FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH



Cordurouy

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If Stupidity got us into this mess,
then why can't it get us out?
—Will Rogers

PROLOGUE

11:13 p.m.
Wednesday, May 17, 2006

The Sockolosky estate was half an hour north of Tulsa on rural side roads with neither streetlamps nor painted centerlines. It was remote, and there were few sounds besides birds, crickets, cicadas, and toads chirping a transcendental orchestra each night. You had to use your floodlights after dark to ensure you wouldn't smash into a deer bouncing across the road and accidentally kill both yourself and the graceful but witless beast. Deer had infested the area over the decades, and with hunting forbidden on private property, the animals had found a murder-free oasis in which to multiply and thrive in serene tranquility. Bobcats, wolves, and coyotes had once confidently roamed those lands, too, but since they were driven out, humans and cars remained the white-tailed deer's only predators throughout most of the Midwest.

A ruthless man had built the Sockolosky estate nearly a century before from the spoils of oil money. The home was constructed using the most ostentatious design standards at the time: four marble columns centered in front of oversized, carved wooden front doors overlooking a circular driveway, set behind a sprawling water fixture centered on a manicured

lawn. The inside of the house encompassed 12,000 square feet, with seven bedrooms, two maid's quarters, two kitchens, and four fireplaces. Magazines once featured the home as an architectural staple of Oklahoma oil days when the house shone.

A dark-maroon Jetta rolled to a stop on the small shoulder of that remote road a few blocks before the estate's gate, and out stepped an angry man who hadn't ever shown the world his anger: Earl Derkatch. He wore sizable pentagon-shaped prescription glasses with a thin metal frame, and his trimmed white beard covered most of the engrained acne scars on his face. Earl was in his late fifties, but he looked like he could've been a decade older. His most identifiable physical aspect was that he had only one arm, his right. He had a belly, but he had been in proper boxing shape in his prime years before he lost his left arm and got old. Earl exited his vehicle, surveyed the road in each direction to ensure he was truly alone, and then pulled a black ski mask over his head. He wasn't a very adept or experienced criminal, but he had anger, tenacity, and persistence—all critical requirements in the field. Above all else, he had a lot of questions.

Two dogs ran up from the other side of the fence, barking at him loudly. Earl removed a wrapped fast-food hamburger from his jacket pocket, set it on his car's hood, and unwrapped the cheap meal. He took the patty from between the buns, split it in half, removed a pill from his front pants pocket, and broke the pill into pieces. He jammed the crumbled medication into each burger patty half and passed them through the fence to the dogs, who both gratefully inhaled

them. He wiped his palm on his jeans to rid his hand of grease and then pulled a black leather glove onto his right hand, using his teeth to pull the glove over his palm.

Earl's left arm ended just above where an elbow would have been, and he had altered his jacket to fit his dimensions neatly. Dressed in jeans, boots, a glove, a ski mask, and a dark denim jacket, Earl took a heavy wool blanket from the backseat of his car and tossed it with a solid throw to hang over the top of the fence and pad the barbed wire for his ascent. Then he pulled out a small folding ladder from the backseat and closed his car door. He extended and positioned the ladder and then took another hard look in each direction of the quiet, unlit road. It was springtime in the Midwest, and the sky was absent of stars or moonlight, as storm clouds had been brewing for the past few hours. It wasn't raining yet, but a brutal storm was likely. In Oklahoma, there is no such thing as a light drizzle. You either have a downpour with heavy winds and tornado sirens or nothing. He worked slowly, waiting ten minutes for the dogs to feel the Ambien. Both hounds wandered to a nearby knoll and lay down to nap.

Earl summited the ladder steps and carefully swung one leg over the padded barbed wire fence. Then he used his other leg to kick over his ladder to the ditch behind his car. Holding a padded section of the railing with his right hand, he swung his leg over and jumped across, plopping onto the grass.

"Aargh, son of a bitch!"

He rubbed his right knee and hamstring in agony and then tugged to bring the blanket off the top of the fence. The barbed wires snagged at the blanket, tearing through

its wool fabric. He shook the blanket a few times to dislodge it, carefully pulled it down, and set it on the ground for his return climb, which he knew would take much more effort without a ladder on his side.

The aging amateur criminal hobbled to the left side of the house, limping like a wounded animal with each step. Earl knew the place was deserted that evening because Bob Sockolosky was hosting a benefit for the governor at the Mayo Hotel downtown to raise money for the governor's reelection campaign. It was in all the local papers. Those events always went late, so it was possible the head honchos might even get drunk and tired enough to sleep at the hotel after the event wrapped. Bob's two kids were off in boarding school, his wife had left him a few years before, and he no longer paid for any live-in help on the property. The house was Earl's for a few hours, but he didn't need that much time. A safe had drawn Earl there: a safe in Bob's office on the first floor, hidden behind a painting. Earl had heard mention of that safe several times—where it was and local rumors about what Bob had squirreled away inside it—and Earl had become obsessed by it.

Earl had conducted his amateur sleuthing for a few months, and that night he finally built up enough courage to do something about it. If you have a safe, the last thing you should do is make anything about it common knowledge. Still, Bob Sockolosky was an arrogant showboat, even posing for a photograph in front of it for an architectural magazine after he first got married. Earl expected to find documents locked away—damning proof of corruption between Bob

and some politician or criminal. There had to be something, at least as far as Earl was concerned, for Earl had the benefit of righteous intuition on his side. His intentions were pure enough, and that was how and why he convinced himself that he was a hero for breaking in, not merely a lowly common criminal. Rumors had spread about extortion, bribes, kickbacks, and misappropriation of government funds, but the authorities never made a case, and nothing was ever done. As far as Earl knew, Bob Sockolosky was probably laughing and smiling with the governor at that very moment, scheming to skim millions more over champagne and caviar in a swanky hotel ballroom.

But again, Earl was no master thief, and doing anything physical with one arm had its disadvantages. He had been teaching history at a local high school for the past twenty-three years. In his younger days, though, he had apprenticed for a locksmith in Stillwater from the age of sixteen. Then he attended Oklahoma State University while continuing to work for the locksmith. He got his degrees and then, when he turned twenty-six, finally quit the locksmith job to move up to Tulsa to teach advanced history classes to high school students who rarely cared about who won the Battle of 1812 or who Otto von Bismarck was. Earl still remembered the skills he learned while apprenticing. Few people in Tulsa knew anything about his adolescence and the decade he spent honing his skills as a professional lockpicker. After seeing the safe in the magazine photograph, Earl bought the same make and model for his own home and practiced on it for a

few weeks, so he was confident he could crack the safe within five minutes and be back to his car within fifteen.

Earl approached a side door that led to one of the kitchens and pulled a tension wrench from his jacket pocket, which he used to pick the simple deadbolt. Once in the kitchen, he closed the door behind him, returned the tension wrench to his jacket pocket, and pulled out a small LED flashlight to guide himself through a hall and toward Bob's office.

The office was more august than expected. Earl observed several bookcases filled with legal volumes, almanacs, and first editions; a full bar built into a mahogany wall; a Persian rug in the room's center; and a few leather chairs facing a big, oversized desk with a giant hourglass on top of it. The room had a few paintings on the walls, and Earl recognized the one from the magazine article. It was an original modernist work from the 1930s by Max Ernst, with shapes that Earl couldn't fathom, but he still knew it was worth a great deal. The painting looked heavy, and Earl took a few moments to peruse it and decide exactly how he'd properly remove it from the wall with only one hand. Earl laid the flashlight on Bob's desk to illuminate the painting. Then he moved into position in front of the canvas. He settled for holding the right side of the frame with his right hand, the left side with the nub of his left arm, and he positioned his right knee at the bottom of the artwork to scoot it up and unlatch it from its hooks on the wall mount. He carefully lowered the image to rest on the ground and then dragged it to the side so he could get to work on the safe.

If Earl had been confronting a state-of-the-art safe, he might have had to resort to using a drill or heavy tools, but this safe was an 86-pound Amsec with a combination lock. If your goal is to fend off petty thieves who are brandishing simple run-of-the-mill crowbars, this type of steel box will keep them at bay just fine. A professional locksmith, though, can easily crack such contraptions with just one hand and a good ear. It was a simple enough process—no need for a stethoscope or anything like you've seen in the movies.

Earl spun the dial with a slight amount of trepidation. He took his time, slowly rotating the dial one way, then another, back in the other direction, and finally—*click*. The steel bolts retracted. He pulled the lever, and the door released. Earl exhaled noisily and then heavily panted like he'd been holding his breath for an hour, sweat dripping from his forehead. He shook his head and said, "All right, let's see what we've got here." He wiped sweat from his brow and then grabbed the flashlight from the desk and popped it into his mouth, aiming into the safe's dark interior.

He pulled items from the safe one at a time and laid them on Bob's garish desk. There were some manila file folders, none of which contained anything about finances or government entanglements. There was Bob's will, his children's birth certificates, corporate documents, and tax filings—nothing out of the ordinary. Then something in the back of the dark steel box caught Earl's attention, something he had seen before: a small, black velvet bag tied closed with a lace cord, the way sweatpants are closed with a drawstring. Earl carefully placed the documents and manila folders back

into the safe and removed the velvet bag. He scrutinized it with his hand, feeling the contents and knowing it was his last chance to salvage the risky evening of virtuous intrigue by finding proof of Bob's crooked dealings. He imagined the evidence being so significant and urgent that newspapers would praise him; he imagined the culprits being promptly removed from office and charged with crimes, so no one would mind that he broke into a home to find his evidence. It was the childish pipedream of a man so consumed by his conspiracy theories that he could fabricate any confirmation bias necessary.

Earl loosened the drawstring, carefully poured the bag's contents onto the desk, and then gasped at what spilled out. Four sparkling blue diamonds rolled onto the desk, each around the length of a long fingernail. Earl knew nothing about fine jewelry, but it was clear enough that they could be worth millions, which almost guaranteed they were connected to money laundering or an otherwise nefarious activity. Earl was sure he would find the answers if he just looked hard enough. He paced the room facing the desk, considered his options, reconsidered and second-guessed, and then repeated the process. He glanced from the safe to the painting, then to the window, and finally back to the diamonds. A stout ceramic planter on Bob's work desk contained a Juniper bonsai tree, and small rocks roughly the same size as the diamonds lined the base of the planter. Earl took four of the stones from the planter, put them into the velvet bag, and stashed the bag in the far back of the safe.

He had just closed the safe, locked it, and exhaled deeply when he heard a car moving up the driveway. The noise shook him. Could it be Bob returning home early? Or maybe someone had identified him breaking in and called the police. Maybe there was an alarm system after all, but a silent one. In that split second, every possibility occurred to Earl, and he realized he wasn't built for the bold life of a cat burglar. He should have stuck to his day job, teaching high school kids lessons they would forget a week later. He was not one for danger and could feel his stomach tensing into knots.

Earl rushed to the office window behind the desk and peered out the blinds. What he found didn't provide him any comfort. A black SUV had passed the gold entrance gate and was steadily rolling toward the house, already nearing the circular driveway. It was Bob's Lincoln Navigator. He had made it home early after all. Earl looked around the room, panicked, and then picked up the four diamonds and hurried into Bob's windowless bathroom attached to the office. He turned on the light and scanned the room, looking for a practical solution. In the toilet, of all places, something caught his attention. There it was, in all its disgusting glory: a floating condom in the water basin, surely well used. One man's trash is another man's salvation, or something like that.

Earl set the four blue diamonds on the sink counter and hunched over the toilet, looking at the clear rubber in excited disgust. Then he looked at the door, calculating whether he could flee through the hallway and out of the kitchen unnoticed. But then he remembered his age, his bad knee, and his gnawing fear of being shot running from a

stranger's house. Oklahoma is one of those states where just about everyone owns a gun. It was a near certainty that Bob owned one, and Earl wanted to die from old age, not from the bullets of someone defending his home from a one-armed, ski-masked vigilante.

Earl looked at the floating johnny, knowing he might have only another minute or two until Bob Sockolosky discovered the presence of an intruder, at which point Earl would undoubtedly be searched and the diamonds would be found. He bit his lip while staring angrily at the receptacle of human spawn circling the vessel of human waste. Then he did the unthinkable. Earl Derkatch reached into the toilet bowl, apprehensive at first, then quickly, as though he were ripping off a Band-Aid. He snagged the condom from the water and tossed it into the sink. Making haste, he sprayed liquid soap on top and inside of the sheath and turned on the faucet to give it a quick cleansing rinse, as though something like that could ever be sterile again, let alone after being in a toilet. Once satisfied that it was clean as it could be, he held it upside down to empty it of water. Then he placed the four diamonds from the counter into the contraceptive. He tried to squeeze all the air out of it and tied the end into a knot like a balloon, which is not so easy to do with just one hand. Earl looked into the mirror with a grimace, not sure if he was about to cry or vomit. Then he tilted his head back, lifted the condom above his head, and placed it into his mouth. He tried to swallow it like a drug mule coming in from Tijuana. The slamming of the house's front door made Earl panic again as he completed a problematic gulp.

Earl quietly turned on the sink faucet and splashed his mouth with water before fully swallowing the contraband into his heaving, unwilling belly. Then the nasty task was complete: he had safely stored the treasure inside himself. He sighed, turned off the bathroom light, and committed to waiting five minutes for Bob to go to bed. Then he would try to sneak out. The best-case scenario was that Bob would be tired and go straight to his room upstairs. That was most likely, Earl reasoned. After all, what purpose could Bob possibly have for going into his office so late? However, if Bob did go into his office, he would find the painting on the ground, check his safe, possibly discover the diamonds were missing, find Bob in the bathroom, and put two and two together. Earl prayed that would not be the case.

The minutes passed slowly. Finally, Earl summoned the courage to begin his escape. Quietly and tentatively, he turned the bathroom doorknob and stepped into the office. It was dark, and the painting was still on the floor where Earl had left it. He didn't see signs of anyone, so he took another step.

Wham!

Something struck Earl in the back of his head—something as brutal and unforgiving as a metal baseball bat. Earl toppled forward, put his hand out to brace his fall, and landed, unconscious, on the floor.

Earl opened his eyes to find himself seated and tied to one of the leather chairs in the office, except now the lights were on, two men in suits stood before him, and the safe door was open again—his worst-case scenario. The back of his head was throbbing, and he could tell there would be an

enormous lump and a lasting headache. His ski mask had been removed, so Earl's pathetic, defeated face was on full display. One of the men was Bob Sockolosky, and the other was Walter Murphy, one of the vermin who worked for Bob. He likely drove Bob home, since Bob stunk of scotch. Bob poured himself a fresh glass and then pulled out a pipe and a match. He unhurriedly filled the pipe with tobacco, lit it with a match, and puffed intently. Then he sat at his desk across from Earl. Earl noticed the velvet bag on the desk, empty again, with the four Bonsai rocks sitting next to it. Despite his probable concussion, he knew that they knew.

"Good morning," Bob said sarcastically. "So who are you? What are you doing in my house?"

Earl remembered he had carried no identification with him. He had at least been wise enough for that, though he knew all they had to do to identify him was go down the road and find his car. His wallet, car insurance, and even lesson plans were all there. "Oh, uh, I was just passing by, and I thought I heard someone screaming, so I jumped over the fence and came in to make sure everything was okay. Which it looks like it is. So I can get out of your hair now if you'll just…"

"You broke into the safe and stole some diamonds just to make sure everything was all right? That's why you were in the bathroom? Making sure things are okay?" Walter had a whiny voice, but it still scared Earl.

"Yes. I do this all the time. I have excellent hearing, and if I hear someone crying out for help, I come running."

"Where the fuck are the diamonds?" the whiny voice screamed back.

"I don't know anything about any diamonds, and I, uh…" Earl didn't know what to do or say, but he knew he was not getting out of the situation without further confrontation. Walter smacked Earl across the face. The slap stung his cheek and flared up the throbbing sensation on the back of his head.

"Listen, fucker! This won't end well for you if you play this game. You have one chance." Bob held up the empty velvet bag for Earl to see. "We know they're not on you because we searched you when you were knocked out. Tell us where they are right now, and we'll let you go. Simple as that. We'll forget about this entire ordeal. Call it a night."

"Obviously, those diamonds were obtained illegally," Earl retorted. "Otherwise, you would have called the cops, and they'd be asking the questions right now."

"It wasn't me." Bob flailed his arms and stood to pour himself another scotch, agitated. "It was a one-armed man."

"I really don't appreciate jokes about my arm."

Bob nodded at Walter and took a long pull from his stiff drink. "You know, I have a feeling I saw you the other night. Were you at the casino?"

"Maybe that was someone else with one arm," Earl responded defiantly.

"Right. So that's your final answer? Not going to tell us where my diamonds are?"

Earl smiled like one of his smart-ass, trouble-making students who thought they could get away with anything. "You can't keep me here forever."

"I don't have time for this," Bob said. "I'm going to sleep. Kill him. Search his body; search his car. I'm sure it's the one parked down the road. The diamonds are here somewhere. Bury him in the spot out in Okmulgee where they're pouring concrete."

Earl gulped, and Walter pulled a revolver from a shoulder holster and pointed it at Earl.

"Not in here, you doofus," Bob said. "You'll ruin the rug. It was fifty grand. Take him out in the backyard and do him on the grass. And put a tarp in the back of the Navigator so you don't get blood on everything this time. Try to be smart, Walter. I'm exhausted. Meet me back here in the morning with the good news that you found my diamonds."

Earl felt genuine despair and prayed silently.

Bob walked to the door, paused, and then turned back to Earl. "Say. Where are my dogs?"

Earl shrugged stupidly, and Bob shook his head, heading toward the door.

"No, wait!" Earl called desperately. He figured there would be more back-and-forth, but Bob left the room.