

MAN
ON THE
RUN

VOLUME III  CON\$PIRACY

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CHAPTER ONE

While on the frosty road less travelled, I came across a lone figure. My choices made, I made another and stopped to offer him a lift.

“Where you heading?” I asked. I was driving to forget and looking for company.

“North,” he said.

“Hop in.”

He did. He put his bag in the back seat and joined me in the front.

“Is that all you got?” I said, looking at his bag.

“Yep.”

He was late middle aged, bearded, and wearing a heavy coat. There wasn't much more I could see from where I was seated. All I knew was he would be dead if someone didn't pick him up soon.

“Waiting long?” I asked.

“Yeah. Not too many people pick up hitchhikers these days. Thanks.” He shrugged and tried to smile. The cold must have frozen most of his face but I understood the gesture.



“I’ll let you warm up before I start talking at you too much,” I said. He didn’t respond. “I’ve got a thermos of coffee in the back if you want something to drink. There’s probably a sandwich and some chocolate if you’d like.”

“You sure?”

“I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t. Help yourself.”

He did. He poured a coffee for me, black, and one for himself. A few minutes later, he must have started thawing out, as he took off his coat and put it in the back seat. He then unbuttoned a heavy flannel jacket, which he left on, and rubbed his hands on the sweater underneath to warm himself. I expected him to have an odour but was pleasantly surprised. I probably smelled worse than him.

“Do you smoke?” I asked.

“When I have the chance. What do you have?”

“Just tobacco,” I said, realizing how it could’ve been misconstrued.

“Works for me. I only smoke tobacco.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just trying to be friendly.”

“I’ve got cigars on me if you like but you may not be too keen on smelling up your new car.”

“It’s a rental.”

That got him interested. “Where you heading?” he asked.



“North sounds good to me. I’ve been driving since Dallas. Need a change of scenery. I looked on a map and saw Churchill and thought northern Canada was as good a destination as any. You know, polar bears and all that.”

He smiled. “Running or rough patch?”

“One hell of a rough patch. Just need to clear my head.”

“You know you can’t drive to Churchill?”

“Uh, yeah. I figured that out when I passed Winnipeg and picked up a map. Who would’ve thought?”

He was silent for a bit. “I’m heading to Churchill too. My plan was to grab the train from Thompson. If you still want to go, that’s really your only option unless you want to fly. But you don’t seem like you’re in any great hurry.”

That made me smile. “Sounds like a plan.”

“You driving through the night?”

“Was planning to but I think Thompson’s only around seven more hours. That should get us in just before midnight.”

“Assuming the weather co-operates,” he added.

It didn’t. Three hours out of Winnipeg and two hours after I picked up my new travelling companion, the wind picked up and the snow on the fields started blowing across the road. At first it was a pleasant scene, something out of a National Geographic landscape. The grand expanse of white with a setting sun created



an orange hue as we followed the black tarmac. There was no snow falling but the stuff on the ground was being driven onto the road, clawing back at civilisation. Snow fingers thudded against the tires as we drove. I slowed down, turned the lights on, and watched the first snowflakes fall. I never even thought about the weather. Who the hell thinks about the weather? That's what good cars are for. The reality is that if you can't see the road, you can't drive.

By the time this dawned on me, panic set in. There weren't many towns along this route. I kept my eyes peeled and gripped the wheel.

"Don't white knuckle it," he said.

"Huh?"

"Relax your hands on the wheel. Slow down and let the car drive. We'll be okay."

"Easy for you to say. I've never seen snow like this, let alone drive in it."

"Do you want me to drive?"

I hesitated. I didn't know this guy from Adam, but he sure seemed like a survivor. Not many would try hitchhiking in this. I decided that was worth more than my spotty driving skills. Besides, my nerves were shot and all the romance of clearing my head and driving north had taken a backseat.

"Okay," he said. "Take your foot off the gas, but don't hit the brake. The last thing we want is to start spinning at this speed."



That just made me more nervous. I hadn't considered the risk of spinning out. I allowed the car to drift to a halt. When we were stationary, my hands were cemented to the wheel. I managed to pry one hand off and put the car into park. I pried off the other and sat back in my seat, sweating. I actually welcomed the blast of cold when I opened the door to switch seats.

"You okay?" he said as we settled into our new positions.

"Yeah. Thanks. I owe you one."

"No. I owe you for picking me up. Sit back, have some of your chocolate, and I'll get you to the next town. I think its Grand Rapids. It's not glamorous but I'm pretty sure they'll have some sort of hotel."

I sank into my chair and watched the snow in the headlights. The sun was down and it felt like we were driving at warp speed, stars racing towards us. Blackness all around. The warmth of the heating and the exhaustion of non-stop driving sent me to sleep quickly.

When I awoke, we were stationary again. The snow was still falling, heavier than before. There was a glow of lights off a white building next to us. He parked us right in front of the hotel entrance and left the engine running as he went inside. When he returned, he was smiling and held up a set of keys.

"They only had one room but it has two beds. I told them okay. I don't think we have too many options. The restaurant is still open for another hour or so. That



should get us enough time to unpack and grab a bite before everything shuts down.”

“Thanks,” I said. “What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. My treat.”

I thought it odd him hitchhiking but having enough money to pay for a room. At the time, I didn’t care too much. I just wanted out of the wintry hellscape and for the sun to rise again.

I grabbed my suitcase and emptied the car of anything that might explode when frozen and joined him in the small, dingy room.

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Calling the establishment a hotel was being kind; it was a motor inn. It was of wood construction, built some seven decades ago, with a steep roof and aluminium front doors. But it was shelter from the cold and I was thankful. The beds were lumpy and the covers had a hint of an odour that fell somewhere between urine and vomit despite clearly being heavily bleached and washed. I didn’t care. It was warm and the heaters were sufficient to keep the cold outside. We ate some semblance of food in the restaurant and had a few drinks in the motel’s bar. The people were friendly and couldn’t have been more helpful with directions, stories, and sympathy at our plight. Under different circumstances, I could see myself liking the place.



The next morning I awoke to the glow of the radio's red clock. It was almost eight and still dark outside. My travelling companion was snoring slightly, but it hadn't woken me. I had a shower and shaved and readied myself for the rest of the journey to Thompson.

"How's the weather looking today?" I asked the waitress as she poured my first coffee.

"Look out the window, hon."

"Is that normal?" I asked.

"Normal enough. Looks like a big one. I don't think anyone's going anywhere for a few days."

"I'm sorry?"

"You haven't heard? Biggest storm of the season blowing in. You were lucky to get here when you did last night. We're expecting up to fourteen inches but the wind'll continue for days. It'll take a good day or so after it stops before the roads open up."

I put my coffee down. I wasn't in any great hurry, but I wasn't expecting this.

"Have you decided what you want yet?"

"I'll have the special. Sunny side up with brown toast, please." I figured there was no sense in starving if I was going to be stuck here. I just wasn't sure what I was going to do for the next few days. At that point, the hitchhiker joined me.

"Hear the news?" He grabbed a chair and sat across from me.

"Yup. Not too great."



“Oh well, can’t complain. We’re in a decent place with hot food and all the amenities. Could be a lot worse.”

“Not much,” I grumbled.

“Believe me, this is heaven. And from what I can surmise from you and your situation, this may be just what you needed.”

I tried to smile. He was just too damn optimistic. “Not sure if you’re qualified to say that,” I said.

“You’d be surprised. Let’s grab some grub and I’ll tell you a story that’ll make you happy to be alive.”

We finished breakfast and, having nowhere else to go, we positioned ourselves in the motel bar. It was next to the breakfast room and had a large television on the far wall with the only comfortable armchairs in the whole place. It was early and we figured we’d be undisturbed there. The waitress saw us move spots and offered a carafe of coffee.

I’d never really met any celebrities. Not really. The closest I came was walking into a small diner one evening where I met an aging comic I idolised in my youth. I was star struck and, trying to be nonchalant, said hello and offered my hand. He shook it and cracked an inside joke about one of his movies. I laughed politely and he went on his way. His handshake wasn’t extraordinary in any way. It was a hand. Not a particularly firm handshake either. The whole experience was less than I



expected. The hitchhiker, on the other hand, continued to surprise me.

As he started talking, I realised I was in the presence of a person who had truly lived a life, one who knew powerful people and had equally powerful enemies. *You can judge the measure of a man by his enemies*, I'd once heard. This is the story he told me.