

Gene Doucette

Fixer

The Writer's Coffee Shop 
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‘What ails you, Polyphemus,’ said they, ‘that you make such a noise, breaking the stillness of the night, and preventing us from being able to sleep? Surely no man is carrying off your sheep? Surely no man is trying to kill you either by fraud or by force?’

“But Polyphemus shouted to them from inside the cave, ‘No man is killing me by fraud; no man is killing me by force.’”

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

Translated by Samuel Butler 1900

PART ONE

GHOSTS

Chapter One

Now

Melissa didn't know what she was thinking when she stepped off the curb, but she knew where she was looking—to the right, which was the wrong way entirely. The curb was on North Street at the edge of Faneuil Hall, roughly ten feet from the junction of North and Clinton Streets, and Clinton was a one-way feeding into North, so it was possible Melissa looked to her right because a moment earlier—had she crossed at Clinton—that would have been an intelligent thing to do.

She also might have been looking that way because John was in that approximate direction. She'd just had lunch with John, he had just asked her out and she had just said yes, and this was just about the best thing that had happened to her since she'd moved to Boston.

It might also have been that Melissa had finally reached the point as a Bostonian where she no longer paid attention to traffic. Pedestrians downtown tended to show the same concern about fast-moving cars as they might have for slow-moving cattle, but for her first month in town Melissa had obeyed the crosswalks like she was raised to. Sometime around the second month she gave up on that. Month number three appeared to be the month where she threw herself in front of a minivan.

And so on a fine, bright and sunny Thursday afternoon, looking the wrong way and perhaps thinking of John rather than the traffic, Melissa stepped off the curb at the same time the driver of a minivan that was about to occupy that exact same space was looking down at a map. The driver was a tourist, and he was lost.

This was another thing that happened routinely in downtown Boston because none of the streets made sense, most of them were one-way, and one or two had a tendency to disappear entirely for extended stretches without any adequate explanation. The driver had been looking for one of those streets, which was supposed to lead him and his wife—she with the map thrust before his eyes at exactly the wrong moment—to the aquarium.

Melissa didn't hear the minivan's approach. The first indication she had that something was amiss was a heavy hand clamping down on her shoulder. Before this really registered, she was being picked up and thrown back onto the sidewalk. She landed hard and banged her elbow and was about to scream out at whoever had just picked her up and thrown her when she heard the screech of the tires and saw a shoe that looked exactly like the one she had just been wearing fly down the street.

I was just hit by a car, she thought.

But that couldn't be right. If she was hit by a car she would still be attached to the shoe, lying someplace entirely different, and probably not capable of recognizing that she'd been hit by anything.

Then her left ankle—the one above her unshod foot—screamed at her, and she wondered if she had just broken it.

A large man was kneeling over her, looking concerned. She didn't know him, but he looked like the guy you warn children to stay away from. Despite that, she was pretty sure he had just saved her life.

“You okay?” he asked.

“How did you . . . do that?” she asked. “Where did you come from?” “Sorry I'm late,” the man said. “Traffic was pretty rough.”

“Late? What are you talking about? Who are you?”

“Corrigan Bain,” he said, smiling and extending his hand. Interestingly, when he smiled, his grim features—he was not, by most standards, a particularly handsome man—transformed him into something strangely gentle and trustworthy.

“Oh, I’m a fixer,” he added, as if this explained everything. “Again, sorry I’m late. Your foot might be broken.”

“I don’t understand . . .” He still had his hand out, meaning to help her up, but she was pretty happy where she was; she was almost positive if she stood she’d just fall right over again.

“Hey!” a familiar voice shouted from half a street away. It was John. He had been across Clinton when he heard the minivan’s tires screeching, which made him turn back and look for Melissa. When he saw her on the ground, he didn’t associate what he was seeing with the sound that had made him turn in the first place. He saw what looked like a big ugly guy attacking his girlfriend.

Melissa didn’t say anything at first because seeing John rush over to defend her made her unaccountably happy. And then John sort of embarrassed himself.

He charged Corrigan Bain, but somehow Bain reacted preemptively to John’s clumsy assault by shifting his weight in just such a way that John’s ostensibly violent shove didn’t move him at all.

John stumbled backward and then tried again. This time Corrigan stepped to one side at the last moment, and John fell on his face. It reminded Melissa of a movie ninja, except Bain wasn’t doing anything special other than moving at exactly the right time.

“John,” Melissa tried, but he wasn’t hearing her.

“All right, buddy,” John said, holding up his fists.

Corrigan Bain looked confused, like someone who was watching a

foreign film with the wrong translation. He looked past John and up the street — there wasn’t anything special going on up the street — then down at Melissa. He started to thank her for some reason, and then John swung at him.

Bain pulled away just in time to miss getting punched, and finally Melissa found her voice. “John!” she shouted. “Will you stop? He saved my life.” John looked down at her like he just realized she was there. “He what?”

And then Corrigan Bain was gone. Melissa was about to apologize for John, but Bain had disappeared. And up the street, where she’d seen him look, two police officers were now running toward them.

“He saved my life,” she repeated to John. “Now would you go get my shoe please?”

It was the crowd that was the problem. Corrigan couldn’t stand crowds, but not because of any kind of low-level agoraphobia or even a personal space problem. It was that entirely too many things could go wrong in a crowd. Sometimes even figuring out whom you were there to save was a bigger challenge than the actual saving.

As he worked through the very kind of crowd he found so disconcerting, he glanced back over his shoulder for one last look at the scene. The cops he’d been expecting had arrived, and it didn’t appear as if either of them were looking for him, which was good.

Thankfully, the girl he’d saved wasn’t a fainter.

Having police turn up at a scene vastly complicated everything in Corrigan’s life, so he did everything he could to avoid them. And since doing everything he could usually meant knowing where they were going to be before they did, it wasn’t all that difficult.

Again, provided there wasn’t a crowd.

Ahead of Corrigan loomed a large stone staircase that led up past city hall and to where he had parked his bike. The people on the steps were a wormy cascade of fuzzy twists and turns, a torrent of possible selves. It was breathtaking and terrifying and very, very difficult to handle because the question of how much of it was real was open to interpretation from moment to moment. Corrigan had to resist the urge to simply close his eyes, kneel down where he was, and wait for everyone to go away.

Instead, he looked down at his feet and charged up the steps. The human spaghetti strands of eventualities adjusted as he moved through, his present causing everyone else's future to adjust and recalibrate. He'd nearly reached the top when he saw the boy.

The kid was only five or six. He stood alone at the top of the steps, watching Corrigan, and he was impossible not to notice because he had no future. Because he wasn't really there.

"It wasn't that close," Corrigan muttered quietly. "Leave me alone."

The boy didn't answer. He never answered when they were in public. He just looked at him angrily and then turned around and walked away.

A little singsong phrase popped into Corrigan's head, the kind of thought meme that reappears when you least want to hear it and refuses to go away no matter what you try and replace it with. He didn't know where it came from or who invented it, or if he might have invented it himself.

Corrigan Bain is going insane.

In order to reach Faneuil Hall in time, Corrigan had been forced to park his motorcycle in a nontraditional space—the sidewalk next to a parking meter across from City Hall Plaza. It was either that or steer the motorcycle down the steps, which he was pretty sure he wouldn't have been able to get away with. It went without saying that parking illegally right between city hall and the courthouse—and a stone's throw from the downtown police station—would attract a parking ticket. So he was surprised to find a redhead on his bike in lieu of any sort of citation. He shook his head to see if that made her go away, but she appeared to be real.

"Maggie?" he said. "Is that you? I almost didn't recognize you."

"Hey, yourself." She smiled and slid off the seat of his bike. "And go to hell, I haven't changed that much. How long's it been?"

Maggie Trent was indeed looking as sharp as she ever did in a blue pants suit and a decent pair of heels that seemed practical only in the sense that

they went well with the suit. She had on her customary dark glasses and a cigarette dangling from her lips. What had thrown him was the hair. She had magnificent hair—currently of the copper-red variety—but had chosen to pull it back past her ears to terminate in some sort of complex Gordian knot at the base of her neck. It was extremely unflattering, but that was probably the idea.

“It’s been three, four years at least,” he insisted.

“Two years. We saw each other at the mayor’s thing. You were with what’s-her-name.”

“Right.” He’d have provided the name of his date to flesh out the details, but the truth was he couldn’t remember it either.

“Never did tell me how you got invited to that,” she added while extending the pack of cigarettes. He slid one out of the box. Corrigan was not a full-time smoker but always took one when it was offered.

“I helped out a guy who knew a guy who had an extra pair of tickets. Dunno why I actually went, though. Wasn’t my sort of thing.”

“No, it wasn’t. Bet it impressed the girl.”

Corrigan leaned forward into the flame from her extended lighter, puffed the cigarette to life, and ignored the tinge of jealousy that was lacing Maggie’s comment regarding his nameless date from two years ago.

“Not as much as you might think,” he said. “So how did you come to be sitting on my bike?”

She laughed. “Seriously? Look where you are.”

He did. Without even realizing it, he’d gone and parked the bike directly in front of Center Plaza; a broad crescent-shaped building that blocked the view of Middlesex courthouse from City Hall like a medieval battlement. The FBI Boston office was in Center Plaza, and had been for years. One could not find this out by looking at the building directory, but that didn’t make it any less true.

“Huh,” he said expressively.

“It’s enough to make a girl think you’re looking for ways to run into her.” She grinned. Not knowing how to respond to this, he simply smiled back and worked on his smoke some more. “You on duty?” she asked.

“Just finished my day,” he said.

“Everybody make it okay?”

“It was close, but yeah. Crowd.”

She nodded, as nothing more needed saying. Anyone who’d spent a little time with Corrigan knew to keep him away from crowds. “So,” she said.

“Down to business.”

“We have business?”

“We certainly do. You owe me a drink.”

“Do I.”

“Perhaps even dinner. You eat yet?”

“Never found time.” He had briefly toyed with the idea of picking up something in Faneuil Hall but figured he wouldn’t be able to handle the mob indoors any better than he did the one outdoors.

“Good,” she said. “I’m hungry, too.”

“Dinner’s quite a commitment,” he said, the word choice being entirely deliberate.

“I’m sure we can handle it. Just in case, we’ll hold off on dessert until we’re sure.”

“Fair enough.” He shrugged. “Not that I’m backing out, but can you tell me when I came to owe you dinner?”

“You see your bike?”

“Yeah.”

“How about the parking ticket?” “There isn’t one.”

“Exactly. Now let’s eat.”

Ten minutes later Maggie and Corrigan had taken up a corner booth in a small, moderately popular Irish pub in the crescent, no more than fifty feet from his bike. The place was only lightly populated, as the truly busy time — when it would be packed right up to the fire code limit — was a good hour or two away. Corrigan sipped from his pint of home-brewed ale, one of the pub’s specialties and quite good if one were an aficionado of beer, as he was. Less accomplished beer drinkers might deem it a tad bitter.

“So, when I last saw you, you were dating this banker . . . what was his name? Larry?”

“Gerry,” Maggie corrected, sipping from her own glass.

“How’d that work out for you?”

“Turned out Gerry was a bit of a dick. Wasted a year finding that out.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you aren’t.” She smiled back with a flirty little tilt of her head. “Fine. I’m not.”

“How about you?”

“Free as ever,” he said. “You know how it is; hard to really develop anything long-term with my work schedule.”

This was a true but incomplete response. More accurately, there were a number of women who floated in and out of his life, much as Maggie did. Each of them was passively aware that there were others, in the same way one is passively aware of one’s own shadow. But what they all had in common, aside from a willingness to occasionally jump into bed with Corrigan, was a lack of possessiveness coupled with indifference toward long-term romantic entanglements.

“What you need, my dear, is a vacation,” Maggie said. “I get days off.”

“And you spend them at home drinking beer.”

“Works for me.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

This temporarily brought the conversation to a halt, veering dangerously close to the subject of their last serious conversation, which had, in truth, been a volcanic argument that teetered on the edge of physical violence

several times. The thesis had been that Corrigan Bain had it within his power to stop *fixing* at any time. And as he had plenty to retire on—and often complained that he didn't even *like* saving people every damn day, every damn year—the only reason he wouldn't quit was because he was a stubborn bastard. Maggie, for some reason, had taken his stubbornness very personally.

They sat there drinking their beer quietly for a little while, each looking for a way back into the current conversation. Corrigan was about to gamble and ask her about work when he caught something across the room. A good twenty feet away from them, at the bar, was a guy who was about to drop an entire beer down the front of another guy. It'd be an accident, but since the second guy was wearing an expensive suit, Corrigan did not see things going well from there.

“You got a rubber band in that hair of yours?” he asked.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Give it to me.”

She did. Then she took out the clips on the side of her head, allowing her whole mane to swing loose, which was momentarily distracting in an arousing sort of way. *Boy has it been a while*, he thought.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“One second.”

Taking careful aim, he fired the hair band at the side of the head of the guy who was about to be wearing lager. The band glanced off the man's ear. It was not an easy shot, but Corrigan resisted the urge to brag.

“Ow!” the target exclaimed, grabbing his ear and looking toward the guilty booth. He couldn't really tell for certain what hit him or where whatever it was had come from, but Corrigan and Maggie were a pretty good bet in the latter regard. More importantly—for the sake of his suit—he'd stopped where he was. Just then the guy at the bar turned around with his full pint and watched in great distress as it slipped from his grasp and landed on the floor with a loud crash. The target in the suit jumped back. He got splashed on the legs, which was enough to make him forget all about the unexplained impact

on his earlobe but not enough to give up on the whole suit, from a dry cleaning perspective.

Maggie knew better than to turn around. “Did you just lose my rubber band?”

“ ‘Fraid so,” Corrigan said. “But I saved a suit that was a lot more expensive. That’s a decent tradeoff, yeah?”

“Sure. But now you owe me another beer.” ***

After an hour of small talk, dinner, and minor beer maintenance, Maggie and Corrigan had managed to avoid enough former relationship land mines to have an enjoyable time with one another. It was odd. For Corrigan, it felt like sliding into an old pair of pants and finding they still fit snugly even when he knew they really shouldn’t.

“Hey, you’re drifting,” Maggie snapped. She’d been complaining about her boss—an agent named Hicks that neither of them cared for—while Corrigan had been staring at a girl across the room that was about to break a heel and twist her knee.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s all right, I understand,” she said, following his gaze. “It’s getting busy, isn’t it?”

Simply put—although it was really fairly complex—the more people there were, the more likely it was that Corrigan would drift entirely out of the present and start pre-reacting to things. At best, this could be embarrassing, and at worst it could cause a scene that had people pointing and screaming. Maggie recognized the signs well enough.

Concentrating mightily to get his head back into the present, he asked, “So tell me; did you get off work early today, or do you usually get to drink while on duty?”

“Actually? I’m on a fact-finding mission,” she said with a sly smile. “You know, if it were anyone else I’d call it a coincidence, but since it’s you . . .”

“What?”

“Honest to God, Corrigan, when I walked downstairs I was on my way to find you.”

“Really,” he said, just to respect the kismet that, for most people, might be considered extraordinary. This sort of thing happened to him all the time. “I figured I’d surprise you at home, but there was your bike. So, I just waited.”

“And you wanted to see me because . . . of a case?” A guess for most, he discerned this by cheating and looking ahead.

“Yeah. It’s about a case. We’re stumped.”

“But how can I possibly help?”

“Not here,” she said. She patted the side of her messenger bag, implying that all answers lay within. “It’s going to take some time to explain.” Corrigan did his best to hide his disappointment, as he thought he was in the midst of a romantic encounter. Now it sounded like this was the preamble of a business meeting instead.

“Upstairs, then,” he said, referring to the FBI offices.

“God, no,” she said. “Are you kidding? How about your place?”

He grinned. Business meeting *and* romantic encounter, then. He could do that.

The notion of bringing her back to his condo was so appealing that any lingering questions he had quickly departed—such as why Maggie was asking him for help with anything at all. She’d never done it before, and he couldn’t fathom any situation in which she might. Sure, he’d asked *her* for help once, but that was different, and it had been a long time ago.

“Place is a mess.”

“Like I care,” she said with a smile.

He nodded. “Well all right, then. Let’s get going.”

Chapter Two

Twelve years past

The lobby was intimidating all by itself. It had a small sitting area with a coffee table, a number of six-month-old magazines, and a couple of plastic plants, all of which seemed to have come directly from the *Big Book of Dental Office Decor* and could have been a waiting room just about anywhere. But beyond that there was the velvet rope partitioning the front of the room, the double-pane bulletproof glass, and the impressive legend on the wall beyond the glass, which read BOSTON FBI HEADQUARTERS. Below the headline were three portraits: the local FBI director, the national FBI director, and the President. These were positioned in such a way that one who didn't know who was who might come to the conclusion that the President was the lowest ranking person on display. Sitting at a desk inside the glass-encased area was a fifty-year-old woman wearing pince-nez glasses who was inordinately preoccupied with whatever was displayed on her computer. Either that, or she was ignoring him with practiced skill.

The woman—identified by nameplate as Mrs. Angela Hotchkiss—had in her possession all of Corrigan's loose change, his key chain, pocketknife, and sunglasses. This was thanks to the metal detector one had to pass through just to get to Mrs. Hotchkiss in the first place and the alarming signs posted in several places warning visitors just exactly what would happen if one were foolish enough to contemplate bringing a firearm into the office area. Corrigan imagined Mrs. Hotchkiss had a fully automatic submachine gun taped to the underside of the desk, or failing that, a SWAT team.

She also had his driver's license. It was sitting on the counter right next to her as she tapped away at her computer, possibly reviewing his arrest record—there was none—and his driving history, which was not good. Or, she was just playing Minesweeper.

Corrigan had plenty of time to ponder because he'd been waiting nearly three hours for someone to find room in their busy day for him. Since he didn't

have any appointments until later in the afternoon, this was not the worst fate imaginable, but still, he expected them to be more efficient.

Finally, the door to the right of Mrs. Hotchkiss's booth—the only door in the lobby other than the one Corrigan had come in through—opened, and out came a nondescript agent who introduced himself as Hicks. Hicks had a pile of folders under one arm and the butt of a gun conspicuously poking out from under his jacket. He sized up his guest.

“Corrigan Bain, is it?” he asked. Corrigan had gone through the trouble to make himself presentable—he had on a tie, even—and thought he'd done a pretty good job of looking like a normal, non-threatening local citizen, which was important when visiting with the FBI. Certainly his standard biker-chic style wouldn't fly.

“That's me,” he said, standing and extending his hand, which agent Hicks neglected to take.

“Interesting name,” he said. Having apparently decided Corrigan was not a serious threat, he nodded toward the door behind him. “Come on back.”

He led Corrigan through a big open space that could have been an office just about anywhere. They ended up at a small cubicle with a large PC and a huge pile of folders covering every inch of surface space, prompting one to wonder, as Corrigan did at that moment, what precisely the computer was there for if not to retain data. Paperweight, perhaps.

Hicks sat at the desk and bade his guest to sit on a folding chair set up for the occasion.

“It's the last names of my parents by blood,” Corrigan said.

“What?”

“My name. My mother's last name is Bain. She met a soldier named

Corrigan, and here I am.”

“Oh,” Hicks said, absently placing the files under his arm atop another set of files on the desk. “Why not his first name?”

“She didn't know his first name. Just the name that was on his uniform:

Corrigan.”

“Right.” Hicks looked as if it was a bad idea to have ever brought it up.

Corrigan was never all that embarrassed by his mother’s youthful indiscretions—especially not the one that ended up with his being born, which he was somewhat happy about—but he usually neglected to consider that his listener might be embarrassed by the tale. He had first heard the story when he was four and had thus never equated it with anything like shame.

“So,” Hicks continued, “what brought you to see us today?”

“I came in because something pretty bad’s gonna happen,” Corrigan said, getting right to the point, “And I think I’m going to need some help.”

Hicks’s reaction to this news could only have been measured by the most precise of instruments. “Something bad,” he said neutrally. “Like what?”

“I don’t know yet. I usually don’t have a clear idea until right before it happens. But I can tell you it’ll be at 2:47 tomorrow afternoon at twenty- nine State Street.”

Hicks blinked—for him the equivalent of a loud shriek. “That’s awfully precise information. Isn’t that a bank?”

“That’s why I’m here. I mean, I’m gonna be there either way, but I figured if maybe you and few other guys were down there, we could stop whatever it is. You know, before lots of people end up dead.”

Hicks broke eye contact and rubbed his face, a gesture of exasperation Corrigan was about to become very familiar with. “Mr. Bain, do I have this right? Are you threatening to do something in the bank tomorrow afternoon?”

“No!” He laughed. “No, no, I’m going to be there to try and *stop* it from happening.”

“But you don’t know what it is.”

“Not yet.”

“And you don’t know who’s going to do it.”

“No idea. Might not be anybody. Could be it’s just a natural disaster or a

gas main or something. You know, I went to this house one time to save this family, and it took me nearly an hour to figure out the problem was carbon monoxide. New heating system, see—”

“I wonder,” Hicks said loudly. “I wonder if you could go back to the beginning.”

“Sorry. I explained some of it to the woman at reception and figured she’d spoken to you.”

“She said you were a repairman.”

Corrigan smiled. “I told her I was a fixer. I may be the only one, so that’s probably what’s confusing.”

“So you fix things,” Hicks said. “Does this have to do with a numbers racket? Something mob-related?”

All at once the depth and breadth of Corrigan’s naiveté in his handling of this interview struck him like so many anvils. *I sound crazy.* He had told people what he did before, but only after he’d already saved them, and they were considerably more likely to believe he could see the future insofar as he’d just proven it to them. Now, here he was talking about it as if everybody knew what a fixer was.

Corrigan Bain is going insane.

“No, that’s not it. I . . . keep people out of trouble. Say somebody is about to have an accident or something, right? What I do is keep them from having that accident.”

“And how do you know when someone’s about to have an ‘accident’?” He made little quotation marks with his fingers to clarify that he felt perhaps they were speaking metaphorically. Corrigan didn’t need to see into the future to recognize that this conversation was not going to be visiting a happy place.

“I just know,” he said.

“How?”

“I just do. Usually I get a heads up the day before. Sometimes if it’s

something really big I might get an extra day or two. That's what this is; something big."

"Somebody calls you?" Hicks suggested.

"No, it's not like that."

"You're a psychic."

"No, goddammit, I'm not a psychic. I told you. I'm a fixer."

Hicks was rubbing his face so hard Corrigan thought there was a chance

he'd draw blood. "O-kay," he said. "Why don't . . . why don't you give me everything you know about what's going to happen tomorrow?"

"Not much more than I already told you. Something bad and I think a lot of people are going to die as a result."

"Like a bank robbery?"

"That's what I was thinking," Corrigan said, glad they were finally moving ahead with this. "Except it's probably something more than that."

"Why?"

"This'll sound weird . . ."

"No kidding."

"Thing is, I'm not so good with out-and-out homicide. Someone robs a bank and starts shooting up the place, it's usually as big a surprise to me as to anybody else. I'm really more of an expert on accidental death and dismemberment. It could be a bank robbery, sure, but it could be something else."

"Something with a high body count." "You've got it."

"Right." Hicks fell silent for a moment, as if he was deciding on something. Then he asked, "Can you excuse me for a minute?"

"Sure thing."

Corrigan imagined Hicks was leaving to grab a superior, but that was just wishful thinking as the agent returned a few minutes later with three other coworkers and a deck of cards.

“All right, let’s try something,” he said. He plopped the deck down on top of a file on his desk.

“What is this?” Corrigan asked.

“Just bear with me,” Hicks said. He gestured to the others. “Don’t mind them; they’re just curious.” He drew a card. “Can you tell me what card I’m holding?”

Corrigan sighed heavily. It was going to be like that, then. “No, I can’t, wise ass.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not going to show it to me after I guess, that’s why. Look, do we really have time for this?”

Hicks frowned. “I have to show it to you for you to guess?” Behind him, Corrigan could practically hear the smirks on the faces of the other agents.

“After. After I’ve . . .”

“I’m just trying to establish your bona fides here. You can’t expect me to take you seriously without—”

“All right, you want to play this for real?”

“There’s no need to get hostile, Mr. Bain.”

“There’s a *lot* of reasons to be hostile right now. But if you want to do this, fine, we’ll do this. I’ll guess your card, and then you count to three and show it to me. Got it?”

Hicks looked around at the others, wondering if maybe he was going a little crazy. “Strange rules,” he said.

“That’s the only way it’s gonna work.”

Hicks appeared to be deeply disappointed that Corrigan wasn’t going to end up being a more entertaining whacko. Uncertain as to how to proceed from there, he elected to hold up a card.

“Three of spades,” Corrigan said. Hicks turned it over and showed it, then tried another one. “Ten of diamonds.”

“That’s impressive,” Hick admitted, turning the card over.

“It’s a trick,” said someone behind Corrigan.

“Yeah, a reflection or something,” said someone else.

“Yeah, yeah,” Hicks agreed. “Must be some kind of trick.”

The third agent—a cute redhead—piped up. “You’re the one who pulled out the cards, Randy.”

“Look,” Corrigan said to Hicks, “I think I’ve been very patient with you. This isn’t a parlor trick, this isn’t a game, and I’m not kidding. I gave you the time and the place. I’m going to be there to try and save who I can, but I could really use the help, so maybe once you’ve stopped playing with cards you can do something good with your time. Now do I need one of you to escort me out or can I do it on my own?”

There was a long and uncomfortable silence until the redhead spoke up. “I’ll walk you out, Mr. Bain.”

“Thank you,” he said. He got to his feet and shoved his way out of the cubicle, hard on the heels of the most attractive fed he’d ever expect to see. And he was almost angry enough not to appreciate that fact.

“It’s this way,” she said, pointing him in a direction other than the lobby, which he found odd. She stopped them in a small vestibule.

“So . . . *was* it a trick?” she asked.

“Do I look like the kind of guy who pops into the FBI to play magic tricks?”

“No. No, you don’t. A little angry, maybe.”

“I get that way. Don’t much like it when people assume I’m nuts. It’s kind of a sore spot.” This was an understatement.

“Yeah . . .” she said, trailing off. She was looking him over, sizing him up, trying to make a decision. “Twenty-nine State Street. 2:47. Right?”

“That’s right,” he said, surprised. Either she was in the next cubicle over from Hicks or sound traveled well in that office.

“I can’t offer you full backup,” she said, smiling. “But I’ll be there.”

Corrigan smiled back and enjoyed, for a moment, the whole smiling-at-each-other thing. “What’s your name?”

“Maggie Trent,” she said, extending her hand. “At your service.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon, Agent Maggie Trent,” he answered, shaking her hand. “Don’t be late. Because whatever’s going down, it won’t wait for either of us.”

It was mostly Dickie’s plan from the start.

Sure, Mikey and Rob had some input on the whole thing, but it was

Dickie who chose the target and got the stuff and Dickie who would run the show once they got inside.

This was an awful lot of responsibility for Dickie.

He got the idea the previous summer, back when he was working construction for his Uncle Ray, doing the kind of crap work you were lucky to get after two years with early release on good behavior.

Dickie’s big problem was that he was not all that bright. This caused him to make foolish decisions when it came to matters such as career choices. His mom had wanted him to finish up school and do something respectable, like . . . well, like construction. Foreman or some such. Dickie thought bank robbing was a much better choice.

One day he walked into the Chelsea office of Bank of America and handed the teller a note that instructed her to give him all the money she had in her drawer and further, to not do anything funny. Because that’s what you’re supposed to say when you rob a bank. It was highly doubtful that anybody in

the history of bank robberies was even aware of what “funny” constituted, but that was a discussion for another time.

So he passed the note and waited for the teller to provide him with what he hoped was a lot of cash. Enough, say, to go buy an island somewhere where islands are inexpensive and plentiful. This was to be the high point of his criminal career.

Dickie had made many mistakes that day. He learned this while in prison as a direct consequence of those very same mistakes. Number one, he signed the note. Didn't even think about it at the time. This error dated back to some bygone childhood scholastic trauma, which Dickie unfortunately had never fully explored—it had to do with passing in homework without putting his name at the top of the page—and which tragically came back to haunt him at exactly the wrong time. Number two, he robbed a bank in Chelsea. Chelsea was a veritable nursery for past and future bank robbers. It was essentially impossible to walk into a bank in the town and obtain more than a couple thousand dollars from any one teller. The moment a teller discovered himself or herself with a sum of cash exceeding that, he or she was trained to close and carry the money in back. There it was put into a large and heavy safe, to be opened again only at the end of the day under the purview of two tellers, the bank manager, three security guards, and at least one irritable guard dog. This was why bank service in Chelsea was so slow, which inspired more than a few of the residents, in a fit of pique, to rob the bank just to make their withdrawal more quickly.

His third mistake was that the teller he attempted to rob was none other than Trina Mahoney, who had passed out at a high school kegger the previous spring and woken up to discover Dickie's hand on her left breast. She was therefore inclined to both positively identify him—loudly—and to be less than inclined to give him much of anything, whether he had a gun or not.

His fourth mistake? He didn't actually have a gun.

That was the difference between two years and ten to fifteen, but Dickie didn't think of it that way. Next time, he was definitely going to have a gun,

and he was going to have partners, which was where Mikey and Rob ultimately came into the picture.

Dickie was determined to get everything right the second go-around. He picked a bank downtown where he was damn near guaranteed nobody would recognize him. He skipped the note part entirely, because there was no point in passing any notes if he was just going to have Rob jump the counter and clean out the drawers himself. And as for the possibility that the drawers might not have enough money for that island he was looking to purchase . . . well, that was part of his big idea, the idea that was going to make him a legend.

Working for Uncle Ray, Dickie found exactly one thing about the construction job that he thoroughly enjoyed; sometimes, you had to blow shit up. And in the short time he spent under Ray's employ, Dickie earned a master's degree in Blowing Up Shit. Ray himself said he had a gift for it, which any other man might construe as a dubious compliment, but which Dickie took to heart. And then he took twenty sticks of dynamite from Ray's storage box.

It was on a pleasant, cool Wednesday in April at just after two in the afternoon that Dickie entered a downtown bank on State Street dragging a large suitcase on wheels, with a snub-nosed pistol in the pocket of his windbreaker. He was there to "case the joint," which was one of the many terms he learned the night before when he and Mikey and Rob stayed up all night watching movies with bank robberies in them, hoping to pick up last-minute tips.

In casing, Dickie concluded that he had picked a pretty good branch to rob. There were no guards, only three tellers, and one dude in a suit at a desk on a little platform. Behind his desk was the vault, and not only was the door to it wide open, but the only thing keeping somebody from walking right in there was a velvet rope. He could scarcely believe his luck.

Dickie didn't bother to count the customers—more than ten, less than twenty—but he did get a good long look at a redheaded cutie waiting for a teller. He wondered, as he pretended to fill out a deposit slip, if she would put out for a

bank robber like him. But the thought reminded him of the unfortunate incident with Trina Mahoney, so he put it aside.

He positioned himself as close as he could to the vault door without looking too suspicious, and waited. A couple of minutes later, Mikey and Rob walked in. Rob got in line, while Mikey stood by the door and glanced over at Dickie. Dickie nodded. Just giving the signal made him semi-hard. He would later wonder if this meant there was something wrong with him.

Mikey pulled a shotgun from under his coat and shouted, “Nobody move! This is a robbery!” Dickie smiled inwardly; Mike had spent two hours practicing that. For emphasis, he fired the gun once into the ceiling, which had two immediate effects. One, everyone in the line dropped to the ground, a few of them screaming. Two, Mikey got showered with plaster from the drop ceiling. Which was sort of funny.

Rob got right to work, jumping over the counter and demanding that all the tellers back away from their stations. Rob was just the right man for this because he once spent two months working in a bank before being let go when it was discovered that his drawer was short fifty dollars nearly every day. He left with a basic knowledge of things such as bait money, silent alarms, and the like and immediately put that knowledge to good use.

Dickie stepped up onto the desk platform and pulled out the snub-nose. The guy behind the desk—who was a Pakistani or Indian or Arab or something, but whose name placard inexplicably identified him as “Assistant Manager Ben Franklin”—froze in his chair when confronted by the gun, which was pretty much the reaction Dickie was hoping for. Dickie turned his attention to Ben Franklin’s customer.

Even sitting down, he could tell the guy was pretty big. He was dressed in a baggy suit and had on a tie that looked like maybe it was a clip-on. And sneakers. Probably not a businessman.

“You,” Dickie said, pointing the gun at the customer. “Get on the floor.”

“I’d really rather not,” the big guy said. He had a low, rumbling voice that reminded Dickie of the cement mixer at Uncle Ray’s construction site.

“Excuse me?” he asked, his voice cracking ever so slightly.

“It’s just that the suit is new. I bought it yesterday. Off the rack, but still.”

“You want to get shot?” Dickie shouted.

“No, of course I don’t.”

The guy paused where he was. It was a weird pause, because he stared at

Dickie’s face the whole time, like he was reading small print on Dickie’s forehead. Finally, he said, “How about if I just sit here? I’ll be good.”

Dickie didn’t remember this happening in any of the movies he watched during his research and was unsure how to proceed. He ultimately decided to let it go because time was his enemy. That came from a movie, but he couldn’t remember which one—their research had prominently involved a 24-pack of Buds, and things got a little fuzzy toward the end.

He turned his focus back on Ben Franklin.

“Which vault in there has the money?” he asked.

“It’s . . . it’s the large one straight in back. But I can’t open it for you.” “Why not?”

“It’s on a time delay,” he explained. “I and the lead teller have the

combinations, but even if we were to apply them, it would not open for fifteen minutes.”

Somewhere in the back of Dickie’s mind was information that confirmed this basic fact; he was pretty sure Rob had said something similar. But that was okay. He planned to blow the door open anyway.

“Hey, big dude,” Dickie said. “Make yourself useful; pick up the suitcase and take it over to the vault.”

“All right,” he said, agreeably enough. He leaned over and grabbed the case handle while Dickie took a second to see how things were going behind him. It looked as if Rob was nearly done cleaning out the teller stations, and Mikey at the door seemed to have all the customers under control. Truthfully, he was a little worried about Mikey, who liked his shotgun much too much. In the rational part of his brain a little voice pointed out that accessory to

murder was a whole shitload worse than armed robbery. He told the little voice to shut up.

“Heavy,” the dude with the suit and sneakers commented. “What do you have in here, bricks?”

Ignoring the comment, Dickie led him over to the vault door. “Go ahead and open it.”

The big guy got down on one knee and unzipped the case. Without prompting, he reached inside and pulled out a stick of the dynamite. Dickie smiled at his own brilliance.

“You’re gonna use this?” the guy asked.

“Hell yeah.”

“How much?”

“All of it, man. That’s a steel vault. I don’t have fifteen minutes to wait for Mr. Franklin here to open it.”

Still holding the stick of dynamite, the guy looked around the bank with a calculating sort of expression that did not at all convey the gravity of the situation. Dickie wondered if he forgot he was being held at gunpoint.

Finally, he said, “You’ll kill everybody in here.”

“Excuse me?”

Louder, he repeated himself. “You’ll kill everybody.”

The gaggle of customers on the floor murmured unhappily at this announcement. The girl with the red hair, Dickie noted, took special interest, even going so far as to sit up.

“The hell do you know?” Dickie asked at approximately the same volume. “I deal with this shit all the time. I’m a goddamn explosives expert. Now, unload the bag and set it up in there before I plug you.”

The big guy wasn’t having any of it. “Look at the vault, friend. It’s like a funnel. You’ll end up directing the blast right out into the lobby. A bigger stack of dynamite will just mean the explosion reaches the street.”

“Then I’ll close the vault door, asshole,” Dickie said defensively. He wondered, even as he said it, why he needed to justify himself to this guy. He wasn’t a criminal mastermind, was he? No, there was only one criminal mastermind in this bank.

“Um, excuse me?” Ben Franklin interrupted meekly. “Now you? What?”
Dickie snapped.

“You can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“Close the door. It cannot be closed before 5 p.m.”

Now Dickie was getting seriously pissed. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It’s a safety precaution,” the assistant manager explained. “So that . . . so that the staff can’t be locked in the vault . . . during a robbery.”

Mikey at the door shouted, “What’s the delay up there? Let’s go!”

“We’re going!” Dickie shouted. He saw Rob jump back over the counter, holding the trash bag, which looked awfully light. They couldn’t walk out on an armed robbery with that little fucking bag. It was the vault or nothing.

“Set it up,” he repeated to the big man.

“No,” he said.

Dickie held the barrel up to the man’s forehead. “Do it,” he insisted, “or

I’ll kill you.”

The man looked around the room. Dickie could see out of the corner of his eye that Rob had stepped to the bottom of the platform and Mikey was still at the door, looking just as much the badass as ever with the shotgun. And still the guy with the dynamite didn’t even look like he was sweating. He had the same look on his face Uncle Ray always had when he was figuring angles on the pool table at Hanratty’s. Dickie suddenly wished he were at Hanratty’s, instead of about to blow a man’s head off. What the hell made him think he could rob a bank, anyway?

Apparently satisfied, the man looked Dickie in the eye. “Go ahead,” he said quietly.

There are a lot of ways to kill a guy. Dickie knew from firsthand experience that most of those ways were really and truly awful and did not in any sense represent something he was capable of doing. Like a shiv. He saw a serious hard-ass named Leonard jab a five-inch shiv into the ribcage of another con on an otherwise pleasant July afternoon in the yard. It was the most brutal fucking thing he ever saw. And the con ended up living through it, which, given the degree of violence involved, was something Dickie found pretty amazing. Another time, he saw one of Ray’s men fall twenty-five feet onto a pile of bricks, landing with a sound that was somewhere between a snapping twig and a bowl of oatmeal getting dumped on the floor. He lived, too.

Seriously messed up, but alive.

But a bullet to the head? Dickie was pretty positive that’d do the trick. And it was a damn sight easier than trying to gut somebody with a bent-up mattress spring wire. Didn’t seem all that fair how easy it was when he thought about it.

And he had to do it. That was the bad part. The big dude had just about come right out and called him a pussy in front of his crew—in front of the whole bank!—and that had to be answered. It just did.

So Dickie screwed his courage and tapped the trigger. Problem was, when he did it, the guy’s head wasn’t there any more. He’d stepped to one side at just exactly the right moment for the bullet to totally miss him and lodge harmlessly in the wood-paneled wall.

“How the fuck—” That was all Dickie could manage before the dude clocked him right on the nose and popped the gun out of his hand.

Falling backward, Dickie got a spectator’s view of the next five seconds, which he would replay in slow motion in his head for another twenty-five years of hard time.

The guy who dislodged Dickie’s snub-nose from him stood under the gun and waited patiently for gravity to take effect and bring it back down again, which was bad news for him since Rob—who was standing at the base of the desk

platform—was aiming to shoot him before that could happen. Except Rob didn't get a chance. A gunshot rang out, but it came from behind Rob, much to the surprise of, well, Rob. He fell facedown next to the desk. It was the redhead on one knee and with a handgun who'd done Rob.

Mikey leveled his shotgun, intending to blast the redhead into pretty little chunks—along with more or less everyone else around her given the spread of that thing—but by then the big guy at the vault had caught Dickie's gun. In one neat motion, he righted the revolver and shot Mikey in the right shoulder, which was exactly where he needed to shoot Mikey to knock his aim off. He still fired the shotgun, but it blew the hell out of the one part of the room where there were no people around. The wound and the kickback combined to jostle the gun from his hands.

By then Dickie had hit the floor. The redhead was on her feet and screaming at Mikey to leave his gun, and the big guy was standing over Dickie, pointing his own gun at him.

"I give," Dickie said.

"Good," he said. He reached a hand out, helped Dickie up, and then sat him down at Ben Franklin's desk. Mr. Franklin had dived inside the vault when the shooting began and had yet to conclude that it was safe to come back out.

Dickie could hear sirens on the street.

"They're here too soon," he muttered sluggishly, what with the blow to the head and all.

"What's that?" the big guy asked. He was leaning over a moaning Rob, just as calm at that moment as he had been for the entire robbery.

Something on the desk caught Dickie's eye. It was the loan application Ben Franklin had been working on before the robbery had begun. There were only two things written on it. At the top was the name Corrigan Bain. And at the bottom, in big block letters, the message:

PUSH THE ALARM. YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE ROBBED.

