

Many Pigs in Manhattan?

A novel by Michael Royea

CHAPTER 1: Could it get any worse?

“We need to talk.”

“This can’t be good.” Jessica sighed.

“No! It’s fine. It’s good. Really.”

“Well, out with it!”

“Jessica, you’re my sister and I love you.”

“But?”

“No but! No. It’s good, really. Now that your parole is finished, we thought it would be better for you to start over in a new place. Somewhere away from Philadelphia. Best for you.”

“Best for me? You mean best for the family.”

“Of course not! That’s not what I meant at all.”

“If I leave, Mom and Dad can tell people I’m doing volunteer work in Africa, like they did while I was in prison.”

“They never . . . forget them. This is for you.” She placed her hand on Jessica’s arm.

“What did you mean by away from here? Harrisburg? Pittsburgh?”

“That would be fine. Or maybe a bit farther.”

“Such as?”

“California.”

“California? You do want to get rid of me. Why don’t you send me to Alaska, for fuck’s sake?”

“Don’t be silly. You would have to drive through Canada to get to Alaska and, with your criminal past, they would never let you across the border.”

“My criminal past? You make me sound like Al Capone. Everyone knows I was framed!”

“We all believe you . . .” She avoided eye contact with Jessica.

“Why don’t you hire me as your nanny? I love your kids. I’ve been looking after them for six months, and doing a kick-ass job.”

“Yes, ah, you’ve been great with the kids, it’s just . . .”

“What?”

“I know it’s not your fault. You picked it up in prison.”

“Picked up what in prison? You make it sound like I got the clap!”

“Nothing like that! Don’t be gross! No, it’s, well, you swear a lot.”

“I don’t swear that much. Hardly at all. In fact, I never swear. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Jeremy told Todd to put away his toys the other night and he told Jeremy to ‘f’ off!”

“Your husband is too thin skinned. Besides, Todd probably picked that up on the street.”

“He’s four! He doesn’t go on the street. He only goes with his Aunty Jess.”

“I’ll bet he picked it up from the boy next door. That kid is a real potty mouth.”

“He’s a year old for Christ’s sake! Now you got me doing it.”

“How am I supposed to get to California? Did you think of that?”

“Jeremy has fixed up the old—”

“Oh, not that shitty Gremlin! Is he out of his fucking mind?”

“He’s a good mechanic. He says the car will get you there without any problems.”

“What about money? How am I supposed to drive across the country with no money?”

She stood up and held out an envelope. “There is five hundred dollars in here.”

“Five hundred? You expect me to make it to California with only five hundred dollars? That won’t even pay the gas.”

“You were a stock broker.”

“What the fuck has that got to do with anything?”

“You worked with money. You must know how to be frugal.”

“Frugal? And what do Mom and Dad think about you shipping me off to the west coast?”

“This money comes from them.”

“Fuck.”

“It’s for the best, Jessica. You can start over. No one will know about your past.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not a charity case!” She grabbed the envelope, startling her sister. “But I’ll take this money because you owe it to me for looking after your snotty, brat kids! And Todd is lucky he had his aunt to teach him some real words because his fucking politically correct father never will!”

“Keys are in the car,” Jessica’s sister called after her as she stomped up the stairs.

Jessica stuffed her meager possessions in a back-pack, went out to the car, threw herself in, and tore out of the driveway.

Seven days later, she was standing on the Las Vegas strip, holding a sign that read “willing to do nothing for money.” Apparently, humor does not work for panhandlers because her cup remained empty. When she spied a policeman approaching, she decided to call it a night and retire to the comfort of her car.

He was nervous. Meeting an editor at 10:00 in the morning was never good. He paced around the suite and continually checked his watch. At 9:59 there was a knock on the door. He peered through the peephole.

“Come in, Trish,” he said as he swung the door open.

“Wilson. Good to see you again. Well, one hopes?”

“As well as can be expected. Drink?”

“Too early for me. But you’re welcome to . . .”

“Please, sit.” *Could this get any more awkward?*

“Thank you. I suppose you know why I’m here.”

“My proposal.”

“Yes. Among other reasons.”

What the heck does that mean? Wilson wondered.

“Wilson, you have been a beloved and respected author for many years, and we are honored to have been your publisher. Your books have entertained and informed countless children.”

“That’s kind of you to say. Of course, it hasn’t exactly hurt your bottom line, right?”

Trish stared at him as a long pause followed his attempt to lighten the mood. Wilson shifted uncomfortably on the sofa.

“We do find that your recent proposal to write an action thriller along the lines of the Jason Bourne novel is a bit of a stretch from your usual work.”

“I used that novel as an example. My book would be completely different. Only the genre would be the same.”

“Frankly, Wilson, your proposal seemed clichéd and uninteresting. And some of your

characters seem, what's the word I'm looking for; bizarre."

"But I would . . ." Wilson slumped back.

"People who write works like that have lived the life. Ex-soldiers or former MI-5 operatives. You're a children's author whose life-experience involves studying farm animals to convert into Willikers characters. Face it, Wilson, you will never be able to write an action novel. The fact is, you're not the type of man to get involved in anything adventurous or dangerous. You are, and I say this with all due respect, wimpish. No offense."

"None taken," he replied, just above a whisper.

"And there is another thing I need to talk to you about. Your book signing this evening will be your last."

"My last? I don't understand. I have seven more appearances remaining on the tour."

"We're giving them to John Baroque for his new novel."

"Baroque? You can't be serious?"

"The decision has been made. Coincidentally, and you're going to love this, John's book is an action thriller! Isn't that rich?"

"Yes. Rich." *Could this get any worse?*

"Have you read John's book?"

"Haven't had the pleasure."

"It is wonderful! Very similar to what you proposed, if you had the tal . . . I mean, experience, to write an action thriller. He was a marine."

"What kind of a ridiculous name is 'Baroque' anyway?"

"It's his pen name. He wishes to protect his privacy."

"Is that why the advertising poster shows him shirtless?"

“Isn’t that a wonderful photo?”

Wilson sighed. “Perhaps you’re right, Trish. I should concentrate on improving the Willikers. Write something new and fresh.”

“Yes. About that.”

“What is it?”

“It’s good! Nothing to worry about. We feel the Willikers have run their course and plan to retire them.”

“But I have a contract for three more books!”

“Yes, well, there is a clause in your contract stating we have the option to pull out of the agreement if sales do not reach a certain level. We have a warehouse full of copies of your last book, and stacks from the previous one. But this is good. You can retire. Travel more. Enjoy your golden years.”

“My golden years? I’m barely middle-aged!”

“Really? You should consider joining a gym. Anyway, must run.”

“What about the book signing this evening?”

“On as scheduled. Think of it as your swan song.”

“I will make this a great event tonight. At least I can go out with dignity.”

“Dignity? Perhaps if you had quit two years ago, I mean, yes, go out with dignity. It is all you have left. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“Goodbye, Wilson.”

“Trish. Always a pleasure.”

“Don’t get up. I’ll see myself out.”

Wilson remained slumped on the sofa watching her depart.

“I was wrong. It could get worse!”

“Oh great! A wall. Stupid GPS app. Now I’m going to be late. Maybe if I recalculate I’ll find it.” As Wilson fumbled with his phone, he got a text.

Hi sweetie! Hope the tore goes wel. I’m movng out. It’s over! Bye. Angel.

“Moving out? She’s breaking up with me by text?” He typed *What do you mean? You’re leaving me?* He hit send and stood staring at the screen. Nothing. Time seemed to stand still as he waited for a reply. Something. Anything!

“Hey mister! Let me see your hands!” a woman shouted from behind him.

Then another text appeared. *I’m taking the dog. Lovs.*

“She’s taking my dog!?”

“Hands! Now!”

Wilson continued to stare at the screen. “Perhaps you could help me,” he called over his shoulder. “I’m trying to get to the Regent Bookstore.”

“What?”

“The Regent Bookstore?” Wilson turned around. Looking at her tattered clothes and disheveled hair, he continued, “Never mind. You don’t look the type to frequent bookstores.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Give me a sec to reprogram this thing.”

“Hey, mister! I have a gun! Let me see your hands!”

Another text came on Wilson’s phone. “Finally, a response from Angel.”

Book signing cancelled. Sheri.

Cancelled? Because I'm late? Wilson.

Children burning effigy of you in front. Don't come here! Sheri.

Wilson stared at the screen.

“Ah, excuse me. Could we get on with this?”

Wilson didn't move.

“Are you okay? You're not having a stroke or something, are you?”

“What? Oh, I forgot about you.”

“Still here. Still want your wallet.”

“My wallet?”

“Yes. This is a stick-up, dumbnuts.”

“There's no need to be rude.”

“Can we get on with this?” the woman asked.

“I'm not having the best day. My book signing got cancelled because children are burning an effigy of me in front of the bookstore. And this is the second time in a week!”

“Yeah, well, we all got problems.”

“Oh yes, and I suppose your day is worse.”

“I'm living in my car and haven't eaten in two days. How's that?”

“Maybe you are worse off than me.”

“I'm more pathetic than you, yay me!” she said sarcastically. “Now, can we continue with the business at hand? It's getting dark and I need to get back to my car before they tow it away.”

A police siren could be heard in the background.

“Look, throw that gun in the trash where it belongs and let's get out of here before I have to spend my evening in a police station explaining how some lunatic woman tried to kill me. And if

you haven't eaten in two days, I will buy you dinner. But first, throw away that gun!"

"You're some piece of work, you know that?" She threw the gun into a garbage can at the end of the alley and they hurried out onto the street.

"I passed a little diner a ways back. We'll go there if it's okay with you?" he asked.

"Anywhere is fine with me."

They continued along the street and turned left at the corner. After a block they entered a diner. The woman went to the last booth and slid into the seat followed by Wilson who sat across from her.

"Get you something to drink?" the waitress asked cheerily.

"Just water," he replied.

"Diet cola."

After the waitress left, he said, "I'm Wilson, Wilson James. And you are?"

She hesitated. "Cari. Just Cari, okay?"

"Fine by me. Tell me, Cari, if that is your real name, how did you end up in an alley with a gun, attempting to mug me?"

"You don't think I could do it, do you?"

"Do what?"

"Mug you. I felt sorry for you because you seem like such a dope."

"I'm sure you make an excellent robber."

"Don't patronize me! I was a Wall Street broker before the collapse in 2008. I can do anything I put my mind to and don't you forget it! I was, ah, I was only trying to get you to buy me dinner. That's it. And it worked perfectly. Just like I planned."

"Wall Street broker to mugger in five years. Impressive."

“Patronizing again.”

Wilson’s attention was diverted to a small television over the counter to his right.

“Police now have a suspect in the brutal murder of Wall Street executive Ralph D. Brentwood from New York,” the news commentator began. “In town for a convention, Brentwood was found dead earlier today in his hotel suite by a maid. Police say he died of a single gunshot and this woman, seen here in a police sketch, was seen running from the room. She has tentatively been identified as Jessica Stone, also from New York, a former colleague of Brentwood’s. Ms. Stone was convicted in 2010 of embezzlement and fraud and served two years in federal penitentiary for her crimes. Her present location is unknown, but if anyone sees her, do not approach as she is considered armed and dangerous. Contact police immediately.” Wilson turned his head and stared at her. “Is it Cari? Or Jessica?”

“What? No! I don’t know what you’re talking about. I look nothing like that woman in the sketch.”

“There is a resemblance.”

“There’s no resemblance!”

“Then you wouldn’t mind if I call 911 and let the police sort this out?”

“Doesn’t bother me in the least.”

He took out his phone and began dialing.

“911, what is your emergency?” the operator asked.

Cari grabbed the phone. “Sorry, wrong number,” and hung up. “Don’t look at me like that. There is a simple explanation.”