

The Hundredth Man

Jack Kerley

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CHAPTER 1

“A guy’s walking his dog late one night. . . .”

I watched Harry Nautilus lean against the autopsy table and tell the World’s Greatest Joke to a dozen listeners holding napkin-wrapped cups and plastic wineglasses. Most were bureaucrats from the city of Mobile and Mobile County. Two were lawyers; prosecution side, of course. Harry and I were the only cops. There were dignitaries around, mostly in the reception area where the main morgue rededication events were scheduled. The ribbon cutting had been an hour back, gold ribbon, not black, as several wags had suggested.

“What kind of dog?” Arthur Peterson asked. Peterson was a deputy prosecutor and his question sounded like an objection.

“A mutt,” Harry grunted, narrowing an eye at the interruption. “A guy is walking his mutt named Fido down the street when he spots a man on his hands and knees under a streetlight.”

Harry took a sip of beer, licked foam from his bulldozer-blade mustache, and set his cup on the table about where a head would be.

“The dog walker asks the man if he’s lost something. Man says, ‘Yeah, my contact lens popped out.’ So the dog walker ties Fido to a phone pole and gets down on his hands and knees to help. They search up and down, back and forth, beneath that light. Fifteen minutes later the dog walker says, ‘Buddy, I can’t find it anywhere. Are you sure it popped out here?’ The man says, ‘No, I lost it over in the park.’ ‘The park?’ the dog walker yells. ‘Then why the hell are we looking in the street?’”

Harry gave it a two-beat build.

“The man points to the streetlamp and says, ‘The light’s better here.’”

Harry laughed, a musical warble at odds with a black man built like an industrial boiler. His audience tittered politely. An attractive redhead in a navy pantsuit frowned and said, “I don’t get it. Why’s that the world’s greatest joke?”

“It has mythical content,” Harry replied, the right half of his mustache twitching with interest, the left drooping in disdain. “Given the choice of groping after something in the dark, or hoping to find it easily in the light, people pick the light ninety-nine times out of a hundred.”

Peterson lofted a prosecutorial eyebrow. “So who’s the hundredth guy, the one always groping in the dark?”

Harry grinned and pointed my way.

“Him,” he said.

I shook my head, showed Harry my back, and walked to the reception area. It was loud and crowded, local VIPs churning like a bucketful of mice as they scrambled for position beside an Even More Important Person or in front of a news camera. Guests huddled three deep around the buffet table. I watched a heavy woman in evening wear slip two sandwiches into her purse before puzzling over meat-balls in gravy. A dozen feet away a florid county commissioner babbled proudly for a news crew.

“ . . . like to welcome y’all to the dedication of the new faculties . . . one of the uniqueist in the nation . . . proud to have voted the fundage . . . the tragedy of Dr. Caulfield should remind us to be ever vigilant. . . .”

I saw Willet Lindy across the hall and plunged into the roiling bodies, excusing and pardoning my way his direction. A reporter from Channel 14 stared, then blocked my path.

“I know you, don’t I?” she said, tapping a scarlet talon against pursed lips. “Weren’t you part of, like, a big story a few months back, don’t tell me. . . .”

I spun and ducked and left her puzzling over my fifteen minutes of fame. Willet Lindy stood against the wall, sipping a soft drink. I pulled myself from the current and joined him.

“It’s Wal-Mart three days before Christmas, Will,” I said,

loosening my tie and wincing at something dark dribbled on my shirt; following the same cosmic dictum that buttered bread always falls sticky side down, the stain was impossible to hide with my sport jacket. Lindy grinned and scooted sideways to give me a piece of wall for leaning. He was four years past my age of twenty-nine, but his gnomish face and receding hairline made him look a decade older. Lindy managed the nonmedical functions of the facility, such as maintenance and purchasing. I'd known him a year or so, starting when my detective status made me privy to the secrets of the morgue.

"Nice renovation of the place," I said. "Looks brand-new." Lindy was a shorter guy, five seven or eight, and I had to speak down half a foot. Not hard, I was told I stooped naturally, a large puppet on slackened strings.

Lindy nodded. "Cosmetic changes aside, we replaced much of the equipment. Plus we have things we didn't have before"—he pointed to a flyspeck dot in a ceiling tile—"security cameras. Miniaturized. If something like the Caulfield incident happens again, the bomb squad can inspect the scene from a distance."

Caulfield was the first-timer pathologist whose hand had been mutilated by a bomb meant to kill a man already dead; a horrifying event, unsolved after six months. "Not a lot of cops here, Will," I said to change the subject.

Lindy raised a dissenting eyebrow. "The chief and deputy chiefs, a captain or two."

I meant *cops*, but didn't have the time, or maybe the

words, to explain the difference. As if cued, Captain Terrence Squill walked by, saw me, backed up. Squill and I had barely exchanged syllables in the past; he was so far up the ladder I squinted to see the bottoms of his shoes.

“Ryder, is it? What the hell are you doing here?” His eyes noted the blot on my shirt and his nose wrinkled. The director of Investigative Services was a compact and dapper man whose precise features and liquid, feminine eyes recalled a fortyish Orrin Hatch. The knot of his tie was so tight and symmetrical it seemed carved from marble. I knew nothing of gray suits but suspected I was looking at one fitted by a tailor.

“I got an invitation, thought I’d come and represent the department, sir.”

He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “This is not an affair for junior personnel. Did you con some City Hall bimbo into slipping your name on the list? Or did you sneak in the back door?”

I was amazed at how much anger was in his eyes while his mouth remained smiling. Anyone out of earshot would figure we were talking football or fishing. “I never sneak,” I said. “Like I told you, I got an—”

Lindy spoke up. “Excuse me, Captain?”

“What is it, Mr. Lindy?”

“Detective Ryder was invited by Dr. Peltier. She also invited his partner, Detective Nautilus.”

Squill pursed his lips as if preparing to speak or spit, shook his head, and disappeared into the crowd. I shrugged off

the incident, said I wanted to thank Dr. Peltier for the invite, and dove back into the crowd.

Clair stood at the door of her office, speaking with Alabama's attorney general and his satellites. A simple black dress set off her skin, velvet over china, and I enjoyed watching her dominate her audience. A striking forty-four-year-old woman with cropped anthracite hair and ice-blue eyes, Dr. Clair Peltier, director of the Mobile office of the Alabama Forensics Bureau, needs only spear and helmet to claim center stage in a Wagner opera. The effect is enhanced by about fifteen extra pounds, which she wears in her thighs and shoulders. When the AG and his retinue paraded away, I stepped up. With high heels she was almost tall enough for her eyes to level into mine.

"Will Lindy says you're the reason I'm here," I said, raising my cup toward those amazing eyes. "Thanks."

"No thanks are necessary, Ryder. The guest list was top-heavy with police brass. The media being here, I figured it appropriate to have some detectives in attendance. I chose you and Detective Nautilus because you might be recognizable from the Adrian case."

Carson Ryder and Harry Nautilus, token detectives, so much for the A-list. I doubted we'd still be recognizable; as demonstrated by the reporter, the media's present-tense mentality had filed the year-old case somewhere between the Norman Conquest and the Industrial Revolution. I started to thank Doc P again anyway, but an upwardly mobilized junior prosecutor shouldered me aside and presented

his giggly fiancée to “one of the top female medical examiners in the nation.”

I smiled as I walked away. “*Top female medical examiners. . .*” Clair was gonna eat that little bastard’s soul the next time they worked together.

A heavy black hand squeezed my shoulder. Harry.

“Working the crowd, amigo?” I asked.

He winked. “A bash like this, Cars, all the politicians and wannabes getting half blammed, you can’t beat it for getting milk.”

Milk was Harry’s term for inside information concerning the department or its influences. Though not a political type himself, he loved departmental gossip and always had the skinny, more milk than a herd of Guernseys. He leaned whisper close. “Rumor has it Chief Hyrum is rolling and strolling next spring, summer at latest.”

“He’s taking dancing lessons?” Harry’s rhyming affliction alternately amused or irritated me. Today was irritation.

“Early retirement, Cars. Two years early.”

I’d been a street cop for three years, a detective for one. Though I knew of the thicket of departmental politics, I was indifferent. Harry’d spent fifteen years studying them on a molecular level. I requested a translation. He paused, divining.

“Gonna be power plays, Carson. Upstaging, backstabbing, and downright lying. People that do nothing but push paper are gonna make like they’re the hottest shit since the devil’s stables.”

“How much of that manure is gonna land on our heads?”
I asked.

Harry scowled at his empty glass and pushed toward the bar, the multitude parting like water for a black Moses in pink slacks and purple shirt. “Don’t fret it and sweat it, bro,” he said over his shoulder. “We’re too far down the ladder to get caught in the shitstorm.”

My glass of iced tea was mostly cubes and I strained it through my fingers and swiped ice chips over my sweating face and the back of my neck. The effect was delicious in the night’s heat; a cold startle of wet ice and the astringent draw of tannin. I sighed at the joy of small pleasures and leaned back in my deck chair. A gibbous moon swept above, hazy and haloed, the air glutted with wet. Hours gone from the morgue rededication ceremony, bare feet propped on the railing, I watched the golden plume of an oil rig burning off gas three miles across the Gulf. Fire from the dark water seemed as exotic as a parrot in a scrub-pine woodlands.

I live on Dauphin Island, thirty miles south of Mobile, several of them water. By Island standards my place is blushingly modest, a two-bedroom cottage perched on pilings over beachfront sand, but any realtor would list it for four hundred grand. When my mother died three years back she left me enough to swing the deal. It was a time in my life when I needed a safe retreat, and where better than a box in the air above an island?

The phone rang. I reflexively patted where pockets would

be if I'd been wearing clothes, then plucked the phone from the table. It was Harry.

"We're wanted at a murder scene. Could be Piss-it's coming-out party."

"You're two months late for April Fool's, Harry. What's really happening?"

"Our inaugural ball, partner. There's a body downtown looking for a head."

Harry and I were homicide detectives in Mobile's first district, partners, our job security assured by the mindless violence of any city where the poor are abundant and tightly compressed. That shaped our world unless, according to the recently revised procedures manual, a murder displayed "*overt evidence of psychopathological or sociopathological tendencies*." Then, regardless of jurisdiction, the Psychopathological and Sociopathological Investigative Team was activated. The entire PSIT, departmentally referred to as Piss-it, of course, was Harry and me and a specialist or two we could enlist as needed. Though the unit was basically a public-relations scheme—and had never been activated—there were those in the department not happy with it.

Like me, right about now.

"Get there as fast as you can," Harry said, reading me the address. "I'll meet you out front. Use siren, flashers. Gun it and run it, don't diddle around."

"You don't want me to pick up a quart of milk and a loaf of bread?"

The phone clicked dead.

I jumped into jeans and pulled on a semiclean dress shirt, yanking a cream linen jacket from the rack to cover the shoulder rig. I stumbled down the steps, climbed into the unmarked Taurus under the house, and blew away in a spray of sand and crushed shells. The flasher and siren stayed off until I'd crossed the inky stretch of water to the mainland, where I cranked up the light show, turned on the screamer, and laid the pedal flat.

The body was in a small park on the near-southwest side of Mobile, five acres of oak and pecan trees surrounded by a turn-of-the-century neighborhood moving from decline to gentrification. Three flashing cruisers fronted the park, plus a tech services van. Two unmarkeds flanked a shiny black SUV I took as Squill's. The ubiquitous news van had its uplink antenna raised. Harry was forty feet ahead and walking toward the park entrance. I pulled to the curb and stepped out into an ambush, a sudden burst of camera light in my eyes.

"I remember you now," came a vaguely familiar voice from behind the glare. "You're Carson Ryder. You had something to do with the Joel Adrian case, right?"

I blinked and saw the woman reporter from the morgue rededication. She was in full TV-journalist bloom, lacquered hair, scarlet talons gripping a microphone like a condor holds a rabbit. Her other hand grabbed my bicep. She lifted the mike to her lips and stared at the camera.

"This is Sondra Farrel of Action Fourteen News. I'm

outside of Bowderie Park, where a headless body has been discovered. With me is Detective Carson Ryder of the—”

I scowled at the camera and unleashed a string of swear words in three real languages and one invented on the spot. There’s nothing reporters hate worse than a sound bite that bites back. The reporter shoved my arm away. “Shit,” she said to the cameraman. “Cut.”

I caught up with Harry at the entrance to the park, guarded by a young patrolman. He gave me a look.

“You’re Carson Ryder, aren’t you?”

I looked down and mumbled something that could have gone either way. As we passed by, the patrolman pointed at his uniform and asked Harry, “How do I get out of this as fast as Ryder did?”

“Be damned good or damned crazy,” Harry called over his shoulder.

“Which one’s Ryder?” the young cop asked. “Good or crazy?”

“Damned if he ain’t a little of both,” Harry yelled. Then to me, “Hurry.”