

CHAPTER ONE

*The boundaries of
our country, sir?
Why sir, on the
north we are
bounded by the
Aurora Borealis,
on the east we are
bounded by the
rising sun, on the
south we are
bounded by the
procession of the
Equinoxes, and on
the west by the
Day of Judgment.*

—The American
Joe Miller's Jest

Shadow had done three years in prison. He was big enough and looked don't-fuck-with-me enough that his biggest problem was killing time. So he kept himself in shape, and taught himself coin tricks, and thought a lot about how much he loved his wife.

The best thing—in Shadow's opinion, perhaps the only good thing—about being in prison was a feeling of relief. The feeling that he'd plunged as low as he could plunge and he'd hit bottom. He didn't worry that the man was going to get him, because the man had got him. He was no longer scared of

what tomorrow might bring, because yesterday had brought it.

It did not matter, Shadow decided, if you had done what you had been convicted of or not. In his experience everyone he met in prison was aggrieved about something: there was always something the authorities had got wrong, something they said you did when you didn't—or you didn't do quite like they said you did. What was important was that they had gotten you.

He had noticed it in the first few days, when everything, from the slang to the bad food, was new. Despite the misery and the utter skin-crawling horror of incarceration, he was breathing relief.

Shadow tried not to talk too much. Somewhere around the middle of year two he mentioned his theory to Low Key Lyesmith, his cellmate.

Low Key, who was a grifter from Minnesota, smiled his scarred smile. "Yeah," he said. "That's true. It's even better when you've been sentenced to death. That's when you remember the jokes about the guys who kicked their boots off as the noose flipped around their necks, because their friends always told them they'd die with their boots on."

"Is that a joke?" asked Shadow.

"Damn right. Gallows humor. Best kind there

is.”

“When did they last hang a man in this state?” asked Shadow.

“How the hell should I know?” Lyesmith kept his orange-blond hair pretty much shaved. You could see the lines of his skull.

“Tell you what, though. This country started going to hell when they stopped hanging folks. No gallows dirt. No gallows deals.”

Shadow shrugged. He could see nothing romantic in a death sentence.

If you didn't have a death sentence, he decided, then prison was, at best, only a temporary reprieve from life, for two reasons. First, life creeps back into prison.

There are always places to go further down. Life goes on. And second, if you just hang in there, someday they're going to have to let you out.

In the beginning it was too far away for Shadow to focus on. Then it became a distant beam of hope, and he learned how to tell himself "this too shall pass" when the prison shit went down, as prison shit always did. One day the magic door would open and he'd walk through it. So he marked off the days on his Songbirds of North America calendar, which was the only calendar they sold in the prison commissary, and the sun went down and he didn't see it and the sun came up and he didn't see it. He practiced coin tricks from a book he found in the

wasteland of the prison library; and he worked out; and he made lists in his head of what he'd do when he got out of prison.

Shadow's lists got shorter and shorter. After two years he had it down to three things.

First, he was going to take a bath. A real, long, serious soak, in a tub with bubbles. Maybe read the paper, maybe not. Some days he thought one way, some days the other.

Second he was going to towel himself off, put on a robe. Maybe slippers. He liked the idea of slippers. If he smoked he would be smoking a pipe about now, but he didn't smoke. He would pick up his wife in his arms ("Puppy," she would squeal in mock

horror and real delight, “what are you doing?”). He would carry her into the bedroom, and close the door. They’d call out for pizzas if they got hungry.

Third, after he and Laura had come out of the bedroom, maybe a couple of days later, he was going to keep his head down and stay out of trouble for the rest of his life.

“And then you’ll be happy?” asked Low Key Lyesmith. That day they were working in the prison shop, assembling bird feeders, which was barely more interesting than stamping out license plates.

“Call no man happy,” said Shadow, “until he is dead.”

“Herodotus,” said Low Key. “Hey. You’re learning.”

“Who the fuck’s Herodotus?” asked the Iceman, slotting together the sides of a bird feeder and passing it to Shadow, who bolted and screwed it tight.

“Dead Greek,” said Shadow.

“My last girlfriend was Greek,” said the Iceman. “The shit her family ate. You would not believe. Like rice wrapped in leaves. Shit like that.”

The Iceman was the same size and shape as a Coke machine, with blue eyes and hair so blond it was almost white. He had beaten the crap out of some guy who had made the

mistake of copping a feel off his girlfriend in the bar where she danced and the Iceman bounced. The guy's friends had called the police, who arrested the Iceman and ran a check on him which revealed that the Iceman had walked from a work-release program eighteen months earlier.

“So what was I supposed to do?” asked the Iceman, aggrieved, when he had told Shadow the whole sad tale. “I’d told him she was my girlfriend. Was I supposed to let him disrespect me like that? Was I? I mean, he had his hands all over her.”

Keep your head down. Do your own time. Shadow had said, “You tell ’em,” and left it at that. One thing he had learned early,

you do your own time in prison. You don't do anyone else's time for them.

Lyesmith had loaned Shadow a battered paperback copy of Herodotus's Histories several months earlier. "It's not boring. It's cool," he said, when Shadow protested that he didn't read books. "Read it first, then tell me it's cool."

Shadow had made a face, but he had started to read, and had found himself hooked against his will.

"Greeks," said the Iceman, with disgust. "And it ain't true what they say about them, neither. I tried giving it to my girlfriend in the ass, she almost clawed my eyes out."

Lyесmith was transferred one day, without warning. He left Shadow his copy of Herodotus. There was a nickel hidden in the pages. Coins were contraband: you can sharpen the edges against a stone, slice open someone's face in a fight. Shadow didn't want a weapon; Shadow just wanted something to do with his hands.

Shadow was not superstitious. He did not believe in anything he could not see. Still, he could feel disaster hovering above the prison in those final weeks, just as he had felt it in the days before the robbery. There was a hollowness in the pit of his stomach that he told himself was simply a fear of going back to the world on the outside. But he could not be sure. He was more paranoid than usual,

and in prison usual is very, and is a survival skill. Shadow became more quiet, more shadowy, than ever. He found himself watching the body language of the guards, of the other inmates, searching for a clue to the bad thing that was going to happen, as he was certain that it would.

A month before he was due to be released. Shadow sat in a chilly office, facing a short man with a port-wine birthmark on his forehead. They sat across a desk from each other; the man had Shadow's file open in front of him, and was holding a ballpoint pen. The end of the pen was badly chewed.

“You cold, Shadow?”

“Yes,” said Shadow. “A little.”

The man shrugged. “That’s the system,” he said. “Furnaces don’t go on until December the first. Then they go off March the first. I don’t make the rules.” He ran his forefinger down the sheet of paper stapled to the inside left of the folder. “You’re thirty-two years old?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You look younger.”

“Clean living.”

“Says here you’ve been a model inmate.”

“I learned my lesson, sir.”

“Did you really?” He looked at Shadow intently, the birthmark on his forehead lowering. Shadow thought about telling the man some of his theories about prison, but he said nothing. He nodded, instead, and concentrated on appearing properly remorseful.

“Says here you’ve got a wife, Shadow.”

“Her name’s Laura.”

“How’s everything there?”

“Pretty good. She’s come down to see me as much as she could—it’s a long way to travel. We write and I call her when I can.”

“What does your wife do?”

“She’s a travel agent. Sends people all over the world.”

“How’d you meet her?”

Shadow could not decide why the man was asking. He considered telling him it was none of his business, then said, “She was my best buddy’s wife’s best friend. They set us up on a blind date. We hit it off.”

“And you’ve got a job waiting for you?”

“Yessir. My buddy, Robbie, the one I just told you about, he owns the Muscle Farm, the place I used to train. He says my old job is waiting for me.”

An eyebrow raised. “Really?”

“Says he figures I’ll be a big draw. Bring back some old-timers, and pull in the tough crowd who want to be tougher.”

The man seemed satisfied. He chewed the end of his ballpoint pen, then turned over the sheet of paper.

“How do you feel about your offense?”

Shadow shrugged. “I was stupid,” he said, and meant it.

The man with the birthmark sighed. He ticked off a number of items on a checklist. Then he riffled through the papers in Shadow’s file. “How’re you getting home from here?” he asked. “Greyhound?”

“Flying home. It’s good to have a wife who’s a travel agent.”

The man frowned, and the birthmark creased.
“She sent you a ticket?”

“Didn’t need to. Just sent me a confirmation number. Electronic ticket. All I have to do is turn up at the airport in a month and show ’em my ID, and I’m outta here.”

The man nodded, scribbled one final note, then he closed the file and put down the ballpoint pen. Two pale hands rested on the gray desk like pink animals. He brought his hands close together, made a steeple of his forefingers, and stared at Shadow with watery hazel eyes.

“You’re lucky,” he said. “You have someone to go back to, you got a job waiting. You can put all this behind you. You got a second chance. Make the most of it.”

The man did not offer to shake Shadow’s hand as he rose to leave, nor did Shadow expect him to.

The last week was the worst. In some ways it was worse than the whole three years put together. Shadow wondered if it was the weather: oppressive, still, and cold. It felt as if a storm was on the way, but the storm never came. He had the jitters and the heebie-jeebies, a feeling deep in his stomach that something was entirely wrong. In the exercise yard the wind gusted. Shadow

imagined that he could smell snow on the air.

He called his wife collect. Shadow knew that the phone companies whacked a three-dollar surcharge on every call made from a prison phone. That was why operators are always real polite to people calling from prisons, Shadow had decided: they knew that he paid their wages.

“Something feels weird,” he told Laura. That wasn’t the first thing he said to her. The first thing was “I love you,” because it’s a good thing to say if you can mean it, and Shadow did.

“Hello,” said Laura. “I love you too. What feels weird?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe the weather. It feels like if we could only get a storm, everything would be okay.”

“It’s nice here,” she said. “The last of the leaves haven’t quite fallen. If we don’t get a storm, you’ll be able to see them when you get home.”

“Five days,” said Shadow.

“A hundred and twenty hours, and then you come home,” she said.

“Everything okay there? Nothing wrong?”

“Everything’s fine. I’m seeing Robbie tonight. We’re planning your surprise welcome-home party.”

“Surprise party?”

“Of course. You don’t know anything about it, do you?”

“Not a thing.”

“That’s my husband,” she said. Shadow realized that he was smiling. He had been inside for three years, but she could still make him smile.

“Love you, babes,” said Shadow.

“Love you, puppy,” said Laura.

Shadow put down the phone.

When they got married Laura told Shadow

that she wanted a puppy, but their landlord had pointed out they weren't allowed pets under the terms of their lease. "Hey," Shadow had said, "I'll be your puppy. What do you want me to do? Chew your slippers? Piss on the kitchen floor? Lick your nose? Sniff your crotch? I bet there's nothing a puppy can do I can't do!" And he picked her up as if she weighed nothing at all and began to lick her nose while she giggled and shrieked, and then he carried her to the bed.

In the food hall Sam Fetishier sidled over to Shadow and smiled, showing his old teeth. He sat down beside Shadow and began to eat his macaroni and cheese.

"We got to talk," said Sam Fetishier.

Sam Fetishier was one of the blackest men that Shadow had ever seen. He might have been sixty. He might have been eighty. Then again, Shadow had met thirty-year-old crackheads who looked older than Sam Fetishier.

“Mm?” said Shadow.

“Storm’s on the way,” said Sam.

“Feels like it,” said Shadow. “Maybe it’ll snow soon.”

“Not that kind of storm. Bigger storm than that coming. I tell you, boy, you’re better off in here than out on the street when the big storm comes.”

“Done my time,” said Shadow. “Friday, I’m gone.”

Sam Fetishier stared at Shadow. “Where you from?” he asked.

“Eagle Point. Indiana.”

“You’re a lying fuck,” said Sam Fetishier. “I mean originally. Where are your folks from?”

“Chicago,” said Shadow. His mother had lived in Chicago as a girl, and she had died there, half a lifetime ago.

“Like I said. Big storm coming. Keep your head down, Shadow-boy. It’s like . . . what do they call those things continents ride

around on? Some kind of plates?”

“Tectonic plates?” Shadow hazarded.

“That’s it. Tectonic plates. It’s like when they go riding, when North America goes skidding into South America, you don’t want to be in the middle. You dig me?”

“Not even a little.”

One brown eye closed in a slow wink. “Hell, don’t say I didn’t warn you,” said Sam Fetisher, and he spooned a trembling lump of orange Jell-O into his mouth.

“I won’t.”

Shadow spent the night half-awake, drifting