

Chapter One

“Of course there is nothing illegal about what you did,” said the sheriff, “keepin’ in mind that it could’ve got you killed.”

“I’m sorry about what happened, Sheriff. I lost my temper.” And I *was* sorry to be making trouble for myself in the state I was in.

“Those men should not have been using your house like that without permission. But it had been vacant for a number of years. And according to what we heard, they were trying to clear out of there when the trouble started.”

“The trouble started when they stopped me in the road with guns and searched my car.”

“Oh, yes, that can be annoying, I know. We have been trying to discourage that kind of behavior. But the militia serves its purpose here, if you want my opinion. Things being how they are, it’s good to know who is coming into Marysville, and if possible, why. So I’ll come right out and ask you what brings you to our quiet little town? You don’t have to answer me if you don’t want to. It’s just a friendly question. We want everybody to get along and be happy here.”

So what was I supposed to tell him? Did I even know? The bottom had fallen out of my life, and I needed to regroup somehow. I needed to find some balance, some

reason to carry on. I had been clinging to a fantasy about a little house that I had inherited years before in the boondocks of New York State, a house I had never seen. I thought if I could just get there, I could cool my brains a little, soak up some nature and sunshine, and maybe start feeling a little better. It wasn't anything I was going to try to explain to this sheriff.

"I came to take possession of this house."

"Well, you did that! But Tom Herman has got such a bad sprain, he couldn't go to work today."

"It was an accident." Herman had to have been the militiaman who had gone over the card table covered with moldy fast-food garbage and militia leaflets on his way out the door. It was sort of an accident. That yahoodie had enjoyed pointing his shotgun in my face while they were searching my car and questioning me. When they found out that I was actually a property owner in Marysville, then according to our quaint customs, he wasn't allowed to point his shotgun in my face anymore. What's more, I was also allowed to throw them and all their stuff out of my house abruptly and rather tactlessly because they had been trespassing and using it for a militia H.Q. and fast-food garbage dump. It's funny how fast things can change sometimes. Or perhaps I should say instead that it's sometimes funny how fast things can change, and sometimes not, as you will see.

I wasn't happy about what had happened. If I had it to do over again, maybe I would have more sense. It frightened me that I hadn't any better control over myself than that. The sheriff was certainly right when he said I could have gotten myself killed. I didn't know who I was dealing with, and there were certainly enough weapons on hand.

So now what? Everybody in that little town would have heard about it by now. I was off to a hell of a start in

Marysville! But the worst thing about it was feeling afraid of my own state of mind.

“How long are you planning to remain in Marysville, if you don’t mind my asking a friendly question?”

“I don’t know, Sheriff. I just need a little peace and quiet right now. I need to work some things out. I don’t have any definite plans.”

“Well, all right, I won’t pry. I just wanted to stop by and have a look at you after what happened. Just one more friendly question, Mr. Darcey. What exactly do you do?”

“I’m kind of betwixt and between right now, Sheriff.”

“What did you do before you came here?”

“I owned a little theater, but it . . . well, it burned down.”

“A movie theater?”

“No, the other kind.”

“A playhouse?”

“Yes, that kind.”

“Oh! Well, I don’t suppose there would be much need for one of those in Marysville.” He tried to say it pleasantly enough, but I think if I’d said I used to own a transvestite bar, it would have made about the same impression.

“I’m not planning to build one here.”

“I just don’t think there would be much interest in such a thing.” The sheriff looked at his watch and hitched up his belt. He looked over his shoulder at his police car and gave me a grim smile and a nod. “All right, Mr. Darcey, I won’t take up any more of your time. I will say that it would probably be just as well if you didn’t tangle with the militia. Just a little friendly advice, that’s all.”

After the sheriff was gone I walked up onto my little porch feeling tired and confused. I sat down in a rickety chair and leaned back against the wall. I was off to a pretty bad start

in Marysville, but I was pleased with my little house. It had a stove. It had a fridge. It had a toilet and a shower and a bed. I had everything I needed for the time being, and maybe after awhile I would even have a life again. Okay, I have a little bit of a temper, and it was not the first time in my life it had got me into trouble. But I supposed the trouble would pass in time. Peace and quiet was what I needed, and that would be abundant in this tiny country town.

So there I was, minding my own business, sitting in my rickety chair, my arms dangling limply, soaking up the sunshine and the gentle rhythms of the rural countryside, when I had another visitor; this one drove up in a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud and parked under the maple tree.

It was the sound of the car door closing that made me open my eyes, so I must have been dozing. There was the Rolls, just as if it had appeared from nowhere, and there was this man who had probably seen the last of his twenties. Four or five inches over five feet tall maybe, he was nicely built, well-proportioned, and very bold in his fashionable and expensive duds. He took up his position at the bottom of the steps, very still and composed, not tilting his head back to look up at me, but keeping his chin level and looking out from under his brows. It made a businesslike, even sinister impression and it made me smile to myself to see this man taking himself so seriously, Rolls-Royce and all.

“Jack Darcey?” he said, and that surprised me very much because I hadn’t told a soul where I was going. Looking this man up and down, I couldn’t find a clue as to who he might be and what kind of trouble he might be bringing with him, so I chose the voice of a country hayseed from my actor’s bag of tricks and said, “Nope, not me.”

That caused him to smile a little ghost of a smile, and he said, “Well, if you know where I can find him, I’ve got some

good news for him.” The accent was hard to place. Cleveland? Detroit? It made me think of professional gamblers, the prize ring, and the track, and that made me nervous. I had made a couple of shady loans to create my little theater, and I was planning to make some provision for them; unfortunately, I hadn’t gotten around to it yet. Could that be it? I didn’t believe for one second that anybody had chased me all the way to Marysville to give me good news.

“Nope,” I said finally, using the same hayseed persona. “Nobody by that name lives here in Marysville, mister.”

He put his head a little over to one side and continued to regard me with the same ghost of a smile for a few moments. Then he reached inside his jacket, and I had a strong impulse to vault the porch railing and make a break for the woods. But instead of a weapon, he produced a photograph; and after glancing at it, he walked up the porch steps over to where I was still leaning against the wall in my rickety chair and held it out to me. I hadn’t much choice but to take it, and there before me was a clear and recent photo of myself loading stuff into my car; in the background was one corner of my little theater, or what was left of it after the fire. I had been completely alone at that moment, very much alone, because every single person who had been part of that enterprise had scattered to the four winds of heaven since there was nothing to hold them any longer. In that moment I had felt as alone as a man can feel, and so I wondered very much who could have taken that photo.

When I looked up, the man had put his hands behind him and he was leaning comfortably against one of the porch posts. The ghost of a smile was gone, but his attitude said he would be content to wait as long as need be. He could have been a process server, or a private investigator, or a cop, or a goon. But driving a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud?

“Okay,” I said finally in my own real voice, “who are you, and what do you want?”

“My name is Rudy Strapp. An old friend of yours, Albert Keane, sent me down with his car to get you and bring you up to the old homestead for a little study break.”

Now there was no disguising my surprise. “The old homestead” was the Keane family nickname for one of the largest country estates on the eastern seaboard; “a study break” was a weekend away from private school. Those were words from my distant past; I hadn’t seen Albert Keane in over twenty years. I did, however, happen to know that his parents had both died in a plane crash, and that he was now a stupendously wealthy man.

In my memory I could see that neat quadrangle of buildings around a grassy lawn: classrooms at one end, dining hall for four hundred people at the other, dormitories on the sides. All heavy red brick edifices in the federal style, with oak trim and tall white pillars, everything well maintained and in excellent taste: The Chesham School, a bastion for the careful breeding of the privileged few.

Beyond the quad were the athletic fields; beyond that a meadow and a thick border of trees. A lane of blacktop ran you out to the front gate, the highway, and the edge of a tiny and boring Connecticut town where most of the girls had either married or run away by the time they were sixteen. If you’d been a good boy (according to some stiff institutional definitions of what that meant) and weren’t on restrictions of any kind, you could walk into town on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons to sneak cigarettes or try to get a feel off some town girl in the movie house or out in the fields. The rest of the time you were confined within the perimeter of the institution, and the teachers did their best to see that your parents got their money’s worth.

Children wound up in such schools for two main reasons. Some parents were anxious to make lawyers or doctors or corporate superstars out of their kids and were willing to pay for the huge advantage a school like Chesham provided. Other parents, for a variety of reasons, couldn't keep a real home for their children, and were willing to pay other people to take over their responsibilities. My parents were in show business and they were as nutty and unstable as show business people usually are. When I was thirteen or so, they were going through a screaming, cut-throat divorce, and I was languishing around Hollywood with a rowdy set of friends, trying out the new drugs and getting into fights. My parents saw the writing on the wall and tried to do the best they could for me. Somebody knew somebody who knew the headmaster of this particularly good school. Arrangements were made, a small wardrobe of appropriate clothing was selected to replace what I was accustomed to wearing, and off I went to New England.

"So you work for Albert, do you?" I asked my visitor.

"Yeah, you could say that."

"You're not his chauffeur."

"No, no. I drive him around sometimes, but I'm not his chauffeur. Mr. Keane doesn't have a chauffeur."

"Are you his bodyguard?"

Instead of replying, he gave me an enigmatic look, as if the answer might be both yes and no.

"What do you usually do for him?"

"Whatever needs to be done."

"You're a man of many talents."

"You could say that."

"Did you take that photo of me?"

"No, that was taken by a pro."

"Why would Albert send someone to take a photo of

me?”

“Why don’t you ask him? He’ll tell you anything you want to know. If you want my opinion, you’re very lucky he’s interested in you.”

“What’s he interested in, exactly?”

“Ask him. Maybe he wants to be your friend.”

In the beginning it had been Albert who needed a friend. According to a peculiar boys’ school prejudice, he was what was known as a rich bitch. He was the only child of a family that was so astronomically wealthy that he was already, in theory, set for life; to boys whose parents had sent them there to sweat the climb to the highest pinnacle of success or die trying, it looked like he had it made from the start. That he was a natural straight-A student; that intellectually there was no one in the school more committed to the life of the mind; that he had his sights set on Harvard and would doubtless be accepted when the time came not only for his scholastic achievement but also for his impeccable character—none of these factors gained him any favor. He was still a rich bitch who already had it made.

He was not a social climber; he was not an athlete. His upper-class manners, which were so stylized that they came off as affectations, made him seem aloof when he really wasn’t at all. And the aspect of his personality most infuriating to his peers was that he didn’t seem to realize or care that he didn’t fit in. He went back and forth to his classes completely absorbed and fascinated by everything he was learning, and he was always polite to everyone in a manner that was cordial and delicate. He was an oddball, he was a rich bitch, and he was alone.

Meanwhile, I was also doing a good job alienating myself from my peers at that school. I had grown up believing (thanks to my bohemian family) that if anybody had scads of money,

they had probably acquired it through the exploitation of all the helpless and innocent lambs that my parents felt sorry for. These exploiters, basically the entire upper-class of America except for a handful of rich artists who had acquired their wealth *ethically*, were by definition callous and heartless; good people, soulful people, did not have them over for dinner unless perhaps it was necessary for business reasons.

In any case, that was my childish interpretation of what my family thought. And so, in looking for a more salubrious environment than the streets of Hollywood for me to spend my teens, my parents had overshot the mark a trifle by plunking me down in such an upper-class school.

Somehow, and don't ask me how, I understood that it was to my advantage to stay in that strange and alien place where boys wore white shirts and jackets and neckties to class and were required by the oddest of all customs to eat fried chicken with a knife and a fork. Somehow I understood that I could make a more stable and healthy home for myself there than the one literally flying to bits in vicious, drunken fights in California. I could pass the courses and follow the rules. I could get what was known as a good education and start to make myself a life. But I couldn't allow myself to bond or even connect very much with my upper-class and upper middle class schoolmates. That was too much of a stretch. In order to feel even marginally good about myself in those awful teen-age days, I had to remain loyal to my parent's ideas, such as I understood them, and that meant keeping myself separate from rich people and also social climbers, who were incipient rich people and for some reason were supposed to be even more detestable than the ones who had already made it.

So although I decided to remain at that school and put up with the insane rules and the impossible load of homework, I stayed on as the resident bohemian, a gadfly, and a judgment

against the whole class that the institution represented, and I too, was alone.

“Do you like to ride horses?” That was Albert Keane talking to me outside the evening study hall. “*I do,*” he continued when I didn’t answer right away, “but it’s ever so much more fun when you have someone to ride with.”

I did like to ride. There was a ranch at the lower end of Griffith Park in the Hollywood Hills which rented horses quite reasonably, and I used to spend many pleasant hours weaving my fantasies as I rode the trails above the city. Los Angeles, from that vantage above the permanent curtain of smog, looked like some lost city of the future where no one lived anymore because of the radioactive cloud that had poisoned it.

“Sure, Albert,” I said sarcastically, “let’s go right after study hall.”

He laughed at that. “Oh, I don’t mean *now*.” He had a jolly laugh, bubbly and uncool. Everything he did was uncool, like paying sincere compliments to people without hedging them in sarcasm or irony the way the rest of us did.

“I do like to ride,” I admitted. “We could ride old Mr. Stookins if we could find a camel saddle.”

Albert wagged a finger at me. “Mr. Stookins is a brilliant teacher, and we’re all very lucky to have him.” Albert was a very funny duck. No other student in the school would have reacted that way to what I’d said, for we were as cruel and bitchy as any other group of American kids that age. To stick up for a teacher? That was really strange.

“But if you like to ride,” he went on, in the same pleasant tone he’d used to reprimand me, “what I’m suggesting . . . Maybe you’re already busy. It’s kind of short notice, I guess, but I hope you’re not. You see, I’m going home next weekend, and if you’d like to come too, Mother says it will be all right,

and we have horses.”

“Out of the road, rich bitch!” That was Guy Hawke, the class bully, shoving Albert out of his way. Albert staggered, and he might have fallen except for bouncing off the doorjamb.

“Watch who you’re shoving, Guy,” I told him, and then I thought, *Oh, God, why did I have to say that?* There was no reason for me to stand up for Albert, except that I’d been born with a bit of a temper, something I’ve never been able to mend, and that temper had gotten me into trouble pretty consistently over the years.

Several other boys had heard the exchange, and their own conversations came to a halt. Fear came gushing up along with the adrenaline, for there would be no way to brazen this out with words. I would have to fight him now, or kiss his ass, and I had already made up my mind which it would be.

Guy Hawke was not your average hulking bully. He was tall and lean and almost graceful in the way he slowly turned and walked back to where I stood. But when he shoved his face right down into mine, I could see how impatient he was for an opportunity to hurt someone.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

“You want to make something of it?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Meet me behind the studio in fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll be there.”

Guy Hawke seemed pleased. Giving me one last baleful stare, he walked away. It was a frightening look, very powerful and predatory; it made me sorry once again that I’d gotten myself into this mess. But there was nothing to do now but go through with it, so I went back to my dorm to change out of my good clothes.

Albert followed me upstairs. “You’re not going to fight with him, are you?”

“Sure, I am.”

“Why?”

“Why? What do you mean why?”

“Don’t you know why?”

“Get out of here, Albert. I have to get ready.”

“Is it a matter of principle?”

“I don’t know, Albert. I hate people like that. I always wind up fighting with people like that. It doesn’t matter why.”

“Do you think you have to save me from him?”

“Huh?” I was looking for my high-top sneakers.

“You told him to quit shoving me.”

I had forgotten about that. “It isn’t about you. A person like that, he’s . . . Let’s talk about it tomorrow, okay?”

“Tomorrow may be too late. Everything we do, Jack, spreads out in ripples to the edge of the universe, and then comes back to touch us with good or ill.”

That made me bark with laughter. “Albert, will you give me a break?” I had broken my shoelace. “You’re going to make me late for this fight. I don’t want to be late. I want to be early so I can get myself set.”

“You don’t have to go through with this.”

“Are you crazy? Of course I do.”

“You can inform him that you’ve decided not to stoop to his level.”

“If I did that, he’d be lifting his leg on me all year!”

“There’s no need to be vulgar. We could go to him together as a united front. We could embarrass him with the smallness of his behavior.”

“Albert, I’ve got to hand it to you. You are a real maniac.”

Grabbing my sweatshirt, I bounded down the stairs.

The studio, where art and music classes were held, was off by itself between the quad and the gym. There were strict rules about fighting in the buildings or on the quad, but hey, boys will be boys, and there was a tacit understanding that the disciplinary machinery would overlook a fight behind the studio if nobody got seriously hurt.

When I got there, a lot of boys had already gathered to watch the fight. In a dull place like a boys' prep school where life is mostly classes and studying, news of anything interesting spreads fast. Guy Hawke wasn't there yet, so I had a chance to catch my breath and look over the killing ground. It was just a bit of lawn covered with dry autumn grass, a couple of big trees at both ends of the studio, and a hedge of blackberry bushes running below the windows in between. The lights were off in the studio but there was some spill from the lights in the gym. Coupled with a bright moon, there was plenty of light for me to get my ass kicked that evening.

I felt good. I was a little afraid of getting hurt, but I was excited too. This would be my first serious fight at that school, and I wanted to make a good showing while I lasted. One good fight with someone bigger than you fixes you right up with a reputation even if you lose; then in the future, anybody who might think to give you a hard time is more likely to pass you by for someone who won't fight back.

Boys kept arriving but they all kept pretty quiet, because if they attracted the attention of the teachers, the fight would be broken up before it started, and nobody wanted that. Now I couldn't wait for Guy to get there, because I'd decided to give them all a surprise. Instead of the usual preliminaries with insults and shoving, I was going to go at him with everything I had the second he stepped onto the grass. I could still remember that strange and awful look he had given me outside the study

hall, and I wanted to get right into it before I lost my nerve.

Well, there he was, in jeans and sneakers just like me, and walking between some of the boys he liked to hang out with, big boys who were on the football team. My body gave a little hop in the air, and then I was charging. Guy crouched with his fists up to meet me and his friends jumped to either side; and suddenly, there was Albert. Damn him! I don't know where he came from, but he was right in my way and I had to pull up short or else run him down.

"Albert, get out of the way, I mean it! You're going to get hurt if you keep this up."

"Don't do it, Jack. You'll only regret it, I assure you. And as for you," he said, turning to Guy Hawke, and moving right up under the point of Guy's beaky nose, "you may think you can intimidate people with your size and strength. But I'm warning you in your best interest that *God is watching.*"

That made all the boys laugh. Still, there was a certain hesitancy in the laughter, I suppose because nobody was completely sure that God *wasn't* watching. Whether we believed in God or not, nobody wanted to get into trouble.

Guy Hawke was furious. It was frightening to see the veins swell up in his neck, the insane look that came into his eyes. What he was thinking I have no idea, but he brought his arm back across his body and dealt Albert a hell of a backhand crack that sent him sprawling flat on the grass. A little gasp went up from the crowd at the viciousness of it; a split second later there was another gasp because I had moved in on Guy while he was distracted and nearly dropped him with a solid punch right under the left eyebrow.

I went right in after him, trying to land a few more, but he got his guard up and was suddenly charging me in his fury. I jumped back and then started to circle him, looking for

another opening.

I had gotten very lucky with that first punch, for his eye began immediately to swell, and in no time at all it was closed completely over. Now I was circling, circling to the right, into his blind side. At first he tried to rush me, but I was fast in those days. I hopped back and came right in on his blind side again. He was roaring now in his frustration, and the crowd of boys had forgotten how to be quiet in their excitement. Guy Hawke had made enemies. There were plenty of people there who would be glad to see him lose. On the other hand, I was not particularly popular myself. So anybody's blood would be welcome in that fight, and the boys cheered us on.

He charged me again, but this time I dodged wrong and circled right into the blackberry bushes. That was a bad mistake, for suddenly he was on me, punching with all his strength, knocking the wind out of me, splitting my lip. The best I could do was to grab him by the shirt and yank him into the thornbush with me, and a mighty thorough scratching we got trying to get to one another after that!

A sharp command from one of the teachers brought the fight to a halt. He looked us both over in the beam of his flashlight, and then took us both to the infirmary where a doctor was called in to look at Guy's eye. Then we were sent to our rooms and told to stay there until they decided what to do with us. The fight had been too bloody to overlook.

"Well, you are an amazing sight," said Albert when I walked into my room. There was a mirror on my dresser and I went to look at myself. My lip was split and puffy. It would be tender for a while but it would heal up fine. My face was scratched from the thorns, but that was nothing. My sweatshirt was flecked and smeared with blood. That was kind of neat.

"You should see Guy Hawke," I said.

"So what do you think that proved?"

“Look, Albert, I feel pretty good right now, so if you’re going to start up again with that faggy crap, why don’t you just get out of here.”

To my surprise he got up and left. In the doorway he stopped and said, “I suppose a fight now and then isn’t so bad. But there’s no excuse for that kind of language.”

A few seconds later he came back in. “I think we should wait a few weeks before we go to my house. I can’t introduce you to my parents looking like that. It wouldn’t make a good impression.”

“Okay, Albert, whatever you say.” What a maniac! I hadn’t even said I wanted to go. Did I want to be associated with a fruitcake like Albert Keane? Could I go out to some big estate and take tea on the knee with the super-rich? Wouldn’t that be some kind of a betrayal to my parents and the things we believed? On the other hand, I was really itching to get out of that school for a couple of days, and the idea of having a horse to ride was very tempting. I could go once, I thought, just to say I’d done it.

At that moment I felt like I could do anything I wanted. I had just gotten the best of someone who was a lot bigger than I was; he even had to see the doctor! I was high as a kite. While we had been sitting on opposite benches in the infirmary, with me holding a guaze pad against my lip, and he with a great bag of ice over one eye, Hawke had whispered hoarsely, “You hit me when I wasn’t looking, you little runt. And I’m going to get even with you if it takes me the rest of my life.” I gave him my best puffy-lipped smile as if to say I was ready anytime. Anytime at all.

“Okay, Rudy, here’s the scoop. You get back in the Rolls and go back to the old homestead, and tell Albert that I’m very touched he was thinking of me, and I’ll give him a call

in a few weeks. You can leave me his number.” I was actually feeling something akin to nausea from all those old memories. I was looking forward to getting Rudy and the Rolls back on the road, and then treating myself to a nice long nap.

Rudy looked a little put out. “Oh, come on, Mr. Darcey, don’t be like that. Why don’t you just get a few things together and let me drive you out there? Mr. Keane is going to be very disappointed if you don’t show up.”

The last thing I wanted was an argument about it, and I was trying to be polite to this man who had driven all the way from Massachusetts for nothing. “Look, Rudy, just tell Albert it’s square business, okay? That means I promise to call him soon. Going with you today is just out of the question, that’s all.”

He reached into his coat again and handed me an envelope. I opened it, and on some expensive stationery was a note from Albert.

Dear Jack,

I would like you to be a part of something that is happening. Please do not be stubborn and balky. Be guided by our long friendship and not by any subsequent separation, and please come right away because time is a factor. I will explain it all when you arrive.

Your dear friend,

Albert

“Do you know what this is about?”

Rudy gave me a long look and shook his head.

“Is it important?”

He gave me a shrug.

“I think you know what this is about.”

“If I did know, I couldn’t tell you.”

“Well, leave me Albert’s number, and tell him what I said.” I went over to the stairs, and gestured with my head toward the open road. We walked together to the Rolls, and he opened the door but didn’t get in. Instead he got a pair of gloves from the pocket of the door and started to draw them on. I remember they seemed kind of thick for driving, but I wasn’t paying much attention. I was thinking instead about how much I was going to enjoy my afternoon nap.

“Mr. Darcey, can I tell you something?”

“Sure, Rudy, lay it on me.” *Anything so long as the next thing is goodbye.*

“You’re not doing so well. You lost your theater. You lost all your money and then some. You’re living in a dump in the boondocks, and you don’t have the slightest idea what to do next. Am I right?”

I just looked at him.

“Okay, well, somebody is trying to do you a big favor, and I am also trying to do you a favor by telling you that you are being very stubborn and foolish. Now why don’t you do *yourself* a favor, and go lock up the house, and get in this car. You don’t even need a toothbrush.”

“Thanks for telling me that, Rudy,” I said, stifling a yawn. “I’m sure it’s very good advice, and I promise I’ll get in touch with Albert in a week or two. Now please just get the hell out of here and give me a break.”

I was very relieved when Rudy suddenly relaxed and grinned at me; all the energy had gone out of him. He shrugged and said, “Well, that’s that. You can’t say I didn’t try.” He winked at me, and I smiled back, glad that it was finally settled.

Then he did a curious thing. He bent down as though he wanted to pick something up from the ground; and at the same

time he made a beckoning gesture with his finger as though he wanted to show me something. So I started to bend over also—like a chump—and the last thing I saw was his fist in that heavy leather glove coming up at me all the way from the ground.