

ARTSCAPE

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Art, Money, Murder and a sheriff with a past

CHAPTER 1

The sun, still low in the east, heated the morning air and sent it shimmering off the asphalt. The humidity, which had hovered around sixty percent all night, began its gradual ascent into the nineties, and people who, an hour or two earlier, started their day showered and crisp, acquired the wilted look that comes with summer in southwest Virginia. And summer in southwest Virginia begins in May.

It is an area blessed with mild winters, pleasant autumns, and breathtaking, beautiful springs, all compressed into seven months. The remaining five make summer. The procession of the seasons, thus compressed and distorted, characterizes the area and shapes the personalities of those who live there.

Ike Schwartz grew up in Picketsville, a town tucked away in the southwest corner of the Old Dominion. For all of his boyhood, Ike took it as a natural course of events that God intended life to be this way. It wasn't until he went to school in Massachusetts and experienced the splendor of New England's weather, deep snow in winter, gentle springs, summers which were warm by day, cool by night, and those blazing golden and red falls, that he realized there might be something better to look forward to from May through September than a shirt permanently sweat-plastered to his back and the inevitable lethargy that overtook everyone by three in the afternoon.

He had been in Boston no more than a week when he experienced the difference climate created in the lives of people. He, like the natives, found himself immersed in its frenetic pace—a pace that seemed never to slow irrespective of the hour. Back home, folks worked slowly and carefully, conserving their energy against the afternoon's heat. By three o'clock, almost everyone was off the streets, out of the sun. There was a tacit understanding that mid-afternoon was a time not suited for work. Employer, employee, and customer all recognized that little, if anything, was going to be accomplished.

To the occasional traveler from up north, this behavior was a source of wonderment, frustration, and anger. To have to sit in the waiting room of Cardwell's Gasateria, alternately cooled and ignored by a rattling, old fashioned oscillating fan, and to watch, helplessly, while the mechanic, one's only hope to get back on the road to Wisconsin or Pennsylvania or wherever, sat and sipped root-beer for an hour or more, qualified as punishment bordering on the cruel and inhumane. These purposeful people, Ike soon learned, had no comprehension, no experience, and therefore no reason to falter in their daily activity. Early in his collegiate years he discovered a number of reasons for not going home again, and summer topped the list.

Yet here he stood in the sweltering Shenandoah Valley, his shirt already damp at nine-thirty in the morning and a whole day ahead of him. *Sheriff* Ike Schwartz, duly elected by the people and sworn to enforce the laws of the United States, the State of Virginia, the County of Rockbridge and the incorporated town of Picketsville. He was also expected to bend those laws here and there, overlook the kids with a keg in Craddock's woods, the incestuous family of Craddock himself, and turn a blind eye to the broken speed limits, parking violations, and certain cash transactions entered into by

members of the Town Council. An easy life, all in all.

He reckoned as negligible the number of serious crimes, difficult cases, or dangerous situations he experienced—nonexistent. The only time anyone shot at him was when Chester Duncan came home to find his wife in bed with his brother, Darryl. Chester shot them both, and vowed to take the whole of the town with them. After he pumped two barrels of his twelve-gauge into the bushes six yards to Ike's right, he sat down on the porch and cried like a baby. Ike only had to gentle him into the police cruiser and take him away. A jury of his peers, small towns being one of the few places on earth where juries are truly composed of one's peers, acquitted Chester of the murder charges declaring any reasonable man would have done the same. The judge, being of a somewhat less lenient disposition, found him guilty of disturbing the peace, discharging a firearm within the corporate limits of the town, and disorderly conduct, and remanded him into the custody of the State Mental Institution, where, it is reported, Chester is making excellent progress.

“At least I don't have to deal with terrorists down here,” Ike muttered to himself. He hoped it would make him feel better. It did not.

He stepped off the porch and headed towards his black and white. The eighty feet he had to walk to the car was enough for the heat to break a light sweat on his forehead. As he heaved his two hundred pound, six-foot two-inch frame behind the wheel, he wondered for the first time that day, and the hundredth time that year, why he had ever decided to come home, and having done so, why he had allowed himself to be talked into running for sheriff of this God-forsaken crossroads. But he did know why, thanks to the expensive psychiatrist at the Phipp's Clinic.

“You can’t run forever, Isaac.”

No one but his mother ever called him Isaac.

“Sooner or later, you have got to go home, face your father, those other people, and when you’re ready, talk. Talk about your wife, your life, what you can do with it, of course, and make peace with yourself. I cannot convince you, and you will not accept the therapy that would allow you to do it yourself, so go home, touch base, and start again. It is like hide and seek. You remember when you were a kid? You’d hide from another kid who was ‘It’, and you’d be half-frightened behind some bush or tree, not knowing if ‘It’ was close to you or after some other kid. You would peep out and if his back was turned, you would make a dash for base . . . all-ee, all-ee outs in free. Right? So go home, touch base, when you’re ready, if you need to, but only when you’re ready, we’ll talk again.”

One hundred and eighty-five dollars an hour and all Herbert Rosenberg, M.D., board certified psychiatrist, tenured professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and author of three books and fifty juried articles, could give him was hide-and-peek. All-ee, all-ee outs, in free, for God’s sake. But Ike knew that sooner or later, he must remember Zurich, and Eloise, but not now, not today no, definitely not today.

He rolled down the windows, started the engine, turned the air-conditioning on high, and switched on his radio. After a moment, he punched the transmit button and called in.

“One to base . . .”

Essie Falcao’s voice crackled back, “Base to One. That you, Ike?”

“Now who else would be calling you on the radio, Essie? Garth Brooks? Of course, it’s me.”

“Right. Sorry, Ike.”

“Okay, Essie, listen. I’m driving out to the college this morning and I’m going to turn this radio off because I don’t want to have to listen to you gabbing with everybody in town on the police frequency.”

“Ike, how do I contact you if anything comes up?”

“Essie, the possibility of anything coming up in the next forty-five minutes is so unlikely that I reckon we’ll chance it. Hell, Essie, the way this town works, it would take somebody an hour to even recognize anything was going on, and another half hour before they would get around to calling it in. But on the off chance a Boeing 747 makes an emergency landing on Main Street, or the phantom rapist shows up at Mrs. Cardwell’s coffee klatch, or worse yet, the mayor makes a decision, you call Whaite or Billy, then call me at the college on my cell phone.”

“Right, Boss.”

“And Essie, the next time you see Billy, you tell him for me that one, he’s to stay out of this cruiser. This bucket of bolts is about to conk out as it is and I don’t need him yahooping around the country scaring old ladies and impressing young girls in it. And two, if he does use it, he is to keep his smoking to an absolute minimum, especially the funny cigarettes he rolls himself with stuff that should be in the evidence locker. And three, if he does use the car and does smoke in it, he should clean up the mess afterward. Got it?”

“Okay, Boss, Yes, sir . I got it.”

“And, Essie, since you’re the one with him when he does that crap, the message is for you, too.”

“Now, Ike, I never . . .”

“Essie, are you missing anything, a bit of personal attire maybe? A little red, frilly—what is this thing? It looks like it belongs on a slingshot. You don’t have to answer, but you might check the glove box next time you find yourself in this car. Really, Essie.”

He snapped off the set before she could answer and grinning, put the car in gear. He opted for a quick detour and breakfast at the Crossroads Diner. He hoped food would fortify him against the appointment he dreaded keeping.

The regulars had already arrived at the diner when he pushed through the door and took his usual stool near the back. Flora brought him his coffee, already creamed and sugared. He nodded his thanks and spent thirty seconds staring at the tiny yellow blobs of butter fat circling his cup. Nothing changed. His eggs over easy, toast, limp bacon and the mandatory dollop of grits, would come next. Flora served grits thick and gelatinous. “Can’t stand them city grits,” she declared, “Look like soup—can’t do a body no good that way.”

He sighed and turned his attention to the antique television in the corner. He forced himself to watch a scene which, played incessantly over the last two months, had been indelibly etched into his brain.

The steady thump of bullets hitting the side of the house and the whine of ricochets all but drowned out the orders he screamed at the three men crouched behind tables, sofas, and anything that might offer some measure of cover.

“Set your bombs to go off as soon as you release,” he shouted. Just then the firing

stopped. They waited in the eerie silence that followed—guns off safety, explosives strapped to their bodies.

“I am sorry, Rasheed,” one rasped.

“It is all right. You tried. The guard was not supposed to be there. Our information was bad. The Italian will pay.”

“He should die for that,” a third said and shook his fist.

“Yes,” the one called Rasheed said. “But we will not be the ones to see to that.”

A bullhorn shattered the silence.

“This is Captain L. P. Davis of the New York Police Department. Come out with your hands in the air. You are surrounded, you cannot escape.”

“Shhhh,” Rasheed whispered. “Do not say anything.”

“Can you hear me in there? You are surrounded. Give yourselves up.”

“Abdul, show the nice policeman what we think about giving up.”

Abdul scuttled across the floor to the window, stood, and snapped off three shots, killing one policeman and wounding another. He fell backwards as a hailstorm of government-issue bullets tore through the window and him. For the next five minutes the noise was deafening. Bullets, shotgun pellets, and balls slammed into the house from all sides. Windows shattered. The siding was reduced to slabs, to splinters, to toothpicks. Their meager cover of furniture could not protect them from the rain of ordinance that shredded the room around them. The shooting stopped again.

“They will ask us to surrender again, Rasheed?”

“Not this time. We have killed one of theirs. They will not stop now until we are all dead.”

“Allah be praised.”

“Yes. You know what to do next?”

The two others nodded.

There was a thump and hiss as a teargas canister arced into the room.

The assault resumed, only this time the shots were high and off to either side of the door.

“Be ready, they are coming,” Rasheed choked. They heard the footsteps on the porch and then in the room. They lay still, faces close to the floor and the little breathable air it afforded, bandannas over their mouths. When he was sure there were at least a half dozen police within range, Rasheed, with his last breath screamed, “Now.” And three bombs went off, the concussion detonating the fourth on the lifeless body of Abdul.

The house exploded in a ball of fire. Debris and body parts flew upward and as far away as the next block. Eight of New York’s finest were killed in the blast. A dozen others were hurt. Houses on either side were flattened. Two across the street had their fronts caved in and windows blown out. There was no trace of the bombers. The NYPD had been victimized by yet another terrorist tragedy, another sad day in a city already burdened with more than its share of senseless deaths.

By midnight the awful work of cleaning up and identifying victims began. DNA samples were taken and matched to scraps of humanity, dental records collected and checked and in the end, a fair amount of guesswork employed as the death toll was totted up. It would be weeks before the investigating team left the scene and three months before the shattered buildings were razed and hauled away.

Ike, his coffee now cold in its cup, watched in fascinated horror, as the scene was run and rerun. He barely heard the running commentary from the talking heads, safe in their studio or blocks away with camera crews.

“This bizarre set of events began early one Friday morning when four men attempted to break into the rare book room of the New York City Public Library. Sources in The Anti-terrorism Task Force now report they believe the men planned to seal themselves in with thousands of precious volumes and, in effect, hold them hostage. The bombs which blew up the house in Brooklyn were to be detonated in the library if their demands for millions of dollars were not met.

“A suspicious guard attempted to detain them and was shot. Another guard’s quick thinking locked down the rooms and the men had no choice but to flee, leading New York police on a high-speed chase across Manhattan and into Brooklyn, where as you just saw, they barricaded themselves in the house, then—the terrible explosion. Two months ago, we witnessed these terrible events. Today, a spokesperson for Homeland Security reports they have identified the group responsible, The New Jihad. The question every American is asking today: Where will the terrorists strike next? Now this . . .”

The coifed and polished newsreaders were replaced by a commercial.

“Shut it off, Flora,” Ike said.

Flora Blevins stubbed out her cigarette in a fried egg and snapped off the television.

Ike stared at his eggs, congealed with the bacon in a puddle of whitish grease. His toast, never hot in the first place, lay limp and cold next to them. His grits remained at attention, awaiting orders to do a body some good. He turned and stared at the parking lot

through the double glass doors and sighed, pushed his breakfast away, and walked to the cash register. Monday morning in The Crossroads Diner—the beginning of another day, another week, a lifetime. A little past nine o'clock in the morning, but becoming clear it was going to be one of those days. He pushed through the doors and headed back toward his patrol car. He turned the air-conditioning on high and headed out of town towards the low hills that shielded Callend College from the untutored eyes of the townsfolk.