

## TUNNEL VISION

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I thought that was him.

His head was low as he rifled through the card rack. After mulling over his identity, there was no doubt in my mind. It was him.

He was so engrossed in his search he didn't notice me on the other side of the rack. He went through the same routine with every card--stare at the front, flip it open, stare at the inside, then replace it. Stare, flip, stare, replace. Stare, flip, stare, replace. He seemed programmed to do it. Maybe he was upset none of them conveyed only his feelings--if he could have any.

He distracted me from searching for a birthday card for my girlfriend. She would be twenty-four the following week, and I didn't have time to do it sooner. I still had yet to pick up her gift, or even to decide what to give her. The smart thing to do was to take care of the easy stuff, like picking out a card. It's usually a snap; sometimes I just zero in on the card. This time, however, I zeroed in on a much bigger target without looking.

He went through the motions one last time and stormed off. I followed at a safe distance.

He still wore that stupid, candy-apple red football jacket he wore to school no matter the season. He wanted everyone to see the "QB" stitched on the right sleeve, as if nobody knew who he was. He wore it like an Armani suit, and God help anyone who grazed him in the hallways. Once in the cafeteria, someone accidentally spilled milk on his jacket. The kid wound up with a broken nose; the kid's parents screamed bloody murder and demanded that he pay the medical bills. He got away with it. He was the quarterback, and it wouldn't look good for the coach or the school. Maybe he kept it for sentimental reasons. He had plenty worth remembering.

I'm not a detective, but I read enough Kinsey Millhone and V. I. Warshawski to know how surveillance works. I stayed behind him about ten feet, figuring out where he might go next.

He walked past another card store, probably because he was already there. His strides were long and leisurely. He kept one hand in his jeans pocket while the other arm swung back and forth like a metronome. He never carried himself like that in the halls of Port Richmond. I would mistake him for someone else if I didn't know better.

I focused on him so much I nearly stumbled over other shoppers. Some asked me what the hell I was doing; others glared at me without responding. I gave them all cursory glances, muttered apologies, and continued after him, oblivious to the rest of the mall.

He strayed toward a large cart in the center area of the Sears wing. There were several carts with items that looked awkward in stores--leather goods, bizarre T-shirts, small flower decorations, and the like. I was caught off guard when he stopped; I had to stop somewhere close enough to watch him yet far enough away to remain undetected. I chose a sneaker store and stayed at the window, faking interest in the brands of sneakers.

I watched his reflection in the window, which gave a security guard reason to consider me someone suspicious. He surprised me when he said, "Excuse me, sir. What are you doing?"

"Just looking at the sneakers," I fumbled.

"Why don't you go inside? There are more of them there."

"Well, I'm not sure I want to buy here. I'm just looking." Brilliant response.

The guard gave me a long, icy stare, then strolled away, probably expecting me to make a fast move. I stared in the window, looking at the sneakers this time. If he looked over his shoulders once or twice, I didn't dare look.

As I wondered what purpose a partially transparent sneaker served, I saw my quarry moving through the mall again. I followed him into a small record store. As he disappeared inside, I wondered what I could do once I got my hands on him. The possibilities seemed

endless--like his rotten disposition, his devil-may-care attitude, the fear he instilled in others with his brawn. Nothing short of divine intervention could change that.

When I reached the record store, he stood near the entrance, looking over the new CD releases. I was so busy mulling over his fate at my hands I almost collided with him. I headed toward the back by the cassettes.

Strangely, we were alone in the store. It was tough watching his reflection in the cassette boxes; I barely made him out. He flung the CDs as he did the cards--as if the store owed him something and he couldn't find it, so he'd have reason to decimate the joint. What a bastard. I couldn't get over how little he changed.

As if blinded, I suddenly lost sight of him. I turned around enough to see him with my peripheral vision. He was in the center aisle three feet away, still assaulting the CDs and too close for comfort. Panic set in. Did he figure it out? Did he know I tailed him? Did he realize who I was? Was this whole CD thing a ruse? Would he jump me outside the store? A million questions, no answers. Nobody likes to be in that position.

*There's no point in overreacting*, I told myself. I slowly ambled to the right, keeping as calm as humanly possible. I moved along the wall to the area with videotapes ranging from the decrepit *Star Trek* episodes to the cheesecake. I caught sight of him in the videotape shrinkwrap. He tossed a CD into the rack and trumped out of the store. I turned to him once his back was toward me. Once he disappeared, I left the store in pursuit.

Just once, I often thought, I'd like to see the bastard get his. I'd like to see him on the floor, staring in horror at the monster he created. God, what a sight--the tables turned. Don't we all wish for that? Don't we want payback on our past tormentors? But now I had a real chance. After seven years, most of which he spent at SUNY Albany, he came back and made himself a

sitting duck. I promised myself to kick his sorry ass if the opportunity arose, but for seven years it sounded empty. Now, however, was a different story.

I wove through the crowd as if by instinct, struggling to close the gap between us. I could only think about this idiot. All my bodily functions went into overdrive. Rage coursed through my veins. Nothing else mattered--the other shoppers, the gift I was supposed to buy my girlfriend, the fact that we were in a public place. My only concern was nailing this former quarterback for the Port Richmond Red Raiders to the wall.

He headed for a women's clothing store. By now I was barely a foot away from him. He raised his hand to wave to someone, but he never got far enough in the gesture. I grabbed his arm, drove it behind his back, and steered him through double doors into a service corridor.

Once inside, I threw him up against a portion of the wall that projected out into the corridor. As he turned around I punched him in the face. He fell against the wall and stayed there. He turned around again, but this time I let him see who was kicking his ass. When our eyes met, he still couldn't figure it out.

"Hello, Mike," I sneered. "Remember me?"

His eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, shit," he mumbled.

"'Oh shit' is right, you bastard." I delivered a left to his solar plexus and watched him crumble to the floor. I crouched down and grabbed his shirt, a right cross positioned for launch. "How do you like your own medicine? Tastes awful, huh? It has to, if it's gonna work."

He was shaking. His eyes were glassy, as if he was about to cry. His mouth hung open like a bomb hatch on a plane. I never thought him capable of fear, but he was terrified. He looked so pathetic and timid I chuckled maniacally. I had this asshole where I wanted him.

Then I heard a woman gasp and a child scream behind me, at the double doors.

His wife and daughter.

Something else I didn't think about.

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The security guard was stunned, at the least, when he heard my story. Mike, the guard, and I sat in the office, surrounded by four bare, off-white walls. The office was hollow, as was my explanation for what I did.

Someone knocked at the door. The guard stuck his head out and whispered to whomever it was, then motioned himself out. It sounded like someone wanted to get in but couldn't. Mike didn't pay much attention, with his head buried in his arms on the table. If he was overcome with guilt, it served him right.

The guard finally walked away from the threshold looking flabbergasted. Mike's wife ushered their daughter in, determined to find out what was going on. "Lorraine, what is she doing here?" Mike exploded. "Get her out of here. She saw enough."

"Excuse me, Michael, but you're making a bad thing worse," Lorraine replied. "She has a right to know." Then she glared at me, as if to burn a hole through her husband's attacker.

She nudged her daughter closer, then urged her to go by herself. What was this about?

"Mister," she said in a fragile voice, "why did you hit my daddy?"

How could I explain this to her? How could I tell this dark-haired girl about her daddy without upsetting her? How could I tell her what her father was like without poisoning her image of him? Lorraine leaned against the wall with her arms folded. The guard stood at the head of the table. Mike buried his head in his arms again.

A million thoughts raced through my mind. She seemed so innocent. She didn't deserve to hear horror stories about the man who brought her into the world. But she had a right to know, and to hear it from the only person who could tell her. "Well, uh...what's your name?"

"Jennifer."

"Okay." I wiped my hands on my jeans. "Your daddy and I went to school together."

"Oh, for God's sake," Mike groaned.

"Shut up, Michael," Lorraine snapped.

"Anyway," I continued, "one day in sixth grade music class, I put my instrument away and accidentally knocked a trumpet off the shelf. Well, your daddy's class came in, and your daddy played that trumpet. That afternoon he started a fight with me in the yard in front of everybody. He came over and...hit me in the face."

Jennifer looked sadder than before. Against my better judgement, I plowed on. "After that, your daddy didn't like me. For the next seven years he picked on me for no reason. He knocked me over in the halls, stole my lunch money, and if I had other problems, your daddy got involved because he wanted to." I felt bitter now.

Jennifer looked at her father as if she didn't recognize him. The damage was done. Now it was time to make amends. "Now you have to understand something, Jennifer. All that happened seven years ago. Today was the first time I saw your daddy since we graduated high school. And you know what? Your daddy isn't like that anymore. If he was, he wouldn't marry your mommy and have a pretty daughter like you."

Jennifer began to sob. Mike looked ready to leap across the table and offer his family a demonstration. "Jennifer," I went on, "your daddy loves you. He would never hurt you. You're a special part of his life, and he loves you very, very much. Okay?"

She nodded. "But if Daddy doesn't bother you," she said, "why did you hit him?"

*Christ, she should play for the Yankees with those curveballs.* "Good question..."

Lorraine walked over to her daughter and said, "Honey, it's time to go now."

"But Mommy--"

"I'll explain it in a little bit . Now we have to go." She took Jennifer's hand and left.

The guard turned to Mike and said, "Mr. Bianchi, would you like to press charges?"

Mike scowled, reminding me of how it always worked. I couldn't avenge myself in school because he was too overpowering; we were never even until I got my unjust desserts. Turnabout may be fair play, but between us it was an excuse for him to beat me up for a stupid accident. No way would this time be different.

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"Hi, sweetheart."

"Hi! Where are you?"

"I'm at the mall, figuring out what to get you for your birthday."

"Am I really so hard to buy for that it takes you five hours?"

"Yeah--I mean, what do you get the woman who has everything?"

She sighed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being--oh, never mind. Look. You mentioned you want to visit that restaurant on New Dorp Avenue. Now would be a great time to do it. Instead of a birthday gift, it'll be a birthday dinner. Sound good?"

"Yeah. Can you be here by seven?"

"Of course! I'm your boyfriend. I can do anything."

"Okay. But did you really look for a gift for me for the last five hours?"

"No, I didn't."

"What were you doing?"

I thought about that. "I ran into someone from school, and you know how that goes."