



Sample Chapter

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Crinkled and faded \$100 Federal Reserve notes tumbled out of a shiny-silver Republican ballot box. Bewildered, Silver County Sheriff Jonas McHugh continued to pour bills, roughly fifty, into a second pile before he tilted the box upright.

Sister Luann, who'd kicked his houseguest butt out to repaint, wouldn't believe what he'd found this first day after the Tuesday Iowa caucus unless he knelt for a selfie next to the cabin-table piles. No texted picture needed for retired Sergeant Ronald Oelschleager, due to arrive any minute from a recon of the frozen lake fifty yards west. The unexplained cash stood to jeopardize Jonas's fishing vacation. His overtaxed memory failed to pinpoint a date when he'd intercepted or discovered a greater cache of unbundled cash.

When his curiosity exceeded caution, he started a third pile of C-notes, peppered with crisp twenties. He maneuvered the ballot box to keep the bills from falling off the backwoods cabin's three-by-five-foot sanded-board table. The unclashed, slotted lid swung free and its unbeveled edge stung his ungloved right hand.

"Damn." A full-lung-capacity blast launched Jonas's curse past his chilled lips into the wintry twenty-degree cold of an unheated cabin. His boot stomps failed to dispel the forest's high-altitude chill that prowled beneath the cabin's planked floorboards and slithered upward through splits and cracks.

Behind his back, the cabin door latch clink preceded the louder hinge creak. Jonas dropped the ballot box and his black calfskin driving gloves to lift his parka's hem from his right hip. Only when he'd completed his pivot did the civilian-clad Jonas remember he'd locked his service revolver in the glove box of Sgt. Oelschleager's Suburban.

"What critter scared you?" Sarge asked. His body filled the doorway, his left thumb hitched to a front pocket of a non-regulation orange flotation vest worn over a dark-blue parka. The vest, a fishing relic devoid of law enforcement initials, bespoke of the trip's intended purpose and Sarge's retired status.

"You." Jonas's tensed shoulders slumped.

"Holy moly. Maybe you're scared now that I know about your stash?" Sarge's left hand pulled the door closer to its doorjamb.

“Trouble is all that cash won’t catch fish. Nor does it help the half-inch lake ice is spider-webbed with cracks. ‘Fraid the trout are safe. The lake’s January cap isn’t thick enough to support a toddler’s weight.”

Jonas peered into a table shadow before he squatted to retrieve the ballot box and his gloves. A straight-line draft through two punched-out knotholes rimples his forehead’s perspiration beads. His torso muscles and toes, warmed by a dark-red parka and insulated hiking boots, warded off half the penetrating cold. Upon standing, he laid the box on the table and his left-hand fingers rubbed his cheeks to stir capillary blood. “Don’t know where this came from.” He winked his left eye. “Sure it isn’t yours.”

Framed by the fur oval of a hooded blue parka, Sarge’s eyes narrowed and he jutted his lower lip left into a twisted grin.

Jonas didn’t equate Sarge’s facial contortions with forthcoming wisdom. “Come in or get out. It’s cold enough.” Jonas fought off his teeth’s urge to chatter. “Don’t let more in.”

“Don’t be a pantywaist. It’s been a warm winter.” Sarge spit out his words. “Can’t dare tiptoe on the lake’s bubbled ice nor flycast bait to open water for there ain’t any.”

While Sarge stepped inside and re-latched the door in non-record-setting time, Jonas inverted the tin box six inches above the tabletop. With the box’s narrow side gripped tight in his now-gloved left hand, he thrice banged his right gloved palm against its bottom. One folded white sheet of bond paper in a stream of green arrested Jonas’s scanning eyeballs. His left forearm muscles tensed as he watched it flutter and come to rest amid the twenties, fifties, and hundreds.

Sheriff McHugh stifled his crude comparison of how the latest cash carpeting the table resembled the overabundant and thick juniper underbrush his boots crunched from Sarge’s Suburban to the cabin’s front porch. Faint sun rays, filtered by the dirt splats on the windowpanes of the one west window, pooled into a ragtag striped-yellow design at his feet. The top bills of two stacks rippled as Sarge strode closer. Jonas gazed left to spy a dozen airborne bills. Three landed in an unlit hearth atop seasoned and cobwebbed two-foot long stacked logs.

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“We gonna count that?” Sarge asked. His words accompanied by a frosty mist. “Must be thousands.” His head unhooded, wide eyes pushed his trimmed brows upward to a brown crew cut. “Ever thought of how it might be to be rich?”

Jonas doubted his infrequent two-dollar lottery ticket purchases would enhance his odds for an early retirement. “Only when Powerball hits \$200 million.”

An out-of-season gunshot rattled the grimy windowpanes.

“You hear that?” Sarge asked.

Jonas nodded. Even though the frozen ground wouldn’t muddy his new hiking boots, to check it out would be a waste of official energy. Riding with Sarge put him six hours outside his Silver County jurisdiction. “I’m not gung-ho enough to jog twenty minutes to your Suburban for your police radio.”

“At least, shouldn’t we check the cabin’s perimeter?”

Jonas shrugged. Even without Iowa fields and forests knee-deep in snow for the first time in his thirty year recollection, he still wasn’t enthused enough to abandon the loose bills for a five-minute hike to Lake Andrew.

Sarge hugged the cabin wall as he sidled to the fieldstone-faced fireplace, its black cat andirons toppled horizontal to crisscross on the mortared brick hearth. Stretched cobwebs, the lattice for a quarter-inch fuzzy dust layer, obscured the finer andiron detail but not the three stacked unlit hardwood logs as one rested in the hollow of the two beneath it. Two wooden thread spools appeared to be the only mantel knickknacks not stored or stolen.

“Help me layer these bills back into the ballot box.” Jonas stated his request matter-of-factly. “No use messing with it too much. That is, if it’s evidence.”

It irked him that the money saddled him with filling out an incident report on a trip born of Luann’s threat to throw him, a live-in tenant, out of her Kanosh house. He was certain he could’ve slept on the living room sofa while painters brightened the second-floor bedrooms. Luann’s Christmas present of new hiking boots, a special tread design for hilly terrain, didn’t mollify him. He hugged her anyway for he could wear them on the rolling hills of his Silver County jurisdiction.

Jonas continued to flatten and stack bills without separating denominations. He discounted the importance of similar bill number sequences as secondary to his immediate quest to refill the ballot box.

Sarge shuffled around the table. “Didn’t expect we’d find this cabin without GPS.”

“Now you tell me.” Jonas pressed his lips together. He shouldn’t be sarcastic even if he uttered a little white lie. “Had faith in you. You know this state better than most know the back of their own hand.”

“Keep telling others that.” Sarge opened the two doors in the cabin’s cabinet that, besides the table and three pressed-back chairs, comprised the one room’s furniture. “You know, a person’s reputation is a perception not always reality unless heard three times. That’s my goal. Triple repetition equals respected reputation.” Sarge’s deep-guttural laugh overwhelmed the cabinet door slam. “No beer. How inhospitable.”

Jonas shook his head and kept his gaze on Sarge. His buddy halted his pacing at the edge of an eight-foot oval braided cotton-rag rug. It summoned within Jonas the fleeting memory that Jonas, as an infant thirty-four-odd years ago, crawled on a similar rug in his mother’s farmhouse sewing room without the circular yellowish-brown stains and black fireplace ember burn holes now before him. Utilitarian, maybe; warming and homey, never.

Jonas ignored nostalgia to set the ballot box down. Finger-by-finger, he tugged off his right-hand glove, stuffed it in his parka pocket and reached for the folded white paper.

“Whoa,” Sarge shouted.

“What?” Jonas glanced up and bridled his annoyance. “I’ll be careful.” And, true to his word, he touched only edges as he separated the twice-folded sheet.

Scrawled at the top of the page, on the fill-in-the-blank line after the printed word “county,” were the words “Balder” and “West School.” Two half-page columns were headed by the words “Candidate” and “Votes Received.”

He pinched the top two corners and held it upright, printed-side facing Sarge. “Didn’t Balder have one of the eight missing

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Republican primary precincts?”

From the opposite table side, Sarge leaned forward and squinted. “Think so. But don’t trust me. Don’t waste time with national politics. Found it better suits me to spend my time with state leaders.” Sarge unzipped his orange vest and parka to lift a cell phone from his plaid shirt’s breast pocket.

Sarge’s claimed detachment from federal politics tweaked Jonas’s skeptic bone. Iowa’s first in the nation caucus blended national into state politics. He scanned the candidate column and the numbers written alongside the listed names: Roper, 435; Sandman, 239; Gingham, 123; Derry, 91; and Packman, 48.

Jonas tried to equate the numbers with the official Iowa Caucus results publicized at the prior week’s GOP humble-pie news conference. New official vote totals didn’t include the eight missing precincts. The decision erased Roper’s caucus night lead to award Sandman an eighteen-vote victory, a presumptive win justified by the Iowa GOP policy decision that the missing votes were irretrievable. If the votes on the sheet in Jonas’s hands hadn’t been tabulated, Roper bested Sandman.

“Hey Sarge, think these votes were counted?”

Sarge raised a right hand index finger. Jonas nodded in response. The January north wind gust rattled and unlatched the cabin door. A freezer-blast of cold frosted Jonas’s cheeks. He buried his lower face in the crook of his right arm as he fended off and waded toward the door through swirling currency. Eight choppy strides accomplished his goal.

His left-hand glove insulated his shivering fingers from being fused to the door’s iron handhold. He braced his left forearm against the door. A sound like a crisp saltine broken in half cracked outside. He peered through his breath’s expanding vapor and saw no visitor.

Jonas attributed the beyond-the-tree-line crack as a squirrel or a wind devil snapping a weak branch. Jonas exerted renewed pressure to raise and drop the latch’s metal bar tongue into its notch before a third wind gust wicked the redness from his exposed skin and he joined the Smurf family in appearance.

“Central committee friend tells me Balder and Cooper Counties

had a missing precinct,” Sarge said. “She couldn’t pinpoint exact precincts. With charges and counter-charges flying, the Republican state chair and the party’s official spokesperson are being tight-lipped.”

Jonas squatted to add twenties to the hundred-dollar bills he retrieved. “Didn’t one official go missing?”

“If you mean Sandman’s campaign manager, consensus is he’s hiding from the press.”

Jonas circled the twenty-by-thirty-two-foot room as he and Sarge gathered bills from the floor. They squared the money into small piles before a gloved Jonas laid each stack inside the ballot box. His tranquilized mind rippled with no answer to his \$64.00 questions: Who paid the money? Who paid off whom?

“Would you agree this is a caucus ballot box?”

Sarge let the fireplace rug he’d lifted drop to the floor. “Seen Democrats use one similar.”

Yet, the vote-total sheet confused Jonas. While it indicated the box may have contained ballots, the names listed were Republicans, not Democrats. Moreover, the first nationwide caucus last week didn’t elect national convention delegates. How much did it matter? A headline? The proverbial light bulb glowed. Campaign contributions. The winner guaranteed to rake in hordes of cash. A caucus victory rallied a campaign cha-ching.

“Know what’s strange?” Sarge pocketed his cell phone and rubbed his hands on opposite elbows. His horizontal forearms, indicative of a powerful man, rested on his protruding teddy-bear abdomen until he arched his back to stiffen his six-foot-two frame.

“What?” Jonas asked.

Sarge’s taut jaw skin a sign he was ready to speak. “With no bed, I’d say no one’s slept or even stayed here for ages.”

Jonas nodded. The faded drywall stains, the dirt-caked windowsill, the one west window either painted or nailed shut and the undisturbed fireplace dust all an unspoken testament to verify Sarge’s observation. Jonas recalled neither scattered wood chips, a chopping block nor an outside woodpile. All inside logs neat and cozy within the hearth.

“There’s one oddity.” Sarge plopped onto a chair, his legs

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sprawled. From his front pants pocket he extracted matches to light the Coleman propane lantern he'd carried in with him.

Over its hiss, Jonas asked, "You mean the lack of dust and dirt on the floor?"

"Exactly."

"Sleeping bag?" Without an answer from Sarge, Jonas added to his question, "Or blankets?" Even if there was a right answer, Sarge's lack of a response gave Jonas no reason to pick a quarrel. The place sure didn't have maid service. "Who owns this place?"

"Wendell O'Dell did 'til he died a couple years back. Would assume Catherine, that's his wife, you know, inherited." Jonas didn't, but he nodded anyway, confident Sarge didn't need encouragement to continue. "Since she walked with a cane last time I saw her, she probably never hiked here."

"Don't know her." Jonas, convinced he had stacked the last of the bills, closed the box's lid.

Sarge twisted to gaze at the now dark curtain-less west window. "Sure you do. Runs the B & B in Elba. Ain't that still your neck of the woods?"

"Yeah, but I gotta think. Elba? Isn't but a grain elevator and half dozen buildings. B & B, you say?" Jonas rubbed his jaw. "There's one old Victorian house. Don't recall a sign."

"Maybe Catherine got remarried."

"She an older . . . dull-haired redhead, sorta stocky, standoffish?"

Sarge chuckled. "On the money."

"Introduced to her as Cath Weeks." Jonas paused to pull out a chair. "She a Republican?"

"Never directly asked her. Wendell, her husband, was knee-deep in Democratic causes. Two or three times crossed paths with him in Des Moines." Sarge fiddled with his lantern's flame. "While the recent caucus could explain why the money's here, doubt Catherine left it."

"Another explanation stares us in the face. A B & B is a cash business. These bills are well worn. Drugs and money laundering high on my distinct-possibility list."

"Been a lot of that in Silver County?"

“Don’t remind me.”

Two loud knocks rattled the cabin’s door. Their echo enhanced the cabin’s claustrophobic effect. Jonas glanced at the stuffed ballot box and then at Sarge’s quizzical mien, partly hidden by his upraised hands. They both stayed quiet. Heavy footwear squeaked porch planks outside their field of vision.

Sarge hadn’t spoken about inviting anyone other than Jonas.

“Come out. Hands up,” a voice boomed. “Come out, whoever you are.”

(Read the full Sheriff Jonas McHugh mystery in Donan Berg’s novel, **Into the Dark** at major online retailers.)

Sheriff McHugh is also featured in **Baby Bones**.

Find information on Author Donan Berg at:

www.authorsden.com/donanberg

E-book **Into the Dark** may be found at

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