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Calumet City

Charlie Newton

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OFFICER PATTI BLACK

There's this place in Chinatown.

Off Wentworth Avenue in the 25th Ward, where the four-story walkups lean out over the street. Buildings not yet leveled by urban renewal, mattress fires, or debts to the wrong politicians. The kind of neighborhood that scares people who look too close.

A block east the 'L' screeches overhead, sharp like it's mad, metal-on-metal that bitters the back of your throat. Amtrak runs up there too, on iron bridging painted gray to match the concrete it shades. Above and below and beyond the trains, twenty lanes of loud expressways rumble and honk in four directions. Everything at ground level vibrates, the sense of movement so strong you can lose your balance.

During the day Great Lakes sailors and bus–tour adventurers shop for trinkets and a glimpse of something that isn't here; at night it's a Mexican border town selling vice in Mandarin. Behind the pagoda storefronts and across the alley, the Outfit runs dice and card rooms, and the Chinese Merchants Association with their teenage hitmen run everything else.

Me, I'm sitting in a side-street restaurant with faded Chinese characters for an address and six tables for locals who should know better. It's dim in here, and that's unusual. The floor's dirty, and that isn't. Rice kettles and radiators steam the stale air humid. Back by the kitchen an old woman sits smoking unfiltered cigarettes down to her fingertips and has for as long as I can remember. We don't speak, her and I; we stare out the front window. Her eyes hide behind the smoke and that's probably a good thing – she hears what I hear: the echoes of a long, violent struggle between me and the devil.

The devil has a man's first and last name – you need to believe that – he's got saliva, busy hands, and a Bible he quotes, and shoes that are always new. But he's the devil just the same.

And he's out there beyond the glass. I've seen his footprints. And so has she.

For the last seventeen years I've come to this restaurant, always alone. Every Friday night since I came on the job. Back then Patti Black was a tough–talking twenty-one, but it was bluster. At heart I was a little-white-girl orphan with bad history and worse dreams, hoping to hide inside a uniform from history that won't let you hide.

Seventeen years I've sat at this same table, looking out this same window, me and a nightmare secret that's kept me a well–armed coward. Tonight I face it: We finish here. I'm bruised and cut, there's a pistol in my pocket that doesn't belong to me, and the taste of its barrel in my mouth. You might say the clock's running. 'Cause it is.

Chapter 1

SEVEN DAYS AGO

It's Monday in Chicago, which is actually worse than it sounds.

Our bookies, palm readers, and civil servants are all doing double-shift overtime. We're in an end-of-season baseball thing – the Cubs and Sox are still alive. A planetary alignment so rare that today's *Herald* suggested biblical implications.

It's also election eve.

And then there's the other *thing* – nineteen hours ago a 'lone gunman' tried to kill our mayor. Three bullets. High caliber. All into the airspace surrounding his and his wife's expensive haircuts.

As you might imagine, our police department is experiencing a bit of discomfort over this. At least above the rank of sergeant there's a bit of discomfort. Below the rank of sergeant we're more focused on policing the city, saving mankind, and stealing the odd apple here and there. Don't get me wrong, I like the mayor – his wife Mary Kate's a bitch, but that's another story – and I don't think Hizzoner should die in office. And as long as my sergeant's not frustrated or hungry, neither does he: big, badass Irish Sonny Barrett.

At this moment Sonny's face is mostly two-handed sandwich. But neither the breaded steak nor the Dan Ryan's southbound trucks lumbering overhead slow his comments on my appearance. 'I'm tellin' you, Patti, and no shit now, you gotta drop a few.'

I'm only 5′6″ and change, but I have a pistol, and although Sonny can't see it under my faded windbreaker, he knows it's there. He's seen me use it. 'Really? You think?'

Sonny nods across the battered fender that separates us, eyes my figure or his opinion thereof, and keeps eating. The other five officers in our Tactical Unit (TAC) are doing the same, enjoying Sonny's lounge act with their Ricobene's – medium-sized, breaded-steak footballs with tomato sauce.

'Don't mind workin' with fat chicks, but shit . . .'

I weigh half what he does and often think Sonny and I would be better off if he were severely wounded in the line of duty. Had he not saved my life on Seventy-ninth, over by St. Rita's, I would've shot him long ago. And I still might. See, we have sort of an unwritten rule in our crew – my personal appearance and your opinion, compliment, or critique, don't need to mingle. But Sonny's safe today and knows it. After this tailgate lunch we're serving a stolen-property warrant on a Gangster Disciples building. A warrant that requires all seven of us be alive. There are thirty thousand members of the GDs nationwide, probably a third or more headquartered in Chicago. Many, if not all, can be on the violent side of unpleasant.

I, on the other hand, am a model of self-control when responding to my sergeant. 'And your freight-train ass is modeling underwear?'

My partner Cisco Pike reaches to mediate and sloshes coffee

across the hood of our Ford, stammering something nobody understands. Cisco has a speech impediment when he's flustered; I think it makes him semi-adorable, but not enough for what you're thinking. Like Cisco, my fellow TAC officers are chuckling, trying to imagine Sergeant Sonny Barrett BVD-clad and runway-ready. Only I bother to wipe at the coffee.

This TAC vehicle, like all the others, is a beater – five years on the job, one hubcap, and two-thirds of the paint it had when new. In Chicago TAC officers only drive what the detectives won't. The dicks wear department-store blazers and knowing expressions. We wear body armor and quick-draw holsters, clothes you could garden in, and tomato sauce on our sleeves – although that's primarily Sonny. Many of the brass and media rate TAC officers only slightly above the outlaws we police. We invite both groups to ride the ghetto with us. Better still, without us. Bring the wife and kids; make a day of it.

District 6, where we work, like districts 2 and 7, is not a good place to be. For anyone. There's plenty of harsh on both sides, plenty of animosity, enough to poison families for generations. Trust me, I know: I came from a place like this. Bosses and reporters ask me why I don't work Traffic instead. Traffic doesn't help and that's as far as I can explain it. I want to help, and most of the folks down here get so little, it wouldn't add up to pity.

Sonny hard-eyes me across the fender and taps the hood. '*How 'bout you break-this-shit-down, Patti Ann, one last time for da brothers*.'

Good sergeants let you run your own warrants; mine wants a replay of the raid diagram while he looks for a street-corner high-five to go with his modified pimp roll. He looks stupid, sort

of a cross between a grizzly bear and an Irishman two beers into the parade, but I know why he's doing it. A focused and loose crew makes fewer mistakes.

Cisco smiles at Sonny's act, then at me. Without me, Cisco would be three times dead, and there isn't a moment when that statistic is lost on him. If luck is real – and it damn sure is – then I'm his and he's mine. Other than his tendency toward fad cologne, Cisco's perfect. *Almost* perfect – there is the occasional smatter of night-school psychobabble. Since spring, his college homework has often been focused at me and the illusion that I have shortcomings. 'Issues,' Cisco likes to call them now that he's educated: 'An unapproachable self' – figure that out while you're rolling through the ghetto. 'Avoidance of thread' – another simple one he says has to do with 'connecting the dots of one's life.' And yesterday's comment, that I still play rugby every weekend and won't wear nail polish. That one I get. I have trouble being a *girl* girl, but that's none of his fucking business, is it? Then there's this other rumor, that I only take criticism well as long as I don't hear it.

Sonny burps and says, 'Okay, cowboys, saddle up.' He's done eating, so the rest of us need to be. 'We gon get us some stereo equipment.'

The attempt on the mayor ceases to matter, as do our cultural differences on the Cubs and Sox. We toss the coffee, pack the papers, and bag the cups. I keep everyone's edible scraps; they help sustain most of the stray animals in 6 and save me from buying them emergency hot dogs.

Everyone checks their pistols. Mine's the only revolver, and they mention that all the time too. Three of us check shotguns. I draw the plan a second time on my hood. Everyone nods, the

levity fading, the adrenaline coming. Two of the boys will handle the Chicago bar and the sixteen-pound hammer. I'll do the door since I know the perps. They'll hear, 'Better to live till tomorrow,' then it's up to them. And occasionally GDs make very poor decisions.

Sonny drops his chin, eyeing all of us; he's lost two partners where we're going, one dead, one to a wheelchair. 'These are bad people, kids. None of us die today.'

We all nod. Eloquent he's not, but Sonny Barrett's always on the money.

This far south, Halsted Street looks like what it is. And the seven of us look like what we are – three TAC cars rolling fast in convoy, passing street-corner lookouts with junior high educations and only one question: *Where?* They're part; we're part, everyone mixed into the swizzle and swazzle. Sonny's Ford makes a left on Vincennes; he has the lead, burning oil we can taste.

Three blocks and we'll be at the dead end of Gilbert Court. Two uniform officers died there in '03, shot fifteen times in their car. My heart's starting to ramp, keeping time with the song in my head. Springsteen's 'Born in the U.S.A.' Cisco's smiling, at what I'm not sure. He does that with some frequency.

Sonny's Ford is pushing 50 and so's ours; the brick storefronts start to blur, hand–painted signs mush into one sentence, 'Big Julie's Suit Up, Temple Mercy, Time Out Lounge, Esta's Chicken Wings.' The shotgun bumps heavy against my vest; I've never had to kill anyone. You make me, and I will, nobody on these streets doubts that, but I lose sleep over a split–second decision that's *right here, right now* all the time.

Two blocks. This neighborhood is ten square miles, parts of which most Americans wouldn't believe were in our country. I've been here since I was twenty-one, watched it change from white to black, working-class to poor, then poor to ghetto. Plywood covers more windows than glass, and not because it's cheaper.

One block. We're doing 60 now. I know all the people who operate these stores, people who try like those who tried before them. Their lives can't be fixed with sermons or promises. Both are popular but useless down here; it's a war zone in every sense of the term – poverty, dope, and gangs, gangs like small countries have armies.

Cisco hits the brakes.

Lookouts yell, '5-0! 5-0!' and scatter.

Our three cars make the turn. In an instant Gilbert Court is flooded by seven white cops with dead-serious expressions, two with shotguns running to the building's rear, me with a twelve-gauge charging the front. Cisco has the Chicago bar, Eric Jackson the hammer. We're on the steps and I'm knocking with my foot. Sonny and the boys are right behind us ready to pour in when the door goes.

'POLICE. We got a warrant, Carlos. Open it NOW!'

Three, two, one. I stand back, Cisco wedges the bar, Eric slams the hammer. The door and frame splinter, a good sign. Fortification usually means armament.

Big flash. Then the roar. The door and frame explode in our faces. *Machine gun*. Cisco's down and Eric Jackson's firing. I'm bent sideways and blind. Pistols bang from behind. I can't see and drop to a knee. Eric sails over the railing. Concussions run together; the air's cordite and flashes. Can't hear – hands grab me, something clubs me in the face. An arm chokes my neck . . .

I fight, kick, claw – *anything not to be taken*, can't see to shoot. I'm headlocked, being dragged by a gorilla with four arms. Big shotgun blasts from the back. Guys yelling. Three gangsters rush past; the gorilla pushes me toward the center.

'Hostage, motherfucka! Hostage 5-0!'

Sonny's firing. I'm choking out and slam a crotch with my shotgun. *Big blast* from mine and behind, then another, and I'm down on a knee. The four-armed gorilla becomes two GDs who drop me and sprint retreat through the apartment. They slam open the back door and I'm chasing before I realize I'm standing. In the tiny yard our backup shotguns are engaged by GDs with pistols banging from the building's corners. My two make it into the alley and across, running for the nearest six-flat. One turns to fire. I duck; he falls, we scramble up, both running again. I can't afford to shoot into the six-flat and miss. He doesn't give a shit and fires twice.

Shotguns roar behind me. At the neighbor's stoop I stumble, don't think, and bolt into the hallway. Five steps in I see both GDs sprinting out the back and something surreal charging up out of the basement stairwell. Two white ComEd workers hit me like linebackers. I'm down, suddenly swimming in gasoline and there's no air. The white guys run out a door into daylight. I cough blind and try to stand. More gunshots make me duck. Framed in the doorway a white van squeals away. I fan through the fumes for GDs – none on the floor; none on the stairs. Cough; blink. Gasoline's everywhere.

Gasoline.

'FIRE! FIRE!'

The basement has to be full of gas, and the building's three floors full of people. I pound on first–floor doors nobody in

their right mind would open. 'FIRE! FIRE! Get out!' If anyone's smoking anything, I'll be a torch. I take the stairs higher two at a time. 'Out! Out!' More doors, more pounding. A woman opens and I grab her. 'GET OUT. Building's on fire!' She balks and I jerk her into the hall. 'OUT! OUT!' Doors crack; white eyes; children crouch, heads peek down through the stair railing. Nobody's safe here, ever; nobody's sure. I smell like a bomb. 'C'mon people, out in the alley. Now. Now. NOW.'

Dogs bark and run everywhere. The six-flat's empty – thirty angry, scared citizens have been pushed through the fences to Gilbert Court. No one has belongings, no picture frames or dishes. Gilbert Court is chaos; the neighborhood's already marshaling, jeering from the windows and shaking their fists. Squads scream in. Two white cops are down but alive. Two black gangsters are dead in the blood, glass, weapons, and wood shards. Brass casings and Cisco cover the stoop. Cisco's staring at me from his back, eyes cloudy, his speech impediment half there, half not. 'Smell like a S-shell station. Whata happen?'

Before I can help him a hand grabs my shoulder. I spin and punch and it's a fireman staggering back. We're both confused. Another one points at me, 'Your clothes, asshole. C'mere,' and he shoves me with a small hose. An EMT rushes Cisco, I get a shower.

A cold one. The fireman tells me to 360; the water pressure's triple my shower at home and I have to brace against it, eyes closed. Cisco's laughing, ringside for a body-armor wet T-shirt contest. The water quits as Cisco's EMT pats him and flashes thumbs–up to her partner. I stumble, fogged on adrenaline and still smell like gas, just less so. Two more EMTs have Eric

Jackson standing, but not under his own power. He looks loopy but his feet are moving, scuffing past the youngest of the dead GDs. I squeegee water and slick back my hair, trying to find steady, then recognize the sprawled body; I know the dead boy's mother.

I turn back to help Cisco and his EMT. The fireman in my face says, 'Strip,' then points to another fellow like they do this all the time, 'Give her a jacket.'

I give him the finger. *In your fucking dreams, homes*. He shrugs at stupid and joins firemen running across the alley. Cisco's on a gurney. My eyes jump to the gasolined six-flat expecting flames. No flames; no occupants died. Deep breath – *c'mon, baby, slow it down*. Dying in a fire is a bad way to go, old people especially. They seem to just curl up in a corner and wait for it to take them. More sirens; our uniforms have the perimeter of the whole block. Our own small army, like every cop in 6 and 7 is here. It's a weird picture for the citizens and always is – the ghetto's rhythm just floating along, then BANG, 5-0 every-damn-where. Makes you wonder what the vibe's like after we're gone.

Sonny's at my shoulder, his pistol pointed at the pavement. 'You all right, P?'

'Huh? Eric's okay, right?'

'Vest stopped it at the shoulder, knocked the fuck out of him, though. Dislocated it.'

I spin to find Cisco. Sonny watches Cisco waving weak as he's put in the ambulance and says Cisco's gonna be off work a while, but he's too educated to die. My knees weaken as the adrenaline dies off and Sonny grabs my collar. I fracture a smile and don't knock his hand away. 'Lotta bullets for some stereo equipment.'

Sonny appears to be having similar thoughts but doesn't share.

'Gonna be more medals for this, P; soaked in fuckin' gasoline and evac-ing a building.' He shakes his head, tilting toward Ireland like he does after five beers. 'I'm hatin' to admit it, but you a gutsy bit a skirt,' and he headlocks me to his vest, a tear in his eye. I know Sonny Barrett; it's definitely the gasoline.

Within minutes Gilbert Court is surrounded by angry citizens. Three media trucks arrive followed by the Homicide dicks who'll run the crime scene while OPS – Office of Professional Standards – watches, waiting to write up the officer–involved shootings. An OPS officer's already eyeing me and my shotgun. This means it will be a long day of interviews after the dicks clear the scene.

The crime-scene techs arrive while the uniforms push back taunting citizens, then string miles of yellow tape. I notice our Watch LT from 6. He's the lieutenant who runs our shift, an 'empty-holster motherfucker' it has been said by those less respectful than I. He and an assistant state's attorney are shoulder-to-shoulder, arms folded, second-guessing our actions. The black bodies aren't covered and look strangely potent on the pavement. Now they're focal, not random and nameless. They're connected to consequences and careers. A black woman I know calls me to the tape.

'Why you kill those boys, Patti Black?'

Although it seems really simple, it isn't. 'You know, Drea. When they shoot at us, we're gonna shoot back.' I point at the two converted TEC-9s in the street. 'Those aren't TV machine guns.'

The boy next to her isn't four feet tall. He's watching from under the tape and says, 'Like on TV?' Drea shoos him away but he just loops her hips and tugs at my jeans. 'You all wet.'

I squat and my knees hold. His little hand squeezes water from my sweatshirt and he laughs. I point at the fireman. 'That man gave me a shower. Thought I smelled bad.'

The boy squints. Drea says, 'That's Ruth Ann's boy, Robert. Ain't it?'

I nod, imagining Ruth Ann's face on her porch twenty minutes from now when they come to tell her Robert's dead. He'll be her third. I wince and tell the pavement: 'Really hate it shit like this has to happen.'

And I do.

Our Watch LT has moved to my left so Channel 7's sunbrites can pick up his name and the glint from his silver bars. He tells a Homicide dick, 'She does love our African Americans.'

I turn into the Homicide dick's answer – 'Almost as much as she does the reporters.' He stares right at me. 'Clears two or three murders, bitch thinks she's a dick.'

Our Watch LT frowns agreement and checks the camera. 'Does *not* hurt to have the superintendent's ear either.'

The dick smiles, adding volume: 'Ain't just his ear.'

He and I are sharing eight feet of pavement and Channel 7's camera lens. I make him forty pounds over and figure his wife has a boyfriend, hopefully two, and different colors.

The fireman who hosed me steps between us and says, 'You might want to look at this.'

I can't tell whether he's refereeing or he really has something. If he does, he needs to talk to the dicks running the scene, not me. I walk with him mainly because it's away from my temper and my two fans with rank. As we pass the second body, a *Tribune* reporter I know yells my name. I say, 'Sorry,' and point at the guys in the blazers and keep walking.

The street deputy arrives with his entourage. He's a deputy superintendent, the highest CPD rank who responds to crime scenes and wields the superintendent's authority. All the manpower that doesn't migrate to him stays focused on the shoot-out crime scene. So far, only the firemen are interested in the gasolined six-flat – it's theirs until they release it. As we cross the alley to the six–flat the fireman comments that it's odd the building has a Gilbert Court address, then says, 'Fuck those two. That move took balls, lady. You come to work for us whenever you want.'

He registers as honest, a nice change from most men. His eyes linger a bit longer than they should; probably a compliment but it just makes me fidget. 'What're we looking at?'

'Basement.'

Downstairs, the six-flat's basement is flooded twenty-four inches and already stinks. I stay on the stairs. He looks at me like more water can't hurt, but he doesn't have to buy my gym shoes. The other firemen are ringing back from a wall section they hacked up by the furnace. I squat and squint. One shines a light that reflects on the tricolor water. There's something white in the rainbow. A bone. No, a hand, palm up with long rigid fingers and no skin. The floating hand's connected to a sleeved arm and part of a body buried in the wall.

Don't see that every day.

The fireman waves me over. I slosh across – a mistake, since this basement is now a homicide scene. Up close, the bones wear a woman's velour jacket popular in the '90s; she's crunched, facing away and tied with leather ligatures that run from neck to wrist. One ligature has snapped with age. I try to see her face but can't. The fireman points his light inside the crypt over dead

worms and roaches at what looks like fingernail ruts in the wood.

He exhales in a whoosh, then says, 'Went in alive.'

The hand's floating near my shin; her fingertips are jagged. Above them her wrist bones have a metal wrist restraint, *perv-manacles* we call them, sex-crime equipment that vice and child services see more often than us.

My wrists have manacle scars too, hard welts I avoid when I wash. She's barefoot. I wasn't allowed shoes when I was pregnant at fifteen. It was in the Bible and kept me from running away; they wanted the baby. The ankle bones glint in the light, but I don't look. There might be manacles on them too. The basement shrinks; fouled air thickens, gasoline water wants to rise over my head. I stumble, flashing through years of piecing together a me, making a person out of the wreckage. I don't want to fall, not in this water, not near the hand with the manacles. And I won't, if I quit thinking.

About all the things I've spent twenty–three years not thinking about.