

Chapter 3 | The Pieces Are Set

The survey of the warehouse, picking up supplies, and visiting Tommy had taken the better part of the day. I headed back to the warehouse to check on Marge and Freddy, pay up for their services, and check on the progress. On the way I stopped by a local pizza joint for a couple of large pies with all the trimmings and two six-packs of the native brew. I figured I would share and hopefully get Marge and Freddy to part with some information.

As I pulled up to the warehouse the garage door I had previously used began to rise. Just inside stood Freddy freely pulling on the door chains. He made the work seem effortless. I pulled into the warehouse and stepped out of the pickup.

“Heard you comin’,” Freddy said.

“How did you know it was me?”

“Who else would it be way out here?”

“Fair point,” I said.

I leaned into the cab and pulled out the pizzas and drinks.

“Hungry?”

“Seems like always,” Freddy replied.

He grabbed a couple of pieces and some suds and sat down on the pile of lumber we had stacked earlier. Marge came up from behind and her unique odor was considerably less, almost bearable. I figured the cleaning supplies and her cleaning efforts contributed greatly to the reduction in smell. Marge grabbed a couple of pieces of pie and sat down close to Freddy. I sat on the tailgate opposite and dived into my own repast. I hadn’t realized it had been so long since breakfast and I was starving. Nothing but silence, feasting, and drink passed between the three of us for a small spell. Freddy finished one pie by himself along with four beers. Marge had three quarters of the second pie, allowing me no more than a couple of pieces. Only a couple of beers remained when the pie was finished. Marge let out a loud belch, wiped her mouth with a ragged sleeve, and then fixed her eyes on me. Freddy beat her to the punch and spoke first.

“What ya puttin’ in here?” Freddy asked.

“Pot,” I replied.

“McCathy won’t like that,” Marge said.

“You talking about D.A. McCathy?” I asked.

“The same. Didn’t sit with him when the state legalized weed. Blames weed on his daughter’s death. Says it’s a gateway drug. Made his bones fighting the dealers and suppliers. Lost a lot of face when everything he fought and everybody he put in prison suddenly became legit. Don’t expect he’s done fighting it.”

“Figured he’d be a problem.”

“Has more than a couple of cops believes like he does.”

“Figured on that as well,” I said.

“You figure on the Angel Sangre, or the 32nd street gangs?” Freddy asked.

Freddy spoke with a disquieting calm and probing reserve. He seemed to have a depth of experience and intelligence that didn’t match his current address. This combination of speech and intelligence evoked a serious caution in his words that sent a chill down my spine.

“As best as can be figured on,” I said.

“Seems anybody found here stands a chance to get seriously injured or worse,” Freddy replied, looking at Marge.

“Probably,” I responded.

“If he ain’t kicking me out, I ain’t going nowhere. Lived here now going on two years. Been on the street long enough to know there ain’t anywhere safe,” Marge said to Freddy’s look.

“Some places are safer than others. Leastwise you won’t get killed or cut up,” Freddy replied to Marge.

“Where might that be? I’ll join you. Long as I been on the streets there’s always been a chance I’ll get my throat slit. Some places for as little as a rotten piece of bread.”

“True that.”

Freddy hung his head and slumped his shoulders at the last words. A huge weight seemed to press on his soul. Freddy’s head then rose once more as he looked at me.

“You kickin’ us out?”

“Depends,” I said.

“On what?” Marge asked.

“Well, why should you stay? Don’t know anything about you and you don’t know anything about me. Might be I could be worse than the locals. Maybe you’ll wait until things get going and turn on me.”

“All’s I got is my word,” Freddy replied, looking me square in the eye.

I had been given a man’s word once before and found it as solid as sand when fortunes changed. But Freddy was right. That was all he had left. He was giving me everything he had. Pretty good collateral. I extended my hand.

“Good enough for me.”

I shook Freddy’s hand and he returned a warm smile.

“Well, I got something. My little home such as that old office is. Let me stay and I won’t be no bother nor trouble,” Marge said, extending her hand to me.

“Fair enough.” I shook her hand as well.

“But you also gotta take a shower once in a while, woman,” I said laughing.

Marge and Freddy both hooted at the comment.

“He’s got a point, Marge,” Freddy chuckled.

“That he does. But now we got showers I can take care of that.”

“Got ‘em all cleaned up?” I asked.

“Shiny as a new penny,” Marge smiled.

“Let’s go look.”

Marge, Freddy and I moved toward the stairs and up to the second level. We went straight for the employee locker rooms. Freddy opened the door to the women’s side and we headed in. I was taken aback. They were indeed shiny as a new penny. The floors were cleaned and mopped. The stalls were free of all grime and mold. The stall doors were repaired and steady. The toilets flushed and ran clear. The faucets gave out fresh clear water as best as could be delivered by the local utility. The men’s side was the same.

“Damn. Y’all are good at this. Even the small repairs on the walls, windows and floors are done. Don’t even know how you got off all the graffiti,” I said.

“Special sauce,” Freddy grinned.

“We’ll have the office cleaned out tomorrow,” Marge said.

I reached in my back pocket and pulled out my wallet.

“I expect you will. Would have been surprised if you got it all done today,” I said as I handed Marge a wad of bills.

“It should all be there. I’ll let you settle up with Freddy.”

“Fair enough,” Marge replied, smiling.

Freddy leaned in in anticipation of his payday.

“You got any more jobs available with your new business?” Freddy asked.

“Couple. Laborers mostly. Some inventory, shipping and accounting work. Need somebody to keep an eye on the place and take deliveries,” I replied.

“Marge can keep an eye on the place and keep records. I can work. Do pretty good with wood.”

“Done. Pays eight hundred a week cash, each.”

“Done.” They replied in unison.

It was obvious neither of them had been successful in finding a job in some time. This triumph, despite the possible dangers, produced a sense of pride, a personal bonus for me that was unexpected earlier in the day.

“I gotta go. Lumber is coming tomorrow in the morning. Should be here early. Let ‘em in if I’m not here when they get here.”

“We’ll take care of it. And we will get the office cleaned,” Marge grinned.

We headed downstairs and I went to the pickup. Freddy opened the garage door. I put the truck in gear and headed for the next meeting.

Evening was getting on when I met Gerry. He had found an out-of-the way mom-and-pop that served a juicy steak with cold beer. The room was small and filled with high-backed booths. The booths provided seclusion that allowed anyone to carry on a subdued conversation and not be overheard. I liked the ambiance. All dark hardwoods with plush blood-red fabric for seating and drapes. It appeared the owners were trying to remake some stylized ideal of a New York steakhouse from the late 1800’s. It worked just enough to make you believe some archetype precinct boss would soon be smoking a big stogy in the corner booth. If they allowed smoking inside restaurants these days. Which they don’t.

Gerry was tucking into a 16-ounce Porterhouse medium rare and a large baked potato with a mound of butter on the side. A dab of green beans, put there as homage to your mom’s rejoinders to eat your vegetables, rounded out the meal. Having only a small portion of the earlier pizza, the smell of steak compelled me to order the same. I was fairly salivating smelling the aromas and watching Gerry dive into that juicy hunk of meat.

“They know you’re here,” Gerry said between mouthfuls.

“I thought they would find out as soon as my licenses came in and were approved,” I replied.

Gerry was about twenty years younger than I, a recent war vet with more than a couple of tours in some of the worst places. He stood six-foot-five, had shoulders as broad and strong as a pro linebacker in full pads, a thin waist and biceps that could crack walnuts. His hair was dirty blond, longish but styled, with a matching and perfectly trimmed mustache. I was assured he had

blue eyes, but never really could confirm that as he wore sunglasses just about everywhere. Even when he took them off, brooding eyebrows concealed their actual tint. Gerry was Security Services. I met him through Molly about fifteen years ago. We had become fast friends.

“I would feel better if you’d let me send some men with you,” Gerry said, cutting another bite from his steak.

I watched the piece of steak drip sizzling juices as it left the hot plate.

“Don’t want to draw too much attention right now. Can’t do that roaring in with two black SUV’s and a couple of linebackers dressed in black. Could scare off the customers. Besides, I want to assess the competition before I tip my hand.”

My steak hit the table in a hot plate with a huge potato smothered in pure butter on the side. The green beans followed in a small bowl. I knew right then there would be a doggy bag involved for a late night snack. But that thought wouldn’t deter me from eating all I could right now. I cut into the steak and it was prepared as ordered. I took a moment to savor the smell then plopped a morsel into my mouth. It melted on my tongue. I didn’t know steak could do that. The experience was wonderful. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the taste as Gerry continued the conversation.

“It’s your show. We’ll do it your way. I’ll have a man up to the warehouse in the morning.”

“Let him know there will be two squatters in there, a woman named Marge and a man named Freddy. Hired them to help with the operation.”

“Trust them?” Gerry asked.

“A bit. Still want some background on them. Too much at risk to let in unknown strays.” I said.

“We’ll take care of it. Have the information back to you tomorrow afternoon.”

Gerry pulled a list from his left shirt pocket.

“We did the backgrounds on the largest growers. Then we checked them out to see if they had any commitments or affiliations with locals or any other groups. Got twenty good prospects within fifty miles of town. All of them independents. More than a couple just getting into the business. You going to start seeing them tomorrow?”

“First thing after I check on the warehouse. Have deliveries coming in and need to get sorting tables and shelves built.”

“That why you want the day laborers?”

“Yes. Foreign workers will be fine. But anyone that can work with wood will do. If they have carpentry experience, even better. Also could use more than a couple to clean the floors and get rid of the bird crap. We’re getting the windows fixed. Like to make sure once the birds can’t get in we don’t have to walk around in their leftover shit,” I said.

“Our people will take care of getting them. That way we can ensure they aren’t snooping around. The armored trucks will arrive in two days. We can begin transport in three,” Gerry said.

“Sounds good. I’ll pass that on to Tommy.”

“Be nice to finally meet. Molly used to speak of him.”

“Just remember to do any bank business with Tommy. Then do the warehouse business with me. You have to keep separate contracts, separate billings. There can’t appear to be any crossover. Once I have someone signed up at the warehouse, Tommy will get them to the bank.

When Tommy confirms they have the accounts set up at the banks you will get a text. The Canada bank pays you for each haul on delivery. You get no payment from the customer or our bank,” I said with due seriousness.

“I remember. No contact with the customers until they are processed. Then only as a pickup and delivery service. We don’t collect any payment from them,” Gerry replied.

“Good.”

“You can believe me that I don’t want the feds or the D.A. to have any excuses to talk with me.”

We settled in to finish our meal. All you could hear from our booth for the next few moments were the rattle of knives and forks on china. The occasional mummer of satisfaction escaped our lips more than once. Gerry finished the steak, potato, and even the green beans well before I had downed half my steak. He motioned to the waiter and quickly found a large piece of apple pie a la mode before him. I surrendered at half a potato and signaled for a to-go box.

“You headed to the farm?” Gerry asked.

I had rented a small farmhouse just outside of town for this operation. Sat on a couple of acres with a pond and a barn. I was assured the pond had a fair amount of edible fish if I could catch ‘em. The barn was in solid condition. It was vacant save for a hay loft, tool bench and a single stall for a long forgotten plow horse. The farmhouse was a single story affair with a porch that extended across the front. Three rooms inside included a front room, bedroom, kitchen and bath. It was a basic white slat-sided house in want of a power wash. I wanted the isolation for protection and anonymity. Wouldn’t be the kind of place a pot king would be expected to use.

“Yes. Only a couple of miles down the road.”

“Dennis set up in the loft. He will do rounds occasionally. Don’t let him bother you,” Gerry said.

I started to protest again, but Gerry’s body language suggested that my argument had already been lost.

“Thanks. See you when I need to.”

Gerry was taking a few more sips of his beer and relaxing as I stood to go. I grabbed a couple of bills from my wallet and he put up his hand.

“Company expense.” Gerry said.

I shoved the cash back in the wallet and extended my hand. Gerry grabbed it tight, then released. I turned and headed for my truck. It had been a long day and that bed at the farm was looking pretty good.