

Chapter 4

["I must be dead! Oh no!"]

Chicago's Skid Row, Tuesday, 2/11/03, 3:00 AM:

Zeke Gomez, with George Kelly riding shotgun, cruised slowly down West Madison on this freezing, lonely morning, while crusty snow waited for the plows. There was only one other car visible, parked off in the distance with lights aglow and steam shrouding a running engine. Zeke slowly twisted the spotlight searching the sidewalk areas for anything suspicious. The beam suddenly revealed the presence of a short, gray-haired man walking toward them, crunching through the sidewalk snow. As they came abreast, Zeke braked. Kelly got out, hand patting his revolver.

Halfway across the street, Kelly pointed his flashlight at the old looking fellow warmly dressed in a stylish, tweed topcoat, with collar upturned around the ears. Kelly asked calmly, "Hey there gramps, whatcha doin' out this time a night? You lookin' to get mugged?"

"Yeah, but I have protection."

"What kind of protection?"

"Beretta. Right here in my coat pocket--with license."

"All right now, you keep your hands where I can see them."

"Certainly. I've done nothing wrong--besides, my chauffeur is just down the street in that brand new Cadillac Sedan DeVille."

"Yeah, big deal. Let me see that there weapon license and a picture ID--be careful now."

"Wonderful. That's just wonderful."

"What's wonderful?"

"You!"

"Hey! You snortin'?"

"No, Kelly, no.... Oh! Yes! Yes, now I remember." He chuckled. "I'll bet you thought the Doc made me look like George Clooney."

"CLYDE? Clyde? That you Clyde? Well I'll be goddamned!"

Kelly rushed up and hugged the breath out of him.

"Take it easy there, I'm quite old and fragile," Royce, AKA Clyde, said patting Kelly's back.

"Let me look at ya!" Kelly pointed his flashlight. "Well, maybe an elder Clooney. Jeez--that nose. It's way different. And the rip scars--like little pencil lines. Well--least yer not ugly. Too bad in a way. No freak-show job."

Royce (Clyde) cupped his face. "Come on--cut that light--it's hard on my weary eyes."

"HEY, ZEKE! Come 'ere! It's CLYDE. Remember ole Clyde?"

Zeke exited the squad car and crossed the street, saying, "Well I'll be. Sure enough. Well now--good to know you're all okay. You know, Kelly here, he worried a lot about you." Zeke shook Clyde's gloved hand in delight. "What the hell you doing out here this time of night?"

"Hunting."

"Hey, Clyde," Kelly injected, "you ain't looking for those kids, are you? Now you listen here. We'll handle those punks!"

"I know. I know. Say--you're just about off your shift, Kelly. I need to talk with you."

"How'd you know that?"

"Hey, I'm wealthy now--I have ways and means."

"Well you're right. Okay--how about this? Why don't we have some doughnuts and coffee at that all-night diner down the street? I'll treat. And this time, you can go right in the front door--and you can eat inside--with me," Kelly laughed outrageously. "Then, later, we'll go in the back and check the garbage can--you know--for old time's sake. Ha-hahaha-hahaha." He ended with a coughing spell.

"Funny, funny, funny. You ought to go on tour.... Okay, fine. Let's go.... Why don't we walk? It's not far. I don't mind the cold anymore...when you can dress for it."

"Zeke, ole buddy," Kelly said, still coughing, "go ahead and take the car back to the station. I'm in *good* company."

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Kelly and Royce were the only patrons sitting in a corner booth with a plate of Krispy Kremes and coffee. The waiter was still the same old senior citizen, as was the cook, his wife.

"You best stay away from here, Mr. Royce. Oh, I know, I know. You wanna find those kids. Well, this ain't the way to do it."

"You keep right on calling me Clyde, Kelly, I like it, I like it.... I'm not here hunting that much. Oh, once in a while. Some kind of hate compulsion. Just want to find that Romano kid--right here--exactly like the rotten sonofabitch found me."

"Romano?"

"That's his name. The other kid's name is Jeter."

"What? You know their names? Well, why in the HELL didn't you tell me that--months ago--goddammit?"

"Sorry, Kelly. Look--at the time, I had lots of other things happening. Dumb, dumb--I know. Maybe it's because I wanted first crack at that Romano slime. Hell, I still want them first--both of them--Romano and Jeter."

"No way Jose'. Listen--I'll run them through the police files. I'll find them--put 'em on ice. Hell, you'd probably kill 'em."

"No--but you're mighty close.... Say, eh, Kelly...how would you like to work for me?"

"Nah. Nah, I don't like you upper crust assholes."

"I'll pay you three times what you're making."

"Don't want your filthy money."

"It isn't *my filthy money*. I'm just going to use it. By the way, I still have this damn amnesia.... So what am I doing? Just riding the waves. Going along with everything they say and give me. Why not? Why the hell not?"

"Thought they were gonna fix your noggin'."

"Dr. Wells rejected any deep brain surgery. Thought it much too dangerous. Funny--said he found two strange tiny holes in my skull. He's bringing in the best neurologists in the world for consultation. Hey, why not? I can afford it. To date, however, surgery is definitely on hold.... Now--let's get back to that job offer."

"What kinda job?"

"Want you to take care of me, just like you always did."

"Oh, I don't know Clyde, I..."

"Includes a full expense account."

"Lookit, I come from a long line a lawmen, why my great granddad..."

"You got three little girls, don't you?"

"Yeah. Nine, eight and seven. Thinking about trying again."

"Need a bigger house, don't you?"

"Sure! Gettin' a little cramped."

"Where would you like to live?"

"Hey, I don't wanna leave. I like it there in Cicero. Lots of mooching relatives around. They all need me."

"Okay. Here's another fringe benefit. Tomorrow, we'll get with one of my realtors and you can pick out a comfortable home right there in Cicero, or wherever you want. Hey, how about this? You buy these doughnuts and I'll buy the house. I need you, Kelly, I need you badly."

"Hey! You some kinda gay?"

"Funny, always trying to be funny, eh? Listen, this job isn't going to be easy. It's not just finding those kids.... I know--I feel, that someone, and I haven't the slightest idea who, will try to kill me again. Kelly, my friend, I'm too old and puny. Need someone to protect me--someone I can trust...YOU. There're some very, very risky investigations to be done."

"For instance?"

"Christ, I don't know, Kelly. All I know is what I dream."

"Clyde, ole pal--I'd be a goddamn fool to refuse an offer like that. So I heartily accept. Christ, with all the goodies you're offering, *I'LL* be upper-crust. Where do I sign?"

"A good handshake is all I need, Kelly."

As they shook, Kelly dropped his head and sighed: "Sure gonna miss all that mini-power, as a cop." He then bulged his eyes from thought and, with hearty laughter, bellowed, "WOW! HEY--the one who'll really--really rejoice--is me ole lady."

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