

CAPITOL PUNISHMENT

AN ANDY HAYES MYSTERY

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“YOU EXPECTING SOMEONE?” ANNE SAID, looking up from the table at the sound of the doorbell. Memorial Day, almost three weeks earlier.

“Not if they know what’s good for them,” I said.

I let the spoon I was holding sink into the bowl of pancake batter on the counter and stumped down the hall. To say it was rare to have a morning together with my two sons, my girlfriend, and my girlfriend’s daughter was the understatement of the year, and I wasn’t in the mood to miss a second of it.

I opened my front door and eyed the man standing before me.

“Yeah?”

“Well, heck, you’re not nearly as ugly in person,” he said, grinning.

“I gave at the office,” I said, and started to close the door in his face. He wouldn’t be the first person to track me down at home and attempt a debate over my two-decade-old college football career. I had no interest in entertaining the latest incarnation, especially so early on a holiday.

“Hang on, Woody,” he said. “I’m not stalking you. I just want to talk.”

"It's Andy. And why would I want to talk to you?"

"Fine, *Andy*. Let's start over. I'm a paying customer. I want to hire you."

"For what?"

"Personal protection," he said. He was about my height, maybe a few years older, a little heavy around the middle and in his jowls, but with a handsome, clean-shaven face and a relatively full head of trim, gray hair. He wore a blue button-down shirt, tan chinos, a navy sports coat, and penny loafers, which all seemed a bit natty for that time of day but which he also carried off well.

"Protection from what?"

"Someone's been following me."

"Who?"

"I knew, I wouldn't need to hire you." He handed me a card. **Lee Hershey, *Public Reporting Enterprise*.**

"That's you?" I said. He nodded. "So what is this?" I asked.

"My business. I'm a freelance reporter. Worked at a bunch of places and now I'm on my own, online. Future of journalism is digital, in case you hadn't noticed."

"I think I read that in the paper," I said. "You're being followed because you're a reporter?"

"As far as I can tell, given that I'm up to date on my alimony payments. Something we can bond over, if I'm not mistaken."

"And how would you know that?"

"Reporter," he said, grinning again.

I thought about the crowd in my kitchen and the pancakes I needed to make and the fact I don't like to be reminded of my two separate divorce proceedings at any time of the day or night.

"Listen," I said. "Is there some other occasion besides first thing on a holiday morning at my front door we could talk? Maybe you could call and make an appointment like a normal person?"

"Fair enough. I realize it's early and all that. But it happened again last night, and I know of your work, and I figured it might

just be faster this way. Plus I'm kind of used to knocking on doors." He pulled out his wallet and retrieved several twenty-dollar bills. "I can pay up front if you need. I'm not trying to blow smoke or anything."

I hesitated, eyeing the money. I'd spent most of the previous day taking pictures of an insurance company honcho walking into the northside condo of a woman not his wife. I'd gotten the money shot, but the fee for that bit of heartbreak would keep gas in my Honda Odyssey and kibble in Hopalong's bowl for a few weeks, max. I had to admit my prospects were otherwise thin at the moment.

"OK," I said. "Just speed it up a bit. You think this is something to do with your job?"

He was about to reply when Anne came up the hall. I introduced them, a little reluctantly, and Hershey shook her hand with a slight bow. It would have been hopelessly pretentious if I tried it, but, like his outfit, he somehow pulled it off.

"A pleasure to meet you," he said to Anne. "You teach science fiction, don't you? At Columbus State?"

"That's right. How did you know that?"

"Big sci-fi buff. I saw you gave a lecture recently on *The Day of the Triffid*. I love the book, though the movie's awesome too."

"They're both great in their own ways," she said, and to my amazement I noticed she was blushing.

"Isn't *The Sparrow* your favorite book?" Hershey continued. "Probably my second favorite, at least science fiction-wise. I went to a Jesuit high school, so I always sort of empathized with the main character. Father—?"

"Emilio Sandoz," she said.

"That's it. We should have coffee some time, when this is all over. Love to pick your brain."

"That sounds good," she said, with more enthusiasm than I cared for. "But what's your first?"

"Sorry?"

"You said *The Sparrow* was your second favorite."

“So I did. I’m a big Philip K. Dick guy. So I have to go with *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*”

“Love that book,” she said. “And if you like that, have you read—”

I cleared my throat. “I don’t mean to interrupt,” I said, which was not strictly true. “You were saying something about being followed?”

“Of course,” Hershey said. “Sorry to get carried away.”

“Who’s following you?” Anne said, with concern in her voice. Hershey repeated what he had told me.

“And you have no idea who it could be?” I said.

From behind us came what sounded like the beginnings of an argument at the breakfast table. “Excuse me,” Anne said. “I have to see to the troops. It was nice meeting you. We’ll have to have that coffee.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Hershey said, doing that bow thing again.

“So,” I said, once Anne was gone, trying not to dwell on the way Hershey’s eyes followed her progress down the hall.

“OK,” he said. “Ever heard of Triple F?” I shook my head.

“It stands for Fair Funding Focus, otherwise known as Governor Hubbard’s school-funding plan.”

I thought about this. “The acronym is all F’s?”

“Leave it to the Democrats. After they realized their mistake, they tried changing the name to ‘A Better Collaboration,’—ABC, get it?” he said. “But it was way too late. Serves them right, in my opinion.”

“I guess. So what about it?”

“It’s the biggest story in the state at the moment. And one I’ve been kicking ass on, pardon my French.”

“It’s big because—?”

“Ohio’s school-funding system has been ruled unconstitutional so many times it’s practically got ‘Return to Sender’ stamped on the first page. Hubbard thinks he’s finally got the numbers right. Enough to appease the state Supreme Court,

anyway. Get it declared fit for duty once and for all. That alone would be huge.”

“And someone’s following you because of this?”

“I’m getting there. The thing is, enacting Triple F into law has another aspect to it.”

“Namely?”

“The eensy-weensy, itsy-bitsy side benefit of providing the feather in Hubbard’s cap to win over Senator Rodriguez.”

“JoAnn Rodriguez? The presidential candidate?”

“One and the same.”

“What’s she got to do with any of this?”

Hershey winked at me. “You know how, in high school, the prettiest girl, by amazing coincidence, always goes to prom with the quarterback?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“I bet. So imagine Rodriguez as our cheerleader captain. The hunk she really wants on her arm at prom—her choice for veep, in case I’ve lost you—is our very own Thomas Huntington Hubbard. They’d make such a cute couple—conservative Democrat from California and a moderate midwestern governor. Rodriguez brings the Latinos and women, Hubbard delivers the unions. Voila!”

“OK, match made in heaven. I get it.”

“Hubbard’s even got a best-selling book, which no doubt you’ve read. I know Rodriguez’s people have, cover to cover.”

“I think my Kindle shorted out that week.”

“*Core Convictions*,” Hershey said. “Biographies of great American populist politicians. Comes with a nice long personal essay that puts him square in that tradition just in case the allusion to his own career escaped you after seven hundred pages.”

“So you’ve read it?”

“Every word, Woody, every word. Thomas Hubbard, literary lion, and don’t you forget it.”

“My nightstand awaits.”

“It’s actually better than you’d imagine. But there’s only one problem with Hubbard.”

“Which is?”

“Something that you of all people can identify with. He may be governor of the most crucial swing state in the country, with a knockout first lady wife and two adorable kids, not to mention *Core Convictions*, but he needs an extra something before Rodriguez extends the invitation.”

“Like what?”

“A win, Woody. A *big* win. We’re not talking Big Ten championship crapola. Sugar Bowl, minimum.”

I considered this. “Triple F,” I said.

“Bingo. Hubbard gets his school-funding law passed, he takes Rodriguez to prom, otherwise known as Rodriguez-Hubbard 2016.”

“And if Triple F fails?”

“If Hubbard can’t deliver the bill, the governor of Pennsylvania is looking like a mighty fine consolation prize.”

“And that’s why you think you’re being followed? Because of the politics involved?”

“The stakes are pretty high. Objectively speaking, I think some of my stories have annoyed people with a powerful interest in seeing the education bill passed.”

“And they’re trying to stop you? Or what?”

“Not really sure. Though for starters, I’d guess they’re trying to find out who my sources are.”

“And who are they?”

“People whose identities I prefer not to divulge for now.”

“So I just avert my eyes and look the other way when you’re in the parking garage talking to Deep Throat?”

“Don’t worry about that part of it,” he said. “Just hang with me when I need you. They’ll get the message, whoever they are.”

“And you really have no idea who it might be?”

He shrugged. “Maybe it’s Hubbard’s folks. Maybe it’s Rodriguez’s camp. Maybe President Ryan’s people are coming down from Michigan to make sure I’m not being followed by Rodriguez’s people. Maybe it’s nutso Tea Party types who want us to go back to slide rules and corporal punishment. I don’t know. But I care to find out. That’s why I came to you.”

“Are you worried, or just curious?”

He hesitated. “Normally, I’d say, you know, fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke. I mean, it’s a free country, First Amendment, Fourth Estate, and all that.”

“But?”

“But it’s a bit of a scary world right now. A *Charlie Hebdo* world, if you know what I mean.”

“That sounds a lot more serious than someone trying to bust your sources.”

“For the record, I don’t think guys with black masks and daggers are out to behead me. It just seems like an overabundance of caution is the way to go.”

“Have you talked to the police?”

He shook his head.

“Why not?”

“I report it, it becomes a public record, someone writes about it. I report news. I’ve no interest in being the news. So what do you say?”

“How long are we talking?”

“Couple of weeks, tops. They need to pass the bill soon, ostensibly to hit the next budget cycle July 1, but also because Rodriguez is itching to make a choice. Hubbard’s on the lawmakers’ backs trying to get this done.”

“And what do you want me to do, exactly?”

“Tag along on a couple of assignments, act as my eyes and ears if I pick up a tail, provide a little muscle if things get rough.”

“Muscle’s all you’re going to get, since I don’t carry a gun.”

“That’s good, since firearms give me a rash. We have a deal?”

Despite a couple of rough edges I’d picked up on, and despite the way Anne had uncharacteristically swooned for the guy, I agreed that we did. I didn’t really have a choice, as my bank account could attest. Hershey handed me several of the twenties as a down payment, and I got his e-mail to send him a contract.

“So what’s the first job?”

“You know the Clarmont?”

“The steakhouse, on South High?”