



HENRY CIMOLI didn't mince words.

"Have I ever asked you for a favor?"

"Nope."

"In all the years I've been knowin' you and Hawk," Henry said, "I haven't asked for jack squat."

"Jack or squat has never been stated."

We sat at an outdoor table at Kelly's Roast Beef, facing the ocean at Revere Beach. It was early spring, and people had rediscovered shorts and T-shirts. I was particularly interested in the return of the skirt, bare legs, and high heels with thin straps. Not that Revere was a fashion mecca. Revere was a working-class town and Revere Beach was a working-class beach. But you could live well on the beach, and the seafood and Italian restaurants along the boulevard were very good. I had ordered a bucket of clams from the take-out window.

“I take calls for you guys, keep Pearl when you and Susan want to leave town and moon over each other.”

“Pearl loves you, Henry.”

“Do I complain?”

“She says you withhold affection.”

The wind was sharp and cold, but the sunshine warmed you during the lulls.

I sampled a few fried clams from the bucket. Sadly, I learned Kelly’s did not serve Blue Moon ale, or any beer, for that matter. One cannot enjoy fried clams with a Coke Zero. I dipped a few more in tartar sauce, and studied a leggy brunette in a flowy skirt standing outside the beach pavilion. She kept the skirt from blowing away with the flat of her hand while she walked. Maybe Revere was on the verge of becoming fashionable.

A couple paunchy guys in coveralls stained with grease got up from a table and patted their stomachs. One belched. Perhaps not.

“Do I detect a request for a favor?” I said.

“Why?” Henry said. “Because I’m saying I never asked for one?”

“Did I tell anyone about the time you wore lifts to that Hall of Fame banquet?” I said.

Henry stood about five-four and weighed about 134 pounds. But 133 of it was muscle, and in his youth, he’d gone toe to toe with Willie Pep. Some of that still showed in his face. He had a lot of scar tissue around the eyes; his knuckles looked like thick pebbles. He was a hard and tough man despite my claim that he had once been a member of the Lollipop Guild.

“So you owe me?” he said.

“I’d do it anyway.”

“What?”

“Whatever you’re going to ask.”

“I don’t like asking for stuff,” Henry said. “I wasn’t brought up

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that way. Say no if you want. Don't worry about what I said. I'm just ticked off about all this crap."

"Fried clam?"

"You could lose a little weight, Spenser," Henry said. "Z told me you've been into the donuts again. You know how many calories are in one donut?"

"Next you'll want me to give up sex."

"Women make you stupid."

"Not all," I said, eating more clams. A blonde had taken the brunette's place, wearing wedge heels, tastefully frayed chino shorts, and a light blue button-down shirt with several buttons open. She wore designer sunglasses on top of her head and shifted her hips as she strolled.

"She could." Henry motioned.

"Talk slower," I said. "I can't understand you."

"So you want to hear it or did you drive up to Revere on a Sunday to eat a bucket of clams?"

"I'm motivated equally."

Henry craned his wrinkled neck over his shoulder, watching for anyone within earshot. Satisfied that a young couple with a toddler posed zero threat, he turned back. "We got some problems at my condo," Henry said. "I tried to handle it myself, but the cowards sent three guys the other night. They told me if I didn't shut up, that they were gonna toss me out my window."

"What floor is your unit?"

"Fourth floor."

"You're so light, you could blow away."

"This ain't funny."

"Okay. Tell me about these guys."

Henry shrugged. Several seagulls landed on a table next to us, and started to scrap over half an onion roll.

“The guy talkin’ was a thick-necked steroid freak. He had a tattoo on his neck and crazy eyes.”

“Lovely.”

“Other guy was black, not as juiced-up, but just as thick. Third guy was older, with long hair and a goatee. Didn’t look that tough. Maybe he’s the shooter. He had that look, trying to show he was a hard guy.”

“Names?”

Henry shrugged.

“I didn’t ask for references.”

The gulls yammered a bit until the victor took his spoils and flew across Beach Boulevard.

“What’s it about?”

“Some asshole wants to buy up the condo and buy us all out,” Henry said. “It’s a decent price. But I like the place and don’t want to move. I mean, look at the fuckin’ view.”

“It’s fucking grand.”

“And there are memories and all.”

Ten years ago, Henry had met a woman. She was ten years younger and she had given him eight good years. Lots of dinners and trips to the Cape. Two years ago she’d died of cancer. He never spoke of it, but in his office I’d seen a prayer candle next to an old photograph. They’d bought the place together, Henry moving out of the gym and fifteen minutes away to the condo.

“So I won’t sign the paper,” Henry said. “A few more of us feel the same way. There’s a nice Jewish couple up on eight who don’t want to leave, either. One of these dumb shits made an anti-Semitic remark to the woman when she was bringing in her groceries. Used some bad language about her in front of her fucking husband.”

“Who’s the guy wants to buy the building?” I asked. “I could pay him a visit and reason with his more enlightened side.”

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“If I just needed head busting, I would have called Hawk.”

“Where is Hawk?”

“Miami,” Henry said. “Guarding some rich broad in South Beach.”

“You know the company who wants to buy your building?”

“Nope,” Henry said. “They sent some lawyer to come speak to the board.”

“When was this?”

“Last week.”

“And you publicly objected?”

“I ain’t alone,” Henry said. “Half of us want to stay, others just want a fast buck. They’re old and tired and looking for the easy way out.”

“Why not just take their money,” I said, “if it’s a fair deal? Move back into your apartment at the gym. Maybe it’s time for Z to find his own place.”

“The money is okay but not great,” Henry said. “I was considering it until they started to press. I don’t like people pressing. Pisses me off. Being told what to do.”

“I can relate.”

“Figured you would.”

“When’s the next board meeting?”

“Tuesday night at seven,” Henry said.

“Do they serve refreshments?”

“All the bullshit you can eat.”

“Wonderful.”

“I sure like to know what kind of piece of crap sends some hoods around to harass a bunch of old people.”

“I can most certainly find that out.”



“**YOU TOLD HENRY** that I was putting on weight?”

“I told him that you ate too many donuts,” Zebulon Sixkill said. “He decided you had put on weight.”

“Is there no loyalty from my Native American apprentice?”

“Pale Face shouldn’t take more than his fair share.”

We were running along the Charles River that Tuesday morning. The promise of an early spring had turned to gray skies and spitting rain. But it was warm enough to wear athletic shorts and a blue sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off. Z was pushing me a bit, keeping a faster pace than I preferred. My pace was slow and even, knowing I could outlast him on the five-mile route along both sides of the river. Maybe if I’d been a D-1 running back like Z, I’d have been swifter of foot.

“How long have you known Henry?” Z asked.

“Since I was eighteen.”

“You and Hawk?”

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“Hawk and I.”

“So there isn’t much you wouldn’t do for the man?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“Me either,” Z said. “He didn’t have to give me a place to stay when you started to train me. I was a mess. All that booze and sloppiness. On the juice. I still don’t know why he did it.”

“Because he saw some promise,” I said. “Henry has always had an eye for talent.”

“He’s a good man.”

“Yep,” I said. “How are you with everything?”

“I drink sometimes,” he said. “I don’t drink because I’m an alcoholic. I drink because I like the taste.”

“You can stop?”

“Sure,” he said. “Just like you.”

“In the past, I struggled with the stopping.”

“I can stop.”

We jogged for a bit, working to control our breathing, rounding the bend of the river by Harvard Stadium. I had just invested in a new pair of New Balance 1260s, feeling patriotic hitting the ground in American-made running shoes.

“Must have been something to trust me,” he said. “When we met.”

“I needed someone to pass along my knowledge to,” I said. “And also could use a little help from time to time.”

“And you will put in a good word with the state,” Z said. “As a reputable citizen of the Commonwealth, noting my fine and up-standing character.”

“Three years,” I said. “The law says you’re under my watch for three years.”

“And then?”

“You have a private investigator license and trade.”

“Not much of a future as a head breaker.”

“Unless you’re Hawk,” I said. “But Hawk is equal parts ass-kicker and philosopher.”

“The Thoreau of Thuggery?”

“Susan is right.”

“About what?”

“You’ve been hanging around with me too long.”

“So where do we start with Henry?”

“I’ll make some calls,” I said. “And we observe.”

“Wait for those guys to show up?”

“Yep.”

“And Henry will push the point?”

“Henry is not a subtle man.”

We turned north onto the Harvard Bridge, making our way toward MIT, where we’d follow the bike path below Mass Ave, past the Longfellow Bridge and over to the dam, where we’d cross back over into the city. Z had yet to let up on the faster pace, seemingly still annoyed I’d taken an extra donut last week.

“Would be good to know who hired them,” Z said.

“We can ask nicely,” I said.

“Does that ever work?”

“Almost never.”