

CHAPTER I



Ned Pickett drove one of the early cars, providing overlap between the second and third shifts. The lineup would be recorded, and later he could stop back at the law enforcement center for the tape and listen to it as he patrolled.

As he did before each tour of duty, he checked the squad car, beginning with a walk around it, looking for dings. Next, the trunk—first aid kit, Ambu bag, couple of blankets, flares, tape measure, traffic vest, pry bar, tire chains. He felt under the back seat for drugs or anything else ditched by the bozos picked up by the second shift. Lights and flashers okay. PA, siren, top lights. In the glove compartment—forms and envelopes, a couple of rounds of number six birdshot for varmints. He noted with satisfaction the several repair links for the tire chains. Big storm on the way. He checked the Remington 870 12-gauge (a loaded four-round magazine), then used his tuning forks to verify the radar gun's calibration. Everything being shipshape, he notified the comm center he was beginning his tour of duty.

He drove out to Five Corners, where the early downtown car would sit during the shift change unless something happened, and parked in plain sight. From his vantage at the edge of the Super Drug's parking lot, he had a straight shot down Twelfth Street as far as St. Luke's. He could see a couple hundred yards along Colter and Brennan, less of Railroad and Anne. The restaurant on the opposite corner, the pharmacy and supermarket behind him, all closed for the night. Not much traffic. A typical Thursday.

One of the street lamps on Colter had failed, and he made a note to contact the city. Despite the cold, he opened the driver's side window. With the window up, Ned felt duller, slightly anesthetized. He preferred summer, when he could keep it down all the

time. Now, the cold air quickly filled the squad, wrapping itself around him with a kind of frigid intimacy.

He waited. The minutes ticked by.

A car approached the stop sign on Anne Street, a dark sedan, drifting steadily along, not fast, but at a speed that suggested a certain insolence, or so it seemed, for Ned knew with his cop's instinct that the driver had no intention of stopping.

And the fellow didn't, merely slowing briefly at the stop sign, the genuflection of an unbeliever, and then continuing placidly onward, directly across Ned's line of sight.

Ned started the squad and put it in gear but didn't pull out. As he watched the taillights receding—both lights functioning properly, he noted—he concentrated not on them so much as the cascade of his own thoughts—the way his mind worked in the presence of some trivial violation like this. First, the slight let-down feeling, very brief, like the flicker of a strobe light, so quick the inner eye might miss it entirely. Then the impulse to take the matter personally, as if the guy running the stop sign had been flipping Ned the bird. Anger came next, and when younger, he would often act on this. But not now. Now he simply readjusted his thinking, telling himself that most likely it had nothing to do with him, and anyway it was a trivial thing, not worth making a federal case over.

He removed his foot from the gas pedal and watched the taillights disappear. The whole sequence had taken only a few moments, but he felt a certain satisfaction, as a person does at the completion of a successful transaction, however minor and hidden from the world.

He settled back and resumed his wait for the other third-shift people to begin their tours. Then he drove down to the law enforcement center to get the lineup tape.



At one a.m., when Mocher Cole, who was running the game, came back with beer and smokes, he also brought the news that he could no longer see the stars.

“Storm's movin' in.”

Mocher would sit in if they were short a player, but otherwise he ran errands and kibitzed.

Deuce Goetzinger threw his hand in and stared up into the dim ceiling joists, beyond which he imagined the now-starless sky. Since he'd arrived, after finishing the second shift at the water plant, he hadn't been able to buy a card. On nights like this, he dumped his busted hands early and never lost much, only the time spent twiddling his thumbs and listening to the chatter, hardly worth the price of admission given this bunch of lumberheads. Might as well be back at the plant watching the gauges.

Moocher passed around the beer, giving the latest weather report—freezing rain first, then the snow.

"I never worry about ice," Ed Byner announced. Byner couldn't open his mouth without annoying Deuce.

"You're a great ice man, are you, Ed?"

"I know how to handle a car. No brag. Always been a good driver, that's all. Taught myself." The button was in front of Byner, and with each card, he dealt another nugget of the grandeur which was himself. "My dad couldn't drive for shit. Mom was even worse. Whenever we went anywhere, I was the one drove, even before I got my license."

"Ed Byner, the child prodigy," Deuce said.

This little exchange, the irritation of it, revived Deuce's interest in the game for the moment, although it didn't do anything to improve his cards. He dumped more hands and listened to more chatter and tried to remember what it felt like to enjoy playing.

The conversation meandered from one subject to another in its faintly logical way, from driving on ice to ice hockey to rollerblades to the best way to cripple an attacker to medical costs to proctology and finally alighted on the worst job any of them had ever held down.

"That's easy," Deuce said as he tossed away another worthless hand, "farm work. Go clean pig shit out of a confinement building once, you want a good time."

"Pretty crummy, all right," Norm Pfohl agreed, "but I'll tell you what you couldn't get me to do, not in a million years—work on skyscrapers." Pfohl, a tight player, stared intently at his cards as he spoke. "I see pictures of guys strolling along an itty-bitty beam a hundred stories up, it gives me the creeps."

"It's some Indian tribe does it," Ed Byner chimed in.

"Mohawks." This came from Moocher, who knew odd shit like that. He had settled down at a nearby card table and begun to play solitaire.

“Mohawks, Apaches, whatever,” Byner said. “They got no fear of heights. They’re too dumb to be afraid or something. You take the fear away, why hell, the job’s easy as pie.”

The conversation having been opened to shitty work in general, other candidates followed: coroner, miner, migrant farm worker. Moocher even nominated prostitutes. “Think of the scumbags those girls got to do it to.”

Deuce ignored this byplay, his mind drawn back to his life on the farm. His childhood, the unremitting misery. The old man on his case every other friggin’ minute. Like living under a goddamn vow, his father as pious about farmwork as any abbot had ever been about the life in a monkery.

Another hand was dealt. Byner, with a little pair showing, raised the bet. Deuce had a king in the hole, nothing showing, but he stayed, playing carelessly, his thoughts still on the farm—the recent past, barely two months ago, when his mother had left a message on his answering machine, begging him to come back and run out the upper fields, his father too busy to harvest the corn.

“Do it for me,” his mother had pleaded, knowing full well that he’d never do it for the old man. Deuce could still hear the pain in her voice, and he knew how much she hated having to shame him into doing it.

The next card didn’t help. He had a possible inside straight, but he thought what the fuck and raised the ante anyway, something he never did.

A couple of the others, who obviously didn’t hold much, had folded as soon as they saw Deuce raise. He was tempted to stay, just for the hell of it, and try to drive everybody else out on the basis of his reputation. But Byner was still in, which meant he had something, maybe not a lot, but something, and when Byner got a few beers in him, he couldn’t be bluffed. He lost for other reasons. Anyway, Deuce didn’t feel bored enough to do something really stupid, so he tossed his own hand in.

He leaned back and returned to his recollections; his mind’s eye now scanned the horizon, the long curve of Iowa prairie above the farm, for on that day two months ago, he had done what his mother wanted—he had harvested the corn, for her and because of the tone in her voice. How strange it had felt, perched up in the picker again after so many years, counting the rows as he swung the machine onto each new set, flushing pheasants and rabbits,

watching a massive rainstorm advancing from the west. After the droughty summer, the harvest was meager, but still he could look back with satisfaction at the clean-picked fields when he was through, a satisfaction he never remembered experiencing as a youth. He remembered only his resentment. His father had taken his labor. Even that wasn't his.

Byner won the hand. As he raked in his winnings, he said to Deuce, "Guess this ain't your night." Byner fancied himself a crackerjack poker player, and his smile suggested that maybe the forces for justice in the universe had finally been properly aligned and Deuce's seven-year run of luck come to an end.

Perhaps not quite yet. On the next hand, he caught two pair. On the draw, everyone else took three cards, and he didn't take any. He won the hand on the pat bluff, although he took no pleasure in it.



By two a.m., Ned Pickett had parked the squad car on Freight Street. Before him rose the massive, somber brick walls of the packinghouse, where the next day the final round of layoffs would begin.

Not much had been happening on the shift. A night of wind-shield inspections. No domestic calls. In cold weather like this, everybody kept their doors and windows closed, so the neighbors had less to complain about.

The lineup tape hadn't contained anything interesting, either. Talk about the blizzard coming in. Ice first, looked like. If it hit before the morning commute, Ned would probably end up with some overtime. That was okay.

Streetlights weakly speckled the flanks of the antiquated packing company building, grown too large to survive. In just a few hours, many of the employees would begin their last shift, the kill floor people first. He remembered the summer he worked there as a kid and how much he hated it.

The end of the company had been a long time coming, decades depending on who told the tale, and though Ned was a loyal union man, hated to see any union people lose their jobs, no matter how shitty, his sympathies had been worn down over the chronic struggle to save the place.

Restlessly, he put the squad back in gear and moved out from beneath the shadow of the old plant, his thoughts returning full circle, to the men soon to be laid off, many of them of his generation, many, he knew, probably too old to catch on anywhere else. How would he have felt, he wondered, if this had been his final shift on the force?

Ned was fifty-two, a cop for nineteen years, a patrolman all that time except for a brief stint as sergeant, until he made them bust him back to doughboy. When the time came and they forced him to retire, he'd do security work, he supposed. After that, who knows? With luck, he'd already be dead.

Uptown, he made a slow pass along Central Avenue. He drove at a crawl by the pool hall, closed hours ago, but a faint glow still visible from within, spilling over the partition in the back of the main room. Moocher Cole would be running one of his poker games. Illegal, of course, although Ned wasn't averse to sitting in on a game himself from time to time. A faint impulse arose to put the arm on Moocher and his friends, even fainter than the impulse earlier to give a traffic ticket to the guy who ran the stop sign. Occasionally, the cops busted a game, but only if they'd been getting complaints. It wasn't, as far as Ned was concerned, real police work.

He let the squad continue to inch along, past the empty storefront next door and then the title company next to that.



The button had come around to Deuce again. Out of his irritation, he chose Kansas City lowball, a game the others didn't much like. But he'd been pulling crappy cards all night, so he might as well take advantage of the fact. Sure enough, he dealt himself nothing but crabs and ice water.

Ed Byner had gotten off on one of his pet peeves.

"Here you got all these people at the Pack about to lose their jobs," he was bitching, "and the niggers get everything handed to them on a silver platter."

"They're not self-made men like you, is that right, Ed?"

"Who the hell built this country, Goetzinger?" Byner demanded. "Whad'ya suppose Daniel Boone would think of this shit?"

These were not questions Deuce cared to explore. Byner looked at him with satisfaction.

The conversation continued. Everybody had a theory. Deuce forgot about himself for a moment and sat back and listened. Since almost no blacks lived in the city, none of these clowns knew jack shit, just what they saw on TV or heard from their dumb friends.

On the other hand, he wondered why there were any blacks at all in Jackson. Why would they choose to live where so many people hated them? But then again, what was the option, living in Cabrini-Green or one of them other Chicago projects? That had to be it—damned if you do, damned if you don't.

“Hey, Deuce, you gonna bet or what?”

Deuce didn't move. So, okay, Jackson wasn't a decent place for a black man. What about a white guy? What about himself? What the hell was he doing there? Work, poker, chickies—that was his life. Pathetic. He supposed he could get married. The women he took out were each year a year older and more desperate to settle down and start raising a family. But if he did get married, it would just be to please his mother, and what kind of fucking reason was that? Deuce had no interest in children. The world had too many goddamn people in it already.

“He's gone to sleep.”

Probably he should quit his job and become a poker hustler. That's what he should do. Go out and live on the edge. At least there'd be some juice then. His mother would disapprove. Her disapproval would be bottomless. But what the fuck, anything was better than what he was doing now.

He threw his hand in, waving after it in disgust. “You can cash me out.”

“What? It ain't even 3:30 yet,” Filer said. “The night's hardly begun.”

“I'm through. That's it for me” was all Deuce said.

“Let the bastard go,” Byner told the others.

Deuce gave him a big, false smile. “Thanks, Ed. I knew you'd understand.”

“Fuck you.”

Deuce took his money and went home.



Two hours later and still no sign of the storm, Ned Pickett had parked the squad car at Ice Harbor Place, pointed toward the bluffs.

In the distance, across a sheaf of railroad tracks, shadowy factory and warehouse buildings were backlit by the downtown streetlights, the tracks mostly unused now, the buildings abandoned.

This late, it wasn't worth it even to work traffic. Nothing had happened the whole shift and nothing was likely to, not now, so Ned's attention had flagged a little and he failed to spot the three figures until they had reached the far side of the tracks and were already disappearing into an alley between two buildings.

He put the squad in gear and stepped on the gas but didn't hit the lights or siren. The car bucked across the tracks, then did a one-eighty on the loose gravel as he circled to the far end of the alley and braked. Nobody.

He panned the scene—filled with deep shadows—and gently depressed the accelerator and began prowling around the old industrial buildings, his lights still off.

Ned didn't care if he actually apprehended anybody. That might involve a foot chase, and over the years he'd put on a few pounds. He just wanted to get a good look. All the local police characters were well known. One good look was all it'd take. Then, if need be, the bozos could be picked up at leisure.

He cruised slowly among the old buildings, trolling as patiently as a fisherman. He rolled down the window again, as he had earlier, the frigid air crackling in his ears.

Like a boat in a current, the car drifted. Waiting, waiting...but still, nothing.

Finally, disappointed, he returned to Ice Harbor Place and began searching for any sign of a break-in. He started with the commercial buildings, driving at first, playing the squad's spotlight off the doors and windows, and when that didn't turn up anything, he took his flashlight and began checking on foot. Like other old-timers on the third shift, Ned took pride in doing this kind of work thoroughly.

But still he couldn't find anything. When he had seen the three figures, they appeared to be loping away from the old railroad station now being used by the historical museum, and so Ned finally turned his attention to this building. He couldn't imagine there was much worth stealing. But, he reminded himself, the mind of your average deviant worked in wondrous ways.

The main entrance remained securely locked. He slowly circled the building, checking each window in turn. In back, grunting, he

climbed up onto the station platform. Wooden shelters had been erected, forming a walkway from the station to a Pullman coach being used as part of an exhibit. One of the plywood sheets stood askew, as if it had been removed and then rapidly replaced. Ned approached cautiously, playing his light up and down the loose edge of the board.

He pulled the sheet out a little and shined his light behind it. The door to the station had been forced. He pulled the plywood out far enough so he could squeeze behind it. As he approached the building, he smelled something. At the door, he stopped dead in his tracks.