

CHAPTER ONE

The old bus wheezed to a shuddering halt, wallowing back and forth on springs that had thrown in the towel long ago. The driver glanced up in the mirror at his lone passenger.

“This good enough?”

Joe Tree met and held the man’s gaze, letting the challenge linger in a way he hadn’t dared for more than twelve years. This guy, Vernon Something or Something Vernon, had been a pain in the ass the entire trip. But since Vernon was just doing a favor for Easley—the guard Joe had blackmailed into arranging this free two-hundred-mile ride—Joe gave the attitude a pass.

He stood and swung his duffel over his shoulder. “Yep, good enough.”

Vernon banged the doors open. “See ya real soon, I’m sure, con.”

Joe ignored the taunt and hopped out. The best retort was to prove the man wrong. The old tub trundled off with an asthmatic hiss of its brakes, and Joe turned his head away from a belch of exhaust that smelled as rancid as a kitchen grease trap.

Alone for the first time in those twelve years, Joe wavered between a sort of dazed disbelief—like it was a cruel joke and someone would pop up any second to drag him back—and an impulse to whoop and holler and run around in circles like a banshee or something. Free.

He stood and checked out his surroundings while waiting for the bus’s dust to settle. An abandoned industrial park near the St. Pete-Clearwater Airport, just east of Largo, Florida, was indeed good enough, though at least ten miles from his destination.

But hey, a two- or three-hour walk sounded like a wonderful idea after spending the last hundred and nine thousand hours living on the concrete. Besides, he didn't want to advertise his return by arriving in the middle of town in a bus labeled "State Prisoners."

He shook his leg to get rid of a plastic bag the swirling wind had wrapped around his ankle and shifted the duffel into a better position between his shoulder blades. A deep lungful of free air and he set off across the parking lot, circling around two grackles that fluttered down to peck at a likely snack, then quickly soared away again.

"Little hot there, huh?" he muttered with a grin. Their indignant squawks echoed off the deserted buildings. Even in November, blacktop was stove-hot in South Florida. Joe reached the shoulder of the state road and turned west into the sun—his first time ever hiking the familiar route out to the coast and Sand Key.

He set a brisk pace, unsure whether his prison legs could hold it, but determined to make it to the Lobster Tank before sundown. By daylight, he would be just another nondescript white guy walking around: forty-two, five eleven, pale as a tourist after his time inside. Anonymous. After dark, without a vehicle, he'd be an obvious ex-con skulking about. Or so he feared, and another arrest was the worst fate he could imagine.

As he pushed along, the only pedestrian evident on the busy highway, he savored the beauty of the palm trees and late-flowering shrubs, the feel of grass under his feet along the right of way. Stuff you never really noticed until you spent a few years locked in a concrete block. Even the exhaust fumes smelled oddly pleasant, though it was all he could do to not jump out of his shoes whenever a car or truck whooshed by. Not a lot of automobiles in prison.

He'd only made about a mile and a half, maybe two, to where the highway began its transformation into a commercial boulevard, when a car veered off in front of him. The silvery-gray something—he hadn't a clue on current models—slammed to a stop in the drive of a scroungy-looking store that boasted specialties in cell phones, lottery tickets, guns and liquor. Joe hesitated, waiting to see whether he should circle behind or in front of the car.

The driver's-side door swung open and a heavy sort of about his age popped out, wearing silly mirrored aviator shades and a cocky smirk. He leaned on the roof of the car and thrust his chin toward Joe. "Damn, I don't believe it. What, fifteen years already? What is it with you convicts, always coming back to the scene of your fuckup?"

Joe lowered his duffel to the ground and stared at the man. His heart hammered. In the county for half an hour and getting the roust already? Guy looked remotely familiar, but only in a cop way, nothing personal. "Do I know you, chief?"

"Hell, you should. Bigelow." He whipped off his shades, exposing a reverse raccoon effect of pasty skin in the shape of sunglasses. Revealed some impressive whiskey bags sagging down under his eyes, too. "Now you remember?"

After twelve years learning to ignore every kind of baiting in the book—from guards who enjoyed keeping their boot on his neck to hard-cores that didn't mind having a few years tacked onto their sentence—Joe felt no reaction to Bigelow's calculated derision. He just didn't give a damn anymore. No idea why the guy wanted to get his goat, but the badge was a problem. It meant Joe had to take whatever Bigelow dished out if he wanted to finish his business and get out of town. "No. Where am I supposed to know you from?"

Bigelow whapped his palms on the car roof and gave him that cop stare that calls you a liar. “I was the responding officer the night you whacked your mother-in-law.”

Well, that didn't sound like this was going to be a very sociable encounter. And no, he still didn't recognize Dirty Harry here. Probably wouldn't remember if the Dalai Lama had been there. Everything from the night Eleanor fell remained a noisy jumbled memory at best, a total blank in spots.

He did remember stopping in to check on her, something he'd done every night he left the Lobster Tank before closing. Though in an early stage of Alzheimer's and lucid more often than not, on some of the bad days Eleanor would forget to eat or forget where her bed was or any nature of disasters. She refused to move from the rambling two-story home she'd raised her daughter in. Nor would she consider live-in help. Since Dani and Joe had known that the day would come when Eleanor wouldn't have a choice anymore, they tried to look after her themselves for as long as possible. The familiar bitter taste of regret rose in his throat. Not a very good idea in retrospect.

He had let himself in with his own key, calling out Eleanor's name as he entered. She appeared at the top of the stairway in her nightgown. He recalled with crystal clarity the words she shouted at him: “No, stay away! Go away! You can't stop me. I've made my mind up.” And he could still see her hand slip on the banister and the agonizing slow-motion nightmare of watching her tumble down, step after step, all the way to his feet. After that, nothing. No recollection of the 911 call or what he'd said. Certainly no memory of this cop or his cheesy mob-speak.

“Looks like maybe you got yourself a promotion since then,” Joe said, waving a finger at Bigelow’s blue oxford and wind-flapping yellow tie. “Maybe that’s why I didn’t know you.”

“Oh, the look?” Bigelow glanced down at the tie. “Naw, I did my twenty and got out. I’m in the consulting biz now.”

A small Chevy sedan pulled up behind Bigelow’s car, with its turn signal winking, and sounded its horn. Bigelow moved a step toward it and rested his hand on his holstered pistol. The little car sped away.

“Well, congratulations and all, but if you’re not Law anymore, what do you want?” Joe asked, once the dude got done with his tough-guy routine. Probably scared the hell out of some grandmother who just wanted to pick up a pint of Old Boston.

The puffy eyes narrowed and Bigelow slid his shades back on. “Don’t get wise-ass on me, boy. Bet you ain’t checked in with the county yet. It won’t look good on you if they hear it from me first.”

“Don’t have to. I was released, not paroled,” Joe shot back. “In case you haven’t heard, even second-degree convictions aren’t eligible for parole in Florida.” A long-suppressed freedom to feel anger swelled inside. Another thing he didn’t have to do was put up with any jerking around from an idiot who thought ex-cop meant anything. “And I damn sure don’t have to talk to you.”

He picked up his duffel and moved off at an angle that would take him well wide of Bigelow’s car, keeping the bag between them for whatever protection it might offer against a bullet. This cat seemed crazy enough to use the gun.

The mirrored glasses followed him as he crossed the driveway. “You walk pretty good for somebody that spent so much time laying on his belly in Raiford. I bet you miss all them boyfriends already.”

Joe spun on his heel. A cautious part of his brain warned him to walk on, but the wild reckless joy kept rising from deep within where it had languished, shackled away for nearly thirteen years. A free man, he didn’t have to eat anyone’s dirt any longer.

“Actually, Bigelow, I didn’t have any boyfriends at the Rock. Nobody did, because your mama still comes up there every weekend and keeps all the guys happy and heterosexual.”

He slung the duffel across his shoulder and strode away. Several people had come out of the little store to rubberneck, and he figured their presence would keep Bigelow from shooting him in the back.

You made an enemy there, he chided himself as he hurried to put distance between them. *Not very smart, and likely just created a huge problem*. Now how long did he have before every cop in the county started looking for an excuse to bounce a nightstick off his skull?

But damn, it felt so good being a person again and not state property. Well, all right. No extended visit with Mack, then. Just say hey, get his gold back and get gone.