

Cold Quarry

By Brent Ladd

A Codi Sanders Adventure Thriller

Dedicated to my daughter Makenzie—the Codi Sanders of my family.

She seems to be at her best when the trail is roughest.

Chapter One

(Based on actual events)

AUGUST 14th 1962 – NEW ENGLAND – ROUTE 3 – 4:12 P.M.

Mist pooled on the faded cracked pavement as Red crushed the stub of his last cigarette with his heel. It joined a group of six others smashed into the wet blacktop. He pinched a bit of loose tobacco from the tip of his tongue and looked up. They were late. Every prior surveillance had revealed a ten-minute variance at most, and now, on the day of the heist, the truck was nowhere in sight. He paced nervously trying not to look out of place parked on the overpass. His companion, Joe, was standing next to their brown Pontiac's open hood looking just as perplexed. If it weren't for the seriousness of the moment at hand, Red would have laughed out loud at his partner's looks. Joe was a large man, at least six foot with wide shoulders and a grim expression. The funny thing was the yellow summer dress and high heels he was wearing. He even had red lipstick smeared across thick uncaring lips, and a blonde wig. A wig that must have been uncomfortable, as he kept scratching and readjusting it, as they stood there and waited. He looked ridiculous. This was a broad no one could love.

“What?” Joe said. “You try putting this on, let alone walk in these ridiculous shoes.”

“Hey.” Red raised his hands in surrender. “You are looking mighty fine from here.”

“Screw you, Red.”

Patches of August rain slowly began to settle over the New England countryside as the sun raced towards the horizon, ending its failed contest with the clouds for the day. The air was thick with the smell of wet pine pitch and exhaust. Red couldn't take the waiting on top of the Clark County overpass. He felt like a cornered tourist with an illegible map. With every car that passed beneath, he was getting more wound up. He ran his fingers through his rain-slicked black hair and decided they should try driving back and forth to look less suspicious.

“Let's go for a ride,” Red said, as he closed the hood.

He and his “date” pulled the Pontiac back on the road and slowly crossed to the other side.

“What on earth are they doing?” Thomas said, through a pair of palmed binoculars, his elbows resting on the hood of his green Oldsmobile. Thomas was the brain behind the operation. He had planned every detail down to the minute, but the truck they were expecting was more than thirty minutes overdue. His lookouts were now driving back and forth across the Clark County overpass like two lost Sunday drivers who couldn't find an onramp.

He was wearing the gray pants and shirt of a Massachusetts State Police Trooper, and was parked two miles away at the Clark County Road exit, waiting for a signal that had yet to come. And now he was doubting its arrival at all. The damp air seemed to cloak him in a misty straightjacket. He felt unable to move, helpless in his current situation. All he could do was watch and wait.

Thomas had received a tip three months earlier about a decision made by the banks in Buzzards Bay and Hyannis. They decided to save money on their summertime cash deliveries to their main branch in Boston by hiring the US Postal Service rather than an armored truck for the deliveries. It had been a very successful plan, saving almost fifty dollars a week across the busy vacation season in Cape Cod.

He lauded himself as a detail oriented person. He had a reputation in the business for planning and getting away with some of the more clever crimes in the Boston area. He had carefully calculated the possible haul in the red, white, and blue mail truck at conservatively one million dollars. But as of right now, *there was no stupid mail truck*. He lowered his binoculars and looked over at the man next to him.

Aggie was leaning on the trunk without a care in the world. He flicked at a toothpick in his mouth, moving it from side to side. He seemed impervious to stress or complications. This often would infuriate Thomas. He knew Aggie would do his job when and where it was needed without hesitation, but otherwise, the man had a way of killing time that was more than annoying. But no matter the stress or amount of bullets flying, he was one cool customer.

Aggie felt his boss's stare on the back of his neck and turned to look at him. "What?"

Thomas said nothing and turned his attention back to the magnified view of the bridge in the distance. "Come on," he said under his breath.

Forty-five mph was the USPS official policy for recommended top speed. Patrick Schena was nothing, if not a rule follower. As a driver for the postal service, he was always on the lookout for drunk or wayward drivers. He was cautious by nature and was proud of his perfect driving record. The problem with the trips to and from Cape Cod was they had become

monotonous. Conversation with the guard riding shotgun, Billie Barrett, had long since run its course. He thought about the term: riding shotgun. It referred to the armed man riding next to a stagecoach driver during the early West, as he literally carried a shotgun for defense of cargo and passengers. Billie had a snub nose thirty-eight in his holster, a modern weapon with less accuracy and stopping power than almost any other gun in the world.

The thought made Patrick smile at the silliness of it all. A few bags of mail would never be worth the trouble, and between the two of them, they had maybe twelve dollars.

The odds of something happening out here on Route 3 were nil. It was a waste of manpower to have a guard on the clock. Patrick glanced down at his speedometer and eased off just slightly, as his random thoughts had led to a slight uptick in their speed. He was looking forward to his upcoming vacation and thinking of visiting family back in South Dakota, but had yet to finalize anything. He pulled out an opened pack of Black Jack gum and offered a blue stick to his partner. A quick headshake, and he took the piece for himself. The spicy anise flavor filled his mouth as he chewed.

After nine stress-filled minutes of watching the highway while driving back and forth, Red pulled the Pontiac back over to the roadside on top of the overpass. He got out and lifted the hood of the car once again. As he glanced down the long strip of black that cut through green fields on either side, he noticed fog starting to roll in. It would only get harder to see cars in the distance. He let out a sigh as a red and white Ford Crestline passed underneath him. Still no sign of the mail truck. Joe stepped out on wobbly feet, still trying to get used to the high heels. He used the car for support. Red turned to look at his masquerading companion. It was all part of the

boss's plan to confuse any eyewitnesses. Luckily for him he'd pulled the long straw and missed his chance to be fitted for a dress.

"I don't think it's coming," Red said.

Joe looked off into the distance. "Well, you don't know diddly."

Red snapped back to the highway. Sure enough, the red, white, and blue stripes of a USPS mail truck parted through the patchy fog, the squared-off flat nose and large windshield clearly on display. Joe swayed to the edge of the overpass for a better look and Red ran to the opposite side of the overpass waving his hands in the air with purpose.

Thomas lowered his binoculars the instant he saw the signal. It was time. "They're here."

It was all Aggie needed. He hopped up, popped the trunk, and jumped back into the car, firing up the engine. Thomas quickly donned his tunic and cap to complete his State Trooper outfit. They both ducked down and laid low.

"That, my friend, is a lot of woman."

Billie looked ahead to where Patrick had pointed. On top of the approaching overpass was a large blonde woman in a bright yellow dress.

"That's more woman than you could handle in a year," Patrick added. "You'd probably have to bring chalk with you just to mark where you'd been so you wouldn't get lost."

The two men chuckled at the joke, but as they drew closer to the bridge their smiles faded.

"Yowzeer, that is one ugly female." The disgust on Patrick's face was palpable.

"You'd never live down a night with that. It would haunt you."

Patrick nodded slowly. He pushed his eyes back onto the road, away from the frightful sight. He quickly moved back into his lane and was glad to be under the overpass and moving away.

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Thomas lay flat in the back seat while Aggie did the same in the front. He lifted his head just enough to see the approaching mail truck through the back window. He ducked as it passed and then counted silently to three. As if shot from the gates at a horse track, Aggie and Thomas sprang from their car and moved to the trunk. They pulled out several wooden barricades with detour signs and set them across the lane, forcing oncoming cars to exit the highway onto Clark Road. They jumped back into the Oldsmobile and lit out, spewing gravel as they fishtailed back onto the highway. Five minutes later they blew past the mail truck going eighty-five mph.

Just up ahead was a curve in Route 3 along a forested area. It was a place where the two highway lanes were separated by a copse of thickly planted pines, making it impossible to see from one lane across to the other. It was critical to their plan. Aggie pushed the Olds as fast as he dared. Losing control now would be catastrophic. Hanging on from the passenger's seat, Thomas seemed focused on the road ahead.

A faded blue pickup rested by the side of the road, its engine idling. Vinnie sat on the tailgate wondering if the others had been pinched. It had been almost forty minutes since the proposed caper was supposed to go down. He did his best to look natural, but sitting was not his specialty, killing was. He was a dyed-in-the-wool killer of men.

It started with his first job, working as a carny. Vinnie and his partner were part of a travelling Bonnie's Big Top. They starred in a sideshow—Klutz, the 800-year-old mummy. Vinnie had perfected his pitch to passersby with a crazy accent from nowhere. *Come see Klutz.*

Over eight hundred years old. Some flesh still remaining on the body. In reality, it was a stolen skeleton from the local college that they had wrapped in old rags and dried pigskin. The audience had been generally impressed, and they made good coin over the first three cities in the tour. But money changed people. He'd seen it countless times in his short life.

One night, after all the customers had gone home, Vinnie discovered a stash of cash hidden under the mummy's faux sarcophagus. His partner denied having cheated him, but Vinnie could tell when the man was lying. He drove his knife into his partner's heart without hesitation, scooped up the cash, and never looked back.

Vinnie used his newfound killer's instinct to work his way up the ranks of the underground and Mafia in the upstate area, eventually ending up in Boston. Now he was a top-notch gun for hire. You name the target, and Vinnie would give you a price and guarantee results. It had been a very successful formula.

He'd connected with Thomas two years ago on a museum heist that had been very profitable for all. They had crossed paths two other times and developed a strong working relationship. As a killer, it was hard to have much of a personal life, but Vinnie trusted Thomas more than just about anyone.

He fingered the reassuring steel of a Thompson machine gun that lay hidden under his jacket next to him as he strained to listen. He brushed away some of the sporadic rain from his hair with a flick. He could just make out the sounds of tires squealing in the distance. The curve he was parked on made it impossible to see very far, but it sounded to him like game time. He put on his jacket and hid the machine gun in the cab of his truck. Then, in a carefully orchestrated routine, he pulled his truck diagonally onto the highway and parked it.

Patrick pulled toward the right edge of the lane as he watched a green Oldsmobile blast past his view through the metronome-like windshield wipers of the mail truck. “Someone’s in a hurry,” he said.

“Probably saw that woman back there,” Billie said with a chuckle. The conversation quickly lapsed, and once again they shared the road in silence. Up ahead, the highway curved out of sight. It was getting close to dusk, so Patrick turned on the headlights. The rain had diminished, and he hit the button to kill the wipers. It was off and on; it couldn’t make up its mind. Someone should invent a way to make windshield wipers intermittent, he thought to himself, but just as quickly dismissed the thought.

As they came around the curve, he spotted a pickup parked in the middle of the lane. The green Oldsmobile that had just gone past them a few seconds before was pulled to the side of the road. A police officer looked like he was giving the pickup driver a ticket. Patrick slowed. He pressed the brakes as the policeman waved for him to stop.

Thomas watched as Aggie flew around the curve, tires crying in protest. They’d passed the mail truck and were trying to get into position. The car quickly pulled to the edge of the road just about thirty feet behind Vinnie’s pickup that was parked in the middle of the lane. Thomas jumped out in his uniform and pretended to talk to Aggie in the driver’s seat. As soon as the mail truck started to slow, he stepped onto the road and waved for it to stop. The driver barely seemed to hesitate as he pulled the truck to a stop just in front of Thomas.

Thomas moved around to the mail truck’s driver side to have a word with him. At the same time, the other two vehicles moved in to surround the mail truck. It was quick and efficient. The hours of practice had paid off. The pickup suddenly reversed right toward the mail truck,

braking just inches away from impact. The Oldsmobile pulled in behind the mail truck, completing the maneuver.

Thomas watched as the driver's smile faded to confusion. At that moment, everything changed. Vinnie showed up with his sawed-off shotgun, and Aggie with a Thompson machine gun. Thomas pulled out a Colt 1911 and pointed right at the driver's head. Per the plan, Vinnie did the talking. He was, in Thomas' mind, certifiable, and it took no time for the two USPS employees to grasp that he would shoot them for the smallest of reasons.

“Hands up now or I'll shoot you where you sit.”

Both employees raised their hands in unison.

“Now, unlock your doors!”

The driver squawked, “They're not locked.”

The doors were quickly opened and the two men were pushed to the ground and disarmed. Their hands were tied and they were blindfolded. Once that was done, Vinnie escorted them back to the rear of the mail truck. He took the guard's keys and unlocked the back rolling door. Inside was a pile of sealed mailbags. Thomas and Aggie removed all sixteen canvas bags and placed them in the trunk of the Oldsmobile.

Vinnie tossed both men into the back of the mail truck, got inside, and drove. The heist had taken just under two minutes to complete.

After driving for a little over an hour with several false stops, Vinnie pulled the mail truck over to the curb along Route 128. “Any of you's two move and I'll let you have it!” he said to the two men inside.

He left his captives bound and gagged, and walked the five blocks to where his car had been parked, whistling a tune as he went.

They stashed the money inside a wall in Thomas' basement, then carefully replaced the wall and moved old storage items in front of it. Red and Joe then drove the Oldsmobile and the blue pickup to a dark alley. Red used five gallons of gasoline to set them on fire, and then strolled away with Joe, making light conversation and a few off-colored jokes.

In the end, the gang had all come away clean.

Now came time for the real genius behind the crime—how to not get caught.

Chapter Two

AUGUST 8TH 1967 – BOSTON – 8:45 A.M.

Special Agent Daniel Johnson walked up the crowded stairs from the Red Line. The air was sticky and humid with a distinguishing odor—a mix of body odor and garbage. His train was delayed twice, but he would still make it to his office on time. With each step, he could feel his sock pressing against the moist cardboard insert, barely keeping the sidewalk out where his loafers had worn through. He would need to get them resoled and soon. Hopefully it wouldn't rain before that happened. At thirty-nine, Daniel still had some of his hair and, for the most part, a good attitude. His wife Candice and their two children were at times more of a distraction than a blessing, but he had made vows and was determined to see them through.

As an FBI agent you had a lot of perks, but money was not one of them. The pay was meager and the hours brutal. Daniel liked the thought that he was essentially above the law, but his tendencies ran towards the straight side of being an agent and there was no profit in that—only honor.

The Sheraton Building, at 470 Atlantic, housed the field office of the FBI in Boston, a thirteen-story rectangle with a concrete steel and glass makeover.

He blew his nose on his handkerchief as the geriatric elevator operator escorted him to the fifth floor. The man had a perpetual coffee-stained smile set against a loose nicotine-wrinkled face. His maroon uniform and bill less hat were adorned with shiny brass buttons.

“Morning, Special Agent Johnson.”

“Sal.”

It was a ritual that had grown no further than a few words. Daniel looked in the mirror of the elevator and ran his hand through his thinning hair. He wasn't happy with the reflection that stared back. He was looking old for his age, tired even, but it had been a long trail to get here. Maybe a trip upstate to do some fishing with his colleagues would help. He'd been invited by Special Agent Withers, a man who seemed to carry the delicate haze of debauchery within a collective bouquet of sweet perfume and whiskey.

Daniel had yet to give him a response. He'd overheard several other agents talking about the trip by the water cooler. It sounded fun.

He moved with robotic purpose through the smoke-filled common area and into his small office. The heavy wood paneling fought against the weak yellow glow of his desk lamp and the small square window on his back wall. His faded rosewood desk held a newer powered typewriter and a brand new push-button phone. There was a stack of eight boxes in the corner, all from the same case. With a dour expression, he eyed the cold, leftover Sanka sitting in his coffee cup from the night before.

SA Daniel Johnson had been one of the first federal agents assigned to the Plymouth Mail Truck Robbery back in '62. He was tasked to the major crimes division, and it was his job to track, sift through, and pressure the known criminals capable of carrying out such an audacious heist. The bandits had been clever, leaving little evidence, and that alone limited the potential

players. Johnson knew that most criminals were fueled by the excitement of a crime and couldn't keep their traps shut after it was committed. That led to their demise in many cases. Even now, five years later, there was no word on the street about the Plymouth Mail Truck Robbery, the most daring heist in US history. Not a word.

At one point more than sixty postal inspectors, a host of FBI investigators, and hundreds of state and local authorities were involved in the case, creating a competitive vibe that had one agency hiding information from the others. There was even false information leaked in an attempt at one-upmanship. It had been a complete disaster for everyone involved, with reports of falsified evidence and forced confessions. The Justice Department raised the reward from \$2,000 to \$150,000 in hopes of moving the evidence needle. That had the phone operators working double shifts just to answer the calls, all filled with useless information and baseless accusations.

Daniel looked over the few eyewitness reports for the hundredth time. Some of the motorists that had been detoured off Route 3 had seen a state trooper from behind. Others said he was a white male, short or tall, slim or stout. Several reported a large woman broken down on the overpass. It was a mishmash of conflicting information.

The powers-that-be moved to create The Coalition of Law Enforcement Agencies in an attempt to get everyone back on the same page and to play nice. Now, all evidence and information flowed to one source. It was progress, but when there was no hard evidence, case files were filled with opinions and conjecture—thirty boxes worth.

Initially, the press was taken in by the heist. It was lauded as a romance crime. No one was killed or injured. The thieves got away with over \$1,500,000 in small, unmarked bills, making it the biggest cash heist in the country's history. One of the banks shipping the money

claimed that a single \$1,000 bill was among the small denominations. It was something the authorities could track, but as of yet it had not surfaced. It became the red herring of the case.

Newspapers sensationalized the story to the limit, even speculated wildly to get readers to buy their papers. This clouded the investigation and had the police chasing their tails. Daniel would have no part in the circus. He remained focused on known criminals and squeezed them every chance he got. But time and poor results washed away interest in solving the crime. By 1967 there were just a handful of investigators left on the case, SA Daniel Johnson among them.

In the end, there were no convictions and the money remained unrecovered. It was a stain on the USPS and the FBI.

Daniel picked up a faded clipping from a newspaper headline.

William F. White, Chief Postal Inspector was asked if the Postal Department considered it was taking a chance in transporting huge sums of money over back roads without escorts. "That's hard to say," he answered. "If we say yes we look stupid. If we say no we still look stupid."

—*Boston Herald, August 17, 1962*

He instinctively reached for his coffee cup and took a sip. *Argh*. Stale and cold, just like this case.

He was pretty sure who the players were, but there was just no proof. And in 1967, proof was now required. It was not like the old days when you could just railroad the most likely suspect. Now there was talk of criminals' rights. They called it Miranda Rights, a swearword in his book. A year ago the Supreme Court had overturned Ernesto Arturo Miranda's conviction, and now arresting and convicting felons had become much more difficult. At least he could still lean heavy on a suspect and wiretap him if needed. He glanced at the only photo of his family. It

was taken years ago and the smiles seemed to haunt him. He could never have imagined the all-consuming requirements of children. They needed this, they needed that, they even demanded your time. He flipped the photo down, and with it the corrosive thoughts dispersed. He was a committed father he told himself, as long as it doesn't get in the way of everything else.

The brown phone on his desk rang. He pressed the flashing button and picked up the receiver. Daniel answered in a pat response, "Johnson."

He listened to the voice and then hung up, drumming his fingers on the desk. This could go two ways. *Justice must be panicking*, he thought. They were making one last stab at convicting three men. Daniel knew the evidence was thin, but they were being told to move ahead with the prosecution anyway. It was any man's guess what would happen, but maybe lady luck was finally on his side.

The meeting room was a holdout from the police ready rooms. It had twelve chairs and a briefing pedestal in front of a black chalkboard. The wooden chairs were small and uncomfortable with a vertical back that was straight out of the Spanish Inquisition. Daniel found an empty chair and sat stiffly. He looked around. With each month, the Coalition of Law Enforcement Agencies, CLEA, had shrunk. Last week's briefing had only five agents, but today there were ten.

Keith Boddington was the lead on what was left of the Coalition. He had spent the last thirty years as a postal inspector, and spearheaded things once the agencies combined resources. He was an angry man with a face to match, but beneath his seemingly rough exterior he had a perfectionist's love of details. Every "i" dotted and "t" crossed. He had little need or time for personal grooming, and his disheveled hair and rumpled clothes proved it.

“As you all know,” he said to the group, “Justice has committed to one last push on the Plymouth Mail Truck Robbery before the statute of limitations runs out on this case. The trial starts Monday at 9:00 a.m., so let’s go over everything one more time just to be sure we haven’t screwed the pooch on this thing. If we need to work all weekend to get ready, so be it.”

Daniel listened as each agent volunteered his or her information. The Federal Grand Jury, sitting for the Northeastern District of Massachusetts handed down three secret indictments. They charged Joseph C. Tripoli and John J. Kelly, alias “Red,” and other persons unknown under Title 18 of the United States Code, section 2114 specifically, with robbing two United States postal employees of \$1,551,277, and putting the lives of those postal employees in jeopardy.

Evidence was mostly circumstantial and they had put almost all their eggs in Daniel’s basket. “Agent Johnson?”

Daniel perked up at the mention of his name.

He cleared his throat “As you all know Thomas Richards has maintained his innocence and we have nothing to tie him to the crime. Compliments of a little luck on our part, he now claims to know who the parties are behind the Plymouth Mail Truck Robbery. He has agreed to give state’s evidence against the ones responsible in exchange for an immunity deal. It is not the most ideal situation, as I’m sure you all agree. But Justice is willing to play ball as we are only days from losing the whole thing to the statute of limitations, and some justice is better than no justice.”

This got a mumbled agreement around the room.

Someone asked, “What’s the minimum sentence look like?”

And an answer came. “A conviction carries a minimum sentence of twenty-five years.”

Keith continued the meeting, going over all the details. Daniel tuned him out. He thought of the lucky happenstance that had presented Thomas to him.

Daniel was literally walking towards his bank when he noticed a man in a guard's uniform walking away from an armored truck. He was carrying a bank bag. In an instant, Daniel recognized the guard as one of his main suspects, Thomas Richards. He pulled his revolver and had the gangster dead to rights.

The brazen man had used some kids with firecrackers and perfect timing to distract the real guards for just a second while he helped himself to a bag of the bank's money from the back of the open armored car they were loading.

Thomas immediately surrendered, and when faced with a sure conviction leveraged his knowledge of the Plymouth Mail Truck Robbery for his freedom. The Justice Department, desperate for any type of conviction, jumped at the deal. It would be the conclusion to a case that had spent upwards of twenty million taxpayer dollars and 104 years of man-hours with nothing to show for it. *Finally an end, and I'm at the center of it all*, Daniel thought. The contemplation had him imagining a step up in the Bureau and with that, better pay. It was everything he'd been working for. Yes, he would tell Special Agent Withers that he was definitely in for the guys' fishing trip.

Monday at 9:00 a.m. the trial commenced. Daniel watched from the hallway as the press tried to fill the courtroom. It was chaos. He waited and waited for his man to show, but as the doors to the courtroom closed there was still no sign of Thomas Richards. Daniel had taken no chances and placed round-the-clock surveillance at the man's house. Though the prosecutor had pleaded with the court to deny bail, the law was the law: innocent until proven guilty. Thomas had been released on \$25,000 bail and had been a model citizen ever since. Sunday, Daniel

stopped by his house to go over his testimony one last time. Richards named Red, Joe, and Vinnie at the heart of the robbery. Everything was finally lining up. Now he just needed him to say it in court.

Officer Caldron approached with a worried look on his face.

“He ain’t there.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel asked.

“I mean, I went into his house and he’s gone.”

“Son of a bitch!” Daniel exclaimed, as he ran towards the exit.

Officer Caldron hurried to catch up, calling out, “We had the front and the back covered all night!”

Agent Daniel Johnson laid his head on his desk. He had a headache that had lasted three days. The aspirin burned his stomach to knots and only dulled the pain. He had gone from hero to zero faster than he could compute. The trial ended, all suspects were acquitted, and his key witness had vaporized. They searched the man’s home and confirmed it was empty. In the basement was a chunk of wallboard that had been removed, and there was no sign of Thomas Richards.

A nationwide APB had been issued and turned up nothing. Now the statute of limitations would certainly run out on the unsolved crime, a crime that had romanced a nation. Daniel pondered the meaning of the removed wallboard. Had the money been there in Richards’ house all this time? It was a disaster.

He stood and moved for the exit, desperately trying to put it all behind him.

His phone rang and he decided to ignore it. Maybe he should spend time with the family instead.

As he was exiting the lobby, a girl from the switchboard came running his way.

“Special Agent Johnson?” she called out.

Daniel turned her way and looked up.

“There’s a call for you and he says it’s urgent.”

“Oh yeah? Who says it’s urgent?”

She looked down at a piece of paper she was holding. “Sherriff John Hobson.”

Daniel let out a deep sigh and a nod. “Can you patch him through to that phone?” He pointed to the phone on the wall of the lobby. The girl nodded and ran off. A moment later the custard-colored phone rang.

“Special Agent Johnson.”

“Agent, thanks for taking my call. This is Sheriff Hobson out in Bozeman, Montana.”

The voice was hollow and distant.

“How can I help you, Sheriff?”

“Well, I was at the Big Bear Diner for lunch and I didn’t think much of it, but there was this guy who seemed familiar to me. Well, no biggie, right?”

Daniel tried not to roll his eyes.

“So I get back to my office, and sure enough, he’s that feller you’re lookin’ for.”

“What fellow?” asked Daniel.

“You know, the one that stole all that mail money and then up and disappeared.”

Daniel jerked upright. Had he heard right? Was this a credible Thomas Richards sighting? Sheriff Hobson had his full attention.

“Well, I hauled ass back to the diner, but he was long gone. But just so you know, he was here. I’ll swear to it. It was definitely your man.”

Daniel took the sheriff’s information, thanked him, and ran to his boss’s office.

The Frontier Airlines turbo prop had made good time against the headwind. Daniel stepped out into the glaring sunlight and down the steep steps to the tarmac. The Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport looked like a leftover from WW II, which it was. In 1940, the Civil Aeronautics Administration, CAA, provided training for pilots just prior to the war. The military-style building was lacking in design and amenities. Daniel looked up and was taken aback at the sheer intensity of the sunlight here. The air was crisp and clean with a faint smell of pine and jet fuel. Ranger Calloway from the Mount Edith Rangers Station was leaning on a late model Dodge Power Wagon just outside the terminal. The truck was orange and black with a US Forestry logo on the sides. The Power Wagon was a capable four-wheel-drive pickup that had served the forest service well.

“You Agent Johnson?”

Daniel nodded as he showed him his badge.

“I was told to deliver you a vehicle. Keys are in it.”

“I was supposed to meet Agent Klem out of the Boise office.”

“Don’t know anything about that. Sorry,” Ranger Calloway said, and then left.

Daniel placed his bag on the passenger seat. He climbed up behind the wheel and looked over the controls. The whirlwind that had taken place to get him here was taking its toll. It took him a second to figure out the vehicle, but he was soon on the road heading for his destination,

the Big Bear Diner. The trees were majestic and the countryside beautiful, but all Daniel could see was his chance at redemption. To bring his witness and his reputation back.

The diner in Three Forks was exactly as Daniel had imagined it. A large pitched-roof cabin-style building made of river rock with redwood trim. There was a red neon diner sign and a large bear out front carved from an impossibly giant tree stump.

Sheriff John Hobson was waiting as Daniel stepped out of his car. He was a tall and lanky man with olive skin and jet-black hair. His face screamed all business, but had a polite way of going about it. He shook hands with Daniel and gestured to the front door.

“Come on in. The coffee here is pretty good and Cindy can give you more details.”

They sat in a booth by the window and Daniel showed him the mugshot of Thomas Richards he had brought.

“Yep, that’s him,” Ranger Calloway said, with hardly a glance to the photograph.

A sudden hope filled Daniel’s soul. Maybe he could save the case and himself.

Cindy was a forty-two-year-old waitress with a world-weary expression that matched her stained and faded apron.

“Hey, Cin, this here’s the Fed I was tellin’ you about. Could you tell him everything you told me? Agent Johnson, show her the picture.”

Daniel showed her the picture. She took it and examined it like she was a doctor prepping for surgery.

“Yeah, that’s him all right. He ordered the scrambled hash and a coffee, sweet.”

“Did he say anything or do anything in particular?” Daniel asked.

Cindy shook her head. “Just ate and paid.” She looked up at the ceiling for a second, thinking. “But I did happen to notice him leave.”

Both Daniel and the Sherriff stared in rapt anticipation. But no more information came forth.

“Well?” The sheriff asked impatiently.

“Oh. He drove a blue Plymouth Roadrunner and took the turnoff for the 287.”

“287, where does that go?” Daniel asked.

“Montana City,” the sheriff said, “then Great Falls, and finally on up to Lethbridge, Canada.”

Canada. The word hit Daniel like the slam of an unseen door.

“I could use some help,” Daniel said.

“Love to, but my jurisdiction ends right here in Three Forks.”

“Understand,” he tossed back, as he moved to the small phonebooth by the exit door.

With his index finger Daniel spun the zero on the rotary phone and waited. A scratchy voice answered. “Operator.”

“Collect call from Daniel Johnson to Boston, Gladstone 2-3675 please.”

The call had gone smoothly, and Daniel’s boss seemed pleased with the progress. He promised to start a dragnet around the Bozeman area and called the border crossing up north to give them a heads up. There was still no word on Agent Klem who was supposed to meet up with him. He would find out what happened and get someone there ASAP. Several more agents were going to be flown in from Denver to help out.

Daniel nodded at the information, but he could not wait for support. This man would not escape again.

He pushed his Power Wagon up the 287, a twisty highway leading north into the mountains. It was getting late in the day when he noticed a small handmade sign along the road: Lodging two miles. A little over a minute later he saw another sign with a one-mile notation.

The Pine Crest Lodge was actually two mobile home trailers that were parked by the side of the road. The seasonal lodge migrated from place to place depending on the need and amount of customers. It was painted white with a thick red strip down the middle. Parked by the last trailer was a blue Plymouth Roadrunner. Daniel almost slammed on the brakes, but managed to continue on past the travelling motel. He waited until he was out of sight and then parked the Dodge on the side of the road.

This was it. After a long, drawn-out case he could finally wrap things up. He would have to do it all by himself and that meant going against FBI policy, but this surely had to be the exception. It was time to use extreme caution. A chill went up Daniel's spine as he checked his pistol and then started to move along the side of the road back to the lodge. He was an investigator not a policeman and had never had to shoot at anyone before. Today he would take no chances. His heart was racing in the thin mountain air and he paused to catch his breath. He had left Boston with nothing but a quick call home, but his wife would understand, especially if things went well.

The sun kissed the distant mountains. Soon, the valley would be blanketed in darkness. He could see the Pine View Lodge through the branches in front of him. The two mobile homes were parked end to end. Each trailer had five small rooms and one shared bathroom. He could hear the distant rumble from a generator somewhere providing the remote facility with power. There were three cars parked in front of various rooms, but only one mattered to Daniel, the blue Plymouth Roadrunner. He appreciated the simile the model name represented for a man on the

run. The vehicle was parked at the end room of the second trailer. A light shone through the small curtained window next to the room's entry door. Daniel stayed low as he moved stealthily to the door. On closer inspection it was an aluminum and wood affair much like you would find on a travel trailer.

He took a calming breath and then flung his body. The flimsy hollow-core door buckled. Daniel followed it into the room, gun raised and ready. The extremely cramped room was clad in cheap wood paneling with a single twin bed, one dresser, and a shelf with a lamp. In one corner were three large suitcases, and sitting on the bed reading a paper like it was Sunday afternoon was Thomas Richards. He seemed unfazed as he looked over to the broken entry door.

"I was wondering when you would get here," he said. "I was sure you would catch up to me in Sioux Falls, but when that didn't happen I started to lose faith."

"It's over, Thomas." Daniel looked at the man who held his future in his hands. He seemed older than the last time he'd seen him. Being on the run must take its toll.

"Perhaps it is, but you can't say I didn't give it my best shot."

"Keep your hands where I can see them. Now drop the newspaper and slowly stand up."

Thomas did as instructed, keeping his hands raised in plain sight. He had no desire to get shot.

Daniel's nerves were jacked up, as adrenaline rushed through his system. His gun hand shook slightly as he watched Thomas comply.

"Now down on your knees and put your hands behind your head."

He watched as his fugitive, with his black predatory eyes, knelt to the floor. The man never took his eyes off Daniel.

Daniel moved quickly to round the bed and take control of his prisoner. *This will make everything right back home*, he thought. He just had to take him back to Boston and he could put the case back on track. In his haste he didn't realize that the cramped quarters of the small room made it a bit tight to get around the bed. He caught his foot on a metal leg just under the corner of the bedframe. In an instant, Daniel lost his balance and fell.

When the door burst open Thomas was surprised. He was sure he had left Boston clean. During the whole trip he'd been very careful with his trail and human interactions. That this Fed had found him was certainly unexpected. He had a gun stashed in the drawer of the nightstand, but he would never reach it in time. So he decided to play it easy. First, start a casual conversation. Second, wait patiently for an opportunity.

Once kneeling on the ground, Thomas watched as the very intense copper suddenly tripped and fell. The room was small and Thomas remembered doing the same thing earlier when he checked in. The oversized legs of the bedframe were set too close to the edge. At the time, he cursed at the pain in his foot and hopped around for a brief second waiting for it to subside. Now he praised the bloody thing, as it had given him his opportunity. One he would not spurn.

Thomas pounced on the fallen Fed and grabbed his gun hand. They struggled in the confined space between the wall and the bed, unable to roll or escape. It was like fighting in an open-top coffin. The man on top owned the advantage, and Thomas was on top. He used his head, fists, and elbows to inflict damage, while keeping Daniel's gun hand at bay. A quick forehead into the Fed's nose and a crunching sound loosened his grip on the gun. Thomas knocked it away and followed with a flurry of punches. The intensity of the fight shifted

momentum in his favor, and Thomas finally managed to get a chokehold on his assailant. He watched as the man's eyes bulged, then dimmed and closed.

Thomas used Daniel as leverage to get up from the tight space. He stood over the man and spat on him, as he considered his options.

Daniel drove the Power Wagon down the dark winding highway, his free hand touching his disfigured nose that had been broken in the fight. He worried what his wife Candice would think once it healed crooked. His children. It was the first time he'd thought of them in some time. He'd been so caught up in this case that he'd put them on the back burner of his life. It was wrong, he knew, but hopefully he could make it up to them. He *would* make it up to them, and his wife too!

Sitting in the passenger seat was the man he had hunted, threatened, caught, lost, and then hunted again. But now the roles were reversed. Thomas Richards was pointing an unwavering gun at Daniel's belly.

Daniel had awoken facedown on the worn gray linoleum floor of the motel room. His hands were tied behind his back and Thomas was now pointing a gun at him. Within a few minutes he had been escorted out and down the road to his parked truck. He'd been tasked with loading three heavy suitcases in the pickup bed and then driving north along the 287.

"Why did you leave?" he asked Thomas.

His question was met with silence.

"I mean, we had a deal. You had amnesty. All you had to do was testify and you'd have been free."

“Free?” The man seemed to seethe as he spoke. “You Feds make me laugh. Free. I’m no stool pigeon, and if I did testify, you think I would be free? I’d be dead in a ditch within the week. For an FBI agent, you ain’t too bright.”

“So what now, shoot me and drop me in a ditch?”

“I’m leaving that life behind. Besides, I was never a killer, always a planner.”

“The master mind behind at least twenty crimes that I know of,” Daniel said.

“More like forty, but never once proven.”

A beat of silence passed as Daniel downshifted for the steep grade in the road.

“No, I’m going to drop you off in the town of Greenville. You can do whatever you can from there.”

“Greenville?” Daniel asked.

“A little town I read about in the local paper.”

They continued on through the night until the silence was interrupted.

“Turn there.” Thomas pointed to a sign that read: Greenville Two Miles.

As the headlights swung to the right, they illuminated orange and white road barricades across the small road.

“Go around it,” Thomas commanded.

Daniel did, and the truck easily navigated the small road that wound down through the valley. The thick trees soon gave way to an open area. In the pale moonlight Daniel could just make out a small town. There were no lights on as if everyone had already gone to sleep.

As the truck pulled into the town, Daniel realized the residents were not sleeping; the town was abandoned.

“A ghost town? You’re dropping me off in a ghost town?”

“Sort of,” came a sideways reply from Thomas. “Greenville has been recently unoccupied, but it will soon fill back up and you can tell your tale to whoever shows up.”

Daniel looked at the buildings as the headlights illuminated them one by one. The town of Greenville was old school with clapboard and brick buildings. There were maybe thirty homes surrounding a small main street with several businesses. The headlights flashed across the front of Mott’s General Store, barren except for empty shelving and moving shadows as they passed. The ghosts of the missing residents.

“Pull over here. Keep the engine on.”

The Power Wagon pulled to a stop in front of a small brick building with a sturdy wooden door. The sign on the wall read: Greenville Jail.

“Step out, Agent Johnson. Nice and easy.”

Daniel exited the truck and followed Thomas’ gun, as it pointed orders. He opened the door to the jail and stepped inside. The room was small, but clean.

It looked like it had just recently been evacuated. There were a few papers on the floor, but anything of value had been removed. Thomas directed him to the back area where three cells with bars were located.

“The middle one.”

Daniel complied.

Thomas took the set of keys that were on a hook just inside the door and locked him in the cell. He then backed away to look at his handiwork. This brought the first smile to his lips in many days. “Don’t worry, I’m sure someone will find you in no time,” he said. “And by then, I’ll be out of your grasp forever.”

Thomas took the keys and tossed them into the other room. He stepped up to the bars, just out of Daniel's reach.

"I have a little something for you."

He pulled from his wallet a \$1,000 bill, and placed it on the edge of the horizontal bar.

"It's the one traceable thing from the Plymouth job I could never spend."

As revelation grew across Daniel's face, his hatred grew.

Thomas just stared at the federal agent, his nod almost imperceptible. He turned and left the building without looking back.

"You won't get away with this," Daniel called out. "I will find you and hunt you down no matter how far you go! I will never stop. You hear me?"

The building was doused in darkness as the Dodge pulled away.

Daniel tried the door for good measure, but it didn't budge. He checked every bar, screaming in frustration. Finally he sat on the wooden bed, furious at himself. He would never live this down. Locked in a jail cell by a fugitive. It was humiliating. His career was done. He'd be lucky to get a posting as a guard at a Laundromat.

Eventually, he decided that nothing more would happen that night, so he laid down on the hard wooden surface and tried to get some rest. He would figure something out in the morning. It was going to be a very long night.

Daniel woke with a start. Something was wrong. His cell was flooding. The water was starting to cover his bed. He stood up. It was just above his knees. He slogged to the cell door.

Still locked. He climbed to the small barred window in the back and looked out.

The view filled him with terror. As far as he could see was water. The whole town was flooding. He took a quick inventory of his assets. He had a wallet, twenty-seven cents, and his FBI shield, plus the \$1,000 dollar bill still lying on the bars.

He called out for help repeatedly. Eventually his voice went hoarse. The reality of his situation hit him. He'd been a fool. Work had been his passion and what had it gotten him? A watery grave. If only there was some way he could see his family just one more time. A second chance to say he was sorry for being so stupid. They were the most important things in his life and he realized it too late. If only he could see their faces or even a picture of them one more time. He should have carried one in his wallet. The thought sent a flash of guilt through his body like a high voltage shock.

He leaned against the bars. Tears started to flow until he was sobbing uncontrollably.