

FROM

The Current

BY TIM JOHNSTON



An hour later Radner pushed through the gray door and began to make his way to the truck, loose-legged and head down, his face shielded by the bill of his cap.

Sutter got out of the truck and shut the passenger door behind him, wondering at the strangeness of his own legs, calling it the time he'd spent sitting in the cold truck waiting and not his nerves, or his sickness. He saw Radner look up at the slam of the truck door. Saw his eyes under the bill when he saw him, and saw his gait change hardly at all as he kept on, hands in his jacket pockets. He stopped a few feet short of the truck, of Sutter, and stood taking him in, jacket first, then the face. Then the rest, down to his boots.

"I know you," Radner said. "You're the man had me looking under his hood today."

In his breath cloud Sutter smelled the Seagram's and 7. A smell and a taste from the old days, before she got him to give it up for good.

"But you weren't wearing that jacket earlier," Radner said, raising one forefinger in the air and wagging it at him. Playacting a man who would not be duped.

"Is this your truck?" Sutter said.

Radner lowered the finger. "What's the trouble, Sheriff?" At the movement of Sutter's arm he glanced down, then showed his hands. "I'm an unarmed man here, Sheriff."

Sutter studied him. The hooded eyes. The smirking and almost girlish lips that wanted to be slapped. Sutter raised the gun. It was his father's old .38 revolver. Now his. He stepped aside and gestured with it.

"I want you to shut up and place your hands on the fender of the truck."

“What’s this about, Sheriff?”

“What did I just say?”

Radner regarded him blankly, drunkenly. Then he stepped forward and put his hands on the fender of the truck.

“Spread your feet.”

Radner spread his feet and Sutter patted him down. He fished the young man’s keys and phone from his jacket pockets and slid them into his own. He glanced at the door of the bar. If anyone else came out it changed everything.

“Put your hands behind your head and lace your fingers.”

Radner did so and Sutter gripped the fingers in his free hand and pocketed the .38. He pulled the bracelets from the hip pocket of his jeans and drew down Radner’s left wrist and cuffed it, then drew down the right and cuffed it to its fellow.

Radner was glancing around the lot. “Where’s that Ford of yours, Sheriff? With the Minnesota plates and no whattayacallit. Official insignia.”

“I won’t tell you again to shut up.”

Sutter opened the truck door and gave Radner a push and Radner got himself in and Sutter shut the door, then walked around to the driver’s side and got in. The smell of the young mechanic had already filled the cab: booze and grease and gasoline.

“Whatever this is—” Radner began, and Sutter struck him with the back of his hand.

Radner sat looking at his lap, tasting his lower lip with his tongue.

“You want to say anything else?” Sutter said. He saw Radner’s eyes go to the door of the glovebox. “It’s a short drive,” Sutter said. “It won’t kill you to keep that mouth shut till we get there.”

The truck started up, the wipers swept snow from the glass, but under the snow was a film of ice and he sat staring at it, his heart pounding—all that waiting and you never thought to scrape the windshield? He tried to crank down the window, but it was either frozen or didn’t work, and finally he reached under Radner’s legs for the metallic scraper, got out of the truck again and went quickly and foolishly at the ice, and with each scrape he saw more of the cab, more of Radner, and it was like the reveal on one of those lotto games, one of those scratch-and-play cards, only this one told you not what you’d won but what you’d lost.

He turned left out of the lot and drove down the road two blocks and turned right, and then right again, down a lampless road where the buildings were all dark and window-boarded and the lots had not been plowed, and he pulled into a lot where the only tracks in the snow were his own tiretracks going in and the tracks of his boots coming out and he followed these to the back of the building, a one-time machine shop, according to the faded signage, and pulled up alongside his sedan and parked the truck and killed the engine.

He turned to Radner, but Radner was looking out the ragged hole Sutter had scraped, and Sutter looked too: the flat, undisturbed snow of the lot, the dark old building. The snow that fell on everything with no prejudice and no sound whatsoever.

Christ—what are you doing?

Sutter got out of the truck and walked around with his eyes on Radner and opened the passenger door. “Get out.”

Radner stared at him. The smirk gone from his lips. His face shining. Then he looked away. As if not seeing Sutter was the same as Sutter not being there.

Sutter took him by the arm and pulled him stumbling from the cab. He walked him a few steps and turned him around again.

“Get on your knees.”

Radner did not. He said, “Sheriff, I’m not putting up any kind of resistance here.”

Sutter stepped behind him and put his boot to the backs of Radner’s knees, and down he went. He swatted the billcap from Radner’s head and took the cuffs in his hands and jerked up on them and leaned over until his face was near Radner’s right ear.

“Do you remember where you were three nights ago?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Three nights ago—?”

“Tuesday night.”

Radner shook his head. “I got no idea. I swear. I coulda been anywhere.”

“You weren’t anywhere, you were at the Shell station on County Road F24 and you were assaulting two young women with your buddy.”

“Hell I was.”

“How’d you get those scratches on your face?”

“At work. A tire blew up in my face.”

“You are full of shit.”

Radner shook his head again. “Swear to God, Sheriff. Ask any of them at work. Ask Toby, he was standing right there.”

Sutter’s heart was banging. He saw his own ragged breaths bursting white into the air. The empty lot, the old machine shop, the falling snow, all seemed to be turning in some sickly way. You can still drop this. Right now. You can get into that sedan and just drive away. Go talk to Toby . . .

“You watch the news?” he said.

“What?”

“Do you watch the news.”

“Yeah, sometimes.” Radner groaned. “Please, Sheriff, you are breakin my arms.”

“Do you know what happened to those two girls, after you ran them off the road down the riverbank?”

“I never did. I never ran nobody down no riverbank.”

“One died, Ryan, and the other one almost did. So guess where that leaves you and your buddy.”

“You got the wrong man, Sheriff. You got the wrong man.”

“Assault, attempted rape, attempted murder on two counts, murder on one count.”

“All right,” Radner said, “so take me in. Haul me in, man. Let me talk to a real sheriff. Let me talk to a—” He howled. Sutter had raised the cuffs.

“Where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

“You know what.”

He shook his head. “I swear I don’t.”

“The backscratcher, Radner. Where is it?”

Radner craned his neck to look at him. Fear and pain in those dark eyes.

“You’re crazy,” Radner said. “You’re just plain crazy. You better let me go before this gets any worse. I won’t say nothin. People make mistakes, I get that. I won’t go to the sheriff or nothin. You just go your way and I’ll go mine, how about that, huh? What’ve you got to lose?”

Sutter was silent. His breaths smoking. His heart slamming. He looked up at the sky. Slow tumble of flakes, landing cold on his face and melting. Faintly there was the fishy, muddy smell of a river . . . but any river would be frozen and you wouldn't smell it, and then he understood that the smell came from Holly Burke—from her wet hair, from the air trapped in the white bag and escaping like breath when they unzipped it.

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