

Chapter 1

The Ram's Horn

My stomach ached. The nagging, worrying feeling that had been bothering me all day, the twisting in my gut, hadn't gone anywhere. Why not?

I sat in my car and reflected on the day. There wasn't much to reflect on. I'd gotten out of bed at the usual time and headed for the office with an acceptable amount of enthusiasm. There was the normal amount of paperwork to get done, then the call from Scott to meet for lunch.

What, then, was this burrowing worm of unease? I was receiving all the internal signals that something was wrong, that I was in for a bad day. Was there some bill I'd forgotten to pay? Some call I'd neglected to make?

Perhaps it's possible to have a bad day without anything bad actually happening. That theory certainly held true when it came to people. I'd met a number of people in my life that I'd just known were bad, with a capital B, but not all of them had done something in front of me to prove it. I just knew.

Take, for example, the two clowns I was watching from my car parked in the lot of the restaurant where I was supposed to be having lunch with a friend. Instead of eating, I was watching two guys telegraph all the signals I associated with "bad guys." I was sitting in my car watching them sit in their car and watch the people moving behind the glass of the Ram's Horn Restaurant.

Their car was a blue Chevy, still on the good side of ten years old and in reasonably good shape. Nothing untoward there. They'd been sitting there a while, looking around them nervously, and waiting. The man in the driver's seat was in his forties. Black hair, slightly hooked nose. A bit grizzled, and a few acne scars, but most women would probably think he was handsome. It looked like he was wearing a broken-in leather jacket. His companion barely looked twenty. He was skinny with curly red hair and patches of freckles on his pale skin. He wore an olive drab army jacket with a frayed collar. It was cool for August, but even so they seemed overdressed for the sixty-degree weather.

The redhead was talking animatedly, gesturing abruptly with his hands to emphasize his words. The driver seemed to be ignoring him as he moved his eyes back and forth over the people in the restaurant. He seemed quite cool and relaxed compared to his passenger, who was a hyper little squirrel. I don't know what it was, but there was something about them . . .

I sat and watched them for about five minutes, then got sick of waiting for the drug deal or package drop or whatever it was these guys were waiting for to happen. I'd been late when I arrived, and sitting in my car listening to the engine click wasn't going to make me any earlier.

I left Heckle and Jeckle in their Chevy and walked into the restaurant. There wasn't any line and no waitress came to seat me as I looked around the room for my friend. I spotted him in a booth near the back corner of the dining room. Ignoring the waitress who appeared in front of me just when I didn't need her, I made my way toward my old friend. He was dressed in a grey, low profile, low budget suit and white shirt with a navy blue tie that was pulled away from his neck. The top button of his shirt was undone but the tie still seemed to chafe him. He'd have to re-button it before he went back to work, but I knew him and he'd put it off until the last minute. I used to do the same thing when I had to wear a tie.

I stopped in front of the table and watched him scowling at the menu. He looked up at me and back down at the menu.

"John," he said.

"Scott," I replied. Bantering fools, us two.

He was sitting with his back to the wall in a spot where he could watch the door. Among cops it was known as the Wild Bill Hickok Syndrome, and it had saved many a cop's life.

"Nice choice of booths."

He looked up at me again, not scowling anymore but with the lines from the frown still etched in his face. They matched the deep lines in the corners of his eyes behind the thick lenses of his glasses and the grey-white hair at his temples. He looked forty-five. He was thirty-three.

"I've never been shot in the back," he replied. "I'd like to keep it that way. I may be paranoid but that doesn't mean they're not out to get me." He went back to scowling at the menu. I smiled – although I wasn't a cop anymore, I had a tendency to keep my back to the wall in restaurants too. I slid in across from him, feeling my jeans stick briefly to the vinyl cushion.

I played with a fork while I waited for a waitress to notice me and bring over a menu. And waited. They could still be too deep in shock

from my good looks to approach, but I wasn't betting on it. Scott attracted bad waitresses like flowers attract bees, and I gritted my teeth in anticipation. Seeing a grand total of nine other people in the restaurant, I figured our waitress had her work timed out to the exact second so she could smoke as many cigarettes in the kitchen, over the food, as possible.

A few minutes later, a plump adolescent wearing an ugly polyester uniform came over to our table and plopped a menu down in front of me. There were zits on her chin that she'd tried to cover with too much make-up, and her jaw muscles stood out like golf balls as she loudly chewed her gum.

"Ready to order yet?" she said in a loud, nasal voice.

I looked down at the unopened menu in front of me and then at Scott. For a brief second his scowl hinted at becoming a smirk, then returned to its normal formation. He ignored her. I thanked the waitress and said, "No, we're not quite ready to order yet, thank you."

She turned on her heel without a word and walked into what looked to be the kitchen, loudly chewing her gum. I looked back at Scott and shook my head.

"I don't know how you do it," I said. "Every single goddamn time."

"It saves me tip money." Both of us laughed for a while and then he went back to scowling at the menu.

"The prices are going to stay the same no matter how long you try to intimidate them," I remarked profoundly. He sighed and closed the menu.

"It's not the prices," he said, inspecting a fingernail, "it's finding something I like."

"Since when have you not cared about price?" I jabbed. "And anyway, you do the same damn thing every time we go out. Here, Denny's, anywhere. You scowl at the menu for a while, ask the waitress what she recommends, then order a hamburger with the works. Every time."

"Well, I like order in my life," he said. I snorted.

The waitress arrived and took our orders. I got a steak sandwich and Scott got a hamburger with the works, after asking the clueless waitress what she recommended. He ignored my snickering.

As I ate I looked around the room. The nine people occupied a total of four tables. Not bad, considering 10:00 a.m. was early for lunch. I'd been keeping weird hours lately, and Scott had to take his lunches when he could get them. As it was, he got paged twice and had to trot off to the pay phone near the restrooms as the battery on his cell phone was dead. The calls turned out to be about improperly filed paperwork. I could hear

him across the room as he informed the second caller that if his lunch was interrupted again for a non-emergency, the person responsible would have a hard time sitting down due to seriously misfiled paperwork.

“Can’t you just flush that beeper?”

He gave me half a smile. “I wish. They’d grab another one out of a drawer and bill me for the one I lost before I could get out the door. There’s no escape.” His voice dropped to a ridiculously deep, melodramatic tone. “Many have tried; all have failed.”

Halfway through the meal I had to excuse myself to the bathroom, stepping around three men dressed in mechanics’ coveralls as they got up to leave. In the john, the toilet paper roll was full and the graffiti was amusing, which was all I could realistically hope for from a public restroom. Someone once wrote that you could judge how a society was faring by the condition of its public restrooms. If so, our country is in trouble.

As I washed my hands in the sink, someone started yelling just outside the door, using profanity that would have been out of line at a bachelor party. Between the sheer volume of noise and the apparent anger behind the tirade, I began to suspect bad things were going to happen. And soon. I shut off the light, leaving myself in darkness, and cracked the door.

Out past the imitation wood paneling partition that partially concealed the restroom doors, my pudgy waitress was standing stone still behind the cash register, looking up, frozen with fear. Someone I recognized was standing on the counter, yelling at her, holding a sawed-off shotgun that wasn’t quite aimed at her and yet wasn’t quite pointed away. He had pale skinny arms disappearing into the sleeves of an army fatigue jacket and red hair under the pantyhose he’d pulled down over his head. I didn’t think anybody did that with pantyhose anymore.

“Gimme the money. Gimme the fucking money!” Red waved the sawed-off pump vaguely in her direction. He was getting angrier by the second. “Get it or I’LL FUCKING SHOOT!”

The adrenaline rush hit me then. My hands began to sweat, and it felt like my eyeballs were throbbing in time to my rapidly accelerating pulse. My face flushed with heat. Pucker factor eight. I opened the bathroom door a few inches wider so that I could almost get my head through and craned my neck to try to see past the partition.

Mr. Acne was there too, in the middle of the dining area with a large automatic in his right hand. He held the pistol down at his side, finger out of the trigger guard. It looked as if he’d been born with it in his hand. Not good.

“Everybody up! I want you to move over to the far wall and start

emptying your pockets on that table there.” Mr. Acne’s voice was even and steady, and he was a lot calmer than Red.

Most of the people were terrified and did exactly as he said. An older man in an expensive suit with his back to the door didn’t respond and Acne reacted by pointing the automatic at his head. There was a noted lack of expression on Acne’s face, another bad sign. The older man was holding a glass halfway to his mouth, frozen, probably not realizing it was still in his hand.

I noticed Acne was wearing gloves. Red wasn’t, and it almost looked like the two of them weren’t aware of each other. Red was engrossed in yelling at the terrified waitress, while all of Acne’s calm and quiet attention suddenly centered on the motionless man in the suit. For all of Acne’s lack of expression, the guy in the suit seemed just as unfazed, maybe even a little resigned — like this happened to him every day and he was expecting it. That soon changed.

“Hey you in the booth! Stand up. Stand up so I can see you.”

Old Mr. Suit’s glass began to tremble.

“HEY, STAND THE FUCK UP!”

Acne’s facial expression hadn’t changed, but he was shouting as he moved closer to the guy in the suit.

I pulled my pistol out of its holster on my right hip and cocked the hammer. It was a SIG P230 automatic, small and light and easy to carry. Small and light and easy to carry, however, meant not much bang. I’d sacrificed stopping power for comfort, and boy was I regretting that decision as I looked at Red’s shotgun. I’d have gladly traded the little SIG for a shotgun of my own, or better yet a Thompson submachinegun.

I looked out the door again, but still couldn’t see Scott. Acne was the closest person to him, and even though he was now shouting animatedly at the man in the suit, (“Look at me! I SAID LOOK AT ME!”) he looked too alert for Scott to jump. If Scott made any sudden moves he’d probably get a bullet in him — and Scott hadn’t bothered to wear a kevlar vest since he’d worked the road. Speaking of vests, Acne’s jacket looked mighty thick, and was zipped up all the way to his neck.

The panicked waitress finally managed to get the drawer to the cash register open and started handing wads of bills to Red. In the dining room, Acne had apparently reached some turning point in his one-way dialogue with the man in the suit. The two were facing each other now, Mr. Suit looking terrified, trying to speak, drink still in his hand.

“D-don’t. . .”

Acne stepped back and steadied the pistol as it pointed at the man’s

face. The muzzle of the gun was only inches from the man's forehead. If he pulled the trigger the room would get a new paint job. Acne's thumb rose and pushed down on the automatic's safety catch.

I swung open the bathroom door and stepped out into a crouch, pointing my SIG at Red, who had one hand full of cash and the other full of shotgun as he turned toward me. I shot him three times in the chest as he raised the shotgun. He looked confused, then fell off the counter onto the floor.

Before Red hit the carpet Acne was already moving. He pivoted and fired a shot at me that ended up in the men's bathroom somewhere, then turned his gun back on the man at the table. I fired twice at Acne, center mass, just as he was squeezing off a round that would've blown the man's head apart. Instead, my bullets threw off his aim enough so that he blew the drink out of the man's hand. Razor sharp glass shards flew through the air.

Acne looked stupidly at the dark holes in his jacket and lurched drunkenly toward the door, all thought of killing the man in the suit forgotten. As the muzzle of my gun came down from the recoil of the second shot I raised my sights, took an extra quarter second to aim, and cranked off a third round at Acne's head as his pistol started tracking up toward me. My bullet hit him in the throat at the same instant I heard a double tap from Scott's automatic. One of the two rounds from Scott's gun hit Acne just under his raised right eyebrow. His body slowly collapsed forward, his finger following a too-late command from his brain and firing the pistol once into the floor.

The body hit with a sickening wet thud. I covered Scott while he approached the corpse and kicked the gun out of its hand. It was then that I noticed the blood sliding slowly down the fractured window that looked out onto the parking lot.

I backpedaled into the bathroom and puked noisily into the sink.

Chapter 2

Aftermath

I stood next to Scott on the sidewalk outside the Ram's Horn, watching the police scurry around like ants. Only the bored expressions on their faces gave away their true feelings about all the activity that seems so intriguing to civilians. The lab guys had already done their once-over: photographing and fingerprinting everything, vacuuming the carpet, tables, and probably my puke in the sink. Two paramedics began loading the black body bags, one at a time, into an ambulance. Apparently the Medical Examiner's meatwagon was busy elsewhere and had to miss the fun.

The county detectives had already taken statements from us. Scott knew most of the responding officers personally so there was very little hassle, and they only gave my concealed weapons permit a cursory glance. After I gave my statement they left me pretty much alone and talked to Scott.

The county lab techs and forensics guys were packing up their things. There hadn't been much for them to do other than to verify our story. They went through all the motions anyway, drawing diagrams of the scene, plotting bullet trajectories, and conferring noisily with the detective in charge of the case. Scott and I had already turned over our guns to the Firearms and Toolmarks expert. It was his job to verify that our guns were the ones that fired the killing rounds. He had to see which bullets from what gun went where, and whether their placement jibed with our story. Standard operating procedure for cops is to assume everybody is lying to them, so I couldn't take the treatment personally, but I still disliked being on the wrong end of the investigator's pen.

The lab techs had done as much as they could at the scene with the blue Chevy that Red and his friend had been sitting in, so they towed it away to their controlled access garage for more in-depth examination.

The usual rubberneckers and gawkers had congealed in clumps on the sidewalk, but there wasn't much for them to see. Even the two uniforms pulling line duty mostly just stood around. Once the sirens had died down a lot of the street spectators had left, probably disappointed. All the good stuff, like pools of blood and crumpled bodies, had been inside and

hard to see. A few news crews were milling around with cameras, but the cops kept them so far away from the scene they'd just about given up hope of ever getting any gruesome video for the six o'clock news.

I shook my head and spat on the sidewalk, the acid taste of vomit still in my mouth. The vomiting had taken me by surprise. I'd seen people shot before — hell, I'd shot people before. Maybe it had been the brains sliding down the window. I hadn't been expecting that. Seeing a corpse was a lot different from seeing someone killed, and that's light years from actually pulling the trigger, but I'd seen a lot of bodies in worse conditions and never lost my lunch.

I'd made myself look at the bodies and remember why I had to kill them. It had been their decision, not mine. I had fewer nightmares that way.

I'd shot people before, in two different situations; it hadn't been glamorous or turned me into a stressed-out wreck. It had been terrifying, horrible, and necessary. I just wished I hadn't glanced at that window.

As I stood there, I remembered looking at Red and what was left of Acne and thinking that the freshly dead all look alike. Skin that didn't look real once it was immobile, loose joints, and glassy eyes over startled expressions. Except for Acne, whose eyes had been about eight inches apart when we finished with him. Christ.

I sucked in a lungful of air and let it out, slowly. The faint smell of automobile pollutants tickled my nostrils. Scott finished talking to two plainclothes county cops and walked over. He reassumed his position beside me and pulled in his own lungful of pure city air, then coughed slightly.

“Well,” he said, “one of the county dicks knew the redhead on sight, so at least we've got that mystery solved already. They'll double-check his prints against the records in AFIS, but it's a pretty sure bet that he's one Leroy Hawkins, better known as Red, or RedMan. Big chewing tobacco fan, apparently. That stuff'll kill ya.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and looked at Scott.

“The other guy we don't know yet,” he went on. “No one recognized him, but then being shot in the head'll do that to you. We'll run his prints and see what shakes.”

“What was he saying to that old guy in the suit, the one he was going to kill?”

“I couldn't hear too well from where I was sitting, but what I did hear didn't seem to make much sense. At first it seemed like he was mad at the guy for not moving fast enough, but then it seemed like he was going

to kill him anyway, no matter what.”

“So what did Mr. Suit have to say about why people are so eager to donate lead to his bloodstream?”

I watched the ambulance pull away with half the lab boys in it, followed by a marked county cruiser with its flashers spinning silently. I looked at my watch. It had only taken the cops three hours to process the scene, a record time. The owner of the restaurant probably didn't mind the lost business; when the story hit the news he'd have hordes of people beating down his doors in hopes of seeing a bloodstain. When Scott didn't answer I looked over at him. He had a wry smile on his face.

“Let me guess,” I said. “He got away.”

Scott nodded. “Probably slipped out when I called the cavalry — while you were still redecorating the bathroom.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose again, swilling a cup of coffee and trying to relax. “So what's the story on Red?”

“Career loser,” Scott explained. “Tough guy that doesn't mind carrying a gun. He's done a little time for assault with intent, that kind of stuff. Been in and out of jail since his teens.”

“This whole thing is screwy,” I said. “None of it makes any sense. Acne looked and acted like a professional, except for the company he was keeping and the little jig with the old guy in the suit. He was wearing gloves and I bet the spent cases from his gun the lab guys bagged are clean of prints, but Red got his prints all over everything and didn't seem to care.”

Scott nodded. “Either ‘Acne,’ as you call him, was just renting the kid 'cause he needed a body, or he wanted the job to look amateurish and the kid fit the bill. This was either a slightly fucked up robbery with way too much firepower, or a botched, really fucked up hit on the guy in the suit.” He shrugged. “Either way, we'll send his description and prints out over the wire and see what pops up. Acne, that is. I'll see what I can find on the guy in the suit, too. I had the techs dust his chair and table in case he left any good prints, but I doubt it. It's not my case, but they'll damn well keep me informed.”

“Man, I thought for sure Acne was wearing a vest,” I confided to Scott. “That's why I failure drilled him.”

“You what?”

“Failure drilled him. . . Two to the body, followed by a shot to the head. You know, 'cause you think the guy's wearing a vest or something, and shots to the body will fail to stop him.”

“The ‘Anything That Can Go Wrong Will Go Wrong’ school of gun-fighting. I’m familiar with the technique,” he said, tolerating my probably-needless explanation. “I’d just never heard it called that before.”

“I think it’s also called a Mozambique drill,” I told him.

“Why?”

“Fuck if I know. I look African to you?” I snapped. Acne’s ruined face kept popping into my head. The coffee wasn’t going down very well.

Scott smiled at my outburst. “Relax, man. . . Go back far enough, we’re all Africans.” While I blinked at him he called out to the two remaining county cops. He told them he’d be heading back to the station in a few minutes and they nodded, then drove off in their cruiser.

Scott and I said goodbye and I watched him walk to his car and drive off. I’d known him since high school and I hoped the lines in his face weren’t mirrored in my own. He’d just made lieutenant, one of the youngest ever in his department, and he’d been so busy lately our lunch was the only time he’d had free to see me. As Wonder Boy of the department, he was having a lot of shit piled on him. Being part of an officer-involved shooting was a major hassle he didn’t need.

I sighed again. Sighing was getting to be addictive, but I promised myself that as soon as my bad day was over I’d quit cold turkey.

I climbed into my car after one last look around and headed out toward my office on Big Beaver Road in Troy. I was leasing an office out of a shiny, modernistic building that looked like it was covered in tin foil. On Big Beaver they all did, victims of the bug that had afflicted architects about fifteen years before and hadn’t quite faded away yet.

My office was halfway up the 12-story monument to food wraps, stuck in the middle of tax offices, moderately successful attorneys, stock brokers, and investment counselors. There was also a cut-rate travel agency that fit in about as well as I did.

The lettering on the pebbled glass door read “THE J. PHAULT AGENCY,” and below that in slightly smaller letters, “Security Consultation and Investigation.” I’d worked hard on coming up with just the right wording that was aggressive yet classy, exciting yet discreet. I don’t know if I’d been successful, but it brought in clients, most of whom could pay. I rode up in the elevator alone. Most of the upwardly mobile types I shared the building with were working hard at four in the afternoon, closing deals, selling shares, or practicing their golf strokes.

The elevator and the hall on the sixth floor, like my office, were done with the same style and grace exhibited on the exterior of the building. Chrome, glass, and blocky aluminum fixtures dominated, with the walls

done in white, off-white, beige, light cream, café au lait, or ivory — whichever one of three dozen names for the white family the interior decorators had been using that week.

I unlocked the door to my office and went in. The building's mail delivery service hadn't been by yet, or maybe they had and I was still unloved by the Postmaster General. I was prepared though. I sat behind my desk that was too ugly to be the stylish fixture its designers had hoped for and caught up on some paperwork I'd been putting off. I had a few letters to type up, and it took me a lot longer than it should have. I kept seeing Red, the confused expression on his face when I shot him, the clumsy way he fell off the counter. Over and over it played in my head, until my temples began to throb.

At about four thirty there was a rattling on the window behind me, and I turned in my chair to see pea-sized hail coming down in thick sheets. The cars down on Big Beaver were switching on their lights in the gathering gloom. I shook my head. It was typical Michigan weather. For the previous two weeks everyone had been sweltering in humid, 90- to 100-degree heat that was the average for August in Michigan, then just two days previous the temperature had plummeted to 60 and was expected to stay there for at least a week. Now there was hail. It just proved what people always said about Michigan weather: If you don't like it, just wait a minute.

Thinking of home, I grabbed the phone, remembered finally to look at the answering machine for messages, found none, and dialed. After two rings a female voice answered. I breathed obscenely into the receiver for about ten seconds, slurped once, then hung up. I drummed my fingers on the desk for about a minute, then snagged the phone on the first ring.

"Phault Chauffeur Agency," I said. "Bend over, we'll drive."

"I knew it was you. I'd recognize that desperate panting anywhere."

"Desperate? Madam, I'll have you know they line up at the door just for the chance to gaze upon my shapely backside. What's for dinner?"

"I don't know, what're you going to make?"

"Wait a minute. You're the wife. You're supposed to greet me naked at the door with dinner already on the table. Besides, you're the one that's home already, Babycakes, not me."

"Sounds like a good way for the dinner to get cold. All right, all right, you whiner. When you get home I'll have something ready for you. When're you leaving?"

"Now, I think. It's dead here." Bad choice of words. Red's face popped into my head again, but I shoved it back down through sheer force

of will.

“Okay. See if you can hurry it up, though. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

We hung up at the same time, me with a big smile on my face and my bad day forgotten, at least for a while.

I rode down in the elevator with a group of young urban professionals that looked at me sideways since I was the only one not wearing a suit. I thought about showing them my gun, but then remembered the police had confiscated it. Nobody has a sense of humor anymore anyway.

By the time I pulled into my driveway the hail had turned into light rain and the wind had picked up. Tomorrow would probably be dry and hot with ball lightning and sun dogs. I ran through the rain up onto the front porch, shook out my hair, and went inside.

“Hi honey, I’m home,” I called out.

My wife appeared in the doorway to the living room wearing an oven mitt and nothing else.

“You’ve got a choice,” she said. “Before dinner we can either compare and discuss the ideas of Freud and Jung against those of the behavioralists such as B. F. Skinner, or we can rut like animals on the carpet.”

“Gee, I don’t know,” I said. “That’s a toughie.” I pursed my lips. “What was the first choice again?”

Later that evening, appetites sated, we half-dozed in front of the local evening news. Kelly was lying on the couch, her head on my lap, close enough to sleep that her breathing had turned heavy.

The Ken and Barbie onscreen, with their hundred-dollar coiffures, had already covered my shooting, and now were talking about a shooting in Rochester with barely contained joy. Probably a botched mugging they said breathlessly, and don’t forget the two stabbing fatalities in Royal Oak that were probably gang related. The two anchors made sad, pouty faces and talked briefly about how awful things were, then went on to the next tragedy.

Except there aren’t any gangs in Royal Oak, I thought. And nobody gets mugged in Rochester. The problem with the media, I thought for perhaps the hundredth time, is that they have no obligation to get anything right. They just aren’t supposed to deliberately get it wrong. Kelly stirred in my lap.

“Are you asleep?” I said softly.

“No,” she mumbled into my leg.

“Good. The last time you fell asleep with your head in my lap you left a drool pool on my leg.”

“You loved it and you know it,” she said softly. She lightly bit my thigh. We sat quietly for a few minutes.

“Scott called me at work and told me what happened to you two today,” she said.

I nodded my head. “I thought he might’ve. He’s a good cop.”

“He was your good friend before he became a good cop. Mine too. Still is.” She scratched her nose by rubbing it on my leg. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen him that I almost forget what he looks like.”

“Still ugly,” I said. “You two would just fight if you got together, anyway.”

“We don’t fight, we bicker. There’s a difference. Besides, he doesn’t have a wife, he needs someone to keep him in line.” After a pause, she said “Do you want to talk about it?” She looked up at me, worry in her eyes.

“No, not now. In a couple days, maybe. I’m okay, I’ve just got to get back into the groove.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. Scott and I did what had to be done. No buts about it. I’ll be fine. Okay?”

“Okay, if you say so. Now shut up and let me get to sleep.”

“Just don’t start drooling.”

“Shaddap.”