

CHAPTER 3

Brian Rouff

“Oh, this is sure stirring up some ghosts for me.” – Robbie Robertson

Fourteen thousand dollars. *Waaay* too much money for a job like this. Or what the job was supposed to be when Brady signed on.

How did Samuels decide on that particular figure anyway? Didn't he believe in rounding to the next highest number? Maybe he found the dough lodged between the cushions of his Italian leather sofa.

Nah, a guy like Samuels was careful, everything planned to the nth degree. He knew exactly what he was paying for, what it was worth to him. The money was for product already received. But, more importantly, for product expected. What that might be, Brady could only guess. At the moment, all he knew was that Samuels possessed the list and he didn't. His personal ace in the hole, gone missing in less than an hour. Impressive, even by Brady's standards.

One thing for sure: The money came with strings attached. A boatload of them. Samuels would want to make damn certain he got a good return on investment. Bigwigs like Samuels and his MBA lapdog, Kevin, didn't believe in loss leaders. Like the corporate philosophy that had sucked the life out of the casino business, every department had to show a profit. The way things stacked up, Brady knew the fourteen grand wouldn't be nearly enough. That's what happens when you get into bed with a Samuels. Who was it that said, “You lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas?” Unconsciously, Brady scratched his forehead.

A smart man would have taken the money, holed up in a 4-star hotel on a tropical beach somewhere, rented a girlfriend for the week. A smart man would have options. Brady just continued to push the car south toward Laughlin. Outside, the scenery rushed past in a mind-numbing blur of desert sameness. Shrub, rock, hill. Shrub, rock, hill. Like bad animation come to life.

These thoughts and a hundred others pinballed around Brady's brain, occasionally lighting up a random synapse but more often dropping into a black hole. Samuels might be the least of his worries, at that. Gravel Voice on the other end of the phone said something about not seeing anyone alive again. Pretty open-ended, that kind of threat. Who, exactly? Axel? No sweat off Brady's balls. The biker knew what he was getting into. Tommy? Wouldn't recognize the man if he was sitting next to him in the passenger's seat. Lil? Okay, that might be a problem.

Too many loose ends. Brady hated them. His life might be in the crapper but at least it was a tidy crapper. Brady remembered a sign hanging in his old Valley High School wood shop. "When in doubt, follow directions." He didn't understand it then; understood it now. He could do that for awhile. Until something better came along.

Orange construction barrels narrowed the blacktop to one lane. Brady came up on a big fifth-wheel doing 45, forcing him to make a quick decision: slow down or pass. Inching into the oncoming lane, he stomped on the pedal. Instead of the burst of speed he needed, the engine serenaded him with a metallic *ping, ping, ping*, a symphony of cheap gas and neglect. Brady backed off the pedal, resolved to bide his time behind the rig, hoping it would eventually pull off to the side. A metaphor for his life, ceding control to others.

The Ford had been a lemon from the moment he drove it off the lot on East Sahara. Nine years ago, back when it was still important to buy American. A block away from the dealership, he hit a pothole and the glove box flew open. He should have flipped a U-ey and returned the piece of shit then and there. He should have done a lot of things.

Brady had never been a patient man, but he was learning. He knew that in front of the RV was another, longer RV. And another. And another. A caravan of old-timers drawn to Laughlin's \$39/night package deals like lemmings to a cliff. He took a deep breath and settled back into his seat. It was going to be a long 90 miles; a long time to be inside his own head.

Christ, his head pounded worse than ever, the throbbing eye pain migrating to his temples and down his jaw. Some sort of warning sign, he remembered reading long ago. Heart attack? Stroke? Brady hadn't been to a doctor in two decades, the last visit for a flu shot. It was the only time he ever got sick. He reached up and massaged his jaw. He'd have to stop in Searchlight to take a leak and pick up some aspirin and gum. That's all that town was good for.

Brady switched on the radio, recognized Sammy Hagar in mid-yelp. "I Can't Drive 55." Appropriate. Sometimes, he felt as if the radio spoke directly to him. The thoughts of a madman, to be sure. He kept it to himself. Brady shook his head as if to clear away the notion. He and Hagar were both too old for this shit. Time for a follow-up: "I Can't *Be* 55."

Searchlight was known for two things: the birthplace of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. And, quite possibly, the worst speed trap in the state. Speed limits dropped precipitously from 65 to 45 to 35 to 25 in less than a quarter mile. A flashing sign

warned, “Speed Limit Strictly Enforced.” No kidding. Brady figured most of the city’s revenue came directly from speeders whose reflexes didn’t kick in fast enough. Nevada Highway Patrol cruisers, like big, blue cheetahs, lay in wait to cut the next victim from the traffic herd.

NHP officers were the second-class citizens of Nevada law enforcement and they knew it. On average, they made about \$19,000 a year less than their Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department counterparts. All of them gave you attitude, swaggering around and patting their gun butts while calling you “Sir” with mocking politeness.

Back when Brady came *this close* to becoming a cop himself, back when he was young and idealistic and thought he could make a difference, the joke was, “What do NHP and Metro officers have in common? They both applied for Metro.”

A week away from graduation, a pit stop at the old Silver Saddle Saloon on East Charleston ended that idea forever, a couple of good old boys taking exception to Brady’s tan training uniform.

“What are you supposed to be, some kind of Eagle Scout?” the bigger one asked, so far up in Brady’s grill he could smell the decayed teeth and dollar beer. “Where’s your merit badge, sonny?”

The smaller one chimed in, “Looks more like a Brownie, don’t he, Lou?”

Brady’s instincts were good back then, sharp. He knew, *knew*, that the only way out of that bar was through these morons. When he wrapped his pool cue across the big guy’s mouth, blood gushed like water from a New Orleans levee. Before the smaller guy could react, Brady jabbed him in the eye with the tip of his cue, leaving a swath of blue

chalk across his cheek. In the three seconds it took Brady to hit the door, he couldn't resist yelling, "I'm not a fucking Scout, I'm a police officer!"

"You're a hothead," Brady's Captain explained later as he pushed the mandatory resignation papers across his desk. "We don't need your type on the Force."

Funny because, as far as Brady could tell, the Force was full of his type. Ironically, the bar fight didn't cost Brady his job. Wearing his uni off-duty and announcing that he was a cop did. A firing offense, had he read the fine print. The first of many dreams, shattered.

That was 1985, the year Brady drifted down to Laughlin for the first time, hot on the trail of a minimum wage security guard gig at the Riverside Resort. After getting bounced from the Academy and the ensuing breakup with Jennifer, his high school sweetheart, he heeded the siren call of the late night commercials for Holiday Shores, a bedroom community just across the Colorado River from Laughlin. Don Adams (not *the* Don Adams of "Get Smart" fame but a fat, balding pitchman), touted the cheap riverfront lots, close to "schools, churches, shopping, recreation."

Also close to doublewides, bait and tackle shops, and meth labs. Brady didn't care. He fit right into this makeshift town of losers running away from their fucked up lives. He made the move on an August day with the mercury topping out at 121, the sweat pouring off him in torrents, making little explosions in the dust. He moved his meager belongings into a 400-square foot efficiency unit on Ramar Road, the kind with the living room and bedroom separated by a half-wall with a swivel TV bolted to the top. The refrigerator was just big enough for a couple of Hungry Man dinners and a sixer of Bud.

He met Shari, his future ex-wife, at the piano bar of the tiny Regency casino, so small it was like hanging out in someone's living room, listening to old bluesman Jimmy Beasley paying tribute to even older bluesmen like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf. Afterwards, he took her to the Regency's restaurant for the \$2.95 prime rib special, then took her home to bed.

They shared a love for the blues, the smell of the river, and early morning sex. Brady thought it would be enough. They got married three months later at American Legion Post 87 with a Cold Duck and Cheese Whiz reception for anyone hanging around the bar. An overnight honeymoon in Havasu at a motel with a number in the name sealed the deal.

A week later, they were already bickering about his gambling, her drinking. Then *his* drinking. Brady stuck it out three more years, just to convince himself he gave it his best shot. When he found that he enjoyed flushing the toilet while she showered just to hear her scream, he knew it was time to get the hell out.

Brady never did buy that riverfront lot. Too bad. It would have been worth almost \$200,000 today. Enough to retire down in Baja like his friend George. Instead, he invested his money at the Riverside craps tables, management being only too happy to recoup their wages before Brady could even exit the building.

By 1987, the gravitational pull of Las Vegas proved too strong and sucked Brady back into its orbit, not an unusual occurrence. Ex-pats often returned, although they could rarely explain why. He bounced around from job to job, woman to woman. Landed at Gaming Control for awhile. Never missed Laughlin, never had reason to go back. Until now.

Thirty miles after Searchlight, Brady turned left onto 163 and began the 25-mile descent into that massive bowl of rock, the heat already radiating upward in shimmering waves. Cotton candy clouds hung low on the horizon, picking up moisture from the river. Turning gray, like Brady's mood. He steered the old Ford past the Mojave Generating Station where his neighbor, Pedro, had melted in a boiler explosion years before. Past Davis Dam, a quick right onto Casino Drive, also known as the Laughlin Strip, a low-rent Vegas wannabe, its tall, white towers standing guard on both sides of the roadway.

He continued past a mobile home park, casino lots crammed with enough motorcycles to put a Harley dealership to shame, past familiar names like the Tropicana and Golden Nugget and Flamingo, looking nothing like their more famous Vegas brethren, their marquees trumpeting George Thorogood, Vince Gill and Davey Jones, to target Laughlin's triple demographic of bikers, rednecks and old folks. Past the miniature Regency Casino, faded and peeling, now dwarfed by high-rises. He felt a kinship with the place. Two dinosaurs, somehow still standing. It was the only thing he recognized, other than the river itself.

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“People say I'm arrogant. Self-centered. A sociopath, even....”

Jeremy “Germy” Boozer, a fat, greasy coil of black hair and nervous energy, prowled the small stage of Sammy's Comedy by the Shore, a 250-seat club tucked away in the ass-end of the island-themed River Palms Casino.

“I’m here to tell you, I’ve seen the error of my ways. This is the first time I’ve said this in public.” Long pause. “I have embraced Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.”

A low murmur from the sparse 2-for-1 crowd taking in the afternoon show as a respite from the heat and gambling. Not exactly the sort of material you’d expect in a joint like this, Brady thought as he nursed a Diet Coke and lemon from the anonymity of his table near the rear exit.

“I know now that Jesus Christ died for my sins.” Another pause. “But *only* for my sins. The rest of you dipshits are on your own.”

From somewhere near the stage, a beer bottle whizzed past Boozer’s head, splattering against a fake palm tree. A dumpy middle-aged couple wearing identical yellow “Colorado River Rat” T-shirts stood up and waddled toward the door, muttering something about “sacrilege.” A whisky-soaked voice screamed, “You’re going to hell, motherfucker!” As the man behind the voice rushed the stage, two security guards wrestled him to the floor.

“Thank you!” Boozer yelled in response. “You’ve been a great audience. I’ll be here ‘til Tuesday.”

Not bloody likely, Brady thought. But he knew Boozer had the dirt on everybody. It was how he kept his gigs. Precisely the reason why Brady figured this was as good a place as any to start his investigation. Brady may have been the only human on earth who actually liked the fat fuck. He was just the kind of asshole he usually got along with.

The comic bounded from the stage and made his way through the maze of tables and chairs, stopping briefly to down a half-empty glass of beer abandoned by one of the previous patrons, wiping his mouth with the back of his hairy hand.

“Germy, over here!” Brady shouted at the big man. Boozer flinched, an automatic response, before focusing his eyes on Brady.

“Danny boy!” Boozer said as the two men shook hands warmly. “What’s it been, three, four years?”

“More like five,” Brady said. “You’re looking well. Other than that shiner.”

Indeed, Boozer did look well. He was one of those guys who hit the wall early and stayed there. It coincided with Brady’s theory that ugly people age better. Not giving a shit about anything helped, too.

“Can I buy you a beer?”

“Stupid question,” Boozer grinned. “Make it two.”

“I see you haven’t changed the act much,” Brady commented as the server laid down their drinks.

“I like to elicit an emotional response. You know that.”

“That’s what you call it now? Pissing people off?”

“It’s what I do best. Performance art.” Boozer picked up his Miller Light and took a giant swig. “Like Kaufman. Kinison. All the way back to Kovacs. You know what those guys had in common?”

““Last names started with ‘K’?”

Boozer shook his head slowly. “All dead. Car crash. Lung cancer. Car crash. Kinison bought it on Highway 95, just outside Needles. Can you believe it? Genius like that dies in fucking Needles. Now there’s a joke for you.”

“The way of the world,” Brady said.

“Amen, brother. On a happier note, you should have been here last night. Audience was mainly African-American. Some kind of Southern Baptist convention. So I trotted out the Stevie Wonder material. You remember that, right?”

Brady remembered how that material almost got Boozer killed. “You didn’t,” was all he could say.

“Yep. Asked if anyone had seen the Grammy’s. Why the hell do they always stick Stevie Wonder in the front row? What a waste of a good seat.”

“Don’t tell me, that’s how you got that black eye.”

“Couple guys jumped me in the parking lot. Security broke it up. Although I think they waited just a little too long, if you know what I mean.”

Brady knew. A lot of people wouldn’t mind watching Boozer get the snot beaten out of him.

“You’re a brave man, Gerny. Or stupid. I’m not sure which.” He raised his glass in mock salute.

Boozer gave a little bow. “I take both as a compliment.” Then, turning serious. “I know you didn’t come all this way just to shoot the shit. That’s some story you told me on the phone. What the hell have you gotten yourself into this time?”

Brady swirled the ice around in his glass, raised it to his lips, thought better of it. His stomach was doing back flips. Jesus, it was getting to where the only things he could

keep down were club soda and saltines. “That’s what I’m trying to find out. What’ve you heard on the street?”

“Not much. Rumors. Hearsay. Innuendo. Hey, not a bad title for my next comedy album.”

“Which would also be your *first* comedy album.” Without thinking, Brady sipped his Coke and winced. At least the dim light in here made his head feel a little better.

“But seriously, folks, a buddy of mine works the cage at the Aquarius, says he’s heard rumblings about some kind of money-laundering scheme, a crew from up your way.”

Brady leaned in. “Say how much?”

“Dunno. Three hundred, four hundred K. That neighborhood. A lot of dough for our little neck of the desert.”

“This buddy of yours got a name?”

“Yeah, but he won’t talk to you. Or anyone, for that matter. He’s skittish. There’s something else, too. Bogus twenties started showing up on the river last month. Treasure was down here for a few days, but they came up empty. Except for the funny money they confiscated from my tip jar.”

“Unbelievable,” Brady said. “Somebody left you a tip.”

Boozer let loose a booming guffaw. “You should write comedy. Come see me if the bottom falls out of the PI biz.”

“Too late.”

“So that’s that. Sorry I can’t be more helpful. Listen, I got comps for the buffet. Not bad if you stay away from the Salisbury steak. Buy you dinner for old times’ sake?”

“Then you’d only owe me ninety-nine more.”

He shrugged. “Gotta start somewhere.”

“Let me take a rain check. Got a few more things I need to do. You’ve been a big help.”

Boozer’s face lit up. “Really? Nobody ever said that to me before.”

Brady spent the rest of the day wandering around Laughlin, hoping to overhear a snippet of useful conversation, making himself just visible enough to attract the attention of Gravel Voice if that was part of the plan. From time to time, he’d sneak a peek to see if he was being followed. But if he had a tail, the guy knew what he was doing. At the pink-windowed but otherwise generic Aquarius Casino, he wasted a few quarters in the “Invaders from the Planet Moolah” slots, then bought into a low limit 7-card stud game. Amazing the things you could hear at a poker table. A hundred forty dollars later (and lighter), all he knew for sure was that the Davey Jones show blew and some old duffer’s wife picked up a nasty case of food poisoning at an Italian place across the river. Had it all been a waste of time? Brady was starting to think someone just wanted him out of the way for awhile. But why?

Late in the afternoon, he drove across the bridge into Bullhead and made a couple of passes through town, now practically unrecognizable, the mom-and-pops replaced by Wal-Marts and Lowe’s. True what they say, you can’t go home again. Assuming this was ever home in the first place. On his last go-around, he spied Valdo’s Mexican Restaurant, a solitary holdover from the past. Brady’s mood brightened. The chili Colorado was as good as he remembered.

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The angry flashing lights just before Searchlight caught Brady by surprise. He had been obeying the speed limit, as far as he could tell with the odometer disconnected. Knowing the drill, he dug through the glove box for proof of insurance and registration (still no list), rolled down his window and kept his hands in plain sight at ten and two on the steering wheel. A glimpse in the rear view mirror revealed three units. Odd. Maybe they were just bored, nothing much to do in this armpit town. Another glance showed the cruisers to be Metro Crown Vics, not NHP. As Brady pondered his predicament, a nonsense voice barked through the PA, “Driver, let me see your hands!”

Brady’s mouth went dry as he followed the order.

Then, “Driver, turn the vehicle off with your left hand!”

Then, “Driver, open the door from the outside with your left hand!”

Then, “Driver, step out of the car with your hands in the air!”

Bile and salsa burnt the back of his throat.

“Driver, walk backwards to the sound of my voice. Stop! Go down to your knees!”

Brady did as he was told.

The voice, much closer now. “On your stomach. Leave your arms flat out to your sides. Cross your legs at the ankles and bring your feet up to your buttocks.”

A pair of sandpaper paws trussed Brady like a rodeo calf. Lying in the gravel and dust, his shoulder blades already howling in protest, Brady raised his eyes just enough to

see an officer pop open his trunk. The dangling lifeless hand with the bright red nail polish and delicate Chinese tattoo looked all too familiar.

Lil.

