

THE THIRD BROTHER

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“GO HOME!”

“Go home!”

“Go home!”

I blinked in the late afternoon sun, processing what I was looking at across the parking lot. Two men shouting at a woman, one of them with something in his hand. The woman shouting back, struggling to retrieve what the man was grasping. Behind her several children, a couple of them wailing. Whatever was happening, it wasn't even the second cousin twice removed of a fair fight. I let go my shopping cart and started to run.

“Go home!”

“Go home!”

“Go home!”

She was black—I was guessing Somali—wearing a flowing yellow dress and orange head scarf. The older of the two guys was chanting while a younger and skinnier man tugged at the scarf like an old-fashioned vagrant trying to steal laundry off the line. Both of them white. She was no pushover; she was yelling at them as she tried with one hand to keep the garment from

being pulled off while shielding her kids with the other. As I ran I looked out at Broad, hoping for a cop, but saw only a steady stream of cars speeding in each direction past a jumble of west-side fast-food restaurants, car lots, and payday loan joints.

“Go home!”

“Go home!”

“Go home!”

“Stop it,” the woman said over the crying of her children. “Stop it!”

“Hey!” I said as I reached them a few moments later. I took a second to catch my breath. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Go home . . .” The older guy said, the chant dying on his lips as he stared at me. He was a hard-living fifty or so, dumpy and balding with patchy grizzle coating his face and chin. He wore loose-fitting tan cargo shorts and a blue checkered button-down short-sleeve shirt with the bottom two buttons undone, exposing a flash of belly as white as butcher-shop lard. The kid with the scarf in his hand was scrawny, midtwenties maybe, in jeans shorts and a white ribbed wifebeater, with a shaved head and a thin face I might have paid more attention to had my eyes not been drawn to a prominent tattoo on his neck that seemed to involve rifles, barbed wire, and the sun. I couldn’t tell if it represented a branch of the military or a prison break fantasy.

“The fuck are you?” Grizzle said. His eyes were glassy and he swayed as he spoke. “Some kind of raghead lover?”

Up close, I noticed for the first time the gun in a holster on his right side. Ohio’s an open carry state, making it perfectly legal. I took a step back. Legal, but cause for concern with a guy in that condition? That was another matter altogether.

“I’m someone telling you to leave this lady alone.”

“We’ll leave her alone when she goes home. Where she belongs.”

“She is home, you nitwit. That’s probably why she’s buying groceries.”

“How do we know she don’t have a bomb under that?” said the scrawny guy with the tattoo, tugging on the scarf as he pointed at her dress.

“Stop it!” she said.

“How do we know you don’t have shit for brains?” I said. “Do everybody a favor and beat it.”

“Free country,” Tattoo said. “Except for *terrorists*.”

“The only terrorists I see are you two clowns. Why don’t you crawl back under the rock where you came from and we can all go about our business?”

“Make us,” Tattoo said, grinning.

“Are you deaf on top of stupid?” I said, reaching out and tearing the end of the scarf from his hand. He looked at me in surprise, as if I were a magician at a kids’ birthday party who’d just pulled a penny from his ear. I turned toward the woman, who rewrapped her scarf without meeting my eyes. I was turning back to face the cowboys when out of the blue Tattoo leaped onto my back. I reached around to try to pull him off, wobbling like a top at the end of its spin, and then gasped as he wrapped his right arm around my throat and cut off my air. *What the hell?* I thought. This was supposed to be a simple grocery run. I gasped as black specks floated before my eyes like flies hovering over dogshit. I staggered, spun around once more, summed up my available options, settled on one, and fell backwards, hard, into the car behind me. The kid made an “oof” sound like a guy who didn’t realize the medicine ball he was catching was quite that heavy, and dropped off me like a leech doused in sea salt.

I stepped away from him, inhaling deeply. “I said, beat it.”

“Let’s hold it right there,” Grizzle said, the gun out of the holster and in his right hand. *Lesh hol’ it right there*.

“Easy now,” I said, backing up.

He didn’t reply. He nodded at Tattoo, who slowly righted himself, walked over to the woman, grabbed her scarf again, and this time pulled it clean off. He shrieked in triumph like a movie

Indian counting coup as the woman cried out and put both hands on her head.

I stepped in front of her, keeping my eye on the gun.

“Why don’t we all calm down a little? No one wants to get hurt.”

“Sure about that?” Tattoo said, charging up to me, scarf balled in his hands as he stuck his face in front of mine. I saw bloodshot eyes and smelled breath that would have wilted poison oak. “You shouldn’ta gotten involved.”

“And you should try picking on people your own size for a change.”

“That’s what I’m about to do.”

“Have it your way—”

“Let’s get out of here,” Grizzle interrupted.

“What?” Tattoo said.

“I said, let’s go.” He held up a phone in his free hand.

“Gimme one minute with this douche. Just one fuckin’ minute.”

“Forget it,” Grizzle said. He waved the phone at Tattoo. “He’s saying JJ’s, now.”

Reluctantly, Tattoo took a step back, though his eyes never left mine.

“Don’t try anything stupid, ya dumb shit,” he said. “Raghead lover. Traitor.”

“There’s a cop,” I said.

“What?”

“Behind you.” He looked around. As he did I grabbed the scarf out of his hands for the second time that day.

He twirled back, eyes blazing, right arm cocked. But Grizzle whistled and held up his phone again. “JJ’s,” he said. Lowering his gun, he turned and limped toward a rusted brown pickup truck three rows over. Too far to see the plate.

“We ain’t done here, douche,” Tattoo said, following his partner.

“I’m free most Thursdays,” I called after him. He flipped me the bird. A minute later they were gone in a squeal of tires and cloud of diesel and a long, defiant blast of their horn.

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I took a breath and turned to the woman.

“You all right?”

She nodded unconvincingly, phone already pressed to her ear as she made a call.

I'd had worse shopping trips, I consoled myself, reaching for my own phone. I was conscious, anyway.

Then it hit me: I'd forgotten to use my coupons at checkout.

Shit.

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“JJ’S?”

“That’s what he said.”

“That a person?”

“Maybe. Or a bar. Or a pool hall in Spencer, Indiana, according to Google. I really don’t know, and I’m not sure I care. I was too busy looking at his gun.”

I was sitting in an Adirondack chair in my postage stamp of a backyard on Mohawk Street two days later. Sunday morning, the quiet kind that I don’t get enough of. Until a minute ago I’d been on my second cup of coffee, reading *Dreamland* and starting to think about breakfast. Hopalong, dozing at my feet, stirred briefly as my phone went off. I saw from caller ID it was Burke Cunningham. I almost didn’t answer, and not just because I liked listening to my new ringtone. A call from Cunningham on a Sunday morning was like the cluck of a dentist as she works on your teeth. The news can’t be good. On the other hand, because he’s one of the most sought-after defense attorneys in Columbus, Ohio, the news would probably involve a job, which I could use right at the moment. But it also meant an end to a quiet Sunday morning of the

kind I don't get enough of. I answered anyway. Unlike my conscience, my bank balance always gets the better of me.

"What'd the cops say?"

"They said it was a good thing I didn't get my ass shot."

"They did not."

"Perhaps I'm paraphrasing."

"Any leads?"

"Not at the moment. They took the info. Put out a news release."

"I saw the coverage. You're a hero, again."

"Slow news day. A zoo baby would have bumped me off the lineup in a heartbeat."

"How about the woman? Is she all right?"

"Scared and angry. But physically OK."

"Any idea who they were?"

"No."

"Any guesses?"

"Let's see. Two redneck Americans looking to have a little fun at the expense of an immigrant who dresses funny to them. Other than that, no."

"And you're OK?"

"I'm out eighty dollars in groceries and my pride's a touch wounded. I never should have let the kid get the drop on me like that."

"What's with the groceries?"

"I lost track of my cart afterward. Is there, ah, anything I can do for you?" I glanced at my book and my coffee.

"Just the opposite. I might have an assignment."

"Now?"

"Something a bit more long term. If you're interested. Are you available tomorrow morning? Perhaps we could discuss it then."

"I'll have to check my calendar. Why, yes, it turns out I'm free. Anything you can tell me beforehand?"

"Probably easiest if we talk in person. Nine o'clock work? My office?"

“See you then.”

I tried returning to my reading but made it only a page or two when I was interrupted by a sound at the back door. I turned and saw Joe, barefoot in red shorts and the Hogwarts T-shirt my parents bought him for his birthday.

“Morning.”

He nodded, wiping sleep from his eyes. I held out my arms. He stumped forward, hesitated a moment, and climbed onto my lap. I hugged him. I tried not to squeeze too tight. I had at best three or four nanoseconds of his childhood left before he was too old for this kind of thing.

“How’d you sleep?”

“Fine. Can I play on the Xbox?”

“In a little while. Is Mike up?”

He yawned and shook his head. He looked down at Hopalong. “Can I take him for a walk?”

“Maybe later. Once we’ve had breakfast.”

“He needs exercise. He’s lazy.”

“He’s an old Labrador. There’s a very slight difference.”

“Can we go swimming today?”

“Not a bad idea. If it doesn’t rain.”

“What’s it matter if it rains? We’re wet either way. It’s so hot. Why don’t you have air conditioning?”

“It’s a zoning code thing.”

“Sure it is, Dad.” He snuggled into me and I held my breath. He was a slight kid, just on the cusp of puberty, edges still soft here and there. Not like his half brother, already shooting up and bristling with muscles and testosterone and attitude. The window for lap sitting with Mike had been almost nonexistent, though most of that was on me. There’d been a scene with him the day before when I told him we couldn’t stop at a food truck on the way to the Clippers game and were making sandwiches instead. Typical stuff between us.

“Do you think you’ll ever get back together with Anne?”

“What?”

“You know, like get back with her. Like, romantically and stuff.”

I looked at him. He returned the look, face full of innocence.

“Why are you asking me this?”

“Just curious. So, will you?”

“Probably not,” I said, after a moment.

“How come? I thought you liked her.”

“I did. But things just didn’t work out.”

“How come?”

A man, his son, his dog, and a Sunday morning inquisition about his failed love life. Could it get any better than this?

“Sometimes my job makes it hard for me to pay attention to people the way I should. Not a lot of ladies like that. It’s hard to blame them.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Plus she’s got a new boyfriend.”

“She does?”

He nodded, reaching down to thump Hopalong.

My stomach shrank a little. “How do you know that?”

“I met him. I was playing with Amelia the other day. He was at her house.”

Against all odds, Joe and Anne’s daughter had stayed friends even after Anne broke up with me, tired of too many dropped balls and missed dates. An English professor at Columbus State, she’d been the first girlfriend in years I hadn’t treated like a doormat with boobs. But I hadn’t been there the times she needed me, either. Call it a draw, I guess.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Amelia says he’s not as funny as you.”

“Probably a good thing.”

We sat for a couple of minutes longer, listening to the sound of German Village waking up. Birds singing, cars juddering down the brick streets of the neighborhood south of downtown, the two Kevins having a just-shy-of-heated discussion across the alley

about whose turn it was to clean the grill. A moment later Joe wiggled off my lap and planted himself atop Hopalong. The dog sighed in protest but didn't move from his Labradorean repose. I shifted in my chair and realized my right leg was asleep. I picked up my cup and took a drink of lukewarm coffee and retrieved my book and read a chapter without absorbing a single word. I put it down, got up stiffly, and went inside, trailed by Joe and the dog. It was time to start mixing pancake batter and frying bacon and figuring out the best places to swim for free on a Sunday in Columbus.