

Northtown Angelus

Robert White

CHAPTER 1

I'd been back from Florida for less than a day when Bart Massey came through my office door jabbering a mile a minute. His softball outfit instead of his deputy's uniform told me two things: either I'd hear of heroics on the base path and centerfield or he'd been robbed by an umpire's willful blindness. Another indicator of his mood was the condition of the uniform: the cleaner, the more likely the latter was to be true.

"You struck out, I take it."

"Who told you that?"

"My razor-sharp intuition."

"You think being a private investigator in this hick town makes you special."

"Bart, spit it out, I've been on the road four days straight. I'm beat."

"They have these things called airplanes now for traveling long distances."

Talking about my cases to him would have been a mistake. Besides, the case wasn't worth discussing. I'd had too many variations of it by then. Ginnie DeRosa was a runaway in such bad shape when I got her out of that cockroach-infested motel that she was in no condition to get on a flight, even if I got her past the check-in. As it was, I had to keep one eye on her out of fear she might go for the steering wheel or try to claw my eyes out to get back to her pimp. The confined space of an automobile isn't the right place to go cold turkey from an Oxy addiction. It didn't help she refused to bathe in the motels along the way.

I had to tune Bart back in because he wasn't going anywhere soon enough.

"Four blessed times."

"Four blessed what times?"

"Are you deaf? I went oh-for-four at the plate. I stank the place up."

"Sorry to hear that. Anything else I can do for you besides lend a sympathetic shoulder?"

"Didn't you hear me? We're a game away from clinching a playoff berth."

The rant that followed imported baseball jargon that went over my head. One item did perk up my ears—his Easton Ghost model cost him \$500. That you could pay that much for one aluminum bat seemed as decadent an expense as Romans feasting on hummingbird tongues, but sports, as Bart was quick to remind me, was his or my brother's purview. I was a poacher.

"Maybe it's the bat," I offered.

“Ray, the only thing you know about a baseball bat is you couldn’t hit a pumpkin with one.”

I actually did possess a limited experiences with baseball bats. A cheating husband once came flying out of the motel I was surveilling and threatened to clobber me with one, your standard Louisville Slugger. I had to wait out Bart’s therapeutic soliloquy of each of his four strikeouts in such detail I barely stifled the yawn bubbling up my esophagus. He was the poster boy for selective memory; we went to Sts. Stephen & Basil, yet he had trouble recalling the names of the teachers we had in common, at least, the ones who didn’t coach. Yet there he was, taking up the oxygen in my small office with his parsing of each ball and strike to fractions of degrees from the strike zone and pinpointing velocity and torque of every pitch.

“Maybe the guy on the mound was just too good today.”

That assumption, gleaned from his past reflections on the notorious “Shotgun” Lloyd, owner of a 90 m.p.h. fastball, fueled the rodomontade I hoped to end. Five more minutes of soliloquy passed before the look on my face checked him mid-sentence.

“Why am I even talking to you?”

“I don’t have the answer to that, either.”

He left without another word. If I had to guess, he’d find solace at Northtown’s most popular sports bar, the Eagle’s Nest, the very same name stenciled across the front of his uniform.

The naming was no accident. The original owner of the bar was an Italian émigré from Naples, an admirer of fascism and all things reminiscent of a dark epoch Italians who settled in Northtown after the Second World War preferred to forget. A bartender showed me an old photo of the first owner he’d found in a box while cleaning out the back room. His small head had a cowl of black hair culminating in a widow’s peak and beard stubble surrounding a pug face. His black eyes squinted suspiciously at the camera. The bushy moustache clipped at the corners of the mouth suggested *il Duce* had a rival for his esteem.

Before Bart’s interruption, I was working on the receipts for my runaway to present a bill to her father. The light refracted from my thick plate glass made me invisible to passersby, but not immune from the heat that made it through. My building was ancient, a 19th-century relic that barely made it to gas lighting. Even hotter was my upstairs loft, where a La-Z-Boy and a Tom Collins made from a chilled glass in my refrigerator awaited. Ginnie’s father and I had a mutual acquaintance from Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows Church up the street. I played chess with Fr. David Villa on Thursday nights; he was a prominent parishioner, one of those multi-taskers who prove indispensable to a busy parish priest when it comes to organizing charity benefits or outreach programs.

Northtown is one of those towns where you can halve the degrees of separation from you and Kevin Bacon—mostly the people who pass by my office window every day. The biggest items on the bill I suspected Ginnie’s father would quibble over were the motels. The places I chose on the road for Ginnie’s sake were short on free Wi-Fi and Continental breakfasts. The last place

included a can of bug spray in the shower stall. After a few hours of driving, Ginnie became too agitated from her withdrawal symptoms to keep going.

Driving off the interstate in search of those neglected Norman Bates motels, I found cottages and weekend trysting spots where managers tolerated noise. Ginnie, a once-pretty teen in her glossy photos on the mantel place and in her Instagram poses, had descended into a hollow-eyed, malnourished, meth junkie thin as a bar code. Her dirty-blond hair was a tangled mess. Her agonized screams from withdrawal cramps would have brought cops pounding on the door at one of those cookie-cutter motels on the interstate. Over the four days we shared on the road it took me to get her home, I tried to understand her plunge into drugs, biker bars, and prostitution. I knew as little at the end of the trip as I did at the beginning.

All I knew for certain was that I'd come full circle by exchanging the swamp-stink of Florida's backwaters to my lakeport town broiling under a heat wave. The smell of rotting shad on Lake Erie's shoreline from Northtown to Toledo was the worst fish die-off in memory.

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