CALUMET CITY

CHARLIE NEWTON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Patti Black is the most decorated cop in Chicago; a ghetto street officer, she redefines the word badass. But the steel-plated exterior she shows to the world – solitary, friendless, loveless – hides the hideous traumas of her past: torments barely contained by her tough-guy persona.

When a series of seemingly unrelated cases – a drug bust gone bad, a mayoral assassination attempt, the abduction and murder of a states attorney, a long-hidden body walled up in a tenement basement – all point in her direction, she comes to the horrified realization that her past is no longer staying in its deeply suppressed place. It’s back and it’s hunting her down.

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Charlie Newton

DEDICATION

In 1959 there was a hurricane in the Libyan desert. They don’t get many of those there. *Calumet City*, like the others that preceded it, is probably for her.

PROLOGUE

There’s this place in Chinatown.

Off Wentworth Avenue in the 25th Ward, where the four-story walkups lean out over the street. Buildings not yet leveled by urban renewal, mattress fires, or debts to the wrong politicians. The kind of neighborhood that scares people who look too close.

A block east the ‘L’ screeches overhead, sharp like it’s mad, metal-on-metal that bitters the back of your throat. Amtrak runs up there too, on iron bridging painted gray to match the concrete it shades. Above and below and beyond the trains, twenty lanes of loud expressways rumble and honk in four directions. Everything at ground level vibrates, the sense of movement so strong you can lose your balance.

During the day Great Lakes sailors and bus-tour adventurers shop for trinkets and a glimpse of something that isn’t here; at night it’s a Mexican border town selling vice in Mandarin. Behind the pagoda storefronts and across the alley, the Outfit runs dice and card rooms, and the Chinese Merchants Association with their teenage hitmen run everything else.

Me, I’m sitting in a side-street restaurant with faded Chinese characters for an address and six tables for locals who should know better. It’s dim in here, and that’s unusual. The floor’s dirty, and that isn’t. Rice kettles and radiators steam the stale air humid. Back by the kitchen an old woman sits smoking unfiltered cigarettes down to her fingertips and has for as long as I can remember. We don’t speak, her and I; we stare out the front window. Her eyes

hide behind the smoke and that’s probably a good thing – she hears what I hear: the echoes of a long, violent struggle between me and the devil.

The devil has a man’s first and last name – you need to believe that – he’s got saliva, busy hands, and a Bible he quotes, and shoes that are always new. But he’s the devil just the same.

And he’s out there beyond the glass. I’ve seen his footprints. And so has she.

For the last seventeen years I’ve come to this restaurant, always alone. Every Friday night since I came on the job. Back then Patti Black was a tough-talking twenty-one, but it was bluster. At heart I was a little-white-girl orphan with bad history and worse dreams, hoping to hide inside a uniform from history that won’t let you hide.

Seventeen years I’ve sat at this same table, looking out this same window, me and a nightmare secret that’s kept me a well-armed coward. Tonight I face it: We finish here. I’m bruised and cut, there’s a pistol in my pocket that doesn’t belong to me, and the taste of its barrel in my mouth. You might say the clock’s running. ’Cause it is.

Chapter 1

SEVEN DAYS AGO

IT'S MONDAY IN Chicago, which is actually worse than it sounds.

Our bookies, palm readers, and civil servants are all doing double-shift overtime. We're in an end-of-season baseball thing – the Cubs and Sox are still alive. A planetary alignment so rare that today's *Herald* suggested biblical implications.

It's also election eve.

And then there's the other *thing* – nineteen hours ago a 'lone gunman' tried to kill our mayor. Three bullets. High caliber. All into the airspace surrounding his and his wife's expensive haircuts.

As you might imagine, our police department is experiencing a bit of discomfort over this. At least above the rank of sergeant there's a bit of discomfort. Below the rank of sergeant we're more focused on policing the city, saving mankind, and stealing the odd apple here and there. Don't get me wrong, I like the mayor – his wife Mary Kate's a bitch, but that's another story – and I don't think Hizzoner should die in office. And as long as my sergeant's not frustrated or hungry, neither does he: big, badass Irish Sonny Barrett.

At this moment Sonny's face is mostly two-handed sandwich. But neither the breaded steak nor the Dan Ryan's southbound trucks lumbering overhead slow his comments

on my appearance. ‘I’m tellin’ you, Patti, and no shit now, you gotta drop a few.’

I’m only 5′6″ and change, but I have a pistol, and although Sonny can’t see it under my faded windbreaker, he knows it’s there. He’s seen me use it. ‘Really? You think?’

Sonny nods across the battered fender that separates us, eyes my figure or his opinion thereof, and keeps eating. The other five officers in our Tactical Unit (TAC) are doing the same, enjoying Sonny’s lounge act with their Ricobene’s – medium-sized, breaded-steak footballs with tomato sauce.

‘Don’t mind workin’ with fat chicks, but shit . . .’

I weigh half what he does and often think Sonny and I would be better off if he were severely wounded in the line of duty. Had he not saved my life on Seventy-ninth, over by St. Rita’s, I would’ve shot him long ago. And I still might. See, we have sort of an unwritten rule in our crew – my personal appearance and your opinion, compliment, or critique, don’t need to mingle. But Sonny’s safe today and knows it. After this tailgate lunch we’re serving a stolen-property warrant on a Gangster Disciples building. A warrant that requires all seven of us be alive. There are thirty thousand members of the GDs nationwide, probably a third or more headquartered in Chicago. Many, if not all, can be on the violent side of unpleasant.

I, on the other hand, am a model of self-control when responding to my sergeant. ‘And your freight-train ass is modeling underwear?’

My partner Cisco Pike reaches to mediate and sloshes coffee across the hood of our Ford, stammering something nobody understands. Cisco has a speech impediment when he’s flustered; I think it makes him semi-adorable, but not enough for what you’re thinking. Like Cisco, my fellow TAC officers are chuckling, trying to imagine Sergeant Sonny Barrett BVD-clad and runway-ready. Only I bother to wipe at the coffee.

This TAC vehicle, like all the others, is a beater – five years on the job, one hubcap, and two-thirds of the paint it had when new. In Chicago TAC officers only drive what the detectives won't. The dicks wear department-store blazers and knowing expressions. We wear body armor and quick-draw holsters, clothes you could garden in, and tomato sauce on our sleeves – although that's primarily Sonny. Many of the brass and media rate TAC officers only slightly above the outlaws we police. We invite both groups to ride the ghetto with us. Better still, without us. Bring the wife and kids; make a day of it.

District 6, where we work, like districts 2 and 7, is not a good place to be. For anyone. There's plenty of harsh on both sides, plenty of animosity, enough to poison families for generations. Trust me, I know: I came from a place like this. Bosses and reporters ask me why I don't work Traffic instead. Traffic doesn't help and that's as far as I can explain it. I want to help, and most of the folks down here get so little, it wouldn't add up to pity.

Sonny hard-eyes me across the fender and taps the hood. '*How 'bout you break-this-shit-down, Patti Ann, one last time for da brothers*.'

Good sergeants let you run your own warrants; mine wants a replay of the raid diagram while he looks for a street-corner high-five to go with his modified pimp roll. He looks stupid, sort of a cross between a grizzly bear and an Irishman two beers into the parade, but I know why he's doing it. A focused and loose crew makes fewer mistakes.

Cisco smiles at Sonny's act, then at me. Without me, Cisco would be three times dead, and there isn't a moment when that statistic is lost on him. If luck is real – and it damn sure is – then I'm his and he's mine. Other than his tendency toward fad cologne, Cisco's perfect. *Almost* perfect – there is the occasional smatter of night-school psychobabble. Since spring, his college homework has often been focused at me and the illusion that I have shortcomings. 'Issues,'

Cisco likes to call them now that he's educated: 'An unapproachable self' – figure that out while you're rolling through the ghetto. 'Avoidance of thread' – another simple one he says has to do with 'connecting the dots of one's life.' And yesterday's comment, that I still play rugby every weekend and won't wear nail polish. That one I get. I have trouble being a *girl* girl, but that's none of his fucking business, is it? Then there's this other rumor, that I only take criticism well as long as I don't hear it.

Sonny burps and says, 'Okay, cowboys, saddle up.' He's done eating, so the rest of us need to be. 'We gon get us some stereo equipment.'

The attempt on the mayor ceases to matter, as do our cultural differences on the Cubs and Sox. We toss the coffee, pack the papers, and bag the cups. I keep everyone's edible scraps; they help sustain most of the stray animals in 6 and save me from buying them emergency hot dogs.

Everyone checks their pistols. Mine's the only revolver, and they mention that all the time too. Three of us check shotguns. I draw the plan a second time on my hood. Everyone nods, the levity fading, the adrenaline coming. Two of the boys will handle the Chicago bar and the sixteen-pound hammer. I'll do the door since I know the perps. They'll hear, 'Better to live till tomorrow,' then it's up to them. And occasionally GDs make very poor decisions.

Sonny drops his chin, eyeing all of us; he's lost two partners where we're going, one dead, one to a wheelchair. 'These are bad people, kids. None of us die today.'

We all nod. Eloquent he's not, but Sonny Barrett's always on the money.

This far south, Halsted Street looks like what it is. And the seven of us look like what we are – three TAC cars rolling fast in convoy, passing street-corner lookouts with junior high educations and only one question: *Where?* They're part; we're part, everyone mixed into the swizzle and

swazzle. Sonny's Ford makes a left on Vincennes; he has the lead, burning oil we can taste.

Three blocks and we'll be at the dead end of Gilbert Court. Two uniform officers died there in '03, shot fifteen times in their car. My heart's starting to ramp, keeping time with the song in my head. Springsteen's 'Born in the U.S.A.' Cisco's smiling, at what I'm not sure. He does that with some frequency.

Sonny's Ford is pushing 50 and so's ours; the brick storefronts start to blur, hand-painted signs mush into one sentence, 'Big Julie's Suit Up, Temple Mercy, Time Out Lounge, Esta's Chicken Wings.' The shotgun bumps heavy against my vest; I've never had to kill anyone. You make me, and I will, nobody on these streets doubts that, but I lose sleep over a split-second decision that's *right here, right now* all the time.

Two blocks. This neighborhood is ten square miles, parts of which most Americans wouldn't believe were in our country. I've been here since I was twenty-one, watched it change from white to black, working-class to poor, then poor to ghetto. Plywood covers more windows than glass, and not because it's cheaper.

One block. We're doing 60 now. I know all the people who operate these stores, people who try like those who tried before them. Their lives can't be fixed with sermons or promises. Both are popular but useless down here; it's a war zone in every sense of the term – poverty, dope, and gangs, gangs like small countries have armies.

Cisco hits the brakes.

Lookouts yell, '5-0! 5-0!' and scatter.

Our three cars make the turn. In an instant Gilbert Court is flooded by seven white cops with dead-serious expressions, two with shotguns running to the building's rear, me with a twelve-gauge charging the front. Cisco has the Chicago bar, Eric Jackson the hammer. We're on the steps and I'm

knocking with my foot. Sonny and the boys are right behind us ready to pour in when the door goes.

‘POLICE. We got a warrant, Carlos. Open it NOW!’

Three, two, one. I stand back, Cisco wedges the bar, Eric slams the hammer. The door and frame splinter, a good sign. Fortification usually means armament.

Big flash. Then the roar. The door and frame explode in our faces. *Machine gun*. Cisco’s down and Eric Jackson’s firing. I’m bent sideways and blind. Pistols bang from behind. I can’t see and drop to a knee. Eric sails over the railing. Concussions run together; the air’s cordite and flashes. Can’t hear – hands grab me, something clubs me in the face. An arm chokes my neck . . . I fight, kick, claw – *anything not to be taken*, can’t see to shoot. I’m headlocked, being dragged by a gorilla with four arms. Big shotgun blasts from the back. Guys yelling. Three gangsters rush past; the gorilla pushes me toward the center.

‘Hostage, motherfucka! Hostage 5-0!’

Sonny’s firing. I’m choking out and slam a crotch with my shotgun. *Big blast* from mine and behind, then another, and I’m down on a knee. The four-armed gorilla becomes two GDs who drop me and sprint retreat through the apartment. They slam open the back door and I’m chasing before I realize I’m standing. In the tiny yard our backup shotguns are engaged by GDs with pistols banging from the building’s corners. My two make it into the alley and across, running for the nearest six-flat. One turns to fire. I duck; he falls, we scramble up, both running again. I can’t afford to shoot into the six-flat and miss. He doesn’t give a shit and fires twice.

Shotguns roar behind me. At the neighbor’s stoop I stumble, don’t think, and bolt into the hallway. Five steps in I see both GDs sprinting out the back and something surreal charging up out of the basement stairwell. Two white ComEd workers hit me like linebackers. I’m down, suddenly swimming in gasoline and there’s no air. The white guys run out a door into daylight. I cough blind and try to stand. More

gunshots make me duck. Framed in the doorway a white van squeals away. I fan through the fumes for GDs – none on the floor; none on the stairs. Cough; blink. Gasoline's everywhere.

Gasoline.

'FIRE! FIRE!'

The basement has to be full of gas, and the building's three floors full of people. I pound on first-floor doors nobody in their right mind would open. 'FIRE! FIRE! Get out!' If anyone's smoking anything, I'll be a torch. I take the stairs higher two at a time. 'Out! Out!' More doors, more pounding. A woman opens and I grab her. 'GET OUT. Building's on fire!' She balks and I jerk her into the hall. 'OUT! OUT!' Doors crack; white eyes; children crouch, heads peek down through the stair railing. Nobody's safe here, ever; nobody's sure. I smell like a bomb. 'C'mon people, out in the alley. Now. Now. NOW.'

Dogs bark and run everywhere. The six-flat's empty – thirty angry, scared citizens have been pushed through the fences to Gilbert Court. No one has belongings, no picture frames or dishes. Gilbert Court is chaos; the neighborhood's already marshaling, jeering from the windows and shaking their fists. Squads scream in. Two white cops are down but alive. Two black gangsters are dead in the blood, glass, weapons, and wood shards. Brass casings and Cisco cover the stoop. Cisco's staring at me from his back, eyes cloudy, his speech impediment half there, half not. 'Smell like a S-shell station. Whata happen?'

Before I can help him a hand grabs my shoulder. I spin and punch and it's a fireman staggering back. We're both confused. Another one points at me, 'Your clothes, asshole. C'mere,' and he shoves me with a small hose. An EMT rushes Cisco, I get a shower.

A cold one. The fireman tells me to 360; the water pressure's triple my shower at home and I have to brace

against it, eyes closed. Cisco's laughing, ringside for a body-armor wet T-shirt contest. The water quits as Cisco's EMT pats him and flashes thumbs-up to her partner. I stumble, fogged on adrenaline and still smell like gas, just less so. Two more EMTs have Eric Jackson standing, but not under his own power. He looks loopy but his feet are moving, scuffing past the youngest of the dead GDs. I squeegee water and slick back my hair, trying to find steady, then recognize the sprawled body; I know the dead boy's mother.

I turn back to help Cisco and his EMT. The fireman in my face says, 'Strip,' then points to another fellow like they do this all the time, 'Give her a jacket.'

I give him the finger. *In your fucking dreams, homes*. He shrugs at stupid and joins firemen running across the alley. Cisco's on a gurney. My eyes jump to the gasolined six-flat expecting flames. No flames; no occupants died. Deep breath – *c'mon, baby, slow it down*. Dying in a fire is a bad way to go, old people especially. They seem to just curl up in a corner and wait for it to take them. More sirens; our uniforms have the perimeter of the whole block. Our own small army, like every cop in 6 and 7 is here. It's a weird picture for the citizens and always is – the ghetto's rhythm just floating along, then BANG, 5-0 every-damn-where. Makes you wonder what the vibe's like after we're gone.

Sonny's at my shoulder, his pistol pointed at the pavement. 'You all right, P?'

'Huh? Eric's okay, right?'

'Vest stopped it at the shoulder, knocked the fuck out of him, though. Dislocated it.'

I spin to find Cisco. Sonny watches Cisco waving weak as he's put in the ambulance and says Cisco's gonna be off work a while, but he's too educated to die. My knees weaken as the adrenaline dies off and Sonny grabs my collar. I fracture a smile and don't knock his hand away. 'Lotta bullets for some stereo equipment.'

Sonny appears to be having similar thoughts but doesn't share. 'Gonna be more medals for this, P; soaked in fuckin' gasoline and evac-ing a building.' He shakes his head, tilting toward Ireland like he does after five beers. 'I'm hatin' to admit it, but you a gutsy bit a skirt,' and he headlocks me to his vest, a tear in his eye. I know Sonny Barrett; it's definitely the gasoline.

Within minutes Gilbert Court is surrounded by angry citizens. Three media trucks arrive followed by the Homicide dicks who'll run the crime scene while OPS – Office of Professional Standards – watches, waiting to write up the officer-involved shootings. An OPS officer's already eyeing me and my shotgun. This means it will be a long day of interviews after the dicks clear the scene.

The crime-scene techs arrive while the uniforms push back taunting citizens, then string miles of yellow tape. I notice our Watch LT from 6. He's the lieutenant who runs our shift, an 'empty-holster motherfucker' it has been said by those less respectful than I. He and an assistant state's attorney are shoulder-to-shoulder, arms folded, second-guessing our actions. The black bodies aren't covered and look strangely potent on the pavement. Now they're focal, not random and nameless. They're connected to consequences and careers. A black woman I know calls me to the tape.

'Why you kill those boys, Patti Black?'

Although it seems really simple, it isn't. 'You know, Drea. When they shoot at us, we're gonna shoot back.' I point at the two converted TEC-9s in the street. 'Those aren't TV machine guns.'

The boy next to her isn't four feet tall. He's watching from under the tape and says, 'Like on TV?' Drea shoos him away but he just loops her hips and tugs at my jeans. 'You all wet.'

I squat and my knees hold. His little hand squeezes water from my sweatshirt and he laughs. I point at the fireman. 'That man gave me a shower. Thought I smelled bad.'

The boy squints. Drea says, ‘That’s Ruth Ann’s boy, Robert. Ain’t it?’

I nod, imagining Ruth Ann’s face on her porch twenty minutes from now when they come to tell her Robert’s dead. He’ll be her third. I wince and tell the pavement: ‘Really hate it shit like this has to happen.’

And I do.

Our Watch LT has moved to my left so Channel 7’s sunbrites can pick up his name and the glint from his silver bars. He tells a Homicide dick, ‘She does love our African Americans.’

I turn into the Homicide dick’s answer – ‘Almost as much as she does the reporters.’ He stares right at me. ‘Clears two or three murders, bitch thinks she’s a dick.’

Our Watch LT frowns agreement and checks the camera. ‘Does *not* hurt to have the superintendent’s ear either.’

The dick smiles, adding volume: ‘Ain’t just his ear.’

He and I are sharing eight feet of pavement and Channel 7’s camera lens. I make him forty pounds over and figure his wife has a boyfriend, hopefully two, and different colors.

The fireman who hosed me steps between us and says, ‘You might want to look at this.’

I can’t tell whether he’s refereeing or he really has something. If he does, he needs to talk to the dicks running the scene, not me. I walk with him mainly because it’s away from my temper and my two fans with rank. As we pass the second body, a *Tribune* reporter I know yells my name. I say, ‘Sorry,’ and point at the guys in the blazers and keep walking.

The street deputy arrives with his entourage. He’s a deputy superintendent, the highest CPD rank who responds to crime scenes and wields the superintendent’s authority. All the manpower that doesn’t migrate to him stays focused on the shoot-out crime scene. So far, only the firemen are interested in the gasolined six-flat – it’s theirs until they release it. As we cross the alley to the six-flat the fireman

comments that it’s odd the building has a Gilbert Court address, then says, ‘Fuck those two. That move took balls, lady. You come to work for us whenever you want.’

He registers as honest, a nice change from most men. His eyes linger a bit longer than they should; probably a compliment but it just makes me fidget. ‘What’re we looking at?’

‘Basement.’

Downstairs, the six-flat’s basement is flooded twenty-four inches and already stinks. I stay on the stairs. He looks at me like more water can’t hurt, but he doesn’t have to buy my gym shoes. The other firemen are ringing back from a wall section they hacked up by the furnace. I squat and squint. One shines a light that reflects on the tricolor water. There’s something white in the rainbow. A bone. No, a hand, palm up with long rigid fingers and no skin. The floating hand’s connected to a sleeved arm and part of a body buried in the wall.

Don’t see that every day.

The fireman waves me over. I slosh across – a mistake, since this basement is now a homicide scene. Up close, the bones wear a woman’s velour jacket popular in the ’90s; she’s crunched, facing away and tied with leather ligatures that run from neck to wrist. One ligature has snapped with age. I try to see her face but can’t. The fireman points his light inside the crypt over dead worms and roaches at what looks like fingernail ruts in the wood.

He exhales in a whoosh, then says, ‘Went in alive.’

The hand’s floating near my shin; her fingertips are jagged. Above them her wrist bones have a metal wrist restraint, *pervmanacles* we call them, sex-crime equipment that vice and child services see more often than us.

My wrists have manacle scars too, hard welts I avoid when I wash. She’s barefoot. I wasn’t allowed shoes when I was pregnant at fifteen. It was in the Bible and kept me from running away; they wanted the baby. The ankle bones glint

in the light, but I don’t look. There might be manacles on them too. The basement shrinks; fouled air thickens, gasoline water wants to rise over my head. I stumble, flashing through years of piecing together a me, making a person out of the wreckage. I don’t want to fall, not in this water, not near the hand with the manacles. And I won’t, if I quit thinking.

About all the things I’ve spent twenty-three years not thinking about.

Chapter 2

MONDAY, DAY 1: AFTERNOON

MY AFTERNOON IS eight hours of interviews at 111th and Cottage Grove, the Area 2 Detective Division, sometimes referred to as ADD by tired and shaken patrol officers who take issue with repeatedly answering the same question.

Each interview is done separately, but the questions don't change, nor do the dour expressions and sidebar conversations. First, it's the Homicide dicks who already interviewed you at the scene; then one at a time, it's the rest of them – OPS, the ASA (Chicago's version of DA/district attorney), our Watch LT, and the street deputy backed by his entourage. They all want to know why you didn't do it differently.

I don't complain because I understand why we're doing this; people died, people with families and maybe even futures. Today, the intermissions are worse than the interrogations. I keep seeing the body in the wall and the hand in the tricolor water. And the manacle.

After our Watch LT finishes the gunfight segment of his questions and his third sidebar with an assistant state's attorney who wasn't introduced, our Watch LT asks me again, 'Why chase the perpetrators across the alley into the six-flat?'

He's been marching toward the conclusion that I abandoned my fellow officers to make the 'hero move' – like he'd have an idea what that was. His name is Carson Scott,

Lieutenant Carson Scott if you wish less shit to fall on you during your workday. Thankfully, I don't see him often unless something awful like this happens. He's an asshole – a racist and a weekend golfer who keeps his nose embedded in the rear seam of any plaid-pants that might get him lifted to captain or feather his ambitions for public office.

'I was protecting my fellow officers by giving chase, by remaining connected to the shooters.'

He jots down my answer a third time. Privately, we call him 'Kit' Carson and speculate that a ringmaster position in a wild west show would be the proper promotion.

'And that's why you abandoned wounded Officers Pike and Jackson?'

'*Abandoned?*'

'Please answer the question.' He's looking at the blank line where his pen will record the answer.

I repeat the same explanation. He writes it down again, then checks it against the previous lines. His pen taps and he curls his lower lip under expensive teeth. Kit Carson has family money he didn't earn and a law degree from DePaul on the Northside. If you don't know the city, Chicago has a 'north/south thing' – the city's separated into two distinct tribal nations by a river engineered to flow backwards from Lake Michigan: the Southside says it works for a living, while the Northside pays five dollars for coffee and has maids to open their windows.

Kit Carson says, 'Hmmm . . . IAD may need to look at this.'

IAD is the Internal Affairs Division. There's no way IAD needs to look at this, and won't unless Kit Carson files a CR number (complaint register investigation) on me, a complaint that would have the same basis in fact as pudding would in the foundation of the Sears Tower. My mouth moves before I can cover it.

'Gimme a break, Kit. Jesus.'

'What?' He two-hands the pen and leans toward me.

‘There’s no violation of policy. No ‘abandonment.’ All I did was what we’re supposed to. You’d know that if you ever left your desk.’

Lieutenant Carson writes that down, taking time to recheck the grammar. ‘That will be all, Officer Black.’

But it isn’t. I can assure you that these interviews are why the police would rather not shoot anyone. And when the interviews are over you cap the twelve-hour, two-death day by dodging accusations from neighborhood politicians waiting outside with the cameras, then doing paperwork until your hands hurt.

My day finally finishes because people like Kit Carson have other things to do and even the bad days end – an elemental truth sane cops learn early, along with no one’s solving shit out here. Little victories are all you get. Live inside those and you can still hope to make a difference . . . for somebody. Cisco for one. So, I stop by Christ Hospital, where he looks comfy, all dopey and bracketed by two red-eyed parents still tie-dyed from the ’60s (hence his name) and student nurses who like their heroes with bullet holes and sidearms. Good guess is he’ll be milking this for days, pun intended. Eric Jackson has already been released to his wife and kids and a barber shop business he’d rather tell you about than hit the lottery.

The Dan Ryan is its usual twenty-four-hour river of chugging metal and frustration, inching me toward my duplex, and I don’t care – my Celica feels like an armchair and if I still drank, it’d be Miller Time. I no longer partake, other than the miniature bottle of Old Crow I carry as a keychain talisman. See, my Miller Time became somewhat extended – every day all day, age sixteen to twenty. All the Old Crow a little white workin’ girl could hustle and swallow.

Traffic stays miserable to the Y at I-57, then eases for the last two miles to 111th. In between Ramsey Lewis and U2 my radio says both the Cubs and Sox won today. More

overtime for everyone; Mardi Gras has come to both sides of the river.

I'll be home in just blocks and should be smiling. But I'm not, I'm thinking, scattershot, like I do when I don't get it and probably should: I see the two GDs sprawled on Gilbert Court and frown deeper. Dead teenagers – even GDs with machine guns – tend to mar a day's 'little victories.' I also see two white guys with gasoline in a part of town where white guys, even ComEd workers, need armed guards. They filled the basement with gasoline . . . *Shiver*; I'm not a big fan of basements . . . and God knows we don't need a multi-block ghetto fire like in Philadelphia.

I make a turn without looking. No way I knew the body in the wall, but her terror's familiar enough. My hands change position so I can't see the scars on my wrist. I make three more turns on residential streets; the last one avoids Tripod the neighborhood poodle.

There's a parking place at my curb. God has shined on me at last. I kill the engine, take a deep breath that doesn't taste like city, and I'm finally a civilian. *Get me Dorothy's red shoes and a parasol*. Out front, my flowers look great, especially the marigolds. My marigolds have everything but major medical and a Social Security number.

I turn and consider my street; it's crowned more than normal and when it storms the rain rushes to the curbs. 'Quaint' you might call it, little bungalows and little lawns, about half old people and half Chicago cops or firemen. Mount Greenwood. It even sounds quaint. The younger guys with power mowers mow the widow ladies' lawns. The trees drop leaves the size of catcher's mitts. If they still delivered milk twice a week, my street would be the milkman's favorite.

I reach to key the lock and—

Son of a. Beneath the CPD star and the voodoo doll hanging from the knocker my door's a B&E. The clothes bag drops out of my hand; I draw, step through. Instantly *my*

living room's gun-sight narrow and threatening, nothing in it mine.

Who's here? How many?

My heart adds beats. Both hands on the pistol. I step slow, cocked forward to fire – kitchen, clean. Bedroom. Clean. Bathroom. Clean. Closet, pantry, under the bed. Clean. My second pistol's in the drawer where it's supposed to be. Porch, backyard. Clean. *Motherfuckers*, this is my house.

Neighbor?

I run out front and pound on Stella's door. Stella's a home beautician and too old to hear her own radio. I pound again, get nothing, step back to kick in the door and it opens; Stella looks more confused than usual. Probably the gun and my foot in the air.

'You all right, Stell?' Beyond her shoulder there's—

She squints and says, '. . . Ah, fine?'

'You are?'

She feebles up her usual grin and reaches for the blond ponytail exiting my Cubs cap. 'Tricia, such pretty blue eyes, but your hair. Always such a fright. You'll never get a man.'

Relief. We're back to the basics. I holster the pistol that Stella doesn't acknowledge. Next will be a comment on the Cubs fixation – a distinctly Northsider trait that's not too popular on our side of the river. Or else she'll say my work clothes do *nothing* for me. She goes with the clothes. 'Tricia, no man wants a waste-basket for a wife.'

'Stell, honey, did you happen to see someone by my door?'

She steps out past her screen and looks at mine. 'You should fix that, Patti. What if company came?'

I nod because it's easier. 'But did you see anybody? Today?'

'Busy, busy.' She reaches for my hair again. 'We'll fix you tomorrow.'

One of our neighbors is in Stella's chair with the hairdryer space-helmet on. She smiles; I smile. Stella closes the door

in my face. I step around my broken door. Front door. Not my back door. A choice that demonstrates a level of brazenness one associates with drug-induced stupidity or knowledge of the neighbors.

Inside I check stuff that matters.

Jezebel and Bathsheba are swimming like champs. No doubt they saw the intruders but goldfish make shit witnesses so I don't ask. My TV's still there, the stereo too. Strange, both are hophead magnets. I had a John Coltrane CD on last night and its case is where I left it. The Johnny Cougar album is still fronting my LP stack – the last one before he went back to John Mellencamp.

My living room seems unmolested. This is not true of my bedroom. My bed's mussed. The perps sat on it, facing my dresser. Then probably stood – *assholes* – and looked close at the pictures wedged into the mirror's curved frame. Pictures that take up so much mirror there's no reflection, pictures of me caked in mud, arm-in-arm with rugby teammates Tracy Moens – a hardass, maxcompetitive, prima-bitch reporter with the *Chicago Herald*, and Julie McCoy, my best pal and owner of the L7 Bar.

Pictures of me with my TAC crew at CPD picnics, Cisco and Sonny and Eric Jackson trying to look all gunfighter. I can't help the grin that crosses my face. They are *da* boys – 'the Magnificent Seven' if you count me, alpha-male hell, but I love them. Even Sonny Barrett if I don't think about it too hard. They and Julie are the brothers and sisters I never had.

I have lots of pictures and can't tell if any are missing. Three for sure aren't. One's the superintendent of police in full uniform when he was the chief of detectives. Then there's me and '60s all-star Ernie Banks at Wrigley Field on fan day – *how cool was that?* Me and Ernie talking home runs and . . . And there's a beautiful baby, a day old and pink. His picture has yellowed with years, taped to the mirror at eye level. PANIC. I check behind the mirror. The

envelope’s still there, still yellowed too, still taped. The deep breath helps—

A quarter inch from my Kleenex box there’s a dust line. I stare, reliving the morning: Did I bump the dresser, sit on the bed? I check the second pistol again. Nope, we’re okay; it really is in the drawer. That stops me. Wanna explain why we do a B&E and don’t take a gun? That’s like leaving a bag of gold. Pistols are illegal inside the Chicago city limits, hence they bring big dollars from the fences and street gangsters. The only way we left this is if we didn’t see it.

And the only way we didn’t see it is if we didn’t look.

Then why the hell break in here in broad daylight?

Which is now gone. I’m supposed to be practicing at Grant Park right now, downtown by the lake – we have the big game this Saturday against the Bay Area SheHawks. My rugby cleats and kit bag are in my locker at 6 where I left them. Exhale; shoulder sag. I’m way too tired to deal with repairing the broken door locks or this . . . this witless B&E. No-showing practice when my friends depend on me won’t work either; ditto spending the night alone with two dead teenagers and a manacled woman in the wall.

I strip, figuring to don the rugby shorts and jersey a respectable fly half would wear (sans the prissy-ass eyeliner Tracy Moens will be wearing), then quit for two reasons – my rugby gear’s not here – duh? And no real desire to participate in the world of the living. I grab unironed jeans, my pistol and star, refind the car keys, and feed the fish. *Love you girls: Promise we’ll do water world on Sunday*. I know, I know, filling the bathtub for their weekly excursion may seem stupid, but it’s no different than taking your dog to the park. I even have underwater props. And the happiest goldfish in Chicago.

And I’m gone, heading east to anywhere. Lights veer in behind me, filling the mirror. In the glare I see that basement, the fingernail ruts clawed into the wood, the expressions on the firemen’s faces . . . Bony fingers reach

for me – *Stop it* – like a B horror movie, but I don't go to horror movies. Denial's my copilot; I'm an expert at burying the day's depravity . . . except there's my wrist and the scar; and there's the bony hand—

Horn. LOUD. Shit! Brakes – miss the guy's fender. Jesus Christ. Sorry. Sorry. Get a freakin' grip, Patti. Two hands on the wheel. Deep breath. Steer . . . Doing fine, doing fine. You're a cop, remember? A gunfighter. Patti Black. *The* Patti Black, okay? You know how to drive. So I do and a ghost whispers, 'Chinatown' to the back of my neck.

Rugby practice is five minutes from over when my Celica decides to stop at Grant Park. Why it drove here I don't know, but now that I have, it's best to make an appearance. The younger girls on the sidelines nod, less than pleased with my absence but not inclined to push it. Last week I played with them in the She-Devil 15s tournament and not particularly well, something a brave few mentioned when we lost. My excuses weren't good so naturally I made several, including being thirty-eight.

They toe the grass with their cleats and continue talking with their significant others, mostly about the assassination attempt on the mayor. Their theories range from *Ryan's Hope* to *The Godfather* in complexity. Me, I'm voting for the same 'lone gunman' who shot our Mayor Cermak back in the '30s and JFK in the '60s. Lone gunmen, like serial killers, have earned wide acceptance in the media and general public. If you don't have a suspect in twenty-four hours, either of those fits like twenty dollars does 'Hey, baby' on Soul Street.

One of the rugby girls isn't trading theories – it's my stellar teammate, Miss All-Everything redhead, Tracy L. Moens, known to her fellow reporters as the Pink Panther. It's not a compliment. Tracy has the body language of an anchor relay sprinter already set in the blocks and the

compassion of concrete on a cold day. I want her and Sonny Barrett to date, drink heavily, and maim one another.

She tosses the ball away but stays at the sideline and smiles like I'm the only person she ever cared about. 'Tough morning, huh?' It's likely she's the only one here who knows about the GD shooting on Gilbert Court.

I nod, then wince at the hamstring I'm attempting to stretch instead of talk to her.

'Care to talk about it?'

I stare. We also have an unwritten rule, Ms. Moens and I. No work stuff at practice or matches. Anywhere else is fair game. But not here and not now. She only forgets that when it's important to her.

'BASH is gonna be a bitch, Trace. Let's focus on them.'

'Thought I'd ask.' She flashes the reporter smile that conveniently hides her sharpest teeth. The others are perfect.

My pal, Julie McCoy, hasn't spoken to me yet because she's busy doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Rugby's her whole life since the motorcycle wreck in Nice ended her cello career. My teammates finish running lines and plays and Julie finally appears. She starts by appraising my street clothes.

'Damn, Patti, forget how to play?'

'Technically, yeah.'

'Tracy looked sharp tonight. She's younger though.'

I add, 'And prettier.'

'That too. Lots more money, boyfriends. Really something, isn't she?'

'Technically, yeah.' I try not to smile. Julie's very good at this for a big blond saloon keeper.

'So? Practice for BASH or just show up Saturday and cripple your teammates?'

Cripple? Maim? I can't help but glance at Tracy sparkling in the lights. Julie laughs. I start to answer and she drapes her arm over my shoulder, 'Come with me, stay upstairs,

have a pizza. Be a Northsider for the night. You can borrow a good shirt for work if you don't get any blood on it.'

A one-night vacation across the river in yuppie land. Won't have to worry about the locksmith or phantom B&Es that make no sense.

'Can we ride in your BMW and wave at the poor people?'

The L7 is a 'women's bar.' Take a look at the L and the 7 and you'll figure it out. Julie's version is brick-wall retro, a Beat generation coffeehouse combined with a full bar, behind which is a long mirror centered by a twenty-foot grainy photo of Julie and her Ducati café racer splattered into a sidewalk bistro in Nice. Four years ago on the anniversary of the crash she got drunk and autographed ten feet of photo in aerosol orange.

The music is usually loud and bluesy – Bessie Simone, k. d. lang, Billie Holiday. The ceiling's high and serpentine with flex A/C ducts painted like snakes that only get that big in your nightmares. Julie's walls are covered with autographed rugby jerseys and pictures of her heroes: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey. At the back there's a small stage, in front there's a loyal clientele strange enough to be in a John Waters movie. Actually, there's a picture of him too, autographed by Johnny Depp and kissed bright red by Traci Lords.

We do not have this type of spot on the Southside, nor do we have the asshole comedian up there doing deaf-guy humor. He's reading something, mimicking Lou Ferrigno's impediment, and nobody's laughing – at least you gotta give these Northsiders that. Guys like Cisco and Mr. Ferrigno deserve better; it's got to be hard wearing your weakness for everybody to see and still having the balls to press on anyway.

The TV above the bar is on but soundless, and I focus on it instead of the comedian. The running lines are the reporter reporting on the assassination attempt backed by video of