

Chapter One

Sir pulled his heavy overcoat tighter and wiped his nose with his sleeve to keep the drips from forming icy stalactites down his upper lip. He staggered down Church Street lurching from one shadow to the next. He was more inebriated than usual, but he knew he had to get to St. Christopher's quickly or he would die. He needed the priest. That was for certain.

To say the day had been difficult for Sir would be an understatement. When he had waked up in Slocum Alley and shifted himself out from under his cardboard tent, he gathered his possessions to begin his morning patrol of the city. He struggled over the alley debris to Juice's tent. Juice, so named because of his predilection for cheap orange-colored wine, had been his first friend in Madison.

"Juice, wake up, man. Let's roll."

Sir stood there in silence waiting for some kind of mumbling and grumbling he always heard from Juice's tent. The usual noises, through which the *Yeah, yeah, I'm comin'* was hardly decipherable, failed to materialize.

This was not good. Juice never left on his patrol this early. In fact, Sir always had to wake him from his stupor to get him going in the mornings. Juice's rusty grocery cart was still in place and the few things he pushed along the street had not been disturbed. There was the old Nancy rag doll in his cart, a toy that had once belonged to his youngest granddaughter, Joy.

Juice never left the alley without Nancy. A decade or so ago a drunk driver had killed Joy—in her parents' own driveway. Juice had been that drunk driver, and Sir had witnessed over and over again Juice's self-flagellations in atonement for his deeply regretted sin. Joy was still clutching Nancy as the EMTs lifted her lifeless body onto the stretcher. The doll was all Juice had left of his only granddaughter. So Juice never went anywhere without Nancy.

Sir grasped Nancy and held the doll close to his breast. *I've got to find Juice*, thought Sir. *I've got to get Nancy to him somehow*. He closed his arms around Nancy, as if she were a warm puppy, and grabbed his own three-wheeled cart and started his search. *I've got to find Juice*.

Sir trudged across the long bedraggled alley that he had shared with Juice for the past six months. Very few other hobs ever came to Slocum. The large green Dumpster that shielded the entrance to the alley from the heavily traveled street provided a modicum of privacy for them. But Sir was always eager to get out of the alley every morning to go on patrol.

But he couldn't go on patrol yet. He had to find Juice. He grabbed his cart and bumped it over the rubble on his way to the graffiti wall to search for Juice. Juice had often added to the graffiti—graffiti over graffiti—that perhaps went back three or four hobe generations. Maybe Juice had slumped down against the wall and dropped off to sleep as he was occasionally accustomed to do. But Juice was not there.

Great horror surged through Sir's heart. Two hobs had been murdered within the last three months. Temporary hobs—or hobos, as they were called—who flew in on the local freight and then quickly flew out again, had been arrested for the murders. Sir sat on the ground, inadvertently splashing himself down into a pile of ice from last night's sleet. But he didn't care. He placed his face in his hands. What if hobos had found Juice. *The police. The police. No*. He couldn't go find a police officer. That was a no-no in the hobe world.

Then a new thought occurred to him. Perhaps Juice had been too drunk to make it back to his cardboard tent and had passed out somewhere along the alley way. So he headed down Slocum toward the street, zigzagging across the alley—almost like a cop grid-searching a crime scene—looking for Juice. He had difficulty pushing his cart off the beaten path, over the rubble,

through the accumulated dead leaves, and around piles of broken glass, where some past hobes had thrown their empty wine bottles against the side brick wall just for the hell of it. But he did not find Juice.

Then just before he reached the Dumpster that shielded the alley from the street, he suddenly stopped, the crippled cart almost throwing him to the ground. Juice lay there, a bloody hole in his forehead. An almost full bottle of orange-colored Bowie's Farm lay gripped in Juice's white-knuckled fist. Sir crouched down beside Juice and stroked his head. The blood was dried by now. *Shit*, he thought, tears dribbling down his cheeks.

Juice had been the first hobe—as they called themselves—he had met when he arrived in Madison. About six months ago now. When he had appeared at the Tyrone Street Bridge, most of the hobes were sitting around drinking or eating in twos or threes, but Juice sat by himself against a concrete piling eating an apple. Sir gravitated to where Juice was and sat down. Not beside him, mind you, but somewhat apart. Neither said anything. Sir started going through his bag—his collection of treasures. Then he heard a grunt. He looked up, and Juice, although saying nothing, offered Sir the apple. Sir smiled the best he could. He took the apple, and the two had become best buddies. And now Juice was dead.

Instinctively Sir dipped his hand into Juice's right coat pocket. Three quarters, a nickel, and four pennies. He immediately shoved the money into his own pocket. Then Juice's other pocket. A scrap of folded paper. The paper, as if it had been torn from some sort of ledger sheet, had been folded into a neat square. He squatted back on his heels and opened the scrap. A word. No, two words written in a scrawled cursive—by a kid, no less. Then Sir read the note: “Yur neckst.”

Several seconds passed before the words registered. “Yur neckst,” he muttered. *No*. The thought was driving him crazy. *No. No*. He looked at the note again. *Your next*. What did that mean? *You're next*. Sir paused again, and clutched his head with both hands. *You're next*. Then a sudden shock wave lurched through his arthritic body. It was for him. He was the hobe most likely to find the body than anyone. It must be for him. He crescendoed the screech. “N-o-o-o,” he keened. “It means me.”

Sir sat for several minutes, holding his head in his hands, stunned and unable to move. He gradually came to himself and leaned over the body again. He reached down and prized the bottle of Bowie's Farm out of Juice's hand. He retrieved Nancy from the cart, and placed the doll into Juice's hands, forcing his fingers around the doll. He knelt there for a couple of moments, as if he were praying, before he pulled himself back up.

Sir left his cart there and struggled back to Juice's sleeping berth and grabbed the old refrigerator box Juice had used as a tent. He dragged the box over the rough alley rubble to where Juice was lying, knelt back down beside the body, and reached out with his hand and placed it upon Juice's forehead and muttered, “Rest in peace, Juice.” Almost as if he had forgotten how, Sir signed himself with the cross. And then he placed Juice's tent over him as if it were an eternal halo.

When he again struggled to his cart, he didn't look back. *I'm next!* was all that passed through his mind. He charged forward, as fast as he could manage his cart, and bumped it out of the alley and up Church Street to Bosham Alley where he knew three of his friends would be waiting for him.

Marty, Tom-Tom, and Jo were always there this time of day drinking the breakfast they had made from pre-owned coffee grounds and a cheap bottle of Irish whiskey they would have rounded up from somewhere. They would have brewed the coffee over a small fire Tom-Tom

would have ignited with a stolen cigarette lighter and leaves and twigs he had scratched up from the alley's floor. If all went according to the ritual, Marty would offer Sir a cup of their alley-made Irish coffee. And Sir would always accept.

But today was different. Jo apparently wasn't home this morning, but Sir asked no questions. He greeted Marty and Tom-Tom with a limp wave of the hand and sat down on a concrete block. Marty handed him his mug of Irish, and they sat and drank for the next quarter hour without saying a word.

He was glad Jo wasn't here. She had flirted fiercely with Sir from the beginning, and at first her behavior flattered him. But his early attraction to her eventually turned to apathy and then to repulsion—partly because he did not appreciate her fervid aggression and partly because his dick had quit working a long time ago.

Marty and Tom-Tom had been around forever, as far as Sir knew. Developing a friendship with them had never been an easy task. For a month or so after Sir had arrived, the two had apparently wanted nothing to do with this interloper. But then everything had changed when Sir brought them each a chicken leg from St. Christopher's Diner, a free dining room especially for hobes. After that Marty and Tom-Tom started going to the diner themselves, and the three of them had become fast friends.

Then, much against protocol, Sir helped himself to another mug of Irish.

Tom-Tom grumbled, "Ya cheap dog."

But Sir continued to drink with only a "harrumph" in reply.

After the third cup and more growling from his hosts, he pulled himself up with the aid of his cart, felt to make sure Juice's Bowie's Farm was in place, and limped his cart out of the alley, ostensibly to go on patrol as he did every day. He had said nothing to his hosts about Juice.

Marty yelled, "And thank you too, ya big ass."

From here Sir would normally go on his first patrol to gather bananas and other too-ripe fruit from the back of Bi-Lo, Publix, and other supermarkets before he parked his cart behind the privet hedges lining the back wall of the building and moved into the Madison City Library to spend a large part of the day. The library was a special gift from God. After reading the daily papers and a couple of news magazines, he would sit for hours either reading the latest novels or re-reading classical favorites—he was almost finished reading *David Copperfield* for about the fifth time—or writing in his pocket-sized notebook. When a librarian or library patron would pass by his carrel, he would automatically slap the notebook closed as if it held all the secrets of the universe.

At around two or three, he would go on his afternoon patrol in the alleys behind bars. By this time of day, the bartenders had made the bar ready for the evening's traffic and had tossed out quarter-filled cans of beer left over from drinkers' tables of the night before. Sometimes he got lucky and found some stronger stuff. Then he would head off to Masters Park to await the supper prepared for him and the other hobes at St. Christopher's Diner.

But Sir didn't go on patrol. No library for him today. He rambled down Church street and turned right at the next light on to Dambers Avenue and then to Masters Park where he stumbled over to a bench—the most secluded bench in the park—next to a large green Dumpster. The bench and the Dumpster were three-quarters surrounded by a small clump of pines that graduated into a thick grove of trees known as Boswell Thicket. He knew he would be alone here. Nobody else wanted to sit next to the stinking Dumpster. *I need to meditate.*

Sir reached into his cart and pulled out the brown bag with Juice's Bowie's Farm, unscrewed the cap and took a deep draught. And another. And another. He was meditating.

When the sun had lumbered into the afternoon sky, Sir reached into his pocket and pulled out his Polo sunglasses and slipped the temples over his ears. He was proud of the sunglasses, but he would have to remember to take them off before he saw the priest again. He had swiped them one evening at the diner when the priest had laid them alongside his plate. He was ashamed to have stolen them, but he wanted a souvenir from the priest. But he wouldn't think about that now.

He reached into his cart again and pulled out an aged banana he had scuffled from the alley behind the Bi-Lo yesterday. He took a bite, spit it out and threw the rest into the Dumpster. Sir did not litter. He was raised not to litter, and he clung to this discipline still. *Can't litter*, he remembered.

As Sir thought of it, he had been reared with many disciplines, not the least of which were studying, punctuality, studying, obedience, studying, church going, and studying. *I beat out Iris Tucker for valedictorian, for crying out loud. What a priss.* Sir was the first in his family to go to college, a major scholarship in English, and then graduate school. *They called me professor once. They called me doctor.* Sir beamed briefly. Just briefly. And suddenly he looked down at the dirty grass in front of him. *My lovely wife. My beautiful son.*

Then, just as suddenly, he reached into his coat pocket and jerked out the crumpled ledger note he had jammed there this morning. He gazed at it as if he had never seen it before. Then even more suddenly he muttered the words, "You're next." *It means me. I'm the target.*

No, that couldn't be so. But why would anybody want to kill Sir? In spite of the unspoken covenant among hobes never to talk to the police, Sir wanted to talk. Sir wanted to tell. Maybe it would be all right to tell the priest. He had never really talked to the priest—only to the hobes. But he would talk now. He stuffed the paper back into his pocket.

Sir relaxed. For a moment, at least.

He took another draught of his Bowie's Farm. He was feeling the whir rather strongly now. The whir always made him more comfortable. It helped him meditate. He reached back into his bag and extracted another over-ripe banana and tried to peel back the skin. He was having some difficulty matching his fingers to the peel but managed to get most of it pulled down. Sir took a large bite and then another, but that was about all he could do. He stood up to throw the remains into the Dumpster and found it difficult to move his feet in the right direction. So he gave up and just dropped the used banana onto the ground—much against his principles, mind you.

It was getting warmer now. Sir didn't know just how long he had been sitting there. But the southern sun appeared to suggest about 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon. He took another draft of Bowie's Farm. Whether from the sun or the alcohol, he was getting warm now and peeled off his London Fog overcoat. Then his Polo sweater. And finally his Tommy Hilfiger shirt. Sir was a Salvation-Army attired man. But he was not ashamed. He vividly remembered the day the priest took him to the thrift store. The priest allowed him to search through the racks carefully to pick out his clothing item by item. He was pleased with his name-brand finds—all gifts from the priest. The priest was a good man.

This strip act was a ritual he performed every afternoon in the summer but certainly not his usual practice in the middle of a cold January winter. Sir called it his cool-down. With his shirt off, Sir felt skinny. He used to be proud of his muscular physique, but now his muscles sagged like rags. He had once stood proudly tall, but now he was no taller than Rumpelstiltskin when he hunkered down and scuttled about the streets shoving his enfeebled shopping cart. He used to get a charge out of showing off his mermaids—one tattooed on his upper left arm and the

other on his right—his muscle girls, he had called them. He had thought of them as signs of his patriotism, since he had spent six years in the United States Navy before he went to college. But the years and the blistering sun had turned his skin into brittle horse's hide, and the mermaids had suffered accordingly.

Maria never did like the mermaids. Maria. He had married the most beautiful girl in the world, and he rued the day he left her to go chasing skirt just to satisfy his dick. A tear came. But that was spilt milk—or water under the bridge—or whatever, and there was no reason for him to scoop up that milk or to try to dam up that river now.

Sir took another draught of Bowie's Farm. That was the last of it now. He tossed his head back and shook the bottle to get the last drop, and then lost it on the ground. He curled up on the bench. He had to do some sleeping now, and he closed his eyes.

The nightmare thrust itself into his subconscious. Some strange man draped in black descended upon him with a loud laugh as Sir struggled valiantly to roll himself out of the way. Dark fly-eyed sunshades covered his eyes. He swooped Sir up from the ground and placed him sitting against the side wall of some building or other. Sir was too drunk or scared or something to resist. Then the man extracted a pistol from somewhere in his clothes and with a loud whoop pulled the trigger.

Crack! Cra-a-a-ck! The detonation filled Sir's ears, brain, and heart with such fear that he flung himself off the park bench with such a thrust that he cracked his head against the Bowie's Farm bottle, stunning him for a moment before he roused himself enough to realize he was still Sir with no bloody punctures through his skull. He wriggled up with the help of the park bench and held his head between both hands. *The shots! The shots!*

Sir abruptly turned and plunged his hand back into his pocket and snagged the crumpled paper. Sir opened it quickly and read again, *Yur neckst.*

Without so much as a further murmur, Sir struggled upright as fast as he could manage. He jerked his clothes back on, grabbed hold of his cart, hobbled it jerkily back to Church Street, and headed down toward St. Christopher's. On crossing the curb at Bulwark, a second wheel flew off the cart. *Shit.* Sir grabbed as much of his stuff as he could get into his pockets, abandoned the cart, and reeled off down Church. *I've got to find the priest.*

He lurched down the street watching every shadow, eying everybody he met, keeping close to the wall, and from time to time sliding into alleys and behind Dumpsters. Sir knew every hiding place on the street. Three narrow alleys now separated him from the church. Two tight basement stairwells led down under the Slattern and Wachovia buildings. No one ever used these stairwells anymore. They had years ago been walled over on the inside, but the hidden stair wells were still good for hobes to move into quickly to get out of the sidewalk traffic and take a leak.

Now he leaned against the wall of the side building and caught a glimpse of something—no, someone! The man! The man in the nightmare. Some strange man draped in black. Sir darted into an alley, but the man kept charging up the street. *It couldn't be!* He waited. It seemed hours instead of moments.

Sir peeked out into the street and the coast seemed clear. He stumbled his way out of the alley and headed as stealthily and steadily as he could manage back down toward St. Christopher's. He crept along for at least two blocks. He could see the spire now. *Beautiful.* He would make it now. Just one more block.

Then he heard it. A shot. Without a moment's hesitation, he dove into the Wachovia basement stairwell, just as a rattling, backfiring clunker of a car charged down Church. But Sir was safe now.

