

Chapter 1



Saturday, March 8

The poignant lyrics of “Desperado” filtered through the cobwebs crocheted across the scratchy speaker in the ceiling.

The ballad seemed a fitting soundtrack for his entrance.

Two steps inside, he stopped and stood silhouetted in the wedge of midday sunlight that shrank as the tufted leather door swished closed behind him and returned the barroom to the simulated nighttime in seedy watering holes on every continent.

This one hunkered near the line that separated Larouche Parish from Terrebonne. Neither parish would be proud to claim it, but the liability fell to Terrebonne. There wasn’t a town close enough to have any significant attachment to the place, but it shared a zip code with Auclair.

He took off his sunglasses, folded the stems, and hooked one of them into the placket of his chambray shirt above the third pearl snap.

The bartender stopped thumbing through a magazine that appeared to have been thumbed through frequently, took his customer's measure, then said, "Is it raining yet?"

"Not yet, but I wouldn't bet against it by nightfall." He walked over to the bar and mounted a stool.

"Cold beer?"

"Coke, please. Lots of ice."

"Coming up."

Then, from the outer reaches of the room: "Dude comes into a bar and orders a Coke. Ain't that what Dairy Queens are for?" The remark elicited a round of guffaws.

The newcomer at the bar looked over his shoulder toward the row of billiard tables. The only one currently in use was lighted by a fixture suspended from the ceiling. It hung low above the felt and shed light on a grungy foursome.

The one who'd scoffed at him was propped against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, knee raised, left foot flat against the concrete blocks. He was grinding a matchstick between his teeth. Another was idly chalking a pool cue. The other two were leaning against the table, slurping from their bottles of beer.

All were eyeing the "dude" with insolent challenge.

But after being on the receiving end of a prolonged and unflinching stare, the spokesman of the four anchored the matchstick in the corner of his mouth beneath a droopy mustache, let his foot slide to the floor, pushed himself away from the wall, and said to the one preparing the cue, "You gonna shoot, or what?" Still muttering with amusement among themselves, they resumed their game.

The bartender, having watched the exchange with

interest, opened a can of Coca-Cola and poured it over a glassful of ice. "Here you go."

"Thanks."

"Bartender, add that to my tab, please."

She was seated in a dim corner booth, chosen because it had an unobstructed view of the entrance, allowing her to see him when he arrived, which she'd wished to do. She'd been early; he'd been right on time.

She'd observed everything that had transpired without having been observed herself. The bit he'd done with his sunglasses had looked casual enough, something one would naturally do when coming from daylight into a darker interior. But she deduced that it had also given him time to let his eyes adjust, take in the scene, and get an idea of the bar's layout and what he was walking into. She'd escaped his notice only because her booth was in a section of the bar where only meager light relieved the gloom.

As he'd walked from the entrance over to the bar, his tread had been loose-limbed, his demeanor nonchalant. His exchange with the bartender, although not effusive, had been friendly enough. But it had taken nothing more than a look from him to squelch the derision of the men playing billiards.

At the time, he'd been facing away from her. But she knew that he must have fixed on them the calculating gaze that now zeroed in on her as he picked up his drink and walked over.

When he reached the booth, he tipped his head toward the vacant bench. "This seat taken?"

She shook her head.

He slid in across from her. They appraised each other with undisguised interest but without comment until he said, "Thanks for the Coke."

"You're welcome."

Dunking the drinking straw in and out of her glass of club soda, she continued her assessment of him. He'd gone to no trouble whatsoever to impress her. He was unshaven and had bed head. His shirt was wrinkled and worn tail out.

His jeans were clean but faded, worn to near white at the knees. They had a hole in the left front pocket and stringy hems. They seemed to be one with him, fitting his form and sauntering tread too well to have been purchased that way, already fashionably distressed. The aging had come from actual wear. Years of it.

"You're not what I expected," she said.

"No? Except for the getup, you're exactly what I expected."

"Based on what?"

"Your voice over the phone."

"What about it?"

"Butter wouldn't melt in your mouth."

She stopped fiddling with the drinking straw and let it sink into the glass. Sitting back against the booth and crossing her arms, she subjected him to a lengthier and even more disapproving once-over that terminated on his implacable stare, from which she didn't back down. "What did you mean by 'except for the getup'?"

"The LSU ball cap? You've never worn it before. It doesn't fit your head, it's way too new, and it doesn't go with your bespoke purse." He glanced down at it lying beside her

on the bench. “Between those two accessories, I’m betting the LV is more you.”

She didn’t acknowledge that he was right. “You’re not wearing a badge.”

He didn’t comment on what was obvious.

“Do you *have* a badge?” she asked.

“In a wallet.”

“Photo ID?”

“In a wallet.”

“On your person?”

“Yes.”

“Would you show them to me, please?”

“No.”

“*No?*”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Well...” He folded his arms on the table and leaned in, lowering his voice. “First off, you asked me—no, *instructed* me—not to show up here looking like a cop. Wearing a badge sort of gives that away. And anyhow, I never wear my badge to be seen.

“Secondly, the pack of hyenas shooting stick? I know that the DEA is on their tail. Now, if they saw me flashing you a badge and ID, they’d peg me as some brand of law officer, and that would likely result in an outbreak of trouble. I know damn well they’re armed; I just don’t know what kind of firepower they’re carrying, and finding out could lead to bloodshed.

“Thirdly, the bartender has given up his *MotorTrend* to polish a shot glass. In a joint like this, that level of cleanliness is uncommon if not downright nonexistent. He’s pretending

not to watch us, but he hasn't missed a thing. I don't know whose side he would be on if a gunfight erupted. If one did—and I can almost guarantee it—you could get hurt, and I would hate that.”

“Your conscience would never recover?”

“No, my career. For a while now, my superior has been looking for an excuse to fire me. If you, an innocent bystander, got injured or killed during a shootout initiated by me, it would be more excuse than he needed to give me the boot.

“All that to say that I'm going to keep my ID wallet in my pocket, my weapon under my shirttail, play it cool, and after we conclude this—whatever this is—I'll be sure to get the license number of that redneck pickup parked out front, which I'm almost certain belongs to those fentanyl pushers and not to you, then notify the DEA where they're hanging out.

“So, for everyone's safety and well-being, let's just go on pretending that this meeting is random, that you're a neglected housewife who's slumming in Auclair, Loooziana. You came in here trolling for an afternoon rodeo. I happened in, you looked me over, and figured I'd do.”

By the time he'd finished, she was seething, but she tried to appear as unfazed as possible. “Your back is to the bartender. How do you know what he's doing?”

“He's reflected in the blacked-out window behind your right shoulder. No, don't turn to look. Trust me.” He picked up his glass and took a long drink, then barely smothered a burp.

She tamped down mounting irritation, which would get her nowhere with him. But she couldn't resist saying, “I came here with an open mind, willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but you actually are an arrogant prick, aren't you?”

“Hey,” he said, looking affronted, “if you’re angling for a rodeo—”

“I most certainly am not.”

“Well, who invited who? For reasons still unknown, by the way.” His eyes skittered over her. “I do have the right woman, don’t I? If your name isn’t Beth Collins, then—”

“It is.”

“Whew. I was about to get embarrassed.” With no attempt to suppress a grin, he slouched against the back of the booth.

To hell with irritation getting her nowhere. She let it show. “You’re enjoying yourself?”

“A little, yeah.”

“I assure you that this isn’t fun and games.”

“No?” He shrugged. “Okay. When are we going to get around to why you wanted to talk to me? I’ll admit to being curious. Especially now that I’ve seen you.”

She didn’t dare rise to *that* bait. “You came here out of curiosity alone, then?”

“Honestly? No. I figured I owed you the courtesy of showing up because you pronounced my name right. Not Bow-ie like the rock star. Boo-ie like the knife.”

“Well, Mr. Bowie like the knife, in all seriousness, thank you for agreeing to see me without an explanation and on short notice. Let’s start over, shall we?” She paused. He gestured for her to continue. “The matter is important, and I’m on a deadline.”

He lost the smirk and studied her for a moment. The intensity with which she’d spoken seemed to have penetrated and captured his interest. At least he no longer looked like it was putting a strain on him not to laugh at her.

“All right, Ms. Collins, I’m here. I came at your request like I told you I would. What’s this about?”

She forced her shoulders to relax, mostly because the bartender, who was in her line of sight, *was* observing them as he polished a shot glass. She forced herself to smile at the disheveled man sitting across from her, then coyly lowered her eyes, as though flirting. Under her breath, she said, “Yesterday, did you tell anyone in the police department that you’d spoken to me?”

“No.”

“Or that we were meeting today?”

“No.”

“When you left the police station to come here—”

“It’s my day off. I came straight from home.” After a beat, “Straight from bed.”

She knew he’d added that to see how she would react, so she didn’t react at all. “Did you tell *anyone* you were meeting with me? Your wife?”

“Don’t have one.”

“Oh.” Her surprised reaction to that was involuntary. “You did.”

“Not anymore.” His brows drew together to form a deep cleft between them. “How the hell—”

“I was given some background information on you.”

“By who?”

Whom, she thought. But she didn’t correct him or give him a direct answer. “I also did some research of my own.”

His stare practically pinned her to the back of the booth. Without looking away, he reached for his drink and took a swallow. When he set down his glass, he said, “What are you up to?”

We're a mediocre department in a modest city. And that's a generous description. If you've got trouble, why call us?"

"You. I called *you*."

"What makes me special?"

She dampened her lips and lowered her voice. "The case of that young woman who vanished in November of 2022."

He clenched his jaw. His gray eyes turned flinty. He assumed the menacing aspect of a cobra about to strike.

Even though she'd anticipated hostility, his reaction was acute and intimidating and caused her to lose her footing. "Her name—"

"I know her name."

She glanced at the bartender, who was still polishing that damn glass. When she came back to John Bowie, she spoke sweetly through a phony smile. "Our observer may not be able to hear what you're saying, but he'll pick up on your angry tone as well as your body language, which is less than convincing that you're hoping for a hookup."

He blinked as though to reboot the law officer in himself. "The playacting is important?"

"Yes. For now."

Taking her at her word, he relaxed his posture and leaned forward again. "Then I'd better up my game." He reached across the table, took her hand, and stroked the palm of it with his thumb. "How's this? Better?"

She curbed the impulse to jerk her hand away from his, resisted the implication of the stroking, and denied the flutter it caused beneath her navel. Instead, she gave him a demure smile and reclaimed her hand with feigned reluctance.

He drained his Coke and shook a pebble-size ice cube

into his mouth. He crunched it while watching her with mistrustful intensity. “What does the Crissy Mellin case have to do with you?”

“It became a national news story.”

He snorted with bitterness. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You were deeply involved in the investigation.”

“I already know that.”

“Your name was frequently mentioned in the news coverage.”

“Again, something I know.”

“But you declined to be interviewed.”

“Not for the bloodsuckers’ lack of trying.”

She hesitated and took a breath. “Although you were never on camera, you were referenced and often quoted. A snippet here, a phrase there, and it soon became obvious that you were dissatisfied with your department’s handling of the investigation.” She paused, then asked, “Was your outspokenness the reason your superior has wanted to fire you?”

“That’s one reason.”

“There’s another?”

“My dick is bigger than his, and that galls him something terrible. Not that we’ve ever actually compared them, but, you know.”

She kept her expression droll. “Ah, intentional vulgarity. Used in the hope that I’ll be offended, will snatch up my bespoke handbag, and storm out.”

“Don’t let me keep you, Ms. Collins.”

“Sorry, Mr. Bowie. You’ll have to do better than that.”

Brow still furrowed and stern, he leaned in farther and

lowered his voice to a near growl. "I'm tired of this back-and-forth. Why did you invite me to this out-of-the-way, low-rent dive? In the middle of the afternoon. On my day off. Like I don't have anything better to do than reminisce about something I'd rather eradicate from memory?"

His eyes narrowed and took a leisurely visual tour of her. When their eyes reconnected, he gave her a lazy smile. "Unless you really are hankering for a rodeo. Maybe with a man who has handcuffs, a badge, and a pistol? Is that it? That's a big turn-on for some women. You'd be surprised by how many."

"I wouldn't be in the least surprised."

"Then if that's the case," he drawled, "let's move it along."

Her cheeks went hot. She bit back an angry retort, reached for her glass, and took a sip from the straw. She returned the glass to the table with a thump. "I called because *Crisis Point*, the true crime network show for which I work as a producer, is soon to air an episode covering the Crissy Mellin case."

His eyes took on that fearsome glint again as he hissed, "Son of a bitch. When the crew was down here filming, it created a big stir. But it's been a while back. I hoped it had been deep-sixed."

"No."

"And you're one of them?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

"Bye-bye."

Before he could scoot to the edge of the booth, her hand shot out and grabbed his forearm, anchoring it to the table-top. "You were the only key player on that case who refused to cooperate with our production team. You took no one's

call, and when someone did get through, you hung up on them the moment they identified themselves.

“You were unshakable against our senior host, renowned for his persistence and powers of persuasion. You wouldn’t grant him an interview or even a private conversation. He’s the one who told me that you were an arrogant prick.” Her heart was thumping. She took another breath. “I reached out in the desperate hope that you would talk to me.”

He looked down at her hand, which was clutching his arm just below the rolled cuff of his sleeve. “I don’t want to arm-wrestle you. Especially with an audience. Let go.”

“Hear me out.”

“Let. Go.”

“Please, Mr. Bowie. It would be a terrible mistake for you not to discuss—”

“My terrible mistake was being lured by an urgent and sexy female voice on the phone. Gotta hand it to you. You laid an enticing trap.”

“Give me two minutes.”

“Thanks again for the Coke.”

He moved to leave. She gripped his arm tighter. “Two minutes.”

A hard shake of his head. “I’m out of here.”

“Thirty seconds. Please. Thirty seconds and you won’t have wasted the trip out here.” When she sensed his hesitation, she squeezed his arm. “Half a minute. Please.”

He chewed on the inside of his cheek as he thought on it, then said, “Tell me something I *don’t* know.”

She exhaled and whispered, “It’s going to happen again.”