

Excerpt

CHAPTER 1

A feeling he cannot escape: Someone is watching. He has no visual confirmation but it's a sense, his gut telling him that he's not alone as he stands on the street outside the athletic club on the commercial district's west side. The bitter air of a February evening stings his sweaty body, the light wind shooting over the top of his long black coat and filling the space within his sweatshirt. His fellow players have left in their various directions, to high-priced condos along the city's lakefront or, in some cases, to student housing at whatever school they are attending. Not so for this young man. He will walk four blocks to the Austin Bus that will transport him to the city's south side, to his middle-class home.

He looks at his watch. It's early. Seven-forty. Open gym at the City Athletic Club-every Wednesday night, the basketball courts can be used free of charge-officially ends at eight o'clock and usually goes to eight-thirty, but tonight the game broke up abruptly after a minor fracas between players turned into a heated altercation, enough so that the gym supervisor sent everyone home. He wasn't a part of the fight. He wouldn't feel so comfortable shoving or throwing punches; it's a class thing, an issue of hierarchy. He's not one of them. He's not their age and he doesn't have their pedigree. They are college kids and grad students, mostly, who live in nice housing their daddies are paying for. He's a high-school kid with a good outside shot. He understands his place.

Not one of them. He's not sure who he is anymore.

The streets on the southwest side of the commercial district are empty. It has been dark since five, and most of the professional buildings in the district are to the east and north, so it is quiet as he walks toward the bus stop. Quiet is not good, not anymore. These days, he prefers noise and company to drown out the howling in his head.

He hears it, before he turns his head and sees it behind him, to the north. Squad cars are unmistakable, even from a distance. This particular police vehicle is headed south on Gentry, towards him. The car has just crossed Bonnard Street, which puts it less than a block away from him. The boy finds it difficult to walk with his head craned back, but he will do what he can to be nonchalant. There is no reason to panic. He doesn't know the officers' intentions. More than likely, it's a routine cruising. He's a white kid in a long coat and sweats, obviously leaving the City Athletic Club after a game of hoops. They might not think anything of him. Or they might stop him. They might even ask him what's in the gym bag he's carrying. But he doesn't know this, and he can't react

preemptively, because that would draw suspicion, could turn a non-event into something.

He hears the squad car stop, short of him. That seems odd, because there is nothing behind him that would draw their interest, no reason to stop. He doesn't know how to respond. He listens a moment, slowing his pace. He hears another car drive by, on Bonnard Street north of the officers. That car, headed east, sounds like it's moving quickly, which might normally catch the attention of police officers on a sleepy night. But he hears no response from the cops, which means something else-someone else-has their attention just now.

He tries to be casual as he turns and looks back at the squad car. The illumination of the street is decent, with the towering lights, and he sees two of them inside the car. The driver is a thick man, an Italian; his partner is smaller and Latino. The driver is speaking into a radio.

The boy turns and continues walking, stifling the instinct to run. His heart is drumming now. Perspiration on his forehead, when it's only ten degrees or so outside.

He hears car doors open, then close, one after the other.

He will not run, not yet. If nothing else, he will let them walk a sufficient distance from the vehicle, so that if the boy does run, it will take some time before they can return to the vehicle, if that is their choice.

He looks ahead of himself now. He is walking among high-rises, so there are few options. Buildings will be closed, or open only to the extent that he could approach a security guard. Wait-an alley, before the end of the block. His mind races as he taps his recall. The alley goes through to the next street. Yes. He can cross through the alley to the next street. Yes.

"Hey," the officer calls out. It's the driver, the bigger, older guy.

It has happened in a finger-snap. He has been identified and called out. Until now, it has been something of a game, the boy ignoring the police and the police not overtly approaching him. Now a line has been drawn.

The boy runs. He's in the perfect outfit, sweats and court shoes, though a sixteen-year-old probably doesn't need such advantages against a large man pushing forty. It takes him under thirty seconds to reach the alley. He hears the officer calling to his partner, something about the car, which means that the vehicle will be giving chase soon, as well.

He looks down the alley. Bags of garbage next to full dumpsters, an old fire escape running up one wall. A parked car on the next street over. Something in the shadows, maybe his eyes playing tricks. It only takes a second to make the decision. He turns and runs.

He hears the officer again, talking into the police radio as he gives chase.

“—in pursuit—”

He looks back for signs of the officer as he’s running. A mistake. He knows it before it happens. His foot catches something, a pipe, probably, and he falls. His gloves rip against the uneven pavement. Worse, his knee. His kneecap, even with the protection of the wool coat, has landed awkwardly onto the tattered concrete. He can’t diagnose the damage. It just hurts like hell.

He gathers his gym bag and manages to get to his feet. He is shrouded in the darkness of the alley, only indirect lighting from the street allowing him to see at all. He can’t run anymore, will probably need a moment before he can even put weight on his leg. He is not even midway between the two streets now. He couldn’t possibly escape.

“I just want to talk to you, kid. Relax.” The officer is standing at the threshold, casting an ominous figure with the light behind him. One hand on his police radio, the other extending forward. But not holding a gun. The officer shakes his head, even shows the palm of his open hand, as if to decelerate the threat. He is moving cautiously toward the boy, shuffling his feet as each one eyes the other.

“See those hands,” he calls out. “Lose the bag.”

The officer moves slowly, his gaze alternating between the boy and the gym bag. The boy shows the palm of his free hand as he moves backward. It actually hurts less to backpedal, but he still moves with a limp. His heartbeat drums, not from the physical exertion. He swallows hard and feels a hot, sickening taste in his mouth. He asks himself, in a flash of a moment, how it could have come to this.

The officer pulls his radio close to his mouth, speaks urgently but quietly. Then he moves closer to the boy, his index finger still extended. Do-not-move.

“I said drop the bag,” he says to the boy. “Let’s just talk a minute.”

The boy drops the bag.

The officer's right hand falls to his side, sweeping gently at his leather jacket, exposing for the first time the holster, his weapon. The boy waits another beat, looks into the eyes of the police officer.

"I haven't said anything," the boy says. "I won't. I swear."

The officer looks at him. Then he brings his radio close to his mouth. He mumbles something into the radio that the boy can't make out.

"I repeat," the officer says in a louder voice. "Suspect is armed."

Copyright © 2022 David Ellis