

IN THE RED

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Kirk Stryker stared out his office window at the two little girls holding hands and skipping along the village sidewalk. The evening sky was a deep red, with swirls of color soaking the large canvas of clouds and casting both a beautiful and an ominous glow on their freckled faces and auburn hair.

All along Lake Shore Avenue, Gardenia was closing up for the day, the shopkeepers sweeping their storefronts and depositing the day's trash at the curb for the morning rounds. It had been a mild winter, following a devastating hurricane last fall, but those days of no electricity and lengthy gas station lines had been long forgotten as the days passed and the temperatures rose. Spring was in the air once again on Long Island, light jackets and baseball caps replacing the parkas and wool hats, lengthier conversations replacing the quick hellos and good-byes. Stryker could see the proprietor of the fruit market down the way chatting amiably with someone walking a dog, and Mayor Barbara Gottlieb having a heart-to-heart with a few constituents as she descended the steps of Village Hall.

Unlike those of his business neighbors, Stryker's night was far from over—another sign that spring had arrived.

Tax season was in full swing; he hadn't made it home before 10:00 p.m. in weeks. *Such was the life of a certified public accountant*, he thought. April was the cruelest month.

His eyes settled on the stone building across the intersection where Marty Benning had opened his accounting practice two years earlier, waltzing into Gardenia like a gunman into an Old Western town with his eye on the stagecoach. The firms faced each other like boxers about to square off in a ring. A young couple strolling down Lake Shore peered inside the dark windows of Benning's building. The guy hadn't been around lately, which was both strange and bad business.

"What are you up to, Benning?" Stryker mumbled as the red, white, and blue pennant flags in front of his building caught the evening wind, tangling themselves around a streetlamp. He imagined them wrapping their laminated nylon around Benning's neck.

He stepped away from the window. The stacks of papers on his desk rose like skyscrapers. Once upon a time, those stacks had been much taller—a trend he wished he could blame entirely on Benning, but he couldn't. Nowadays, a generation of do-it-yourselfers preferred to muddle their way through a tax form than pay someone who actually knew what he was doing. *Millennials*. No wonder most of the accountants Stryker knew were going out of business. If the industry were a spreadsheet, it would be insolvent; the debits were far outweighing the assets.

He pulled out his desk drawer, revealing the pack of cigarettes and lighter he had hidden behind the boxes of staples. He stuck a butt in his mouth, lit it, and took a slow

drag, blowing the smoke across the room and watching it circle beneath the room's smoke detector. He was glad he had Hugo Lurch dismantle the thing after the village banned smoking on the public sidewalks. The government seemed to be cracking down on everything—drinking, smoking. A man couldn't even comment on how a woman looked these days. It was getting harder and harder to have a little fun. Still, Stryker enjoyed the sneaking around. *The secrets*. He took another drag of his cigarette.

He sat down at his desk and leaned back in his chair, his thoughts turning again to Benning. In two short years, the guy had managed to charm an entire incorporated village. How? Benning was new and handsome, and people liked new and handsome, plus he was a Manhattanite, which most people on Long Island viewed as royalty. Since his arrival, Benning had been elected chamber of commerce president, named Merchant of the Year, and given the Consensus Civility Award from the mayor, who seemed taken with the village's new wonderboy and his magical powers of deduction.

Stryker picked up a pen, wrote *B-E-N-N-I-N-G* on his desk planner and stared at it, as if trying to decode a message, his pen point pressing into the letter *G* like the end of a blade. There was talk that Benning was setting the stage for some kind of run for political office. *Carpenterbagger*. Stryker couldn't imagine a place as conservative as Gardenia electing a liberal like Benning, no matter how handsome he was, but stranger things had happened.

His cell phone rang, and he looked at the caller ID. It was Gloria, probably wanting to know when he'd be home—as if tonight would be any different from the

night before and the night before that. He sighed and let it go to voice mail.

He wiggled his mouse, which lit up his computer screen, and opened his email to compose a quick note. As he typed, he felt a twinge in his groin and smiled. He pressed *Send*, and as the words disappeared from his screen, there was a knock on his office door. Stryker jammed his cigarette into the paperweight on his desk and tossed the butt onto the plastic floor guard below.

"Come in," he said, waving his hand at the smoke and crossing his legs to hide his bulge.

The door opened, and Paulette stuck in her head. "I'm leaving, Kirk. Colby file's done. I left it on Eva's desk." She shook her head. "That thing was a mess as usual. Half the financial statements were missing, and after six years of coming to us, he still doesn't know how to itemize, or the difference between *equipment* and *supplies*."

"That's why he has you, Paulette," Stryker said with a smile.

"Lucky me." She leaned against the doorframe. "Anyway, everyone else is gone besides Sandy and me. Need anything? I can order from the Chinese place before I go."

"Nah, I'm only going to stay for a couple of hours."

"All right then, I'll see you in the morning."

"Thanks, Paulette. See you tomorrow." He leaned across his desk so he could see Sandra picking up her handbag from her desk in the outer office. "Good night, Sandy." She waved.

Paulette shut off the light in the main office, turning the entire second floor dark, except for Stryker's office, which

was illuminated by a small desk lamp. He bent down and picked up the mangled butt he'd dropped on the floor. The ash was still lit, and he blew on it until it burned brightly and stood again next to the window. Downstairs, the tops of two heads appeared and bobbed their way across the street toward Stevie's, the overpriced pub where Sandra and Paulette grabbed a nightcap most evenings.

Hiring Paulette eight years ago was the best business decision Stryker had ever made. She was smart, confident, well-liked. Stryker knew Benning had been wooing Paulette since he opened for business, which made sense. Paulette was Stryker's most requested tax advisor and alone probably pulled in a third of the firm's income. It was time, he knew, to make her a partner. He couldn't hold off any longer, not with Benning around.

Stryker turned the page of his desk planner. He had a meeting with Colby first thing in the morning, and taxes were just the tip of the iceberg of things they had to discuss. He crossed the room to collect the Colby file from Eva's desk in the outer office but was startled by the silhouette of a person standing in the doorway. Before his eyes could focus in the semi-darkness, he heard a pop and felt a searing pain in the center of his chest.

"What the . . . ?" he yelled, lashing out, but his body convulsed, and he fell backward, slamming his head onto the corner of his desk.



The streetlights outside the office window swam around the room, a light haze following them like the tail of a

meteor as Stryker's eyes fluttered open. He was still on the office floor, a stale cigarette smell, buried deep within the carpeting from years of secret smoking, made him feel nauseated.

How long had he been lying there?

He looked around but couldn't see anything—his desk lamp had been turned off—and his body burned, as if tiny fish hooks were ripping into the flesh of his torso. He ran his hand along his midsection and found the buttons of his collared shirt and trousers undone, the skin of his abdomen raw and wet.

He tried to lift himself from the floor, but scorching pain forced him back down with a grunt, and he curled into a fetal position. A noise caught his attention at the far end of his office, and he remembered the figure from before, the one standing there in the dark, and he lay still, his eyes searching the room. Something small was floating near the window, a tiny dot that glowed bright and then dimmed again, and Stryker realized it was the lit ash of a cigarette—was it *his*?—and that someone was smoking it.

"Who's there?" he coughed, the action making his chest ache.

No answer.

"I know you're there," he said.

The ash, which hung in the darkness like a twinkling star, began to change color and shape, and suddenly with a sizzling *whoosh*, it burst into a bright orange, and he realized, with horror, that the window drapery had caught fire.

Stryker flipped himself onto his stomach, shouting in agony as his skin grazed the shag carpet. He reached for the molding of the doorframe when the sting of a kick

forced him to retract his arm, and he curled his body again into a tight ball.

The figure was hunched and rummaging inside Stryker's closet, tossing things out—cardboard boxes, pillows, blankets, a raincoat, articles of clothing. Then it hit him: *The safe*.

He did a quick tally—stock and bond certificates, assorted business papers and media, and somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen thousand dollars in cash. A feeling of satisfaction overcame him.

“You’ll never open it,” he yelled with a sneer. “The hardplate is drill resistant. The door is three inches of indestructible steel. The thing’s bolted to the ground.” He coughed, the pain of his midsection intensifying. “And I’m not about to give the keypad combination to some lowlife who would rather steal from a hardworking man than earn his own living, so go fuck your—”

The bullet pierced Stryker's chest, and he fell back onto the floor, clutching at the wound just below his clavicle and feeling the warm spurt of blood. Above him, the fire shot across the wood-paneled ceiling as the small office filled with smoke. Over the crackle of the flames, the faint sound of fire truck sirens echoed in the distance.

“I hear them. They’re coming,” he whispered, sucking in the last of the smokeless air as the door to his office opened and closed, and he realized the intruder had gone.

The burst of fresh air fueled the flames, which were licking the bottom of the disarmed smoke detector. Stryker kicked his feet in an effort to move toward the exit, but the pain was too excruciating, and he couldn't catch his breath. Instead, he reached over his head, his fingertips

grazing the raincoat the intruder had tossed onto the floor. He managed to curl his fingers around the belt and pull the item to him, burying his face beneath the fabric, which he hoped would conserve some air until help arrived. The sirens were louder now, and the red light of the engines created a flashing bull's eye along the perimeter of the small office. The firefighters were right outside.

Stryker pressed his shattered shoulder into the floor to stem the bleeding, which had soaked the carpet below him. Shouts ricocheted outside his window now, and he tried to call back, but every inhale burned his insides, and he was beginning to feel lightheaded.

He pulled the raincoat down, forming a fabric tent over his body and hoping that would buy him some time. He laid his head as low as possible to the floor and peered through a tiny space between the raincoat and the carpeting.

"Please, hurry," he murmured as the blaze bore down on him, illuminating the glass eyes of a teddy bear lying on the floor.

Where did that come from, he wondered, and a new fear seized him. His eyes searched the bottom of his closet and landed on his safe. To his relief, it was still intact, but then he realized, to his horror, that the safe's indestructible and drill-resistant three-inch steel door was hanging wide open.