

DEADline

by

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*For all the unsung heroes
of the Fourth Estate...*

PROLOGUE

It was a bitch of a curve, hidden on the far side of a rise in the road. The driver didn't know it was there until he was well into it, and then it was too late. The road surface sloped down to the left while the curve went sharply to the right. It would have been hard to handle at ten miles an hour, much less forty-five. The driver overreacted and clumsily fishtailed through the curve. The high-pitched squeal of the tires on the damp macadam counterpointed the low, dull thump of the body being tossed around in the trunk.

"Jesus Christ! Slow down! You're going to kill us both!"

The driver glanced at his passenger. Even in the dim green wash of the instrument lights, he could see fear in the eyes.

"My driving isn't the problem here," the driver said. "The guy in the trunk is. We screw this up, everybody goes down."

The driver slowed the car. Somewhere around here. Remote and undeveloped, even though it borders the suburbs. Far enough outside center-city Philly, anyway — nobody's going to find anything until tomorrow, and even then, the yokel cops out here won't know who the guy is. They'll tag him "John Doe" and wait for someone to file a missing person report. Which no one will.

He let the car drift onto the gravel shoulder.

"Killing both of us would save a lot of trouble, when you think about it," the driver said. "But with my luck, I'd survive and be left to explain everything, and that's one thing I'll be damned if I'll do."

The stones popped under the tires as the car rolled to a stop. The driver cut the engine and looked around. The only thing visible was the tree line a hundred yards away. Good. It was as deserted as he remembered it. The road ahead was clear for a mile; he could see that. He glanced up at the rearview mirror. What he couldn't see was back around the curve behind him and that could be trouble.

"Screw it," he said. "Let's do this."

The passenger closed his eyes, and let his head drop back to the headrest, rolling it side to side as if he could wish this all away.

"Get the hell out of the car," the driver said. "This is your problem we're solving here."

The passenger looked back at the driver. The fear was gone from his eyes, replaced by a heavy despair that seemed to want to pull them closed again. He slowly opened his door, and stood into the chill night air. He hesitated by the rear fender as the driver opened the trunk. The evening air was cooling quickly, and he could see the misty fingers of ground fog snaking like smoke across the small meadow beside the car. A chill ran up his back and made him shudder.

"Where.....?" he said.

"Here," the driver said, pointing at the edge of the road where the gravel gave way to the damp meadow grass.

They reached into the trunk. The body was small, and wrapped in a rough wool blanket. They dragged it over the lip of the trunk, and let it fall to the road. The sound wasn't unlike a bag of peat moss being dropped on a driveway.

They pulled at the edge of the rough wool, unrolling it like they were spreading a carpet across a floor. The body flopped onto the pavement, the legs spiraled around one another. In the near dark, the blood that covered the right side of the head and shoulder looked black.

"Jesus," the passenger said, bringing a hand to his mouth.

The driver looked behind him, into the curve, then forward down the road. He studied the darkness a moment, letting his peripheral vision search the far edges of the meadow. Satisfied they were still alone, he turned his attention back to the man at his side, whose eyes had never left the body.

"Get back in the car," he said.

"We're just going to leave him?"

"Kind of."

The driver fired the engine, and put the car into gear. He moved forty feet forward, then dropped into reverse. He turned in his seat and looked out the back window, set his jaw, and gunned the engine.

The car jerked backwards, kicking gravel into the headlights in front of it. The passenger's hands went to the dashboard, bracing against the unexpected direction. The car jumped twice as the wheels crossed the body.

The driver jammed the gearshift into drive. The car lurched forward and hit the body harder this time, violently twisting it. It rolled across the shoulder of the road and onto the meadow grass, grotesquely bent and broken.

The driver didn't stop to check it. He knew it would look the way he wanted it to. He swung the car through a U-turn, and headed back the way he came. This time he was ready for the curve, accelerating into it. The tires hardly squealed, and there was no sound at all from the trunk.

Political campaigns are like potato chips. They're pretty much all the same. If you've tasted one, you've tasted them all. I didn't like potato chips.

Yet there I was, in the ballroom of the Bellevue Hotel in downtown Philadelphia, listening to Senator Jefferson Harper, senior Democrat from Pennsylvania, fire another salvo in his bid for re-election. Across the room, the television crews were lined up in front of the podium, which was unusual, given that Harper had been over an hour late. I'd expected them to have packed it in by now, but they'd hung in there.

So had I, for that matter, despite my distaste for anything political. At least as a purveyor of the printed word I didn't have to carry around a half a ton of electronic equipment. Small blessings.

I'd watched as Harper skillfully apologized for his tardiness. "The business of politics can't always be punctual," he'd said, "but it will eventually come through for you in the end. At least it will the way I practice it."

Uh-huh. Nice spin. Bullshit, but smooth. Maybe I'd use it the next time I missed a deadline.

My cynicism wasn't shared. The loyal throngs had immediately shown forgiveness in the form of cheers and applause. Harper had then launched into his Law and Order speech. He'd been holding forth for about ten minutes, enough time for what he was saying to turn to wordzack and my mind to start wandering.

I stood along the periphery of an arc of reporters, photographers, the television crews, and political groupies. There was an obvious bodyguard at each corner of the dais, arms folded across their chests, oversized monuments to testosterone. They reminded me of the carved marble lions Caesar had standing at the entrance to the Roman Forum.

The Senator stood behind a small lectern, looking over a tangle of microphones. He wore a dark blue, three-piece suit with a light pinstripe, a white shirt, a bright red power tie and matching pocket square. Image perfect.

"This is not the country I grew up in as a boy," he said. "I was not afraid to walk down the street. Children weren't being shot in their schools."

He was the epitome of what we think a senator should look like: tall and slim, with broad shoulders held straight with good posture. He had an angular face, with high cheekbones and a solid jaw, but the hardness of the angles was softened by a ready and easy grin. His eyes were green and spirited, his hair dark, though he had the distinguished wings of grey over the temples that we take as a sign of wisdom these days. His voice was strong and confident.

"Corruption wasn't the norm, but the exception," Harper said. "Organizations to me were the Boy Scouts, or the Knights of Columbus, not international cartels whose reason for being is the destruction of the

fabric this country's woven over the last two hundred years. No, this is definitely not the country I grew up in."

A smattering of applause rose from one corner of the crowd off to my right. It came from a knot of young ladies looking at one another and enthusiastically nodding their heads. Their faces beamed as they looked up at Harper, their hero. The applause caught on and moved rapidly through the crowd. The cynic in me wondered if the girls were plants — modern-day shills in a game of political three-card monte.

"Frankly," Harper continued as the applause tapered off, "I don't want to hand over what our fathers and their fathers before them have left us to protect. I believe we have an obligation to them, to make sure that the basic freedoms they left us will be intact when we leave them to our children."

He began to tap the lectern with his index finger.

"Rampant crime in our streets and corruption in our institutions are tearing these freedoms from our grasp one by one, and, by God, I will not let it continue." His voice became more forceful. "As long as you see fit to return me to Washington, I will do everything in my power to see that your freedoms remain intact. It is my promise and my pledge to you. Thank you. And God Bless America!"

It was the big finish, and the girls on the right made sure we all knew it. The high school band that had been parked against the back wall of the ballroom struck up a rousing political march, and the crowd began clapping in time with the beat, shouting "Har-per! Har-per! Har-per!"

Jesus. Politics.

I turned to search for the most direct route to the elevators out of the ballroom, and found myself looking into the face of a short, round man wearing an English skimmer pulled down across his eyebrows. He had two cameras hung around his neck, and a large canvas bag riding on his hip.

"Hey, Cross," he said, falling into step with me.

"Jay Fitch. As I live and breathe."

"Harper, right?"

"Twenty inches double wide for the Sunday edition" I said. "First in a series."

"Sixteen inches now," he said. "They sent me for some art. Por-traiture."

Fitch was five-ten, with a full beard and dirty blond hair poking out from the skimmer. I was glad to see him. You never had to worry about the art complementing your story if he shot it.

"Where we hookin' up with him?" Fitch said.

"Eighteenth floor. Some suite. They said to wait for them here."

A large man in black suit and shades stood by the service elevator. I guy-nodded at him. He twitched a sniff, but otherwise didn't move. The word "monolith" seemed appropriate.

"I guess we wait," I said.

We turned and looked back at Harper. A beautiful blonde stood near him, and his loyal minions—a high percentage of them swooning young women—crowded around him.

"Good-lookin' guy," Fitch said.

"Prerequisite these days," I said.

"Guess that lets me out."

"I'd give you my vote."

"Yeah, but you'd make me buy it."

"Fair's fair," I said.

Harper and his entourage worked their way through the crowd doling out smiles and handshakes. As they neared us, the blonde emerged from the sea of bodies, her hand outstretched. I smiled automatically, hoping she was reaching for me. My hope was rewarded.

"You're Nick Cross," she said as she took my hand. "I'm Lauren Carpenter, public relations director for the campaign. Glad you could make it." She had a firm handshake. One point for her.

"Thanks for accommodating us," I said. "I've always wanted to do a story like this." I wasn't exactly telling the truth, but ingratiation is an art form I learned early in my career and practiced religiously. "You have a game plan here?"

"Yes. I thought it better to introduce you upstairs. It's a little crazy down here. Why don't we go on up. The Senator will join us in a moment, and you two can get acquainted. You'll be spending a lot of time together in the next couple of months if things work out."

She nodded at the monolith, who pushed the button on the service elevator. We stepped in. She pushed eighteen.

"Have you covered many campaigns, Mr. Cross?"

"Call me Nick, and yeah, I've covered a few, though not extensively. Did a story here and there on Obama, early Trump. Not so much since, though. Been on the Metro desk for a while."

"Covering what?"

"You might call it the seedy side."

"Mm-hmm." She looked up at me. "Why the change?"

"Let's just say I wanted to breathe some cleaner air. This came up, I took it."

"You interested in politics, then?"

I let a smile cross my face. Potato chips came to mind. "Not really. But I thought this might be a novel approach. Seeing it from the inside, I mean."

"Perhaps we can change your opinion," she said. "Senator Harper is not your typical politician. You'll see some new things in this campaign."

"Most politicians have no politics. They are made entirely by the circumstances of their career."

"Excuse me?"

"G.K. Chesterton." I smiled.

She smiled back. "G.K. Chesterton should have met Senator Harper," she said.

Her eyes turned to the floor indicator. I was leaning against the railing at the back of the cab, slightly behind her. I let my eyes fall over her.

She was at least five-nine, maybe five-ten, slim and small-boned. An oval face held beautifully-balanced features — small, sculptured nose, full, soft lips, round eyes with lashes a mile long. She had dark, almost black hair, gathered and worn up in a smooth turn on top of her head. Very professional. Her red, two-piece skirted suit fit tight around a body that

made me guilty just looking at it. I was glad I was behind her and not facing her blue eyes. She'd have seen every thought crossing my mind.

A bell chime brought me out of my carnal reverie, and the elevator door opened onto the eighteenth floor.

"After you," I said.

She led us to the Executive Suite at the end of the hall. She opened the door and stepped aside.

"After you," she said, and gave me that slight smile again. Liberated, I thought to myself. Another point for her.

The suite was bigger than my entire apartment, and without question better appointed. Large sitting area with plush couch and chairs, dining room and wet bar, balcony, two bedrooms. I suddenly felt underpaid.

"The campaign's doing well, I take it," I said.

"This is special," she said. "We try not to be extravagant. But Philadelphia's the center of the campaign here in Pennsylvania, and we have a lot of meetings in town. We figure a good impression can't hurt, so we justify the expense. Would either of you like a drink?"

Fitch shook his head.

"Crown Royal, if you have it," I said. "On the rocks."

She started to walk behind the bar, but stopped and pointed at a low cabinet along the side wall of the suite. "There's some food over here on the sideboard, if you're hungry. Help yourself."

"No thanks on the food," I said, patting my stomach. "Watching the diet these days."

She let her eyes quickly cruise me top to bottom. I don't think she meant me to catch the move. "You look fine to me," she said over her shoulder, smiling.

She walked behind the bar and opened one of the cabinets to reveal what appeared to be an exceptionally-stocked bar. Almost exceptional.

"There doesn't seem to be any Crown ... whatever," she said. "Will V.O. do?"

"In a pinch," I said.

She made my drink, poured herself a glass of white wine, and came out from behind the bar. Just as she joined me, the door to the suite opened and Harper strode through, followed by two politicians in suits, and the two Forum lions I'd seen earlier. One of the suits immediately removed his jacket and began unbuttoning his vest as he crossed the room to the bar. Harper followed him, the energy of the crowd still with him.

"Nice crowd, wasn't it?" he said to the room in general, and then, without waiting for an answer, "How do you think they took the speech? What's the early feeling on the floor?"

"So far as we can tell, it's positive," said the suit at the bar, sliding onto one of the barstools. He cradled a cellphone on his shoulder while he thumbed through a small book he pulled from his jacket pocket. He was average height, a little thick in the middle, with light hair balding from the front. Tired eyes punctuated a reddish, doughy face. His custom-tailored suit had lost its shape.

"The crowd was definitely with you," he said. "We'll see how the press handles it in tomorrow's papers."

"Why don't you ask them right now?" Lauren said. She stood and walked to the Senator. "Senator Harper, I'd like you to meet Nick Cross of the Philadelphia Examiner. Mr. Cross, Senator Jefferson Harper."

Harper came from behind the bar and we shook hands.

"Glad to meet you, Nick. Lauren speaks very highly of your work — says you have a way of cutting through the bullshit. Good trait to have. We could use more of that in the Senate."

"You weren't mincing any words out there tonight, Senator," I said, as though I'd heard any of them.

"I was trying not to. I believe this country's in trouble and we'd better start calling it like it is if we're going to fix it." He nodded toward Lauren. "You've met Lauren, of course. This is Bill Guitings, my campaign manager," indicating the suit at the bar, still on the phone. We nodded at each other.

"Over there is Bob Tracey, my chief of staff, and the big guys are Ron Vickers and Mark Forschner, necessary evils in a world gone mad."

I nodded at the three men across the room. Tracey said "Hi," sat down on the couch and opened a newspaper. The two bodyguards smiled mechanically. Fitch went to the balcony and sat in one of the wrought iron chairs, waiting for his opportunity to shoot.

"I'd introduce you to my wife, Melinda," Harper continued, "but she had another function to handle for me elsewhere." He glanced at Lauren. Their eyes locked a moment, one of those moments you never think anyone else sees. Then he quickly turned and smiled broadly. "Couldn't do any of this without Mel," he said.

I smiled back blankly as if acknowledging the greater truth of his implied statement about political wives, but it was actually more in reaction to my own thoughts. I was already making a mental note about the glance he'd given Lauren Carpenter. It had made my reporter's curiosity start to itch. It takes a lot of history — intimate history — to communicate with glances. What kind of history was it? Had the glance between them been professional or personal? Casual or intentional? Confirming something or implying something? Was the message good or bad? Did it have to do with Melinda and the Senator or Lauren Carpenter and the Senator? Most people aren't aware of it, but there's a story in even the smallest of moments. My gift—or curse, depending on how you looked at it—was that not too many of those moments get past me.

Harper, drink in hand, dropped himself into an easy chair and loosened his tie. He shoved a hassock out of the way with his right foot, then crossed his legs. "What did you think, Mr. Cross? Gonna vote for me?"

"Well, I'm a last-minute kind of guy — make my decisions in the booth."

"Uh-huh." He took a long pull on his drink without taking his eyes off of me. "So, what can we do for you, Nick? As you can imagine, my schedule is pretty nuts from now on. We've got two months left in this campaign, and time is getting tough to find. In fact, I've got to be on a train back to Washington in a few minutes."

"Twenty-eight minutes," Guitings said over his shoulder, still curled around the phone at the bar.

"Twenty-eight minutes," Harper said, smiling at Lauren, then looking back at me. "My point is, what is it you're looking into here?"

"We always see what politicians want us to see, Senator," I said. "The sound bites, the quick photo opportunities, the packaged quotes. The public side's all starting to sound the same—no offense—so much so that I think the public's numbed to most of it. I'm working on the premise that politics isn't what we think it is anymore, that it's another animal somehow, and I think we need to know what that animal is. I want to hang around in rooms like these—see it from the inside. "

"We run a straight-up campaign here, Mr. Cross. No games."

Lauren came to the center of the room. "I'm sure that Nick wasn't implying anything like that, Senator. I think he's more interested in writing about the enormous undertaking that mounting a campaign for high office can be, and how it's accomplished in this high-tech world of ours." She was looking at me the whole time she spoke. No glance. The message was clear: now's not the time.

"More or less, that's it," I said, taking the hint. "I want to write about the process, the players. The politics are almost incidental."

I didn't believe that for a minute, but Lauren was right. This wasn't the time to get into it. Personally, I believed that politics wasn't about leadership at all. It's a business, with power as its currency, control as its profit. Once inside the arena, the game becomes more perpetuation of the position than representation of the electorate. But we'd have to see. Harper seemed like a nice-enough guy. Keep an open mind here, Cross.

Harper came to Lauren's side, facing me. He took a deep breath, held it a moment, then grinned his trademark grin.

"Sure, okay. I, uh...I guess I'm just a little gun shy about the press. I've been bitten a couple of times by some pretty pretty zealot writers. Sorry to pre-judge you."

Guitings hung up the phone, turned to us and hopped off the barstool. Harper motioned toward him with his drink. "Look, it's up to Bill and Lauren here. I'll go along with whatever they think."

"Well, if it's up to me, then I say no," Bill Guitings said. "I'm not comfortable with it. It's inviting the fox into the henhouse. No offense here, Mr. Cross, but the press is usually more trouble than it's worth."

I grinned, and tried to look mischievous. I was a second short of proving Guitings right by saying something incendiary, but Lauren Carpenter cut into the conversation by flashing an arresting smile. It was as effective as a shout, catching everyone's attention. I was impressed.

"I think we ought to take a more positive view, Bill," she said, acquiring control of the conversation as comfortably as a diva delivering an aria. "Think of the image it will give Jeff. By having the press inside the campaign—everything above the waterline—we generate the image for Jeff of a man with absolutely nothing to hide. No skeletons. No clandestine agenda. All we ask of you, Nick, is that you realize that there may be times that what you see and hear will be confidential for obvious reasons, and that such information will have to be considered off the record and not for publication or discussion." She didn't wait for an answer and

quickly looked back at Harper. "I don't really see a problem here, Jeff. I say we get on with it."

"Fine," Harper said, then turned to Guitings. "Bill?" Guitings looked from Harper to Lauren Carpenter and back again, then grunted and turned back to the phone.

"OK," Harper said. "Then it's settled. Welcome aboard, Mr. Cross."

I smiled perfunctorily. I didn't like the feeling of being bum's-rushed into agreeing to what amounted to the campaign's reserving the right to edit what I was going to write. I was about to set up a few rules of my own when the muffled chirp of a cellphone cut through the room. Guitings, Lauren, the bodyguard by the balcony doors, Fitch and I all looked at our phones at once.

"Whose is it?" Guitings said.

"It's mine," I said. "My editor." I let it ring through to voicemail. "Perhaps my photographer can grab some quick shots while I take this."

"No problem," Harper said. "But let's make it quick. I need to get cleaned up before that train ride. Nice to meet you, Nick. I'm looking forward to talking more with you."

He shook my hand and turned to Fitch, who was already snapping frames. Harper's face lit up like someone had thrown a switch.

I moved off to the side of the room and looked at my phone. It was the direct line to the city editor at the Examiner. This time of night that would be Charlie Taunton. I punched the number.

"Taunton here," he said before the first ring went silent.

"You should let it ring a couple more times, Charlie — we scribes get the impression you're desperate when you answer like that."

"I am desperate, Cross. Writers make me desperate. Especially this time of night." It was almost ten o'clock. Charlie was two hours from rolling the presses. "Where are you?"

"In a suite on the eighteenth floor of the Bellevue. I just hooked up with Harper."

"You just got together with him? Why the hell so late?"

"He's on campaign time, Charlie. Gotta kiss every baby, shake every hand. Ever meet a politician who was on time?"

"Fitch with you?"

I turned and looked across the suite. Fitch was already finished shooting. He was back on the balcony, in one of the wrought iron chairs, his right leg propped up on the arms of another. The slightest of breezes pushed the gauzy curtains into the suite, as if the room were inhaling.

"Yeah, he's here," I said, "working hard as usual."

"Good. I got something I need covered, Nick. It just came in. You and Fitch gotta handle it."

"Oh, no. No way. I'm exclusive on this Harper thing now. You agreed. I'm off the streets. Get Williams, or one of the sports guys."

"Nobody's free, Nick. And it's not their turf, anyway. It's yours. I got a body in the middle of a road in Bryn Mawr. Hit and run, but we're hearin' crosstalk like the guy might have been intentionally splattered."

"No, Charlie. I told you — no more. After Carlito..."

"Carlito wasn't your fault, Nick. You gotta get past that one."

"It was me who sent him in there, Charlie."

"It goes with the territory, buddy. Stories don't always end in smiles. You did what you had to. Live with it."

I wanted to hang up the phone, but I knew I wouldn't. So did Taunton.

"And now I gotta do what I have to," he said, "which is send you out to Bryn Mawr. It's your meat and potatoes, Nick. You know all those guys in homicide and the M.E.'s office. It'll be quick and easy for you. So, handle it, okay?"

He took my silence for acquiescence. "It's just off the Main Line, on Bryn Mawr Avenue, about three miles down. You got two hours. You can make the first edition if you get on it right now."

"Aw, Charlie..." I heard a click on the line. "Charlie? Shit."

"Trouble?"

I put the phone back in my jacket pocket and turned to Lauren Carpenter.

"Nah. Something's come up. I have to go. Where can I hook up with you guys?"

"We'll be in Washington for the next day or two, then we'll be back in town," Lauren said. "I'm thinking maybe we can get together for a lunch early next week, go over some of the basics of our campaign."

I nodded.

"I'll have biographical material sent to you, as well as any campaign materials we have."

"Fine," I said. "Just send it to the paper with my name on it. It'll get to me."

I went to the balcony. "Come on, Jay. Father Taunton's got a live one for us."

Fitch got out of the wrought iron chair, and smoothly slipped his camera case onto his shoulder. He followed me to the main door of the suite.

"So long," I said to Mark the bodyguard, as he opened the door.

"Good night, Mr. Cross," he said. The scent of garlic was heavy on his breath.

"Eat Italian tonight, Mark?" I said, as we went into the hall. "Maybe DiLullo's? Smells like his marinara."

He just smiled and closed the door behind us.

Fitch and I walked to the elevator.

"So. Whattaya think?" Fitch said. "There a story there?"

"Potato chips."

"Huh?"

"Never mind," I said, as we stepped into the elevator.