

*~ Chapter 1 ~*

It was a drizzly and cold Saturday night and I was going into Sparkie's, a bar that was dark and smelled of stale beer that had been spilled over the years by overly ambitious patrons with a few bucks in their pockets and a weight on their hearts. The floor had wooden slats laid out in a diagonal pattern that made my head hurt.

I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting before I continued into the dive. The faces of James Dean, Jimmy Stewart, and John Wayne were plastered all over the walls on old tattered movie posters. It did help the appearance of the place somewhat, but the posters couldn't cover up all of the plaster that was cracking or missing.

A few old, square-top tables were scattered across the main part of the floor, some with folding chairs and some with cushioned highback seats, the latter probably for important patrons that came to call. The tables were mostly metal with Formica tops in colors that I didn't know were even in the spectrum. Dirty lime-green, pale duck-yellow, and some a muddy-water brown that I figured was once a different color years ago.

Along the walls on both sides of the door were old-fashioned booths with padded cushion seats. Most of the seat cushions were covered with duct tape to keep what was left of the stuffing in place. A shine came from some of the seats, but I bet it wasn't because they were clean. More than likely it was from new beer spills that the owner had failed to see or

didn't care to clean up.

My eyes watered, and I felt myself holding my breath as I wondered how anyone could get used to the aroma coming out of this seedy place. Two people sat at the back tables next to the wall where the light had not been seen for probably as long as the dirt had been there. I didn't really blame anyone for not patronizing this establishment, since I wouldn't be here either if I didn't need the money to pay bills this month.

Now I'm not a blue-blood by any stretch of the imagination, and I would never stick my nose up at anyone, but with the atmosphere here at Sparkie's, no one could hold his nose up too long without suffering a sinus attack. My nose had already become congested, but I was here on official business, and I wasn't planning on leaving until I got some information.

I put a hold on my senses and walked across the damp wooden floor toward the bartender, who was busy polishing what was probably the only clean glass in the house with a rag that didn't look too clean. The bartender was eyeing me with a little bit of suspicion and didn't seem too eager to find out what I might want. His apron was stained with all types of spills. He was wearing a tie, but it was frayed and worn-looking. He had on a white shirt with short sleeves and a pack of Marlboro Light 100s in his shirt pocket; one lone cigarette behind his left ear completed his attire.

I walked up to the long wooden bar and looked down at one of the bar stools, thought better about sitting on it. I reached inside my back pocket and pulled out my wallet, looked at the bartender, and nodded. The bartender walked slowly toward

me at the prospect of making some money; he was still wiping the glass he had been holding since I stepped into this pigsty.

“What’ll it be, mister?” he growled.

I hesitated. I really didn’t know if I wanted to drink out of any glasses in a nine-mile radius of this place. “Let me have a bottle of any brand of beer,” I said.

The bartender reached down behind the bar and pulled a longneck brown bottle out of the cooler. He set it down on the bar and asked, “You want a glass with that?”

Without responding too quickly, I took a sip. I instantly regretted that move and shook my head. I never thought there was a way to mess up a bottle of beer, but I guess I was wrong. I learn something every day.

“That’ll be three-fifty,” the bartender said.

I pulled a five out of my wallet and laid it on the counter. The bartender reached across the bar to pick it up, but I held up my hand and he stopped his forward progress and looked up at me. I pulled out a twenty and laid it next to the five.

The bartender raised his left eyebrow and spoke in a low voice. “If you’re here for information, that twenty won’t get you my shoe size.”

“I already know your shoe size; it’s a nine and a half. There’s a lot I know about you, but I’m not here to find out anything else, Reggie. I need information about someone else.”

Reggie’s eyes got a little wider when he heard his name coming out of a stranger’s mouth. He quickly recovered, narrowed his eyelids, leaned over the bar, and looked directly into my face. “I think you better leave before. . . .” He left his comment hanging as he reached under the bar.

“Reggie,” I warned, “when you pull your hand out from under that bar, it better be another bottle of beer for yourself. It would not be very friendly to come up with that shotgun.”

Reggie stared at me but didn’t pull his hand out from under the bar. He had a small smile on his face. “And if you think,” I continued, “that you’re going to shoot me through the front of the bar you better notice that I have a nine millimeter pointed at your chest.”

Reggie’s face drained of all color as he looked at my right hand; I love doing that to people. He saw a small glint of steel protruding out of my jacket. Reggie’s eyes traveled up the jacket to my face. I gave him a quick smile to punctuate my point.

“Stalemate?” I asked.

“Okay,” said Reggie. “For now, anyway.”

“Now that that’s settled, let’s get down to business,” I began. “First of all, I am looking for a guy who has disappeared. I know you have some information about him or know someone who does. Now we can do this easy, or we can make it ugly for both of us. Your choice.”

Reggie slowly raised his right hand into view and with very easy movements moved away from the bar, settling his back against an old metal cash register. He crossed his arms, looked squarely in my face, and smiled. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you can get into just coming here? Do you think that you can just waltz in here and starting asking questions? You might know some things about me, but you don’t know everything.”

“I know more than you think, Reggie. Do you think that

you guys at Langley are so smart that no one else could figure out what's going on in here? Look, I'm just a small-time investigator trying to eke out a living. I might have graduated from college with a degree in stupidity, but I know how to figure things out."

I grinned at him. "Call it a gift. Call it a curse. Call it whatever you want to, but I do the best with what I have to work with, so stop making this harder, answer a few questions, and I will be out of here and you and your buddies over there can go back to doing whatever you do, if anything." I motioned toward the corner where two men sat in a booth. They thought they were hidden in the darkness of the bar, but I had spotted them about the same time I spotted James Dean.

"Are you high or something? Do us both a favor and ask your questions. I'll tell you what I can and then you can beat it, okay?" said Reggie.

I laughed for a second then nodded my head, "Okay, okay. The guy's name is William B. Smith. He is the CEO of American Diamond House in Chicago, a diamond cutting and distribution house. He disappeared two days ago under suspicious circumstances, no phone calls, no notes, no nothing. I have been hired by several interested parties looking for Mr. Smith, very rich and influential parties who want to know where their boss and friend might be."

"Buzz," said Reggie. "First question gets you no prize. I don't know anything about a William Smith, but if I did know I don't think twenty would get you any of that information."

Now most people are not as observant as I am, and I get paid to find out information no one likes to know but many