.”

“Good for him.”

Stosh looked back at me and there was a warning in his look. He continued. “Legally, he was arrested and charged with DUI and manslaughter, two counts. He made bond. Case comes up next month. Seems pretty open and closed. But he's got some big-bucks lawyer.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Where did it happen?”

He pursed his lips and took a deep breath. “Well, you know your dad loved that drive along Sheridan Road. They had been up at the Highland Park Country Club for some political shindig. Instead of going back to the highway, he took Sheridan. Happened at the bend around West Park. Evidently the kid came up on him from behind and tried to pass. They hit the bend side by side and the kid lost it. Your dad went almost straight over the edge and down into the ravine. The kid made it halfway around the curve to the left, spun and ended up facing the wrong way with the left side of the car against a tree.”

“Rich kid?”

He swirled what was left of his ginger ale in the bottom of the glass. “Nope. Not even close. Lives in a dump on Armitage. Has had ten jobs

in the last four years.”

“Then where did the lawyer come from?”

“Don’t know yet. The kid wouldn’t say. We’re looking into it but we’ve got to be careful about rights and it’s not illegal to have expensive attorneys.”

“No, just a little strange. It would be nice to know who’s footing the bill.”

“Sure would.”

“Can’t you do anything?”

“We’re doing everything we can, Spence. I have a list of officers and detectives as long as your arm who volunteered to put in off-duty time to tail the kid, but that could open a can of worms. Last thing we want is a harassment charge. We did stake out his apartment. He never showed. Landlord said the kid stiffed him out of the last month’s rent. We’ll see if he shows for court.”

“Any record?”

“None. Kid’s clean. Not even a parking ticket.”

“What about the car?”

“Registered to the kid. It was towed to a yard up on 41. It’s still there.”

I let the facts roll around and bounce off of each other. I liked things to make sense. This didn’t. Stosh was watching the balls roll.

“Leave it alone, Spence.”

I took a deep breath. “It seems a little strange.”

“I know it does. But we’re doing all we can. It’s probably just a case of wrong place at the wrong time. And the kid is probably one of the thousands who hides in the cracks of society.”

“And who has a high-profile attorney?”

“I know. There are things that don’t make sense. But that’s only because we don’t have all the facts. From the right point of view it will make perfect sense. We just don’t have that point of view and the kid wasn’t talking. And he doesn’t have to. He can plead guilty and get off with a slap on the wrist for a first-time offense. Or the big-bucks lawyer

may find a loophole and the kid'll walk." He shrugged his big shoulders. "It may be as simple as rich girl and poor boy fall in love and daddy is helping to cover it up."

I thought some more. "Was Dad involved in anything big?"

I got another hard look that softened just a little. Stosh put his hand on my arm and said, "Leave it alone, Spence. We'll do our job. If there's something there, we'll find it."

I nodded. But I also knew how the system worked—with both hands tied behind its back.

The bartender asked if we wanted refills. We both declined. It was almost ten and, except for a couple at the table in the corner, the place was empty.

"You wanna tell me the kid's name?"

"Nope. That doesn't seem in line with my previous advice."

"It's public record."

Stosh nodded his head. "Yup. And if you really want it, go find it. But I'm not giving it to you."

I wasn't sure if I did, or, if I did, what my reasons were.

We talked about the Cubs for a few minutes, Stosh emptied his glass, and I put thirty bucks on the bar. He started to protest and then saw the look in my eyes. Twenty years ago, Stanley Powolski had saved my Dad's life and ever since, Dad had picked up the tab. Stosh's nod said more than words ever could have. We stood up and shook hands.

As I turned to go, Stosh put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You know, there's always a spot on the force for you, if you want it."

I smiled. "Thanks, Stosh. But I pretty much decided that I'd get a P.I. license and see how that goes. I think I still will."

"Well, whatever you do, you know I'm behind you. If there's anything you need—"

I smiled. "I'll be sure to ask."

At twenty-eight I was a big boy and thought I could take care of myself. But I was not above asking for help if I needed it, and I knew if I asked it would be there. I told him I'd be in touch.

Chapter 2

Six months later I had my license. The kid plea-bargained and was given probation. I looked up his name, but I didn't go to the trial. I was angry, but more so at life in general than at the kid. It just wasn't fair. I wondered how I'd act if I ran into him. I always thought I'd kill whoever harmed my family. And up close, I may have done something stupid. From afar I wasn't quite as angry as I may have been in person, so I stayed away. But the name Robert Dayton would forever be etched in my memory.

I'd rented a puny office with an adjacent room that I could pretend was an apartment on the top floor of an old three-story building on the south side. It was about as far from the old neighborhood as I could get and still be in the city, but it was only a couple of miles from the station. I'd eagerly hung up a little sign that said: "Spencer Manning, Private Detective" and hung my diploma up on the wall. I figured it would be a fun and easy way to make a living. So far it wasn't much of anything, except maybe bad for my health. I was getting fat and lazy sleeping behind that desk every day. If this kept up much longer, I'd be like one of those old walruses that can barely get off the rocks and back in the water.

My only visitor had been a friend who worked for Motorola who gave me a gift of a new-model pager, saying no self-respecting P.I. would be caught without one.

My stomach suddenly rumbled and I realized I was hungry. I locked the office and walked down the hall and out the back door. I stood on the porch, wiped a few beads of sweat off my forehead and watched as a lonely, hot wind blew a single sheet of newspaper up against a rickety old fence. It was the third week of June and, as I walked down the stairs, I let out a sigh as I remembered how hot and muggy Chicago summers could be. So far, this one was even hotter than normal and it had been a month since we'd had any rain.

Cutting across the back yards, I walked around to the other side of the block and opened the door of Beef's Diner. I had discovered it just a week ago on one of my strolls around the neighborhood. When Beef found out I had been in the army, he'd started giving me a cut rate on meals. I'd told him it wasn't necessary but he had insisted. He'd been a sergeant in Viet Nam and picked up his name there. Seems the officers in his outfit had told the guys that if they had a beef they could take it up with the sarge. No one ever did. I wouldn't have either. Beef was built like a bulldozer and looked like he had the personality to match. A jagged scar stood out like a medal someone had pinned on his left cheek. His arms were solid muscle and his left forearm sported a tattoo of a flagpole. No flag, just the pole. He said the artist had a heart attack and died before he got to the flag and Beef had decided to leave it as is.

His hair was almost white and cut in a crewcut that had probably been his cut of choice since birth. It topped his tough-as-nails exterior. But underneath there was a heart of gold. He always had something cheerful to say and we passed the time telling war stories. All the interesting ones were his. And he always asked how business was. Unfortunately, he always got the same answer. I waved at Maria, who was busy in the kitchen working on the dinner crowd, and started toward my usual booth.

"Hey, Mister Detective."

"Hi, Beef. What's the special tonight?"

He grinned at me as he set down a couple of plates of meatloaf on the counter and said, "The special is, I got a case for you."

As I turned and walked back to the counter, I gave him a blank stare and tried to figure out if he was serious or had been at the rum again.

He set down a couple of beers and said, “You didn’t get busy all of a sudden, did you?”

“Not since lunch, no. What do you mean, a case?”

He threw his hands up in the air and said, “A case, a job, something to do besides dust your desk with your legs.”

“What happened? Somebody finally complain about your cooking and want to find out what this stuff really is?”

“Maybe that’s why you’re about as successful as the Cubs. You put out a sign that says ‘Private Detective’ but you really want to be a comedian. Last booth on the left. Go see what the young lady wants. I told her I knew this hotshot who was put on the earth for the sole purpose of solving her problem. Go on, I gotta close the joint in two hours.”

A case. A real case. And a young lady at that. Of course, I had always pictured her walking in my door—long shapely legs, showing just enough under a tight black dress to let you know they were attached to more woman than any man would ever be able to handle. I guessed I could change the scenario to Beef’s Diner. I peered eagerly down the row to the last booth on the left but there was nobody there.

My hopes dropped back to the ground with a thud and I turned back to the counter. “Well, that figures, she’s gone.”

“What do you mean, she’s gone? She’d better not be!”

I was starting to get angry. I didn’t mind losing a client I never had as much as I minded being the butt of some joke. “There’s nobody there, Beef. And it’s not very funny.”

He looked down the row and smiled. “Oh, I see. She’s there. Just walk down there and see for yourself.”

I shrugged and walked down the aisle. He was right. She was there, but she didn’t have the long legs or the tight dress. What she did have was an adult-sized piece of chocolate cake and she was shoveling it in faster than I would have thought possible. And now I knew why I thought no one was there. She couldn’t have been more than four or

five years old and didn't come within a foot of the top of the high-backed booth.

Beef had come up behind me and he introduced us. "Marty, this is Mr. Manning. He's going to help us find your daddy. P.I., this is my niece, Marty."

She stopped eating long enough to give me a muffled "Hi" and then went back to the cake. She seemed much more interested in it than in finding her daddy. But then I'd tasted Maria's chocolate cake and the cake *was* right there in front of her. Hard to ignore. Marty was a cute little thing. Long black hair framed a thin face with green eyes, a slightly upturned nose, and a mouth covered with chocolate. I told her it was nice to meet her and then noticed a Raggedy Ann doll sitting next to her on the bench with a white paper napkin spread across its lap.

"Who's your friend there, Marty?"

"That's Ann." She didn't take her eyes off the cake.

"She looks hungry. Did your daddy give her to you?"

"No. Uncle Ronny did."

I glanced over at Beef and saw the puzzled look on his face. I guessed this Uncle Ronny was a new addition to the family.

"Well, you see she gets something to eat, okay?"

"Okay."

I knew that was a lie. She wasn't about to share that cake with anybody. I took Beef's arm and steered him back toward the counter.

"So, you gonna take the case, P.I.?"

"How about you tell me what the case is first? Her father is missing?"

"More like we don't know who the father is."

"Her mother is your sister?"

"Was. She died six months ago." He pursed his lips and took a deep breath. "And to answer your next question, she wouldn't tell me who the father was."

"They weren't married?"

"They weren't married. But it's not what you think. She wasn't that kind of girl."

“I hadn’t considered what kind of girl she was, Beef.”

“Hey! How about a refill!” Down at the end of the counter, an old guy with a two-day growth of stubble held up his cup.

“Coming right up, Pops.” Beef walked behind the counter and picked up the coffee pot. “I’m closing at eight,” he said to me. “How about I get Marty settled with Maria and then come up to your hole in the wall?”

“Okay.” I ate, put seven bucks on the counter, and headed back to the office. I wasn’t crazy about the case. Missing persons wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, but I felt I didn’t have the right to be choosy. Things were a little slow and I had rent to pay.

Chapter 3

I unlocked my door, wondering if I'd ever get a real case so I'd have to use the old marker-in-the-door trick like I'd read about in the mystery novels. What was left of the sun left a sickly yellow pall over the few pieces of old wooden furniture that had come with the place, left behind by a tenant who didn't think them worth the trouble of hauling to the next address. If this worked out, I'd have to spend some of my inheritance and buy some real furniture. But, for the moment, I didn't want any of that money.

I was about to make the place a little more presentable when something about the room suddenly struck me as odd. A quick glance around showed me what it was. I must have noticed the blinking red light on the answering machine out of the corner of my eye. It was only the second message I'd had and the first one didn't count; that was me checking the machine and what I'd said couldn't be repeated. I rewound the tape and waited anxiously.

When I heard the gentle voice, I sighed and shook my head. It was Aunt Rose. Another great expectation ground into dust. She said she was still waiting to see me and then went on to say she had run into Kathleen at the grocery store. Kathleen was one of the memories up in Door County I wanted to avoid, and the third reason I had joined the army. And now it seemed she was coming to Chicago to exhibit her paintings. Of course, Aunt Rose, who firmly believed I should have married Kathleen instead

of joining the army, had given her my phone number and told her I'd love to see her. I could always count on Aunt Rose.

Kathleen Johnson was a beautiful, talented, sometimes addle-brained woman whom I had fallen head-over-heels for the first summer I was interested in that sort of thing. We had been spending summers up in Door and staying in Aunt Rose's inn for as long as I could remember. But, until the year I was fourteen, every summer had been spent down by the docks, out on a sailboat, or on one of the island beaches reading Mickey Spillane, Raymond Chandler, and Arthur Conan Doyle in the hot sun. Then, in June of one fateful summer, I had met Kathleen on my way to the boat and had spent the next month dreaming about her long blond hair and bright blue eyes and following her around with about as much control over my destiny as a dog's tail.

She was almost a year older than me and at first wanted nothing to do with me. But I was persistent and, by the end of the next summer, she had fallen in love with me too. We were inseparable and, as the years went by, most everyone assumed we'd get married one day, especially Aunt Rose. Dad had laughed and said it was just puppy love. He said I'd go off to college and find out what love really was. Then I'd get married and find out once more; that's when Mom hit him. I'm not saying there weren't other girls in my life, but both Kathleen and I finished college without having found anyone else and the next year I asked her to marry me.

It was then that the fighting began. Both of us had tempers which were quick to flare. And the main argument was over where to live. I had always wanted to be a detective and had planned on joining the force in Chicago. She was an artist and never wanted to live anywhere but Door County and she once said that, even if she were in a pine box, she would have found a way to keep herself from being shipped to Chicago. Evidently she was willing to sacrifice me for her art. But then I wasn't bending much either.

How had we spent seven years avoiding this issue to which there seemed to be no solution? But that wasn't true. There was a solution and I found it. I broke off the engagement. Somehow a wonderful rela-

tionship spent watching fluffy white clouds and listening to tug whistles had gone south. We still loved each other but that love was interrupted far too often by fits of anger. We were either in each other's arms or at each other's throats. And I never knew which was coming next. So I had eventually decided to put myself in a position where I wouldn't be able to change my mind. I joined the army. But a part of me missed her and had never forgotten her.

Evidently, neither had Aunt Rose. It was Tuesday and Kathleen wasn't coming until next Wednesday. Eight days away. I'd have time to take care of Beef's problem and then run up to Door for a visit to Aunt Rose. I knew I was trying to avoid Kathleen but only because I knew I'd have a hard time saying good-bye if I saw her in person. I loved her—I probably always would. But love should be like a favorite old chair with lumps. If you know where the lumps are, you can settle down in the comfortable spots in between. With Kathleen, the lumps kept moving around.

I spent the next hour dusting my desk with my pants and wishing Aunt Rose hadn't reminded me about Kathleen. That was one clean desk.

Chapter 4

About 8:30, Beef knocked and let himself in. He dragged a straight chair to the other end of the desk and sat down. He had taken the time to put on his Hawaiian shirt and splash on some aftershave. Old Spice if my nose served me correctly.

“You going to a party?” I asked trying not to laugh.

“Nah. But I’ve heard about those gorgeous broads that are always dropping in on you P.I.s and I thought I’d be ready.”

But his Hawaiian shirt was already sweat-stained and I didn’t want to tell him what I thought he was ready for. He wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt and said, “You know, I could do without this heat.”

“You and me both. But I can remember Dad saying that same thing since I was a little kid and he couldn’t do anything about it either. You care for a cold one?”

He gave me a look that told me I didn’t have to ask and, as I walked to the mini-fridge in the corner he said, “Ya know they invented air conditioning a while back.”

“Yeah, I heard something about that. The crowd coming in the front door has kept me so busy I haven’t had time to get one. Marty settled in okay?”

“Sure. I got her PJs on and Maria’s reading her a book. And not that trash you read either.”

He was referring to the couple of hundred mysteries that lined the bookcase against the wall. There was also some Dickens and Steinbeck

sprinkled in there for my more serious moods, not that Beef would have noticed.

He tipped back the bottle and took a long drink. "So P.I., you want the job?"

"I'm not too clear on what the job is, Beef. You want to fill me in?"

"It's not too complicated. My sister, Elizabeth, got herself pregnant some five years ago. She wasn't going to get married and she wouldn't think of not having the baby. You know what I mean. So, nine months later, Marty is a member of the family and I became an uncle. I loved that kid like I was her own father, changed her diapers, sang to her, took her for walks. I wouldn't give her up for anything."

My raised eyebrows got me a dirty look.

"Don't give me that look. Under this tough hide I got a heart just like you college boys. Just don't spread it around."

"She never told you who the father was?"

"Nope. She refused to talk about it and after awhile I figured it didn't really matter so I stopped asking."

"Do you think she knew who it was?"

He set down the bottle and slowly turned red. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Just trying to see how things stood." I had discovered one thing. You don't want to get Beef mad.

"Well, now you know. My sister was a good Catholic girl and I don't want you to ever forget it."

I didn't point out that she had evidently taken at least one night off from being good.

He calmed down, took another gulp of beer, and continued. "She knew who it was all right. It was just some big damned secret."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Cuz the guy did the right thing by her. Aside from marrying her, of course. She got a check every month for support of Marty."

"You ever see the checks?"

A perplexed look preceded his "no."

“Then how do you know he sent them?”

“Because she said he did and she wasn’t hurtin’ for money.”

I finished my beer and asked, “Who’s Uncle Ronny?”

The hardness returned to his face and he sat up straight in the chair. “I don’t know. That’s the first I’ve heard of him.”

“Not a relative?”

“Not in our family. And I oughta know. It was just me and Sis.”

“Maybe the father’s brother.”

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe a friend of your sister. You know how they always seem to get called uncle.”

“Maybe. It really irks me. I figured Beth gave her that doll cuz she never lets go of it. Now I find out it’s some slob. All the dolls I’ve given her and she drags that thing from some stranger around.”

“Doesn’t sound like a stranger to me, Beef.”

His eyes narrowed. “There you go again.”

Crossing my arms on my chest and leaning back, I said, “I didn’t mean anything by it. People are allowed to have friends you know.” I hadn’t noticed until now that the light from the setting sun had been replaced by lamplight from the street. I reached out and switched on the desk lamp.

“Yeah, I suppose,” he said disgustedly.

I wasn’t about to say it, but it crossed my mind that this big, mean junkyard dog was jealous. “He could’ve been the father but your sister didn’t want Marty to know.”

“I don’t think so. Sis was pretty firm about the fact that nobody ever needed to know. The guy is out there somewhere—he just doesn’t have a name. That’s why I’m hiring you.” He looked perplexed and fidgeted in his chair. “There’s just one thing.”

“Shoot.”

“Well, business is not that good. I’ve already got two mortgages on the joint. I—”

I waved my hand. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll do some nosing around and see what I come up with. If I get a line, we’ll see where it

goes from there.” I didn’t want to tell him that I was pretty well-off money-wise. With the inheritance and the insurance and the money I could get from selling the house, I could have afforded a much nicer office. Maybe even curtains on the windows. But I wanted to make it on my own.

“Thanks, Spence. But chow is on me.” He gave me a quick look-over. “You could use a few pounds, you know.” I thought my six-foot frame did okay at 190. Beef obviously disagreed.

“Throw in the chocolate cake and you’ve got a deal.”

He laughed and we shook on it.

“I’ll need to talk to Marty, Beef. When’s a good time?”

“She gets home from camp by noon. Day care place. Any time after that. She’ll be upstairs with Maria.”

“Okay, tell Maria I’ll stop by after lunch.”

“Fine. Just keep it simple. I don’t want Marty getting upset. And it’s me that wants to know, not her. As far as she’s concerned, she’s got a daddy—me.”

“Where did Elizabeth live, Beef?”

I got a hard look that would’ve melted lead.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I need something to go on here. The neighbors might know something.”

He looked like he wasn’t going to tell me and then gave me an address on Paulina. I jotted it down and then looked at him.

“Pardon my asking, Beef, but why do you want to know who the father is?”

“After Elizabeth died, the checks stopped. I had her mail forwarded thinking I would find out who it was. No more checks came.”

“So whoever it was knew she had died.”

“Right. And whoever it was could provide for Marty better than I can and I’d like to see she gets it. She deserves more than what she gets from me.” He squinted his eyes like he was thinking about something. I watched. It wasn’t a pretty sight.

“I don’t want you askin’ her nothin’ about that night—the night Beth died. She’s forgotten about it. She spent weeks cryin’ herself to sleep and I don’t want that startin’ all over again.”

“Okay, nothing about that night.” I didn’t want to upset her either, but I also knew that one day she’d remember. It wasn’t something you could forget, no matter how old you were. And when she remembered, it would be nice to have something to tell her.

Beef pushed back his chair and stood up.

“Hey, Beef. How did she die?”

He turned and gave me a blank stare.

“Elizabeth, Beef. How did she die?”

“She just died, that’s all. Everybody does sooner or later.” There was no energy in his voice.

There was something here he was trying to stay away from and I was going to have to find out what it was, but I knew I had to be careful. I wouldn’t get any information out of an angry client and, at the moment, I was in need of some information.

“I have to know, Beef. I’m not going to publicize it for Christ’s sake.”

He stared at me for a good ten seconds, me holding my breath the whole time. About when I thought I was going to burst, he said, “She was killed.”

I let out my breath. The barrier had been broken. I sat down on the corner of the desk, dangling one leg over the front edge, and asked softly, “What killed her, Beef?”

I watched as the look on his face went from defiant to puzzled. He was trying hard to find the right words. He remained quiet for a few more seconds and then said, “She was shot. Right through the heart. The coroner said she was dead before she had time to think about it.”

I waited a minute while my shock wore off before I spoke. “That’s not killed, Beef. That’s murdered. Did they find who did it?”

He shook his head no.

“You know, the police don’t look kindly on some P.I. nosing around in an open murder investigation.”

He glared at me. “Nobody’s asking you to. What I’m asking you to do is find the father. And anyway it’s not open.”

“Beef, it doesn’t take much imagination to think that the father could be tied to the murder. Maybe they’re one and the same. Maybe he got tired of paying the support or ten other reasons that we don’t know about.”

He waved his hand at me. “Nah. It was some jerk. That’s all. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time and some jerk nailed her.”

“Maybe, maybe not. What do you mean the case isn’t open? It’s not that old.”

“Well, maybe—maybe it’s open,” he stammered. “But they’re not doing much. They can’t. It was just some jerk with a gun in his hand. Good luck finding him.”

I stood up. “We’ll see.”

“We’ll see, nothin’,” he growled. “It’s find the father or nothin’. If the two overlap, you come and tell me. I want this thing dropped. I’ve spent the last six months coming to terms with this and tryin’ to forget that she’s gone and I can’t do anything about it. And now I want it left alone.”

“Where did it happen?”

“At her apartment.”

“The place on Paulina?”

I got another look. “No.”

“She had two apartments?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“Then, nothin’. She changed apartments. People move you know.”

“Where was the new one?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“Maybe I don’t, but I won’t know that till I check it out. That’s how this works. I don’t have a magic ball. I have to follow all the leads I have and her neighbors are a good place to start.” I got the stare. “So?”

“So what?”

I took a deep breath. “Where was she murdered?”

He thought for a few seconds without changing the stare and then spit out an address on Hunter. I wrote that down too.

“Was Marty there?”

“No, she was with Maria.”

“You went there?”

He let out a long breath. “The place was a dump. It was supposed to be a big secret but I knew about it. I finally got tired of knowing Marty was living there and was going to talk to sis about it.”

“You found her?”

“I walked in the door in the morning and there she was.”

“What did you do?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s got nothin’ to do with you.”

“Beef. You dragged me into this. I can find out from the police report, but it’d be easier and somehow more meaningful if I get it from you.”

He didn’t respond.

“I’m not going to get in the way of an open police investigation. I’d just like to know.”

He sat back down, his shoulders slumped. “I knocked and nobody answered. The door was unlocked so I went in.”

He paused and looked up at me. I think he was hoping I’d be satisfied with that, but when I didn’t respond he frowned and continued.

“I went in...” He took a deep breath. “It was a small joint. Just a living room and a kitchen stuck at one end, a small bedroom and a bath. She was lying on her side in the living room. First I thought she had passed out or something. Her back was to me. But when I got closer I saw the pool of blood and the look on her face. It was that blank stare that dead people get, you know like they don’t give a damn about anything anymore, which I guess they don’t.”

His eyes had glossed over and I knew he was looking at something that wasn’t in the room with us.

“I saw the same look in Nam. Kids who got it without knowing it was coming didn’t even have time to be afraid.” He blinked and gave

me a hard stare. “She got it quick—no warning.” Then his jaw relaxed and the lines around his eyes softened. “I couldn’t stand that look so I reached down and closed her eyes.” He said it like something someone would say in church during the sermon, quietly and reverently.

“Did the police come up with anything?”

“Nah. She wasn’t important enough. They got better things to do.”

“That’s not true, Beef. Everything gets investigated. They just don’t have the people to hit everything as hard. But I guarantee you if they found something it would be followed up.”

His look said he didn’t believe me. But it was true. Dad had always felt badly about the cases that didn’t get solved and often complained that there wasn’t enough money to hire the personnel he needed. Chicago was a typical big city with all the problems that come with it.

“Was the place upset any? Did it look like there had been a struggle?”

He got up again. “Find the father.” He turned and stormed out of my office, leaving the door open behind him and my orders hanging in the air like sides of beef.

I took a deep breath, let it out slowly and went over to close the door. Until tonight all I had seen of Beef was a happy-go-lucky guy in a t-shirt and an apron. This side of him was a little unnerving and I had the feeling that there was something he wasn’t telling me. Maybe it was none of my business or maybe I just didn’t know how someone acted when their sister had been murdered. I’d just have to start digging and see what came up. And sometime soon I’d have to have an off-the-record talk with Sergeant Powolski.

Chapter 5

I had a fitful night's sleep, tossing and turning and dreaming about winding roads when I was asleep and wondering why Beef didn't want me to look for the killer when I wasn't. It was a little before six. The night had not cooled things off much and I lay in bed with the sheet twisted around my legs and tried to come up with another answer besides the two logical reasons that were written up on the wall in big letters. Either Beef was going to be on my tail waiting for me to find whoever it was and then plug him, or maybe he had killed her himself.

Statistically, the second made sense. Most people are killed by relatives or someone they know. But then he needed a motive and there didn't appear to be any. I knew he loved Marty, and, from the way he'd described closing her eyes, I knew he loved his sister too. I pulled my legs out of the sheet. And maybe he was nuts.

Knowing what I knew of Beef, the first option made more sense. I didn't buy Beef's story about coming to terms with his sister's death. He wasn't the type. He was the type for revenge. Either way, it bothered me and I considered turning him down. After all, I hadn't eaten any of the retainer yet.

But sooner or later Beef would run out of chocolate cake, and someday Marty might ask questions about her daddy and it might help to have the answers. And maybe someday her father would want to know about her too. I kicked off the sheet, swung out of bed, changed my

shorts, and poured a glass of orange juice. The humidity had softened whatever finish was on the wood floor and my feet made little thwack thwack noises as I walked across the room.

Marty got home from camp at noon. I'd have plenty of time to tie up some of the red tape my folks had left behind before I saw her. There were still bank accounts to be closed, insurance forms to be filled out, and a stack of mail I hadn't even opened yet. Then I'd talk to Marty and see if I could get a better feel for where this road was leading.

I grabbed a fast-food burger on the way to the bank. The temperature was 97 and they predicted it would hit 100. I liked the heat and tried as much as possible to live without air conditioning. But this was too much, so, on the way back, I stopped and picked up a window unit.

Back in the car, I turned the air to full blast, flicked on the radio, and pulled out into traffic. The first button was still set to AM 720, WGN, Dad's favorite station. I had grown up listening to the mostly talk format and I still usually prefer that to music. Late at night they used to play big band music and Dad and I would sit and listen and talk when I got home from dates. Now they had switched to all-night talk except for Saturday nights when Mike Rapchak still played the big bands. He always led off with *Girl Talk*, Dad's favorite song. Dad had sent me tapes of the show when I was in the army. It was an anchor to home. Since I'd been back, I hadn't been able to bring myself to listen.

Me and this '65 Mustang went back to high school days. It was really Dad's car but he'd rarely used it. I can still remember how excited I was the day I turned sixteen and he handed me my own keys. Then, when I finished college, he signed it over to me for a graduation present and had it repainted my favorite color—just as light blue as they could get, even lighter than a skyblue popsicle. When I went into the army, we drained the fluids and put her up on blocks. Then, when I wrote that I wasn't going to re-up, Dad had her put back in street condition. She ran as smooth as ever.

I honked at some kids who were playing at the curb and pulled into a space in front of my building. When I got out and stepped into mother

nature's oven, I remembered why I didn't like air conditioning. The sudden shock of going from cold to hot and vice versa was like running into a brick wall.

The three kids who were usually raising hell in the yard were just sitting against the fence looking drained and beat. Score one for the heat. I lugged the unit up the stairs, installed it, and turned it to high. By the time I got home it would be cooled down, my feet wouldn't stick to the floor, and I could get a good night's sleep. After filing the morning's work on the pile on the desk, I headed for Beef's apartment above the diner.

Chapter 6

I climbed the back stairs and knocked on the screen door. In a few seconds Maria's smiling face appeared.

"Hello, Maria," I said as she opened the door.

"Hello Mister Spence. Mister Beef tells me you were coming. Martha is waiting for you." She turned and led the way back to the playroom. As I followed, I admired the neat hair pulled tightly into a bun and streaked with gray and the bright, flowered dress that added to the warmth Maria brought into a room. I would have given about anything to have this happy, roly-poly Spanish woman for a grandmother.

Marty was sitting in the middle of the toy-covered floor coloring a picture. Next to her was her Raggedy Ann doll. I cleared a spot and sat down but I wasn't quite sure what to say. How do you interrogate a kid?

"What are you drawing, Marty?"

"A house."

"Who is going to live in it?"

"Ann's mommy and daddy."

While she talked she stared at the paper and kept coloring.

"Isn't it for Ann, too?"

She scrunched up her lips and furrowed her brow and, after a few seconds, said, "Sometimes. But sometimes she'll live somewhere else. And then they'll all move."

"Do you mean like you moved with your Mom?"

She nodded yes and added, "And we were going to move again, too."

I knew something was going on here. I felt like I was wandering down a dark, twisting path—one I wasn't quite sure I wanted to be on. I wanted to pick her up and hug her and tell her everything was going to be all right. But everything wasn't all right. This little girl's mother had been murdered, and she didn't know who her father was and I had no magic to make her feel better. But she did have Beef and Maria and I knew she would be well taken care of. She also had the shell she had built around herself and she seemed to have transferred her problems to Ann. If I was going to get any answers, I would probably have to break down that shell and, as I looked at that fragile little girl at my feet, I decided that breaking down her shell wasn't something I was willing to do. For the moment she was nice and safe in there. Maybe at twenty-five or thirty she'd break into it on some therapist's couch, but that would be up to her. I didn't want someone breaking into my shell. I tried another path.

"Marty, last night you said Uncle Ronny gave Ann to you. Was she a present for your birthday?"

"No he just brought her one day."

"Did he bring you any other things?"

"He brought some coloring books and crayons too."

"Was Uncle Ronny related to your mother, like Uncle Beef was your mother's brother?"

She thought for a moment and said, "No, he was my friend."

"Did your Mommy tell you to call him uncle?"

"No, he did. He said he was going to be our friend and I should call him Uncle Ronny."

"Did Uncle Ronny come a lot?"

She got an angry look on her face and said, "One day Mommy told him not to come back any more. And he said he'd take me for a ride on a horse."

"Did he have his own horse, Marty?"

She shook her head no. "He said where he worked they had horses and during the day they didn't use the horses so no one would know."

Finally she looked up and I almost melted in the gaze of those bright green eyes. “Do you think you could get me a ride on a horse? Mommy isn’t here to tell me no.”

It was all I could do to choke out, “I’ll see what I can do.”

This was just great. Maybe I should have a new ad made up: P.I. will break down and cry if you get a kid to pull his strings.

“Do you remember what Uncle Ronny looked like Marty?”

She shrugged. “He looked nice.”

“That’s good. What color hair did he have?”

Another shrug.

“Was it like mine, or Uncle Beef’s, or Maria’s?”

She looked up at me and said. “It was your color, but longer. Uncle Ronny let me play with his ponytail.”

“How big? Was he as big as me?”

“About like you.”

I patted the top of her head and smoothed her black hair and told her to be sure to draw a good house for Ann and her family. She said she would.

I stood up and, as I walked out of the room, she said, “Don’t forget about the horse.”

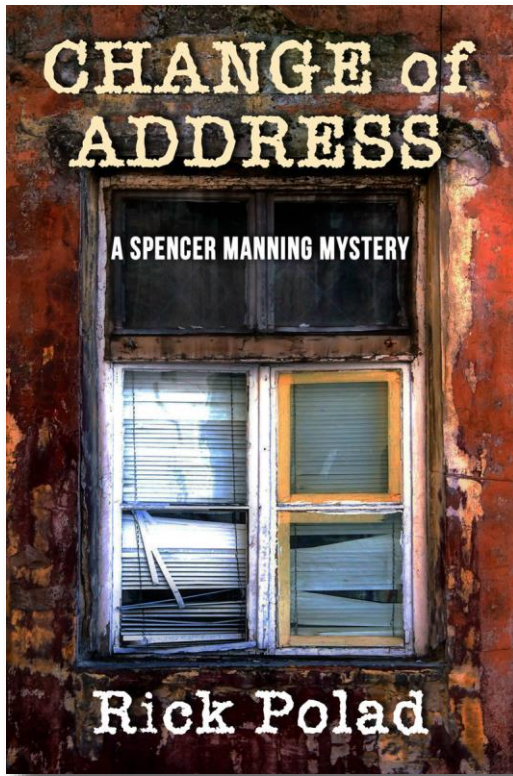
I assured her I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. It was my only lead. That is if you didn’t count a guy about my size with brown hair in a ponytail.

I said good-bye to Maria and walked back to the office thinking about horses. I had spent a good deal of my formative years at Linden racetrack and Skyline Park. They weren’t far from Elizabeth’s second address. It might be a good place to start. But there was a better spot to get info on the track. I decided that tonight I’d pay a visit to the Blue Note Lounge and some of the sweetest jazz in the world. If horses were involved, old Blue Eyes Jackson would know about it.

Dad had taken me to the Blue Note ever since I was big enough to sit on a stool and had told me that there was so much blues in Mr. Jackson that, once he started playing, his brown eyes would turn blue right while I watched. To this day, I’d swear there were times when they did.

I had been avoiding the Blue Note and the memories that I knew would roll out when I opened the front door. But I had been avoiding long enough and that would be the perfect place to start facing up to the past and start getting on with the present. I knew Dad would be there in spirit. I also knew that this time Mom wouldn't be waiting up for us with milk and homemade chocolate chip cookies.

I figured the next step was to see what the police had on the case. So, after making my way back to the office, which was too cold, I called the station to see if Stosh was free. He wasn't. I told the desk sergeant to tell Stosh I'd be in Thursday morning and to call if that was a problem. Then I took a nap.



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