

# Fast Food Detective

by Paul Merrill



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**Fast Food Detective**

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To those who get that love and laughter  
are *really* what make the world go ‘round.  
You and I are citizens of the same country.

“The way you know someone has gone  
from being neurotic to psychotic  
is that they lose their sense of humor.”

— Mary M.

Psych-ward nurse

University of Washington Hospital



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## PROLOGUE

J.P.'s chest rose and fell, lifting his sheets and lowering them again. The clock in the hallway chimed six times. A little wooden soldier popped out of the clock, ran in circles, and yelled, "Out of bed, grunt!"

J.P.'s hand groped his nightstand.

"John, I'm out of gum!"

"Here, Sir," Hampton said, extending a pack of Riley's Jackhammer. "How's the leg this morning, Sir?"

"Stiff." J.P. lifted his night mask. "Always stiff in the morning."

Hampton offered his arm. "Mr. Okonomiyaki from the Japanese trade mission called, Sir."

"No, I won't sell Park Towers to the Japs!" He set his feet in his slippers. "Tell 'em to stick to fortune cookies."

"That's the Chinese, Sir."

"The same to me. Tell 'em to talk to Trump." He took the cane from Hampton's hand. "If it wasn't for the damned Japs I wouldn't have this stiff leg."

"That was the Vietnamese, Sir."

"I don't need a damned geography lesson, Hampton. Is it loaded?"

"Every morning, Sir."

J.P. stepped onto the balcony and inhaled the morning air. He leaned his cane against the handrail and grabbed the handles of the fifty-caliber machine gun mounted in front of him. Below, two men in red blazers ran toward the house, away from a large picture sitting on a stump.



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J.P. squinted at the pulled-back hair and slightly taut smile of the woman in the crosshairs of his gun. His hands trembled. He exhaled—and squeezed. Pieces of wood and glass leaped into the air, and the words he yelled were drowned in gunfire.

The noise stopped.

The air smelled of gunpowder. Two doves darted across the sky. J.P. squinted at the wood and glass on the ground.

“Our patsy detective, have we found him yet?”

“Soon, Sir. Very soon.”

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# CHAPTER 1

With wide eyes and a plastic smile, Bimbo the Clown spoke.

“Hi. Can I take your order?”

“Yeah, one Fun-Fries, two Cheezie-Weezies, a Big-Bang-Boom-Burger on a Fun-Bun, two Chippy-Chocky Shakes, one Ungy-Ringo, and a large Yummy-Yummy.”

“Thank you for being a Bimbo today,” the speaker crackled. “Please drive forward.”

Inside a brown brick building on Arlington, Virginia’s fast food row, amid piles of steaming food and beeping cash registers, nine high school students and their assistant manager moved in a blur of orange and red polyester. On the other side of the counter, customers huddled at plastic tables as voices and piped-in music ricocheted off the walls like gunfire.

“More lettuce to veggie prep!” someone yelled.

“You got it, Larry!”

Lunchtime—and under an inferno of heat lamps, rows of warming trays stood packed with bundles of bread and meat waiting to be eaten. The smell of peanut oil and air freshener filled the air.

Behind the counter, above the marquee and the pictures of Boom Burgers and Whizzy-Cream Shakes, a sign proclaimed:

## BIMBO’S RULE THE WORLD

It was supposed to say, “BIMBO’S RULES THE WORLD,” but the “S” had disappeared long ago, and no one seemed to notice.

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At this time of day, the music blaring from Bimbo's speakers should have been a selection from the *Chew Fast and Scoot 'Em* series—classic Rock 'n Roll tunes performed on a synthesizer, subliminally overlaid with tracks of crying babies, sirens, and raspy voices asking for rent money. But Mr. Pinwhip, manager and franchise owner of Lee Highway's Bimbo's Burgers, was on vacation these middle weeks of March.

Horacinda, his voracious wife, had dragged him away, kicking and screaming, for her annual pilgrimage to the birthplace of Liberace in West Allis, Wisconsin, leaving assistant manager Larry Gibsom in charge of Mr. Pinwhip's beloved burger kingdom.

The little man was hardly out the door when Larry, against strict and oft-repeated orders, yanked *Fast-Chew #2* from the jaws of the CD player, and inserted The Yoo-Hoo Girls, *Bump and Grind Your Way to Heaven*.

The results were nothing short of amazing. One by one, Bimbo's young employees awoke from their catatonic stupors and began to move and sway, flexing their facial muscles in joyous teenage smiles.

The kid at the grill tossed patties and skipped buns across the griddle; mustard and ketchup squirters dancing in his hands like spurting maracas. Like the conductor of some smoking orchestra, his arms flew in every direction. Salt and pepper shakers went up, hovering in midair, and deposited their contents on a mosaic of sizzling patties before coming to rest at his side. Through the haze of smoke and steam he grabbed, slapped, pounded, bumped, and smacked everything in sight. Buns flew up and patties rose to meet them; lettuce and tomato slices collided in midair—all ending up neatly in their wrappers and bouncing off to their waiting warming trays.

The kid with day-glow purple sneakers dunked and boiled French fries while a girl with green hair adjusted the thickness knob on the Patty-Matic. The machine whirled, sucked in another log of ground beef, and dumped a pile of patties out its back end.

At the drive-up window, a kid with a football tattoo passed sacks to outstretched hands with such a sincere smile that Bimbo's drive-up

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customers left that day with a better feeling about life, lunch, and kids in general.

At the front, girls shoveled food across the counter to the beat of the music; to the guy in the beer can hat, the lady in mid-calf nylons, the uniformed Catholic school girls with their brand-new breasts; to the tired cop and the dusty body-and-fender worker—to America’s great “just-washed-for-lunch.” And so it went until Arlington was fed, burped, and back to work.

Larry walked through this smoky battlefield giving orders and seeing that things moved smoothly from cooler to counter. He was borderline handsome, Larry Gibsom, at six-foot-three inches tall. But his job at Bimbo’s, and a diet of burgers and shakes, had left him barely able to fit into his jumpsuit in the morning.

His hair was brown but light enough to show rivulets of blonde by the end of summer, and he was older than the fuzz-faced boys and pubescent girls who scurried around him filling sacks and making change.

“Hey, Larry, dis one great tape, Mon,” a voice yelled from veggie-prep.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” Larry said, flipping a slice of tomato into a plastic bucket. “Pinwhip’s back in three days.” He dropped two burgers into a sack and grabbed a bag of fries. “Keep an eye on things, would ya? I’m on break.”

\* \* \*

The break room was small and windowless, with blue-green walls and two rows of neon lights hugging a dirty ceiling. In the center, eight vinyl tube chairs circled a Formica table top. Copies of *The Bimbo Bulletin*, plastered together with ketchup and mustard, overflowed a trashcan and scattered themselves across the floor.

Larry tossed his sack onto the table and pulled a paperback from his pocket.

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Jack Flange  
A Corpse in My Soup

Sipping a Clown-Berry shake and chomping down his burger he continued the saga he'd left off at breakfast.

Flange stalked London's most heinous criminal, Johnny Ringo, through the back lot of an empty soup factory.

*"Jack's fingers gripped the butt of his forty-five. Around him, fog hung on the night like a shroud of misty, gray death. He could sense the presence of his adversary, somewhere in the darkness, somewhere out there among the rusty kettles—waiting."*

"Get the asshole!" Larry mumbled through a mouthful of fries.

"Excuse me. Mr. Gibsom?"

Larry looked over his book. It was DeeDee Nelson, the new girl. She looked pretty standing there, despite her uniform. "They're so cute when they're young and innocent," he thought. She looked concerned.

"DeeDee," he said, "If you call me 'mister' one more time, I'm going to put you onto some really awful job." He thought for a moment. "Hey... how would you like to be assistant manager?"

"I'm sorry, Larry," she said. "It's just that I'm being extra polite 'cause I have a favor to ask you."

"Oh, I see. What kind of favor?"

She took a breath.

"Well, my boyfriend is going to Florida to be, like, a helper on a biology field trip, and he's leaving at four-thirty from Washington National, and we said goodbye last night." Her face filled with distress. "But I really miss him already, and like, I just really want to meet him at the airport before he goes, and surprise him and say goodbye again. It would mean so much to me, and I could make up the time on the weekend.

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Do you think that would be all right?" She paused, and her eyes became even softer, "...Larry?"

"DeeDee, I..."

DeeDee's eyes projected pain and love to the farthest corners of the universe.

"I don't think this is a good time, DeeDee," he said. "It's one-thirty, and..." She looked like she was going to cry. "Oh, heck, where are you now?"

"On the counter."

"Okay, get out of here."

DeeDee's smile threatened to rip her cheeks. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Oh, thank you, Larry!" she said, hopping up and down. "You're so cool!"

And she was gone.

\* \* \*

Rolling slowly toward Bimbo's Burgers, on Lee Highway, was a most unusual car; a white Cadillac sedan, the rear half of the car covered with orange polka dots. The front half was painted with orange and brown stripes, and on either door was the face of a clown. The hood ornament was a red clown's nose.

Hardly visible as he peered through the spokes of the steering wheel, he sat perched on two large pillows; a little man, erect, on whose head a donut of gray hair clung to a dome of sunburned scalp. His eyes were fierce green jellybeans of intensity, and his fingers gripped the steering wheel with ten white knuckles. He was dressed in the jumpsuit of a Bimbo's employee, but the half-circle of red fuzz pinned to the sides of his head announced him to be a Bimbo's franchise owner.

The car, moving at half the speed of traffic, idled toward the entrance of Bimbo's as traffic shot past it on both sides. Suddenly, the driver veered to the left, blocking the cars behind him. Blaring horns, shouting, and

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obscene hand gestures followed, but they were for naught; the driver of this boat had things on his mind. He slowed even more, causing a cacophony of screeching brakes and more honking, then without a signal, swerved to the right, into Bimbo's parking lot, and moved to the back where he came to rest across four spaces. The knuckles relaxed, and with a series of jerks the driver extricated himself from his car and stood blinking in the sunlight.

His eyes focused on the building that was his empire, and he grimaced. His face seemed twisted with tension and discomfort, but in fact he was quite happy. Yes, happy! Happy that another vacation obligation was over. Happy that he'd finally appeased his unquenchable wife who would now shut up about a vacation for another couple of months. And happy to be back in business. His business! He just always looked tense.

This was Edjimer E. Pinwhip, a balding, portly man of fifty-seven, preceptor and president of Lee Highway's Bimbo's Burgers, CEO and paragon of discipline, self-proclaimed tutelary and guiding light to all young men and women in his charge.

Pride swelled in Pinwhip's tiny frame. It was an E. E. Pinwhip in charge that marched across the parking lot on little legs. He knew and had known for the last twelve days that his employees were bungling the entire operation, robbing him blind, and having group sex in the walk-in cooler to the sound of rap music. They did it every time he went on vacation.

He stopped at the back door, adjusted his orange hair, plucked a red globe from his pocket, and jammed it on his nose with a twist.

Just then, the door opened and DeeDee Nelson stepped out, smiling from ear to ear.

\* \* \*

Larry walked to the grill, where the conductor hovered over a patchwork of toasting buns.

"Take the counter. I'll get this."

"Sure, boss," the kid said and smiled. "Did you let DeeDee off early so

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she could go make out with her squeeze at the airport?”

“Yes, I did,” Larry said. “Now get going.”

The lunchtime masses had dwindled. Larry pulled Jack Flange from his pocket, jammed it under the spatula rack, and continued reading.

*“Jack picked up a rock and tossed it at the chain-link fence that ran the perimeter of the yard. Laughter echoed from somewhere in the darkness. It was Johnny Ringo’s laughter. ‘You take me for a fool, Jack Flange.*

*‘There was a rumbling above him. Jack looked up to see the ball of an enormous bean crusher falling straight for his head!’”*

Larry read on, flipping buns and turning pages. DeeDee came in the back door crying. Jack Flange jumped clear of the bean ball and ran into the darkness.

“Gibsom!”

*“Flange rounded the corner and stopped cold. In front of him, eyes aglow with madness and revenge, clad only in a pair of green boxer shorts...”*

“Gibsom-Wibbsom!”

“Just a second, I’m almost finished.”

“You can say that again!” Small, sausage-like fingers lifted a patty in front of Larry’s face. The hand was shaking. “What’s this, Gibsom?”

Larry turned to see Mr. Pinwhip, standing on a stool so close their noses almost touched. Beads of sweat stood out on the little man’s face. His eyes were like two fiery green peas in a loaf of Spam. The burger split and fell to the grill with a splat. Drops of grease splattered Larry’s jumpsuit.

“You’re back early, Mr. Pinwhip.”

“Look at the size of that thing!” Pinwhip said, dropping the other half



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onto the grill. "It's half a cow!" The veins in Pinwhip's neck stood out like little water balloons. "How many times have I told you, Gibsom, economy is the key! What do you have this thing set on? Five?" He squinted at the Patty-Matic. "You've got this thing on five, Gibsom! Five! You've got this thing on five! You're throwing away food! You might as well run into the boy's potty room and flush my meat down the toilet!"

Larry shot a glance in the direction of the counter. "I'm sorry, Mr. Pinwhip. I didn't realize it was set on five."

"Of course not! Because you were reading some stupid, dick-head book!" Pinwhip's lips twitched. "I'm feeling a little peckish, Gibsom... Let me say that again. A little peckish!"

Larry nodded toward the front. "Don't you think we should be a bit quieter, Mr. Pinwhip? The customers might hear."

"I don't care. Let them hear! Do you realize that on five, you put an extra tablespoon of product into each and every patty? That means..." Pinwhip whipped his calculator from his pants. "We serve one thousand hamburgers a day..." He mumbled to himself, then blew air through his lips like he'd been punched. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! At half an ounce per tablespoon, that's five hundred ounces per day. That's three thousand five hundred ounces a week..." Poke, poke. "...minus one week's vacation..." Poke, poke. "...that's one hundred seventy-eight thousand five hundred ounces per year! Convert to pounds. That's eleven thousand one hundred fifty-six point two five pounds per year, Gibsom!" he yelled, waving his calculator in the air. "Eleven thousand one hundred fifty-six point two five pounds of my hamburger you're wasting a year!"

"What are you trying to do, break me? I leave for two weeks on a mercy mission for my wife, and you try to bankrupt me. I'd be out of business at this rate. A broken man! Washed up! Wiped out! All my hard work—gone! Why don't you just put a gun to my head, Gibsom? I leave you for two weeks, and I come back to this?" He grabbed his chest.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pinwhip. This was the first set of patties. I would have noticed it in a minute or two."

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“Poo-poo and poop! Gibsom, I’ve done so much for you. Don’t ever forget you were once a Taco-Jocko nothing! A lot of guys out there would give their nuts to be in a Bimbo position like yours. And what do I get in return? Mutiny on the Bounty! Burger mayhem! Poo-poo pants!”

“You don’t need to yell, Mr...”

“So why do I find Miss Nelson-Welson sneaking out the back door just now, two hours before the end of her shift? She said you said it was okay. Did you say it was okay, Gibsom? Did you say it was oyeh-ehkay?”

Larry could see DeeDee moving boxes of lettuce from the cooler. She looked like she’d been crying. He sighed and dropped his shoulders.

“Yes, Mr. Pinwhip,” he said. “I said it was okay. I figured we could handle it.”

“Well, you were wrong! Very wrong! No leave! No time off! No romantic rendezvous! This is a business my business! Not a nursery for the emotionally handicapped. And those sex-crazed retards screaming over my loudspeakers, was that your doing?”

“Yes, Sir, that’s right.”

“No! That’s wrong, too, Gibsom!”

“I thought it would boost morale.”

“Well, you shouldn’t think, Gibsom, because you do a damn lousy job of it!” Pinwhip wagged his finger. “A clear head is the key, Gibsom! I had great hopes for you. But I can’t have an assistant manager who does a lousy job thinking! You are hereby demoted. You are now a nobody, just like everyone else. I’ll find a new assistant manager who can think like a Bimbo. Obviously, you can’t! And you can forget that raise I promised you. I can’t afford it now after losing so much money.”

Pinwhip pulled a bandanna from his pocket and patted his forehead. “Whew. I’m glad that’s settled.”

Larry chewed his lip. “Mr. Pinwhip, I don’t normally say stuff like this, but you know I’m trying to do a good job here. I stay late when you

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want me to. I...”

“Cut it short, Gibsom, you sound like a girl! Just get back to work. And not on the grill—take the window,” he said, snapping his fingers. “Now get out of here. Break’s over!”

Fire shot through Larry’s veins. He wanted to tell Pinwhip how he felt—to fucking chill out. He knew the kids were watching him; he could feel them, embarrassed by his silence. But he wasn’t the boss. Pinwhip was the boss, so Pinwhip called the shots. They’d have to understand that. If he didn’t go along with Pinwhip, he could lose his job.

Pinwhip was staring at him. Larry knew what he had to do. His bills still weren’t paid from last month. “Yes, Sir,” he said, reaching for his book.

Pinwhip snatched the book from the spatula rack. “I’ll take this,” he said, sticking it in his pocket. “Evidence.”

Holding onto the grill with one hand and the edge of the stool with the other, Pinwhip dropped to the floor, stood, and raised a finger.

“If you’re going to get anywhere at Bimbo’s, Gibsom, you’ve got to think business. Bimbo business!” He started to go, then turned. “And remember, Gibsom, in this business, obeying orders is the key!”

Larry watched him leave, dragging his stool behind him.

Larry looked at the drive-up window. The kid with the purple sneakers was standing next to the fry machine, looking at him. They were all looking at him. He smiled.

“I tried, right guys?”

“Yeah, you tried,” one of them said.

The speakers cut off The Yoo-Hoo Girls. *Fast Chew #2* came on, and the kids shuffled back to work. On the other side of the counter, the customers returned to their conversations.

“Remember, Gibsom! Speed’s the key!”

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Larry spun around to see Pinwhip disappear around the coffee maker. When he turned back, the window kid was holding out the headset. "I guess that puts me on the grill," he said and walked off.

Larry looked out the window at a station wagon idling in the drive-up lane. A large woman stared at him from the driver's seat. Behind her, four little kid noses pressed against the glass. He tried to smile.

"Fries, Mommy!" one of the kids yelled.

"Shut up!"

Larry stuffed burgers into two bags and drinks into a holder. The woman reached up. "Thank you, ma'am," Larry said. "Have a nice day."

She grabbed the bags and looked inside.

"More sauce!"

Larry's cheeks flexed. It wasn't exactly a smile, but it would have to do. The act seemed to require more energy than he'd put out for anything in his life.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. He grabbed a handful of Bimbo's Noz-Watering Sauce packs and held them out with a cheery, "There you go."

She took the sauce, dropped half of them into the bag between her legs, and the rest into the second bag, which she threw over her shoulder.

There followed the wildest gruntings, whacking noises, and flailing of limbs Larry had ever seen. Feet and elbows hit the glass. There were high-pitched screams and moans. Pieces of paper flew in the air, and red liquid splattered the windows. Ketchup, he thought.

The woman behind the wheel stuck a handful of Fun-Fries in her mouth, grabbed the gear shift, and left a huge, stinking, black cloud in the air where she'd been.

Larry's chest felt tight. His head ached. "What the fuck am I doing here?" he said.

"I'll tell you what the fuck you're doing here!" a voice crackled.

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“You’re getting me one Ungy-Ringo, a Vanilla-Gorilla with extra Whizzi-Cream, and a Circus Pie.”

Larry snapped to attention. Shit! He’d forgotten the headset. “Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir. Anything else?”

“No, just do it fast. I’m in a hurry.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Larry walked to the girl at the warming trays. “Take over for me, would ya?” he said, and removed his headset.

“Sure, Larry. Are you okay?” She looked concerned.

“I’m fine,” he mumbled, and headed for the hallway door.

Miraculously, the hallway was empty. That is, except for Wang, the Chinese janitor, calmly pushing his mop across the floor.

Thin and clean-shaven, Wang was well-on in years and bald except for a few well-placed hairs. In his work shirt, denim pants, and white tennis shoes he looked like a sailor. As he swirled his mop in seamless figure-eights he brushed its strands against the baseboards on either side. His face brightened as Larry approached.

“Hi, Larry,” he said in his heavy Chinese accent.

“Hi, Wang,” Larry said, heading for the men’s room.

Wang stopped. “You be careful, Larry.”

Larry turned back. “What’s that, Wang?”

“Slippery,” Wang said, pointing to the floor.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.”

“Larry.”

Larry turned again. “What, Wang?”

“Larry, you not happy here.”

“Huh?” He eyed the old man.

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“You not happy here. Better you go.”

“Wang, are you talking about me quitting?”

The Chinese man nodded. “Quit.”

“Me leaving this job is not an option, Wang. I need the money.”

“Is only option.”

“It’s my job, Wang. It’s all I know. If I quit, what would I do?”

The Chinese man shrugged.

“I’d like to do something else, I guess,” Larry said, “and someday I will. My dream is to... well, anyway, you have a nice day, Wang.”

“Larry,” Wang said. “Chinese have saying: He who stay at job only for money has brain size of grain of sand, and ass-hole big as China.”

“The Chinese say that?”

“I think so.”

“Dang, Wang, I appreciate your advice, and sometimes I think I can’t take another minute. But that’s life, isn’t it? Anyway, if I can hold out another three months, I get a week off.”

“I see.”

“I’d better go, Wang. But thanks for the advice.”

Larry walked to the door marked “Bimbos” and locked it behind him. He didn’t need to use the bathroom; he needed a break. He looked at the mirror in front of him with Bimbo the Clown’s head painted on it—the inside of the face left out so the viewer saw himself with tufts of orange hair and a red and white polka-dotted bow tie.

Larry eyed the clown in the mirror. “Hey, what else could I do?” he said out loud. “He’s the boss, right? I can’t quit. No way! I’ve got rent to pay, utilities, phone bills, food... I need to buy gas and tires. And what would happen if I needed to go to the doctor?” He leaned closer. “Do you know how many people are out of work these days?” He joined himself

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for a little laugh. "Pretty soon, Pinwhip will forget what he said, and I'll be his assistant manager again, just like all the other times. Sure, the job sucks, but it pays the rent. I don't have a choice." He felt better.

He opened the door. The floor sparkled in front of him. Wang was gone. He walked to the kitchen door, took a breath, and pushed it open.

Pinwhip glared back at him. "Where the hell have you been?"

"I—"

"Don't stand there blabbing. Get back to work! I've got one kid on break and one just left. Take over the grill. And do it right this time, will you?" Pinwhip held up a finger. "And don't forget, Gibsom, at Bimbo's, speed's the key!"

Larry started to speak, but the little man was gone. He walked to the grill. The Patty-Matic, typically on four and a half, was set on three. Pinwhip was making his money back. Larry picked up the spatula.

"No, not like that, Nelson, like this! This is Condiment Squirter Training, young lady, and you're not getting it right; this is the third time I've warned you about over-squirt. You know what I'm talking about. You're making my funny-wunny day not so funny-wunny."

Larry angled his head toward Pinwhip's voice. The voice was coming from the other side of the stacking trays and sounded tense. He looked at the kid on the fry machine. The kid raised his eyebrows. Larry tossed a handful of patties onto the grill.

"Nelson, no, no, no! That's not what I mean. Give me your finger. You do it this way! In this business, a good squirt is the key, Nelson. You don't have any concept of a good squirt, do you? Do it again. And I'm watching you."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pinwhip," Larry heard DeeDee saying. "I don't know why I do that." He strained to hear over the sizzle of burgers.

"Ow, Mr. Pinwhip, you're hurting me."

He flipped a patty. It landed on another. Was that sound DeeDee

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crying? It was quiet on the other side of the trays. He imagined Pinwhip standing there, tense, leaning forward on the balls of his feet, eyes focused on the squirter in DeeDee's hand. He put the spatula down, started for the prepping area, and stopped. He looked back at the fry machine. The fry kid raised his eyebrows again.

Larry looked at the counter girls. They were working and glancing toward the prepping area. He looked at the drive-up window. The window girl was filling orders and looking toward Pinwhip's voice. He felt self-conscious. He walked back to the grill and picked up his spatula.

"No, no, no, no, no! You did it again! Don't you see what you're doing?"

Larry flipped a burger. It landed half off the grill.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pinwhip. I'm trying!"

He flipped another. Then another. And another.

The kid on the fry machine looked over to see what Larry was going to do, but Larry was gone. Three patties lay on the floor, and another slid down the ventilator hood.

On the other side of the stacking trays, Pinwhip stood next to the prepping table, perched on his stool over a stack of buns. He held a ketchup dispenser in one hand, and DeeDee's right hand in the other. DeeDee was twisted away from him, trying to extricate her hand from Pinwhip. Her face was the picture of pain, and her lower lip trembled.

"Listen, young lady," Pinwhip said, "if you don't learn to squirt right, you're as good as out of here. Do you read me loud and clear? I'm not playing any gamzie-wamzies. It's either do it right or get out! You'd know how to do this right by now if you weren't always trying to sneak out the back door."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pinwhip, I'm trying."

"Well, you're not trying hard enough because you're not getting it. And I don't want a big splat, either. I want cute little star shapes. You'll do



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it my way, won't you, Miss Nelson?"

"Yes, Sir," DeeDee blubbered. Tears streamed down her face. "I really need this job, Mr. Pinwhip. It's my first job, and my mom and I need the money."

"Don't try to make me feel guilty, young lady. We don't carry slackers here. We fire them. At Bimbo's, efficiency is the key!"

Larry stepped forward. "Mr. Pinwhip, can I talk to you a minute in private?"

Pinwhip looked up. "Gibson? What are you doing here? No, talk to me right now." He turned back to DeeDee, and with his right hand, twisted her fingers into the trigger loop of the squirter.

"I'd like to talk to you in private if you don't mind, Sir," Larry said.

"Gibson, get back to work. Talk to me later."

"Excuse me, Mr. Pinwhip; can't you see you're hurting her?"

Pinwhip let go of DeeDee and whirled around. DeeDee looked up. There was relief in her eyes, but she knew this meant trouble.

"Gibson..." Pinwhip squeezed his knees together and stuck out his chest. "Get back to work."

"Mr. Pinwhip..." Larry swallowed. "DeeDee's new. She's only been here three weeks. I haven't trained her on the squirters yet. She's been on the counter the whole time you've been gone."

"Don't blame me for your shortcomings! Now, do as I say. Get back to work before I fire you on the spot."

DeeDee moved uneasily. Her eyes were wide with fear, and tears made paths through her mascara.

"Sir, I-I think you're handling this the wrong way."

Pinwhip looked at Larry in disbelief. "What did you say? Damn it, Gibson, I've told you once, and that's all I'm going to tell you! You don't disobey the orders of your commanding officer!" Pinwhip turned to

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DeeDee, grabbed her finger, and jammed it into the trigger loop. “Okay, Nelson, you’re going to get it this time. You feel this? You feel *this*? This is the way we do it at Bimbo’s.”

DeeDee writhed in pain. Larry couldn’t move. He didn’t know what to do. His arms felt heavy and weak by his sides. His mouth was dry. His throat was tight.

DeeDee was sobbing now. “I’m trying... I’m... I’m trying. I’m sorry, Mr. Pinwhip, I can’t do it.”

“Oh, just like a girl,” Pinwhip snapped. “Always blubbering.”

Larry’s hands opened and closed. They were hot and sweaty. “Excuse me, Mr. Pinwhip...”

The counter girls weren’t even looking at the customers anymore. They collected money, handed over food, and said “thank you,” all the time looking over their shoulders. Even the girl at the window was facing the voices, passing sacks behind her back to the cars.

“Gibson, get out of here!” Pinwhip yelled, not taking his eyes off DeeDee’s fingers. “Get, get, get, and *get*!”

Larry took a step forward. “Mr. Pinwhip, I...”

“Get back to work, you worm!” Pinwhip yelled, motioning behind him. Pinwhip was small, but he was strong. The knuckles of the little man’s fist caught Larry in the solar plexus.

Larry gasped and backed into the bread racks, sending rows of trays crashing to the floor. He stood, mouth open, trying to get his breath. He couldn’t get physical with Pinwhip. He’d get fired. He needed to get out of the building, somewhere away, where he could cool off. But DeeDee was there, and Pinwhip was hurting her.

“Mr. Pinwhip, I can’t go back to work,” Larry gasped. “Please, just let her go.”

Pinwhip turned. “Gibson, you’re fired!” he snorted. “You’re no Bimbo; you’re just another clown!” He turned back to DeeDee. “Now get

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out of here, Gibsom! You're fired, you're fired, you're fired!" he yelled, squeezing DeeDee's fingers each time for emphasis. DeeDee looked like she was going to faint. Larry looked stunned.

The customers at the counter craned their heads, trying to catch a glimpse of the melee.

"Fired?" Larry said, "Not today."

"What do you mean 'Not today?' Yes, today! Thursday, March fifteenth! Let's see. I think the words I used were 'you're fired, you're fired, you're fired!' You're an upstart, Gibsom, who won't obey his leader. Is that Bimbo business? No!" Pinwhip wagged a finger. "At Bimbo's, Gibsom, obedience is the key!"

"Mr. Pinwhip," Larry said. "I'm your assistant manager."

"Was! Was! Wasy-was-was! You're not a Bimbo anymore, Gibsom, and you never were! By my decree. I've made a Custer decision! Over, done, finished, terminated!" Pinwhip looked back at DeeDee. "Now, young lady, are you ready to cooperate?"

Larry stood watching Pinwhip twist DeeDee's hand as tears streamed down her face. The front counter was as quiet as if it had been midnight. *Fast Chew #2* whined on in the background. The entire building stood still. Tense. Waiting.

Then something happened.

Larry took a deep breath and relaxed. Something shifted, something inside. He lowered his shoulders. His face looked strangely angelic.

"Stop it," he said.

Pinwhip took no notice.

"Please stop it, Mr. Pinwhip," he said again.

Pinwhip continued to wrestle with DeeDee. Larry looked at her for a long time, then at Pinwhip. Then he reached over and grabbed Pinwhip by the shoulder. It was a fluid, serene kind of motion. To Larry, it seemed as if someone else was doing it. He just watched it happen from some place

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inside.

“Let go of me, you idiot!” he heard Pinwhip say.

It was peculiar to watch his hands grab Pinwhip’s belt, to lift the little man—his arms strong from years of work in the fast food business—and whirl him away. He held onto Pinwhip, and Pinwhip’s momentum pulled Larry after him, the two men spinning together like revolving planets in the direction of the counter.

As they came closer, knocking over trays and crashing into racks, the counter girls parted in front of them like pedestrians in front of a speeding car.

One girl, in the middle of an order, jumped backward, landing on the counter with her backside to the customers. The girl with green hair flattened herself against the pop machine.

Larry whirled Pinwhip one last time, the little man’s legs a blur beneath him, and spun Pinwhip toward the warming trays where his hand guided Pinwhip’s face down into a pile of Cheezie-Weezies.

And it was over.

Pinwhip raised two ketchup-stained hands above his head. On the other side of the counter a woman fainted.

DeeDee hovered off to Larry’s left, looking scared. *Fast Chew #2* droned on in the background. Pinwhip, with Larry’s hand still on the back of his head, mumbled something into the burgers about always having thought of Larry like a son, and please not to hurt him.

One of the counter girls stood with her mouth open a few feet away, holding a soft cone and some change.

Larry reached out, took the cone, and grabbed Pinwhip’s belt. He pulled and let go of the cone. “And remember, Mr. Pinwhip,” he said, “at Bimbo’s, ice cream down your pants is the key.” The little man’s legs tensed, but he didn’t move. Seconds later, melted ice cream ran over the tops of his shoes.

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Larry looked around the room.

The girl on the counter sat hugging a bag of burgers to her chest. A few feet away, the girl who'd held the soft cone stood like a statue, her hand still in the air.

A few customers had their mouths open; others chuckled quietly to themselves.

The drive-up window girl held a ten-dollar bill halfway to the till. Larry looked at Pinwhip, his hands still in the air, waiting for the inevitable knife in the back.

Larry took his book from Pinwhip's pocket, sat on the counter, and dropped to the other side. The customers moved back. He adjusted his jumpsuit.

"You did the right thing, kid," someone yelled.

Then Larry walked past them, and out of Bimbo's Burgers for the last time.

On the sidewalk, in the sun, he stopped. It seemed unusually beautiful that day—clear and warm. The traffic noises coming from the street sounded almost musical. And the daffodils lining the sidewalk; they were so, so amazingly yellow! He had never noticed that before.

Larry looked at them for what seemed forever, then stepped off the curb and walked across the parking lot to his car.

## CHAPTER 2

His Zipworth Tornado purring beneath him, Larry made his way down Pershing Street under a canopy of oaks. Their trunks rose on either side like columns, casting shadows into the street and twisting the sidewalk in waves of concrete. Row houses drifted by like chimneyed caravans heading the other direction.

He found a parking space, grabbed two bags of groceries from the back seat, and headed for The Majestic. The Majestic was home; a fantastic, pink, Italian, Palacio-style apartment from the twenties that took up an entire block in one of Arlington's finest neighborhoods. So carefully manicured were the Majestic's hedges that they were sometimes mistaken for stone, and no twig or leaf was ever found out-of-place anywhere on the property.

Just walking through the front door of the Majestic was an experience. Interwoven vines of Florentine marble framed the door; its glass etched with the forms of maidens, flowers, and birds. Then there was the white-marble foyer with rose-colored carpets and vases of white carnations on pedestals or inset into the walls. And suspended from the ceiling on a gold chain, the foyer's crystal chandelier showered luminescent sparks around the room like a million diamonds.

Larry pulled a handful of bills from his mailbox, stuffed them into a grocery bag, and crossed the room to an unmarked door. The door opened with a creak. A 40-watt lightbulb cast its tired light down the first few steps. The smell of old carpet greeted his nose.

He headed down, absorbed in visions of the day: Edjimer Pinwhip,

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face down in a pile of Cheezie-Weezies, the lovely DeeDee's girlish face—would she ever master a good squirt or would she be forced to leave?—the woman and the station wagon massacre...

Golden light from the basement's windows ignited shafts of dust as he made his way past the washing machines and clotheslines. There was a scratching sound from inside one of the dryers. Probably a mouse; a perk that came with reduced rent. He stopped at a row of doors, leaned against one of them, pinned the grocery sacks against his chest, and fished for his keys.

The door fell away in front of him.

"Surprise!" cried a chorus of voices.

His sacks hit the floor first, splitting and sending cans and bottles in every direction. Larry came next, landing on a bag of Smiley-Boy potato chips and blasting them across the rug.

"Oh, Larry! I'm so sorry!"

It was his sister, Barbara, looking down at him, her hand still on the doorknob.

"Hi, Barb," he mumbled into the carpet.

\* \* \*

Friends laughed and called to Larry as they picked up bags of Cheezy-Q's, Dong-a-Longs, Doughy-Duds, Ding-Bats, and cans of pop. One of his friends held a sign:

HAPPY THREE ZERO, LARRY!

"Happy birthday, Larry!" someone said.

"Yeah, happy birthday, Larry!" the others chimed in.

He wiped bits of potato chip from his face.

"I was hoping we might forget this one."

"Hey, what do you say for yourself, old man? Ha, ha, ha," one of them

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said.

The others looked at him expectantly.

“What do I say?” Larry thought about it. “Well... I just got fired.”

\* \* \*

Guests with drinks and snacks laughed and talked, stepping over potted plants, a weight set, around the two ceiling-high ficus trees, stacks of books, a tattered couch with thread-bare pillows, a coffee table, and the wooden crates that doubled as plant stands, speaker bases, and bookshelves. On the walls, 007, Spiderman, and Detective Harry Chard romped through a series of action scenes, their posters covering cracks in the plaster.

Detective novels flowed in paper waterfalls from bookshelves to the coffee table and lay in pools on the floor. Tiny holes circled a dartboard by the front door.

Larry sat with his sister on the couch, his feet on the coffee table, eating a Ding-Bat.

“Down his pants? It must have been so cold!” Barb squealed, pounding her feet on the cushions.

Larry grinned. “I guess it is pretty funny.”

“I bet you don’t go back to Bimbo’s for a while,” Bob Cuhlo said.

“No. Bimbo’s is history for me.”

“Could it be true?” Barb cried. “Oh, promise me, Larry, you will never set foot inside a Bimbo’s Burgers again. Promise me!”

“Hmm? Uh yeah, sure, Sis.”

“No! Say it so we can all hear, Larry. Say out loud that you will never go back.”

“Yeah... okay, sure... I, uh... promise.”

“Yes! Larry Gibbsom, you’ve made my day today! You were right to



stand up to Pinwhip. And congratulations on finally standing up for yourself. Do you realize, my big brother, that you have taken a huge step forward today? You have just stepped out of the mold you've been living in your whole life." She spread her arms. "In one fell swoop you've severed the behavioral umbilical cord of your last thirty years of security-based, work-a-day world, and have stepped into a land of new frontiers, of new horizons. Larry, with this newfound strength, there's nothing you can't do! You can enliven your wildest dreams! The whole world is yours, big brother, if you will but take it!"

Larry swallowed the last of his Ding-Bat. "Actually, Barb, I'm going to look for another fast-food job tomorrow. There are lots of places besides Bimbo's, and with my experience it should be pretty easy."

She fell against the cushions. "Larry? Did you hear anything I just said? Do you want to work a job like Bimbo's or Taco-Jocko's for the rest of your life? Think about it! Will a job like that ever nourish your soul? Can it bring you fulfillment on any primordial level? Have you ever woken up in the morning, jumped out of bed and yelled, 'Give me some oil! I want to fry something?'

"Listen, Larry, think of what you can do. You could finish college. Remember? You wanted to be a marine biologist and swim with the pink dolphins in the Amazon. You could start your own business. You could work for the Peace Corps in Silamarillian like my friend Jill. You could do anything!" She pointed over in the corner where piano keys peered from beneath a bed sheet and a stack of CDs. "You could play the piano again, Larry. Remember how good you were?"

"Hey, that's right, Larry," Bob Cuhlo said, tapping the side of his head. "It's all up here. They've done studies."

"Oh, please, not that again!" Judy Cuhlo put her fingers in her ears. "For once, can we skip the Tony Robbins testimonial?"

Her husband eyed her coldly. "Larry, this is the way it is. Never get married. It's okay for her to talk about her sister's kid, and how even his little butt cheeks are cute, and how he's so wonderful while he's getting

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his ‘diapies’ changed, till you’re begging for mercy. But if the man of the house, that’s you, bud, wants to talk about anything halfway intelligent, it’s, ‘Oh, please, not that again!’”

His wife rolled her eyes. “Somebody tell me, did I hit his ‘ON’ button?”

“You, Larry, are a smart man,” Bob continued. “And whether you know it or not, trust me, you’re lucky Suzanne flew the coop.”

Judy jabbed her husband in the ribs.

Larry cleared his throat.

“Now, if we could just get him to forget Suzanne,” Barb said.

“Oh, please, not that again!” Larry said.

“Larry, you haven’t dated in two years. You used to be such a romantic. You had lots of girlfriends. Now, one woman leaves you and you’re afraid of them all.”

“It wasn’t one woman, and I’m not afraid of them.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I’m afraid of what they do.”

“What they do?”

“You know, how they look so great in the beginning, and they’re so friendly, and everything you do is just ‘so incredibly cute’ or ‘so incredibly courageous.’ Then, once you’re hooked, you find out they were putting on their ‘look-great-for-the-bait’ face. They start acting differently; they aren’t romantic anymore. They start trying to change you. That’s if everything is going well. If things aren’t going so well, you find out that they’ve been lying to you all along, and the guy they were ‘just friends with’ is more than a friend, and they’ve gone off for the weekend to ‘explore their relationship.’”

“What an attitude! Is my brother not a complete basket case? A couple of bad relationships, and now it’s logical that every girl on the planet is a

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flake. I've got twenty-five great-looking girlfriends who'd drop dead to go out with a good-looking assistant manager—"

Larry held up his finger. "Ex."

"Ex-assistant manager, who drives the world's sexiest Zipworth and has an incredibly charming sister—that, of course, is me—and who has the entire world in front of him."

"Barb, can't we talk about something else?" Larry said.

"Suzanne definitely wasn't Miss Perfect!" she continued. "If she were so perfect, she wouldn't have picked her hunky, bucket-brained hairdresser to run off with to Las Vegas. You need a real woman, Larry. Like my friend, Gloria—"

Larry stood up. "Well, I think it's time for me to put this glass in the sink. It's looking pretty dirty."

"You're leaving because you're chicken, Larry."

"You're right."

She watched him walk away, then rolled her eyes. "The thing with men is you have to set them up with your girlfriends without letting them know you're setting them up. As long as the guy thinks he's in the driver's seat," she whispered, "you can do anything."

\* \* \*

Larry squeezed his way into the kitchen, jammed with people talking, drinking, and sitting on the counters.

"So, who won the game?" someone was asking. "I bet it was a hell of a fight."

"Who knows?" A lanky blonde said leaning against the refrigerator. "The picture went out ten minutes into the second half. The microwave-jamming thing."

"Not fucking again! This is getting stupid."

"Excuse me," Larry said. "Heading for the sink."

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“Any lock?” someone said.

“Any lock!” It was Helvin Knuckle. Helvin’s father was the brilliant Syd Knuckle, owner and founder of Knuckle Systems, a specialty firm supplying the Pentagon with its tools of the trade. “As my dad says, ‘they make it; the big Knuckle breaks it.’”

“What about the assessor’s office downtown?”

“Any lock,” Helvin said, folding his arms across his chest.

“That would be so cool! I could get in and change my tax assessment. So why do you call it Sweet Nothings?”

“Because,” Helvin grinned, “when you need to get in, you just whisper ‘Sweet Nothings,’ and she opens right up.”

“Excuse me, Betty,” one of the women said to Helvin’s wife, “but can you tell me why men always have to be so sexual?”

“They’re animals, my dear. They never evolved.”

Larry put down his glass and headed for the hallway, where he closed the bathroom door and leaned against it. He could hear bursts of laughter coming from the living room. Barb was telling another one of her stories.

He looked in the mirror, moved his head from side to side, then leaned closer. He squinted, lifted a finger, and pushed at the skin around his eyes.

“Thirty isn’t so old,” he whispered.

\* \* \*

In the living room, the guests had gathered in a circle. As Larry rounded the corner, one of them smiled and lifted a glass.

“Larry, being the esteemed individual you are, and the first among us to hit the big ‘three zero,’ won’t you please take a minute to reflect on your life and share with us, your dear friends, some of the deep wisdom you’ve gained on your journey?”

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“Of course, that should be on something other than relationships,” Barb added.

The room was silent.

Larry looked at his friends’ faces. “Well, let me think,” he said, clearing his throat. He smiled. “First of all...” He meant to go for a joke, but nothing came. He started to feel warm. He smiled again. His friends smiled back. “Well...” He sighed, then laughed. “I guess I really haven’t done anything with my life except work at fast-food restaurants.”

The smiles dimmed briefly. Betty Knuckle broke the silence.

“Sure, you have, Larry. You’ve done lots of things.”

Larry looked at her. “I have? Like what?”

She laughed. “Well, you know, all those things.” She turned to the others. No one volunteered.

“Yeah, Larry, lots of things.” It was Judy Cuhlo. She squeezed her palms and looked around the room, stopping at the bookshelves. “Well, you’ve certainly read a lot of detective books.”

Larry thought about it. “Yeah,” he said, “I’ve certainly read a lot of detective books.”

\* \* \*

Larry slammed the car door with his knee, folded the classifieds under his arm, and walked across the parking lot of Giovanni Italiano’s House of Impressive Noodles. Larry knew his ten years of experience made him a hot commodity, but he was wearing a white shirt, dark slacks, and a red power tie just to eliminate the competition. He had a new haircut and smelled of triple the recommended daily dose of cologne. He walked to the door, smiled patronizingly at the “Help Wanted” sign taped to the window, and went in.

“I’m here to see Mr. Olson.”

The girl behind the counter wore a baggy polyester jumpsuit identical to the ones at Bimbo’s except for its lime-green color.

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“One minute,” she said with a smile and disappeared around the warming racks. Returning a few seconds later, she pointed down the hall. “He’s waiting for you. The one with *Employees Only* on the door.”

Larry thanked her, followed her directions, and found a large man seated behind a metal desk. The room smelled of sweat and spaghetti sauce. The man wore only the inference of a T-shirt, a rag so thin it couldn’t hide the bed of hair flattened against his Falstaffian belly. His massive arms were a canvas of faded tattoos and freckles, and the hair on his head stood out like a forest of short blonde needles. An apron lay in a pile on the desk.

“So, you’re Gibsom?” the man said. “Have a seat.” He lifted Larry’s application from a stack of papers. A dented olive oil can stuffed with pencils and a swing-arm lamp were the only other things in the room. “I’m Oly Olson. I run this place. You really have this much experience?” he said, tapping the paper with his finger.

“Ten years.”

“Impressive. The average help stays here less than three months. High turnover in the noodle business.” He rubbed an earlobe. “It’s the same everywhere, I guess. They get uppity pretty fast. Then they want three seventy-five, three eighty-five, four bucks an hour. Everybody’s gotta be the big man; you know what I mean? You give ‘em the money, and they pierce their noses.” He leaned back. “But experience like yours would lift this place to a new level. Might even stop the stealing. Yeah, Gibsom, I’m interested.”

Oly opened a drawer and shoved a form across the table. “Fill it out and sign it,” he said, following it with a pen. “We’ll talk money later. But don’t worry,” he winked. “We don’t treat the big dogs bad here; you know what I mean?” Larry joined him for a chuckle. Oly shoved his chair back and parked his hands on his belly.

Larry went to work on the form, aware that he was being watched. He kept his posture smart and his writing continuous. Confidence was all his. Ten years of experience in the fast food business was nothing to sneeze at.

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Oly watched with approving eyes, drumming his fingers on his stomach, and humming the Norwegian national anthem.

“Hmmm?” His brow furrowed. Oly opened his desk drawer, dug through a mélange of pencils and paper clips, and lifted a small poster. At the top of the poster was the word “DANGEROUS,” and below that, a face and the name “LARRY GIBSOM.”

Oly looked across the table.

Larry scratched away. He was done with the “Experience” section and had moved on to “Address of Closest Relative” when a hand slammed down on his application.

“Hey! This you?” Oly held up the poster.

Larry managed a little cough.

“Assault with a softie, Gibbsom. That’s cold.”

\* \* \*

Larry stood in the middle of “Wong’s Long Dongs and Fast Chinese Foo to Go.” It was dark. Chairs floated upside down on the tables. Wong’s was closed after the lunch rush. The four-foot nine Wong, wiry as a Jing-Ming noodle, pushed against Larry’s stomach with both hands.

“No, sorry you boy,” he said. “Tanky very much. You no tanky.”

“But the sign in the window says, ‘Prease! Herp Wanted!’”

Wong, head down, back arched, shoved Larry backward past the Wonton machine.

“No tanky. Sign big mistake. No need help now. Change mind. No want trouble here. This nice place, okay? You find other job.”

They were at the dragon-covered front doors now. Wong put all his strength into one last push. Larry’s foot caught the threshold, and he stumbled backward. The doors burst open, and Larry found himself in a flowerbed, squinting up in the sunlight at the black birds circling high above him.

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And so it went: At Johnny-Joe's Jive-Ass Chitlins Place; at Shree Swami Bhagwan Schmidt's Sattvic Fast-Food and Kundalini Juice Bar; at Sum Yung Duc's Ancient Fried Chicken; and Ethel's House of Spam; at The Big Meow Catfish Palace; at Barky-Sparky's Hot-dog Hotel; at Mom's House of Frozen Peas; at The Universal Light *Fast-But-Make-Sure-You-Chew-It* Food for the New Age; and finally, when he thought he could take no more, at The House of Big German Wieners.

\* \* \*

Larry sat on a bench in Lubber Run Park, head in hands, eyes closed, feeling the sun on the back of his neck. Footsteps passed on the sidewalk. A sparrow, perched on the other end of the bench, flitted nervously and eyed the empty Cheezy-Q bags, chocolate milk cartons, and ice cream wrappers at his feet.

Larry opened his eyes. A beetle moved slowly across the concrete below him. He puckered his lips, and a glob of saliva landed in front of the bug. The beetle touched it, then veered off to the right. Since another try would have required Larry to move his head, the beetle was free to go.

The next victim to approach ground zero was an ant. Larry spit and this time got it directly. The ant flailed in the bubbly mixture, pulled itself free, and walked off trailing a thin line of saliva.

Larry laughed and ran his fingers through his greasy, uncombed hair. He shoved a dirty white shirttail into his slacks and pushed a scuffed brown shoe through the pool of spit. It was time for something different. He pulled Jack Flange from his pocket, opened it to a Happy-Helper pie wrapper, stared at it for a few seconds, then threw it on the ground.

"I've been to nineteen places!" he laughed. The footsteps on the sidewalk veered onto the grass.

"Ah, it's all bullshit anyway, isn't it?" he said. He picked up his book, lay down on the bench, and put it over his eyes. There was a loud honk. He shot upright, and the book went flying.



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Edjimer Pinwhip stuck his orange-hair-covered head out of the Clown-mobile. "Hey, Gibsom! Unemployment's the key!" The little man pounded his fists on the horn and shook with laughter.

"Stick it up your ass, Bimbo!" Larry yelled, leaping to his feet and extending his middle finger, but Pinwhip was gone. He sat back down, put his head in his hands, and started to laugh.

"Pretty funny, isn't it?" a voice said.

Larry whirled around to face a small man sitting on the other end of the bench.

"I also find life humorous," the tanned figure said. "You, Sir, like myself, see beyond the sham and illusion of this pitiless, valquitious, and very doo-doo existence."

Who was he? What did he want? Was he dangerous? Larry eyed the man from head to foot. Like Larry, the man wore a soiled white shirt, no tie, and dirty blue slacks. He was of similar build to Larry, but smaller. Maybe in his forties. His hair had bits of grey in it and needed combing. And like Larry, he had a head start on a short beard. Larry tensed. Was the guy dangerous? Or nuts? Or both?

"You, like I," the man continued, "have joined the ranks of those who know the truth about this masquerade and choose to live a life above it."

"No, not me," Larry shook his head. "I'll get out of this mess. This is just temporary. I'll get things back together. I'll find a job this week."

The man laughed. "That's what I used to say. Then it became clear that, hey, this is just *me*. It's who I am. It's my nature. And it's okay." The man put his chin to his chest and burped the sound of a collapsing mine shaft. "We are kindred spirits, you and I," he said. "One of a kind." He gestured toward Larry with a brown paper bag. "Want a snort?"

Larry didn't know where he was going; he just ran. And ran, and ran, and ran. He ran out of the park, along Mason Drive, down Carlin Springs Road, turned left somewhere along the way, then right somewhere else. He didn't notice the people jumping out of his way. He didn't see the

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swerving cars or the stoplights or the shops. He just ran and ran until his body had nothing left to give. And when he could run no more, he fell against a wall, his chest heaving like a piston and his mind floating in the peace of physical exhaustion.

And when finally he was able to look around, Larry found himself in downtown Ballston, surrounded by fancy, small-town shops and restaurants. The sun was low, and being Sunday, Ballston was deserted. A few restaurant doors were open, and a handful of cars wound through the boulevards. The wind, funneled between the buildings, pushed little pieces of paper across his feet. Pigeons pecked the surrounding ground, glancing sideways at bits of garbage, and a handful of people strolled the shop windows.

They stared at Larry as they passed, and he felt naked. He began walking, combing his hair with his fingers, and pretending to study the window displays as they did.

And what displays they were! Clothes and shoes and watches, so expensive and beautiful! Things from all over the world: luggage, computers, and travel posters that beckoned him to palm tree-lined coasts and ancient mountain castles. Soon he forgot himself, and for a brief moment, was lost in the world of wealth and fantasy.

But it was getting late, and the sweat on his face and clothes cooled and made him shiver. He thought about food, but he didn't want to go home. He buttoned his shirt collar and stuck his hands in his pockets, making his way along the glass front of Nuttweiler's Books, where elegant displays and glossy, colorful covers gleamed at him from behind polished glass.

From floor to ceiling they vied for his attention—here was a book on relationships, one on getting in touch with your feelings, and one on compost. There were diet books next to cookbooks, next to romance books, next to car books; books about getting to the top, and books about dealing with the guilt and stress of being there.

He moved onward, perusing the covers, and kicking a paper cup. He

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turned his back to the breeze and hugged his arms to his sides.

Then he stopped.

*What was that?!*

He walked back.

That book! There! A small, unassuming paperback, between *Lies You've Heard About Lard* and *Learning to Love Lethargy*. But its title burned in his mind like blazing fire:

*Do-It-Yourself Detective*

by Bob Winsome and Margot Smith

And its subtitle:

*A Nuts-and-Bolts Guide*

*To the Life of a Private Investigator*

Larry thought he heard a voice in the evening breeze. It said, "Why, with this newfound strength, Larry, there's nothing you can't do! You can enliven your wildest dreams. The whole world is yours, Larry, if you will, but take it!"

His face touched the glass. His nose bent sideways. A tingling rose from the base of his spine and exploded into his head. He tried to swallow, but his mouth was as dry as talcum.

\$23.95

He touched his wallet. He had the money. And he had the time. He turned and looked down the window front toward the door.

It was wide open.

## CHAPTER 3

Outside in the darkness the loudspeaker of the Pershing Street Gospel Church chimed three o'clock. Larry, unshaven, hunched over the book in front of him. The lightbulb above him cast a circle of gold onto his desk. He ripped open a Cheery-Cherry Squeezie-Pop, stuffed it in his mouth, and tossed the wrapper over his shoulder.

He'd finished the chapters on "Your Office," "Your Desk," "Your Business Card," "Signs and Advertising," and "Affirmations." Next to the book lay a three by five card scribbled with the words:

I will succeed!

I will make a million dollars!

He read on.

*"Client Contact Point #11—The Telephone. When the phone rings in your new office, don't be too quick to answer. This gives the impression you've been sitting around with nothing to do. Wait three rings, then pick up. However, do not wait longer than three rings. Your client could become hostile."*

Larry lifted his phone. "Ring! Ring! Ring! Hello, this is Larry Gibsom," he said, "...Private Investigator."

Those last two words! Their sound sent a thrill through every cell of his body. He slammed the phone down and turned back to his book.

*"When a client asks you to take on a fresh case, don't be too eager. This looks bad. Appear busy."*

"Right."

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*“Tell your caller you’re in the middle of an important job, but you’ll try to fit them in. Then get your calendar and schedule them.*

*“A NOTE TO THE BEGINNER: Don’t advertise the fact that you’re inexperienced. This makes prospective clients nervous. Avoid comments like, ‘Boy, I’ve always wanted to do this’ and ‘This is way more fun than my last job.’ Also, avoid asking your client questions like, ‘Where do you think we should start?’ or using phrases like, ‘I haven’t got a clue’ or ‘I’ll take a stab at it.’”*

Larry grabbed a can of Swell and smiled.

“I can do this.”

\* \* \*

“Not a bad lookin’ car.”

Larry’s powder-blue Zipworth gleamed in the morning light, from its white top to its newly greased black tires. The man in the polyester suit fiddled with his keys and exhaled. He took a toothpick from his pocket, twisted it between his teeth, and shook his head. “But seven thousand, five hundred seems a bit high.”

Larry opened a matchbook from Wong’s Dongs, ripped off a match, and twisted it between his teeth. “What do you think you could do?”

The man kicked a tire. “Well, maybe I could do fifty-five. I don’t know, but maybe that’s what I could do.”

Larry spit pieces of wet cardboard. “Sixty-nine hundred.”

The man clicked his tongue. “Six big boys and five juniors. That’s as far as I go.”

Larry exhaled loudly and held out his hand. “Mister,” he said, “you got yourself a car.”

\* \* \*

## FAST FOOD DETECTIVE

Larry stood on the sidewalk of Four Mile Run, looking up at the building that housed his new office. It wasn't the fanciest neighborhood in Arlington—mostly warehouses in both directions—but the building had fresh paint, and the toilets worked.

The place had been home to the Louis Linoleum Diapers factory, a promising idea that had failed its investors and been converted into commercial space. It was two stories, gray wood with white trim. It had a flat roof, dirty windows, and white columns in front that gave it as respectable a look as could be hoped for, considering the neighborhood. In the back was a dirt parking lot. All in all, he thought, rather nice considering the rent was three hundred dollars a month.

He walked to the door and examined the directory beside it. The list was varied:

Doctor Bent, D.D.S.—Dentistry the Fun Way

Rainbow-Dove-Joy—New-Age Collection Agency

Tough Luck Construction, LLP.

Madam Lasagna—Pet Psychic

Pygmy Bros.—Executive Headhunters

And there at the bottom, not twenty-four hours old:

Larry Gibsom—Private Investigator

Seeing those words in print, Larry experienced a sense of accomplishment he'd never felt before. The future seemed a field of endless possibilities. He'd read *Do-It-Yourself Detective* three times already; no one knew private investigating theory better than he did. He'd practiced his "Disguises and Impersonations," and bought an assortment of clothes, shoes, and hats at "The Trippy Hippie Secondhand Store." As for his impersonations, well, his Boston and New York accents weren't so great, but his Southern accent could have gotten him a job at Crawfish's Black Bean Bakery.

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He went inside, up the strangely springy white steps to the landing at the top. He stopped in front of his door, picked a piece of paint from his name, and went inside.

The office was of ample size, twenty by thirty, with a small bathroom and a toilet that blew bubbles when you flushed it. A long wall held two large windows facing the street, and a sturdy-looking desk on a gray carpet faced the door. To these basics Larry added a small potted plant, a picture of the Eiffel Tower, a maroon garbage can, a soft chair for his clients, a coffee table, and a stack of *Everybody's Business* magazines.

He moved the flower vase to the coffee table, straightened the Eiffel Tower, and took two boxes from his desk. He opened the first box and withdrew a shiny black holster. From the second he pulled a Colt Government Model, 45-caliber pistol. It was heavy, smooth, and black. He pulled the slide, released it, and walked to the window with the gun at his side.

He looked down at the cars passing on the street and smiled.

\* \* \*

A week later, Larry stood at the same spot by the window, watching the cars. They had been drawing him, more and more, away from his desk. He often found himself staring at them, sometimes for hours. At least *they* were moving.

He walked to his desk, stared at his phone, then the three-by-five affirmation card in his hand. He stuck the card back in his pocket, sat down, and continued clipping his nails.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, Larry stood again looking down at the passing cars. He'd read *Do-It-Yourself Detective* a fourth time, then switched to Jack Flange. His ads, one in the Yellow Pages, one in *The Arlington Journal*, and one in *The Little Wooden Nickel*, had produced nothing. His only calls had been wrong numbers. He spent his time wadding up sheets of paper and throwing them at the trash can, now perched on a stack of cardboard boxes

## FAST FOOD DETECTIVE

in the corner. His misses littered the floor. Cheezy-Q and Happy-Helper pie wrappers covered his desk. A buxom brunette with darts in her breasts smiled from the back of the door.

Larry started taking longer lunch breaks. He bought an old TV and placed it where he could put his feet on his desk and watch re-runs of "Detective Harry Chard." A spring-loaded hula doll waved his "I'll-Be-a-Millionaire" affirmation card from the top of the TV. But it wasn't enough. His spirits began to sink.

\* \* \*

Two months later, Larry, unshaven, in a Washington Nationals baseball cap, slumped in his clients' chair, staring at the cars on the street below. His unbuttoned white shirt was covered with crumbs, and his red power tie dangled from the back of the chair. He was noticeably thinner from the walking he'd been doing since he sold the Zipworth. Detective Harry Chard droned on in the background, but he didn't hear it anymore. The garbage can at his feet overflowed with empty pop cans and Doughy-Dud wrappers.

He'd carried his gun with him constantly for the first few weeks, attended gun lessons at the local shooting range, cleaned it twenty or thirty times, then put it back in its box. Now his finger played on the trigger of a Slap-N-Whack-It plastic flyswatter gun as he finished off a lemon pie and watched one of the winged creatures circle in front of him. *Do-It-Yourself Detective* lay on the coffee table under a stack of Johnny G-Man comic books. Unpaid bills peered from beneath Cheezy-Q and Happy-Helper pie wrappers on his desk.

Outside, the sun sank into the west, and the hills were awash in pink. Streetlights went on. Larry's head fell forward, and he slept, sitting in his chair, holding his plastic gun, facing the street, and snoring quietly as the cars moved back and forth below. Clouds rolled in from the Northwest, and a soft mist played against the windows.

Then it happened.

Something.



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Something strange.

Something strange was trying to get inside his head. It was a noise. It was uncomfortable. And it was getting louder.

It was his phone!

He stood up too fast and fell against the TV. There was a crashing sound and a flash of light. Bits of glass pricked his face. He reeled forward, tripped, and fell to the floor.

Ring!

“Shit! That’s the third time!” he cried, crawling forward. “Where the fuck is it?!” His face met a table leg, and sparks shot in front of his eyes. He pulled himself up and ran his hands across the table, knocking magazines and milk cartons to the floor.

“Where?” he hissed!

Ring!

It wasn’t on the table. It was on the damned floor! He turned his head back and forth like a radar antenna, dove into the darkness, and closed his hands around it.

“Hello!” he whispered, “Larry Gibsom... Private Investigator.”

The voice on the other end was deep and sonorous.

“Larry Gibsom, I have a job for you.”

“You do?” Larry panted.

“Yes. And I need you to start right away.”

“Well, actually...” Larry racked his brain. He’d read the book four fucking times! What was that line he was supposed to say? “I’m a little tied up right now. Where’s that scheduling book?”

“Don’t bullshit me, Gibsom. You’ve been sitting on your ass for two and a half months. I’ve been watching you. You have no experience, no

## FAST FOOD DETECTIVE

clients, and you're out of money. We need to meet tonight. Can you be ready in ten minutes?"

"Can I be ready in ten minutes?" What the hell did the book say *now*?  
"Yes! Yes, I'll be ready!"

"Be out front."

There was a click.

Larry lay on the floor holding the phone in his hand, staring into the darkness.

*"Please hang up and try your call again. This is a recording. If you need assistance, dial your operator. Please hang up and try your call again. This is a recording."*

"This is it," he whispered.

Then he was up.

Lights on! Crumbs off his shirt! Fresh deodorant—both sides—shave, a squeeze of toothpaste on his tongue, shoulder holster, gun, sport coat, overcoat, affirmations card.

He hit the lights and ran out the door.

\* \* \*

Outside, the air was cool. Rain fell in sheets across Four Mile Run. Car tires hissed on the wet pavement. Larry leaned against a pillar and turned his collar to the wind. Down the wall, a bum sprawled on the ground and sucked the last few drops from a bottle of Red Rooster. Two empty bottles lay at his feet.

"They're landing!" the bum screamed, "Someone help me!"

Larry glanced at his watch. What if the guy didn't show? What if he was a crank? He hadn't gotten a name. He looked at the bum—passed out. Who would call a business at ten at night, anyway? And what if the guy turned out to be a weirdo? Larry touched the butt of his gun.

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A siren wailed in the darkness. The pavement glistened like a river of oil. Larry thought of Rick and Inspector Renault, walking through the fog of Casablanca.

Car lights hit his face. Was this the guy? No. A limo; probably a lost Richie looking for the freeway.

The limousine stopped and the driver's door opened. The arms and shoulders of a dark-skinned giant strained under a black dinner jacket. The man stepped out. His hair was short, and his face held a close beard. He walked to the middle of the car and opened a door.

“We are ready, Mr. Gibsom.”

## CHAPTER 4

His client!!!! Okay, no problem. Just stay cool, look professional. Larry straightened, spread his feet, and said, “Yeck, uma Glarry Iibsom.”

Damn! He coughed into his hand, straightened again, and smiled.

“Yes, right. Larry Gibbsom. Private Investigator here.”

“My employer is waiting.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll just get in the back here.” Larry walked to the limousine, stepped in a puddle up to his socks, and climbed in onto a sofa against the far wall. The door closed behind him.

He was in! He fell against the cushions and blew air through his lips. And what a car! The sofa conformed to his body exquisitely and ran the entire length of one side and across the back. A gold cell phone in a scallop of olive wood lay recessed into a cushion to his left. His feet rested on a luxuriously thick carpet, cream-colored except for a few muddy footprints.

Water fell from golden spouts on either side of the chauffeur’s window, cascading down rainbow-colored stones to a pool where iridescent fish meandered beneath purple lilies. Small palm trees on either side of the pool swayed as his chauffeur dropped into the driver’s seat.

Larry watched a miniature locomotive pull a string of colored boxcars along a track near the ceiling. Puffing smoke, its headlight ablaze, it crossed a tiny stone trestle, whistled, and disappeared into a tunnel in the chauffeur’s wall.

The limousine pulled out.

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“They’ll hear about this!” the bum screamed. “You twisted solar scum! You’ll never get meeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Larry watched the bum disappear, waving his bottle of Red Rooster at the sky.

He noted the driver’s route as they headed northwest along Four Mile Run, then onto George Mason Drive, heading toward Ballston. But just before Ballston, they veered onto a side road.

Larry slid up to the chauffeur’s window and cleared his throat. He could see huge gloved hands on the steering wheel. “Excuse me. Where are we going?”

“To see the man who hired you,” the driver said. A finger touched a button on the dashboard, and an obsidian pane of glass rose between them.

The streetlights became less frequent. It was difficult to see through the tinted windows. Larry lowered one and got a face-full of rain.

They turned onto a boulevard bordered by a park. The park ended. They turned again. Then again. A mile or two later the car slowed and turned one more time. Larry saw bars roll away in front of them; then a kiosk appeared, full of blue monitors and blinking lights. A man in a uniform waved them through.

They stopped at a red light. Numbers on a sign counted down to zero, then flashed the word ‘CLEARED.’ The light turned green, and they were off again.

The road wound through a wood, turning back on itself so tightly their headlights were seldom on the pavement. The rain stopped. Fingers of mist hung in the trees. The road leveled, and the forest gave way to a large green, lit up like daylight. In front of them, water shot from a fountain and fell onto muscular, Greek-looking gods astride rearing steeds, wielding swords at fishlike creatures beneath them.

A few feet away, bare-chested maidens lounged on islands of stone flowers combing their marble hair. To the left, a lawn ran into the darkness, and to the right stood a huge manor house.

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They stopped. A man in a red blazer opened the limousine door. Behind him, steps cascaded down from the manor house like a hundred marble waterfalls. Above the steps, columns rose to meet a balcony, and above that, rows of copper-covered gables.

“This way, Mr. Gibsom,” a voice called from the top of the stairs.

Larry was breathing hard by the time he arrived.

“Good evening, Sir,” the man said, pushing back an enormous door. “So good to see you, Mr. Gibsom. May I take your coat? I trust you had a pleasant ride.”

“Nice car,” Larry wheezed.

Inside, another man stood at crisp attention.

“Mr. Hampton here will show you to the library.”

Where the first man was a tall, stately figure, the second man was small and thin, with a thin gray mustache. Hampton smiled warmly, turned immediately, and crossed a large foyer. Grand hallways fell away on either side as Larry and his guide made their way amid echoing footsteps deep into the building.

Large paintings covered the walls wherever they went, mostly of people just standing around or sitting—illustrious-looking people with blue veins and skim milk complexions, in buckled shoes and white socks.

After an almost endless march past an almost endless number of marble statues of naked people, Hampton stopped at a tall wooden door. The old man gave it a shove, and Larry found himself looking into an extensive library.

The room’s walls were covered from floor to ceiling with rows of books; this interrupted occasionally by a painting or a statue. Here and there was a leather couch and an end table with a reading lamp. At the far end of the hall, a desk faced the center of the room, and in front of that was a single red chair.

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“Please have a seat,” Hampton said, gesturing toward the chair. With that he took his leave, pulling the door closed behind him with a report that echoed and reechoed throughout the room.

Larry played with the keys in his pocket and looked around the room. The bookcases didn’t go all the way to the ceiling as he’d first thought, but stopped at windows three or four feet below. These would provide light during the daytime. Behind the desk at the far end of the room was a door, and above that, rows of animal trophies.

He walked across the room, looked at a couple of books, then stopped by a statue. “The Goddess Athena,” a plaque read. On the opposite side of the room stood “Zeus,” of similar style and proportion. The statues appeared to have been done by the same sculptor; both had no arms and were stark naked.

He walked to the desk and stood, contemplating the wealth that must lie behind so much finery. An assortment of gold pens, a leather address book with gold lettering, a gold clock, and a gold lamp lay on the desk.

“Wow! I guess I’ve hit the big time,” he whispered.

After some time, his feet began to hurt. He sat down in the red chair. He couldn’t remember when he’d arrived, but there had been more than ample time to summon whoever was supposed to meet him. He picked at some mud on his shoes. The tick of his watch began to annoy him, and he pulled his sleeve to cover it. He crossed his legs, uncrossed them, then dropped some lint from his pants and watched it hit the floor.

“I wish this guy would hurry up,” he whispered.

There was a loud *crack!*

The door behind the desk flew open, smashing into the bookshelf next to it. Larry looked up, his eyes riveted on the barrel of the gun in front of him. There was a blinding flash and the pounding thump of gunfire. Larry dove for the floor, grabbed his forty-five, and pressed his back against the desk. Spent casings bounced on the floor around him like pieces of brass

## FAST FOOD DETECTIVE

popcorn. Books flew from their shelves, and fragments of wood and pieces of paper exploded into the air.

With his back to the desk, his gun drawn, and his heart pounding in his ears, Larry realized something peculiarly odd. Whoever was doing the shooting wasn't shooting at him. He was firing randomly around the room.

Then, as abruptly as it started, the shooting stopped. Across the room, a book fell to the floor with a thud. Books, parts of books, and wood chips littered the room.

"Nicole," a man's voice yelled. "Yvonne, Yvette, Charlotte, Suzette! On the double! Let's move it!"

Instantly, five young women dressed in short, ruffled blue dresses and white aprons appeared at the far end of the room.

"Clean up this mess!" the man yelled. "On the double!"

"Yes, Sir!" the girls sang out. Running to a cabinet, one produced a bottle of wood glue and a handful of clamps. Another grabbed a dustpan and broom and another a handful of garbage bags. The girls threw themselves into their work, tossing pieces of books into bags, dusting away splinters, and gluing shards of wood back onto the shelves.

Larry looked around the end of the desk. In the middle of a haze of blue smoke, a large man in camouflage pants and a black tank top stood next to the desk, holding a machine gun. Bandoleers of bullets crisscrossed his chest, and a string of cartridges dangled from his gun. His hair was short and gray, flat on top, and his mouth clenched an unlit cigar. He threw the gun on the table, unclipped his bandoleers, and dropped them to the floor.

Larry got up and dusted himself off, his hands shaking a bit more than he would have liked.

"Never underestimate the value of a good entrance, Mr. Gibsom," the man said, seating himself. "Now, let's get down to business."



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“Yes. Ready,” Larry said, wiping the sweat from his chin and the cartridges from his chair.

The man leaned forward and pulled the cigar from his mouth. “Gibsom, do you know who I am?”

Larry looked across the table. The man’s face didn’t ring a bell. “No, Sir, I don’t,” he said.

“I’m J. Paul Getit, the richest man in the world.”

“Getit?”

“*You got it!*” the man said, jamming the cigar back into his mouth. “Call me J.P.” He looked at Larry hard, then leaned back. “You’d think I’d be the happiest man in the world, having all this money, wouldn’t you, Gibsom? A huge estate, servants, maids, power, admiration.”

Larry looked around the room; at the chandeliers, the fluted ceilings, the walls of books, the paintings, and statues. “Yeah,” he smiled, “I certainly would.”

“Well, I’m not!” J.P. snapped, flinging his cigar through the air and hitting Athena on the breast. The girls returned their things to the cabinet and retreated through the door.

“Closed!” J.P. yelled, then looked back at Larry. “Do you want to know why I’m not happy, Gibsom?”

J.P. opened a drawer and lifted a photograph. He looked at it for a long time, then threw it on the table. “Her,” he said.

The picture was of a striking woman in her early fifties with a kind face and a beautiful smile.

“My wife,” he said. Then, almost in a whisper, “Sarah Payne Getit.” He picked up the picture, gave it one last look, and tossed it in the drawer. “She left me. Right after joining the N.O.O.W.” His eyes narrowed, and his face grimaced. “Do you know what N.O.O.W. is, Mr. Gibsom?”

“Isn’t it some kind of women’s group?” Larry said.

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“The National Organization of Organized Women,” J.P. said through his teeth. “I’ve been through eight wives, Gibsom. Eight! And they all left me, and all for stupid reasons. But Sarah, she was the best.” His eyes lost their harshness. “We had a perfect marriage. Everything was wonderful. She did everything I said when I said it. When I wanted something, she got it for me. When I was sick, she looked after me like a mother. She was the perfect wife, Gibsom. Perfect. Then she left.” His jaw tightened.

“I’m sorry,” Larry said. “Maybe she just needed to...” He searched for the right word. “...you know, explore her feelings, get in touch with....”

“Commie pinko shit, Gibsom!” J.P. yelled. “She did it!”

J.P. spun around and pointed to the wall behind him, at a woman’s picture hanging where there should have been an animal trophy. The “she” he was referring to was an attractive woman in her mid-thirties, blonde-brown hair pulled back in a tight bun, a slightly taut smile on her lips. To either side of her hung giant moose heads with large, motionless eyes and lacquered tongues.

“Venus Van Damme! The president and CEO of N.O.O.W.! Sarah joined that stupid-ass organization, and suddenly, nothing was right. Nothing about the way we lived was right! She wanted more ‘freedom,’ she wanted more of this; she wanted more of that. She wouldn’t do what I wanted anymore. Nothing I could do was good enough. I wasn’t in touch with my inner child. Damn!” he roared, slamming his fist down on the table and sending spent casings into the air. “I was a male chauvinist pig!” he said, pounding his chest. “Me!”

“The next thing I knew, she was leaving.” He folded his hands on the desk in front of him. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to endure, Gibsom. I became bitter. I started my own organization. M.A.C.C.C.C.H.O.—the Men Against Contradictory, Combative, Criticizing, and Confused Housewives Organization. We’re a small but dedicated group of men sworn to bring down those damned libbers. Those damned libbers who don’t know their place, who go around wrecking it for the rest of us. Professional libbers who undermine the very structure of

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society and steal men's wives off to stuff envelopes and talk about equality. The hell with equality! If a woman can do everything a man can do, what's the use of a man, anyway?" He leaned back. "On a clear day, I can see their headquarters from my bedroom." He shook his head. "That's hard. Do you know what it was before it was their headquarters, Gibsom?"

"No, Sir."

"It was the Balls-R-Us Athletic Support Company. Jockstraps, Gibsom! Ironical, isn't it? They converted it; did a lot of construction, too. Who knows why? It was one hell of a rock-solid building. It probably wasn't pretty enough for them, and they needed to get all the 'man vibes' out. Only women workers were allowed on the job. Men would have been too crude. When I look at it," J.P. said, slapping his desk with his pen, "all I can think of is Sarah. It's torture for me."

"I'm sorry," Larry said.

"She's the one who's responsible for this!" he yelled, turning to the picture on the wall. "Her! That feeling-spewing, libbing, slime-ball. If it weren't for her, my Sarah would be here right now."

He looked at Larry. The muscles in his cheeks stood out like walnuts. "I may be bitter, and my life may be ruined, but I want hers ruined, too," he said, pointing at the picture. "Anything you can get on her," he hissed. The pen in his hand snapped. "I want her destroyed. I want her head right up there on the wall, right there with the rest of them." He leaned toward Larry. "You want the assignment, boy?"

Larry coughed. "Excuse me, Mr. Getit, but I don't think I could..." He looked at the trophies, "...you know, kill someone."

"I don't mean kill her! That's just a metaphor, man! I mean, take her down. Destroy her. Look into her history and find the dirt. Bring it out and make it public. Everyone has some kind of dirt. Find it. Embarrass her. Disgrace her. Discredit her. Make her life miserable. Make her pay for what she did to me."

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J.P. folded his arms across his chest. "My wedding anniversary is two months from tomorrow, Gibsom. That's how much time you've got. I'm not going through another anniversary without knowing she's hurting, too. It may not be the nicest first assignment for a new private eye, but it's what I've got." He leaned across the table. "So, what's the verdict?"

Larry tapped the arm of his chair. "Uh, let me think about this until tomorrow if you don't mind, J.P. I need to, uh, see how I feel about an assignment like this."

"Feel? Are you a woman, Gibsom? For Christ's sake, use your head! Here's the first case for a P.I. who's never had a job in his life other than pounding patties in some doggie diner."

J.P. chewed his lip, leaned back, and looked hard at Larry. "Okay, I'll be honest with you, Gibsom. Let's put our cards on the table. I'm famous, and I'm rich, which makes me a target for certain unscrupulous types. For that reason, I'm not going through the normal channels on this thing. You're a nobody, and you've got no credibility. I could deny anything you say or do as easily as I could spit. That's your strong point. My reluctance to have this out in the open, and your lack of credibility, provide you with a unique opportunity." He looked at Larry and ran his thumb back and forth across his chin. "And I'm willing to pay you five million dollars to do it. Plus expenses."

Larry coughed and cleared his throat. "Five million dollars?" he squeaked.

"That's right, Gibsom. Five million. You want the assignment or not?"

"Well, J.P., like you said, this is a unique opportunity."

J.P. reached across the table. "We got a deal?"

Larry smiled and grabbed J.P.'s hand. "Yeah, J.P., we got a deal."

Off to one side, in a space between bookshelves, the head of Athena revolved silently on stone shoulders. An eyelid lowered to expose a small lens. The lens focused on Larry, buzzed, and the eyelid closed.

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J.P. leaned back in his chair and smiled. “Cigar, Gibbsom?”

The head rotated again. The eyelid dropped, and the lens pointed at J.P. There was another buzzing sound, and the statue was still.