



Big Apple or Big Sky; which is it to be? The two places couldn't be more different, but both pull strongly on emotions and future plans. Are there reasonable compromises that can be made, or is the pull too strong to resist?

BIG APPLE OR BIG SKY

by Fred M Rhodes

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The background of the entire image is a composite landscape. In the foreground, a family consisting of a man, a woman, and a small child are shown in silhouette, walking away from the viewer down a paved road. The man is on the left, the woman on the right, and the child is in the center between them, holding their hands. The road stretches into the distance. On the left side of the road, there are green hills and jagged, rocky mountains under a bright, hazy sky. On the right side, a city skyline is visible, featuring several tall skyscrapers, including the Empire State Building. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and grey, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The title text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

BIG APPLE *or* BIG SKY

Fred M Rhodes

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 - CONTRACT ON A DUNGEON	1
CHAPTER 2 - THE PICTURE.....	6
CHAPTER 3 - CALL OF THE WILD	10
CHAPTER 4 - FOREIGN ASSIGNMENT	15
CHAPTER 5 - BIG CITY	19
CHAPTER 6 - REUNION.....	22
CHAPTER 7 - DEMOLITION	37
CHAPTER 8 - GOLDMINE	46
CHAPTER 9 - FIRST REPORT	49
CHAPTER 10 - DEAL	57
CHAPTER 11 - LAWN PARTY	67
CHAPTER 12 - MATERIAL CHANGE	69
CHAPTER 13 - OUT	72
CHAPTER 14 - LONGSHOT CALL	75
CHAPTER 15 - BIG APPLE BEHIND	78
CHAPTER 16 - BULL RUN II.....	87
CHAPTER 17 - IN BUSINESS.....	94
CHAPTER 18 - HOME SWEET HOME	97
CHAPTER 19 - CRASH.....	110
CHAPTER 20 - CRAWLING OUT OF THE HOLE.....	115
CHAPTER 21 - RESPONSIBILITIES.....	117
CHAPTER 22 - BUST.....	121
CHAPTER 23 - FIRST GUEST.....	124
CHAPTER 24 - LAWYERING UP	129
CHAPTER 25 - PEACE OFFERING.....	131
CHAPTER 26 - ROLLOVER.....	138
CHAPTER 27 - MEETINGS.....	140
CHAPTER 28 - BORED FISHERMAN.....	142
CHAPTER 29 - VAGUE DATE	152
CHAPTER 30 - NEW DEALER.....	154
CHAPTER 31 - DINNER ARRANGEMENTS	156
CHAPTER 32 - INTRIGUING IS THE WORD	159
CHAPTER 33 - ROACHES.....	166
CHAPTER 34 - SIGNUP	174
CHAPTER 35 - REUNITED	176

Fred M Rhodes

CHAPTER 36 - CHECKING IN	179
CHAPTER 37 - SILENCE	182
CHAPTER 38 - THE SABBATH AND BEYOND.....	185
CHAPTER 39 - RECONNECTING	192
CHAPTER 40 - GOT 'ER DONE	197
CHAPTER 41 - COMANCHE	201
CHAPTER 42 - TROUT	206
CHAPTER 43 - MURDER.....	210
CHAPTER 44 - REAL DATE	219
CHAPTER 45 - NO SOHO	227
CHAPTER 46 - THE PRICE OF CREDIT	233
CHAPTER 47 - THE BIGHORNS	237
CHAPTER 48 - BUSINESS IS BUSINESS.....	267
CHAPTER 49 - BEARTOOTH COUNTRY	269
CHAPTER 50 - RELEASE.....	287
CHAPTER 51 - LANDFALL	289
CHAPTER 52 - BOB MARSHALL AND HENRY	292
CHAPTER 53 - EXTRACTION	308
CHAPTER 54 - SETUP	329
CHAPTER 55 - RETURNING HOME	336
CHAPTER 56 - RECRIMINATIONS	339
CHAPTER 57 - TIPTOEING BACK IN.....	346
CHAPTER 58 - FINDING ESSIE	352
CHAPTER 59 - BIRD OUT OF THE CAGE	367
CHAPTER 60 - INVASION	369
CHAPTER 61 - RACHEL'S GRAND SLAM.....	374

Chapter 1

Contract on a Dungeon

Tee accepted the Manila envelope handed to him by the legal secretary behind the desk without any attempt to open it to be sure it contained the contract he had so anxiously anticipated. Instinctively, he returned her smile with one of his own, hoping he could make her stand so he could see the tight skirt he was sure would be under the scooped neck of the black dress. No such luck.

He had signed the contract earlier, and the attorney had assured him that he would obtain the signature of the other party, closing the deal.

"I think you will find everything in order. If you do not, please feel free to bring it back to me and we will address the problem, in the unlikely event that were to be one," she said, still smiling.

He thought: *Several clear messages in there: First, we did it right so there will be no "problem" causing you to bring it back, if you are intelligent enough to understand the document we have prepared. Second, don't read it here; go away and read it someplace else. Third, if you have a beef, bring it to me; don't try to reach the lawyer who wrote it without going through me. You won't get there.*

There may have been a fourth message, unspoken: *Don't even go there; I'm way out of your class.* The perfectly-arranged way-too-blonde coiffure above the perfectly-applied makeup, all above the perfectly-fitting dress—no pants here—confirmed the fourth message. Tee grudgingly acknowledged delivery of this last message, but reserved judgment on the others directed to the contract itself. With a weak hand wave, he reversed direction and headed for the elevator.

The envelope was heavy in his hand, obviously containing more than paper. Curious, he opened it while waiting for the elevator. Inside, with the contract, were three keys: a single, large, tarnished, antique brass key, longer than the hand he was holding it in from heel of palm to tip of longest finger; and two copies of a common hardware-store padlock key shorter than the joint of one finger.

Before he hit the ground floor he knew he had what he needed: a one-year lease contract on a small building in west midtown Manhattan, New York City, condition: “as-is.”

Small hardly would cover it: a single room, larger than a studio apartment but less than 2000 square feet. “As-is” was open to interpretation, but, in this case, at the most optimistic, it meant dirty, smelly, musty, dark, littered with discarded junk and rat droppings. The room had not been used for anything except storage for many years, and he doubted that anybody had ever actually occupied the room as anything more than a squat. Various types of materials had obviously been stored there from time to time, some perhaps valuable, all now gone leaving only worthless remains.

It was Friday afternoon and he had taken advantage of the custom in New York City on the last workday of the week: quitting work shortly after lunch. A measly twenty-dollar cab ride, twenty-five with tip, brought him from the lawyer's office in mid-Manhattan to his newly-acquired place. As the cab sped away, he began to doubt the wisdom of beginning this project so late in the afternoon. The early spring sun was already behind the skyscrapers.

Contract on a Dungeon

After lunch, thinking that he might sleep in his own new place that night, he had bought two sheets, a pillow case, a blanket, a towel and some basic toiletries. He knew there was no real bed in the room, but he had seen a makeshift bunk constructed of junk materials padded with rags by squatters. He guessed that the various temporary occupants had been bums or employees taking some unauthorized downtime from their jobs.

He brought out the keys and addressed the formidable front door. A no-nonsense, heavy, iron-gridded security door had been installed outside of the regular door. The smaller key opened the padlock on it. Behind it was a solid wood door reinforced with crude iron bars screwed to it, right out of an Elizabethan movie, with a miniscule high-mounted peeping window guarded by an iron grid over it. The large brass key fit the lock, and as the door opened, he noted that it was three, maybe closer to four, inches thick. He half-expected it to creak when he opened it, completing the eerie scenario; it did.

All Tee's senses immediately came to battle stations. As the fading sunlight invaded the room through the open door, his eyes strained to reach into the darkness of the room. Scurrying sounds were barely audible; he was sure it was rats, having seen their traces on the floor during an earlier visit. Even with shoes on, he could feel the crunching of trash and grit underfoot. A strong, thick, miasma assailed his olfactory nerves.

He deposited his briefcase on the makeshift bunk, the case now bulging with the linens and toiletries just purchased, the contract and work papers in a side pocket, and a bottle of bourbon stuffed in. A puff of dust rose from the rag mattress when he set the suitcase on it, the particles spotlighted in the thin stream of sunlight coming through the windows. Peeling back the top layer of rags, he reconsidered his plan for sleeping there this night. He thought, if the rags were reasonably clean, he could lay over them, separated by the new sheet, and stuff some rags into the new pillow case to form a pillow. It was summer in New York, so a light blanket was all he would need

over the top. Oddly, the room was much cooler than on the street, owing to its two-foot-thick stone walls and ground-level location.

He took off his suit coat and tie, and took a pull on the bourbon. Ice would be nice, but not essential; besides, he had no glassware. He thought about buying a tumbler and some ice later after going out to eat.

Raising the bottle, he proposed a toast to all present, which were himself and, he was sure, uncounted rats and insects:

Here's to a helluva deal: A private suite—maybe that term is a little too grand—but still, an apartment in downtown Manhattan for less than two bucks a month per square foot—twenty-four bucks per square foot annually. Fantastic! Sure, I'll have to spend some money for cleaning and furniture, and probably some other things that I don't know about, but still, even if I have to double the twenty-four bucks, still a helluva deal compared to the hundred bucks they charge around here.

A deep pull on the bourbon completed the toast.

Tee knew what he was getting into, so he did not expect much. In fact, the terrible condition of the place was a valuable bargaining chip in negotiating down the price with the owner. The filth could be cleaned up by professionals; he had set up a local outfit for the next morning and would spend the week-end directing this work. Some carpeting and window coverings, a bed with a good mattress set, and a few other items of furniture, and he would be in.

The sink had only one cold water faucet. *Looks like I'll need a plumber to put in a water heater and a shower. No big deal.*

As he raised the liquor bottle one more time, his eyes were diverted upward for an instant. The dim light was enough to reflect on a glossy ebony-colored eye a half-dozen feet away. As he lowered his arm, the rat turned and scurried away on the huge hand-hewn ceiling beam above his head.

Contract on a Dungeon

He removed the bedclothes from his briefcase and laid them on the bunk, and returned the capped bottle to the suitcase. After washing his hands in the cold-water sink, he surveyed the situation, hung the towel on a nail, picked up his coat, tie, and briefcase, and headed for the door.

Decision made: *One more night in an overpriced Manhattan hotel. Tomorrow, we'll start fresh. Enjoy your last night in charge, Mr. Rat; tomorrow you will be evicted.*

Chapter 43

Murder

Three figures, all dressed completely in black, stepped out of the Lincoln *Navigator*. Ford Motor Company would not recognize it as their own: bullet-proof blackout glass all around, expensive aftermarket wheels and tires, and armor plate hidden in strategic places all around.

They gathered their gear out of the back hatch and moved as a unit to their destination, a mid-scale apartment building in SoHo, leaving the SUV parked in the no-parking zone without bothering to lock it up or concern about the parking violation. It was near midnight, but being Saturday, activity on the street was winding down but nowhere near completely shut down.

The leader hand-motioned the other two to move forward. They moved quickly, silently and deliberately, walking somewhat unnaturally because of the long and angular objects held close to their bodies and obscured by the loose-fitting outerwear. Black skull caps and heavy beards and mustaches hid most of their heads and faces, the small slits for the eyes providing little means of unique identification.

Curbside, at their destination, they regrouped tightly, and waited.

As if choreographed, in a few minutes, an electronically-latched door in the apartment building opened and three people

Murder

walked out: a man, a woman, and a small child. A low-wattage lamp on the landing gave them barely enough light to navigate the walkway to the stairs leading down to street level where street lights provided better illumination. Contrary to American custom, the man stepped forward first and the woman followed behind, with the child in between; in this order they started down the stairs. They were less than fifty feet from the three men waiting below.

Just up the street, Rachel shifted her position to the curb-side door as her taxi approached her apartment, an act done without conscious thinking because she had done it hundreds of times. There was no need to pay the driver; she was paid up on her arrangement with him. She was returning from a job catering an event for one of her clients, a job for which she was especially grateful since she was still recovering from her wound. The duty was light, and she carried it off in a manner that almost completely hid her temporary handicap. Nevertheless, she was exhausted and looking forward to bed.

A man dressed in black stepped forward from the group of three in the shadows and seemed to be silently motioning her to step back. She looked around to see the reason for this action, and seeing none, stepped out of the cab, side-stepped him, and continued on for a few steps at an oblique angle, hoping to gain the stairs to her apartment before he could interfere, emboldened by the fact that the taxi was still at the curb and the driver could see everything. This would not be the first time she was approached by an unwelcome street person when she returned home late, and the cab driver usually tarried if he thought she might need some backup.

The other two figures emerged from those same shadows, jogging ahead at an angle and reaching the stairs before her. She stopped, and for an instant, considered returning to the taxi. It was too late.

Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop! The AR-15's in semi-automatic mode produced overwhelming sound from only a few feet away from Rachel, cracking through the low-level murmur of traffic

and night life on the street. Each of the “pops” was instantly followed by a close-coupled sound, some a dull thud and some a ringing sound as with metal striking metal. She instinctively crouched low to the ground, then dropped to her knees while covering her ears with her hands. The three men moved forward to the walkway leading to the foot of the stairs where the trio was descending, then stopped. They fired only a few more shots: **Pop-pop-pop**, then turned and trotted, almost nonchalantly, to the waiting SUV, their AR-15’s no longer concealed.

For Rachel, reality disappeared, blasted away by the noise and the thought of what was unfolding in front of her, then slowly began to return, although out of focus. Sub-consciously, she raised a hand to her shoulder almost expecting to feel warm and sticky blood as she had before, but finding none. She rose, ignoring the damage to her hosiery and scratches on her knees, and approached the stairs slowly. Three objects were there, out of place on the stairs, motionless. She refused to allow herself to speculate on what they were, totally dishonest with her rational self for the moment. As she stepped onto the first flight, she saw a narrow cascading stream of magenta-colored blood flowing down, dripping step-by-step, almost touching her extended toe before she could jerk it back.

She took in a deep breath before allowing herself to look up the stairway.

The first object was a man, face-up, not moving, his face illuminated by the dim outdoor light on the building. Further up the stairs was the form of a small woman, slumped over, bleeding from a source hidden by her face-down position. One petite shoe was laying loose two stair flights below the foot where it belonged.

In between the man and the woman was a child, a small girl, elegantly dressed, her face frozen, standing and holding tightly to a baluster under the handrail along the stairway with one hand while the other was held tightly at her side, struggling to force out the scream and tears that were building up in her

head. Rachel could see the contrast between the pale blue coat the girl was wearing and the crimson blotch under her right hand.

“Essie!”

Rachel cried out the name as loud as she could, determined to make the girl know she was there. Stepping over the man, she threw herself at the girl and gathered her into her arms. The girl released the baluster and the scream and the tears and collapsed into Rachel’s arms, the two forming a duet of primeval sounds and a fountain of tears, the crimson stain now slowly transferring onto Rachel.

Rachel picked up the girl and headed down the stairs, carefully stepping over the man, forcing the girl’s head away from the sight, totally ignorant of where she was headed but anxious to get away from the carnage and, more importantly, get the child away from it.

Out on the curb, a crowd was forming. Rachel’s first reaction was to call back the taxi just to get away from the awful scene. Before she could make the call, a police car arrived, then a second one, and a third, all with red lights flashing. The uniformed policemen drew their weapons and approached the apartment building slowly while pushing the crowd back. Another car, unmarked, arrived with plain-clothes men who quickly began giving orders. A brightly-colored tape was quickly stretched to indicate the police line and contain the scene. This done, they began asking questions of the bystanders, eventually getting around to Rachel. A few seconds into the questioning, Rachel lost it.

“God damn it! Don’t you guys know **anything** about what’s going on here? This little girl has just gone through...” It suddenly dawned on her that she should not say anything that would confirm what the girl had just witnessed: her parents were shot and may be dead. “She lives here, and she was here when it happened. She’s bleeding, can’t you see it? She needs medical attention.” Rachel pointed to the stairs as she spoke, then lifted the girl’s small right hand.

The distal and intermediate phalanges—the outer two joints of her forefinger--were missing, and the blood was still issuing with each beat of her small heart. Rachel removed her apron and wrapped the girl's hand in it, mindful of the injury but surprised that her action brought no cry of pain.

"Are you a relative of the girl, or someone authorized to care for her?" one of the plainclothesmen asked.

"No, no, I'm just a ...friend. I live in that building, too. Can't you understand: this girl is **hurt**?"

"May I get your name?" The man had his pad and pen out, but put them aside for the moment when he saw the girl, who seemed physically unhurt except for the improvised bandage on her hand now growing increasingly red in color. "Emergency medical techs are on the way, ma'am," he said.

Frustrated, Rachel gave the man all the information he asked for as they waited, stroking the girl and hoping the questions would end soon, necessary as they are.

"Look, I know you guys have to do your job, but this girl not only needs medical attention but needs to get away from here. I'll tell you anything you want, but tend to her first, OK?"

"Child Protective Services has been notified, ma'am."

As they talked, another siren, this one from an ambulance, raked the silence as it bore down on the scene. Emergency medical technicians ran to the stairs with two gurneys. In a few minutes, they walked back to the ambulance pushing the gurneys, walking without any sense of urgency, the persons on the gurneys completely covered from head to toe by blankets. The policeman approached them and returned with two EMT's who attended to the girl's injury, applying a large bandage to her hand. They attempted to get her to take a pain-killer tablet, but she steadfastly refused. Shock seemed to be blocking the pain for the moment.

Rachel took the girl and began aimlessly walking down the street, away from the crowd, followed by a uniformed officer.

"You can't leave the area, ma'am."

Murder

"I'm not leaving; I just don't want her to see what's going on." The girl had stopped crying but had a lock on Rachel's neck as Rachel walked backward so the girl could not see the unfolding scene over her shoulder.

As Rachel slowly made her way back, an unmarked van arrived. Two women stepped out, one uniformed and one not. The man in charge motioned to Rachel and they approached.

"Is this the child involved?" the woman in street clothes asked.

"Yes," Rachel answered. "Her name is Esperanza. We call her 'Essie.' She has an injury to her hand. The ambulance team dressed it, but it should be examined by a doctor." The woman nodded agreement.

"Hello, Essie. I'm sorry this has been such a bad time for you. We are going to take you to a hospital to make your finger stop hurting, and to a safe place for a while until things get straightened out". She reached for the girl, who instinctively recoiled and tightened her grip on Rachel.

The woman continued to speak in a soft and pleasant voice, but Essie would not give ground. The woman finally began giving head movements to Rachel indicating that Rachel would have to help in the handover process, which she did, reluctantly.

"No, no... **Rachel!**" Essie screamed as the breakaway was finally made. The woman carried the girl, now crying openly, to the van and quickly left.

Oh, God! What's going to happen to her? I shouldn't have let them take her. But they are the authorities—they would force it if I didn't do it. And how could I take care of her? She has to see a doctor. I should have lied and told them she was my...daughter, or niece, or something. I could have found a way. Oh, sweet Jesus, what should I have done? Oh Essie! Rachel began shaking; it began in her shoulders, then her legs, then her whole body, until she could not stand. She slumped to the pavement on her knees again, sobbing, coiled up into a ball as if being pummeled.

“Are you alright, ma’am?” The uniformed officer was gently grasping her arm to help her rise.

Sniffling, she replied, “Yes,” a lie.

She fumbled for her cell phone and called her taxi driver.

Tee was sure he heard a car door closing, then, within a few seconds, he heard something he had never heard before: a knock on the door of his room in the dungeon. He sprang to the door, and his eyes widened as he recognized Rachel obviously in distress made plain by the expression on her face and Essie’s blood smeared on her neck and shoulders. The urge to call out “What happened” almost overcame his manners, but he recovered, saying, “Come in.”

“Oh, Tee, let me sit down a minute. Something awful has happened.” She proceeded to tell him about the scene at her apartment, blotting tears as she talked and grabbing his arm as if she needed to be grounded.

“Do you know the...people who were hurt?” he asked.

“A little. I know the little girl. Her name is Esperanza, which means ‘hope,’ or something like that, in Spanish. They call her ‘Essie.’ She is a sweetheart.” The thought of the girl, and what it would mean for her to lose her parents—far more important than the loss of a part of a finger—started a new flow of tears.

Tee awkwardly offered his handkerchief to replace the sodden paper tissues. “Were they Hispanic?” he asked, and then realized the answer was patently obvious.

“Yes, from Honduras, I think. Their name is Gutierrez, Jaime and Luna. They moved in a couple of years ago when Essie was a tiny baby. They both worked, and Essie was in day care. They seemed like nice people, and seemed to become well-off, at least compared to the rest of us in the apartment building. The way they dressed seemed to keep going upscale, and one day I saw them taking delivery of some expensive-looking furniture and appliances. Oh, Tee, here I am talking about them in the past tense as if they are gone, dead. And what will

Murder

happen to little Essie if they are? And they shot off part of a finger on her little hand. She was so brave.”

Rachel seemed about to collapse as Tee, now on one knee, gathered her in his arms. “I’m sure the NYPD knows how to handle such matters. They will have professionals take her in and take care of her. Maybe she has family around here. If so, they will find them.

“I’ll make you a cup of tea—I know you like tea—and I have a couple of cookies that the calorie police would call absolutely illegal; you might like them. Then you can lay down on the bed awhile and rest. I know you don’t want to sleep, but you can rest your bones anyway. You probably won’t be able to get into your place tonight, so just try to relax.”

Rachel did as instructed, and seemed to recover some composure. After washing off the blood and dried tears, she downed two cups of tea and a half cookie, and allowed the conversation to migrate to less troublesome topics. They tried to discuss her progress in resuming work, which was still limited to a couple of loyal customers who were willing to accommodate her slow performance using only one arm, her rambling explanation somewhat disjointed, her mind constantly reverting to Essie.

She finally moved to the bed. Tee continued to watch television with one eye and Rachel with the other until the strain moved both eyes to her. He lay down on the bed beside her fully clothed, as she was, except for her shoes and his boots, and held her in his arms until she eventually drifted off to sleep. About 4:00 am, she rose to use the bathroom, then returned and slipped out of her dirty and blood-stained dress and torn stockings, and crawled under the bedclothes in her underwear. Tee put his arm around her and gave her a hard squeeze, careful to avoid the injured shoulder, then removed it and studied her for a long moment until she drifted off again and he assumed a more comfortable position.

How fragile she looks; she looks more like a little girl that was shot than the adult that rescued the girl.

What a bloody scene that must have been. It will take a long time for it to fade away. This strong, independent girl, CEO of her own business, has just about been taken to the limit. I need to find a way to get her out of SoHo. But that's another big problem, more than I can deal with tonight.

They were in the same position when Tee got up at 6:30 am.

Chapter 53

Extraction

“**W**hat do you know about this guy?” Tee opened the subject.

“He’s new in his job, been there a few months. The guy before him sold drugs to locals, including Beth. He operated with near-impunity because he did not actually do business from any kind of storefront or crackhouse, and never had drugs on him. The local sheriff’s office had him pegged for a long time, but couldn’t get the evidence they needed. Then something changed and they got him, busted him a few weeks ago. I don’t know what charges they got him on, but he disappeared.

“The new guy—Beth says his name is “Aiden”—inherited a good market, and he has kept it going, until he made a huge mistake. He beat up a girl who couldn’t make the payments on the merchandise he sold her. Turns out the girl was a close friend of Beth—grew up together. Her name is Andrea; Beth calls her ‘Andy.’ They beat her so bad she has lost the use of one eye—won’t move, and she may have lost sight out of it. She may be handicapped for life, and maybe not. Beth took it real hard, partly because they were buddies and—my opinion—partly because Beth didn’t do more to keep her friend off the funny stuff.”

Extraction

"All because she didn't pay her bill," Tee commented.

"Yip; looks that way. Maybe it was intended to show who was the new big man in town."

"Tell me what we're headed into," Tee asked.

"You probably can predict it as well as I can. He works out of his vehicle, probably some kind of fancy rig—I'd bet the farm on it. It's Saturday night, so our man Aiden will be doing a lively business. He will probably have some punks there to back him up. Beth says he parks behind a business on Main Avenue, convenient for his customers."

The outskirts of Choteau were upon them as Tee tried to wind things up.

"What's the plan?"

"Here's what I suggest; tell me if you think we should do something different. First, we find the guy's vehicle, to be sure where he is in town. Then we find him, and move him out of town. What happens after that, we make up on the job; no strongarm stuff. According to Beth, he'll have some help we'll have to deal with."

"Then what?" Tee asked.

"We'll drive away, back the way we came. We'll find a place to stop, and wing it from there. My objective is to get him out of Choteau, find the illegal drugs in his vehicle, and turn him over to the authorities. But before we drop him, I want to impress on him how important it is that he never set foot in Choteau again. I'm not quite sure how to do that; maybe you have some suggestions."

"We'll think of something," Tee said.

"You've got the heat. Try not to use it on the man, but you have my unqualified permission to scare the crap out of him and his backup."

It was not difficult to spot the dealer's vehicle parked up close to the buildings in an apparently reserved place, a new Cadillac *Escalade*, white in color, tricked out with aftermarket fancy wheels, low-profile tires, and blackout glass everywhere

except on the windshield. Darron parked his pickup in the lot nearby, at the far end of the lot amongst other vehicles.

"Let's go around front," Darron said. "I think I know where we can find him." He led the way around the corner to the business fronts on Main Avenue, and into a bar there.

As predicted, several pairs of eyes watched them as they entered. The place was busy, as usual on a Saturday night. Miasma from cigarette smoke hung over the bar and the tables. Tee thought he detected a tinge of cannabis in it, but would be quick to admit he was not a reliable judge of it. All the bar stools were occupied, so they stood behind the barstool row and reached over some cowboys at the bar to order two draft beers. A fat tip launched over the cowboys shoulders eased the strain on the busy bartender.

"You boys new in town?" one of the cowboys asked as he rotated half-around on his stool.

"Yip. Just passing through," Darron answered, smiling congenially.

"Where you headed?"

"The Falls," Darron continued. Tee was glad Darron was handling the interview. He smiled at the cowboy, too, but said nothing.

"What brings you to Choteau?"

Darron looked for a way to end the interrogation without offending the cowboy who seemed to be only trying to be friendly. "Delivered some stuff up to Browning. Supposed to come out of Cut Bank, but something got screwed up. Me and my partner, here, drew the trip. Messed up my plans to go fishing today, but I can use the Saturday overtime," Darron lied.

"I hear that," the cowboy said, sympathetically, "Gotta make it when you can."

The crowd and the marginal air conditioning system, if one existed, combined to make the beer slide down easily. Tee ordered two more, and, thankfully, they had to move down the bar to collect them. The cowboy turned back to his friends and

scrutiny of the two strangers seemed to recede in favor of bar conversation among friends.

At the rear of the room, one table was obviously the center of attention, the seats pushed back to accommodate more people than the table was designed to seat. Aiden was presiding, looking like he did not belong there but acting like he owned the place. He wore the obligatory dress of his generation: baggy pants below a sleeveless tee shirt with an obscene graphic and caption printed on it. His black footwear was highly polished above high Cuban-style heels, clearly different from the dusty western boots that predominated in the room. The tee shirt was, undoubtedly, selected to display the many tattoos on his body—on arms, back, and neck, and probably on other parts not immediately visible. It also revealed an unremarkable torso, not muscular but not obese. One wrist bore a Rolex watch, or a knockoff of one, and the other a clunky gold chain bracelet. He wore no hat on his shaved bald head which contrasted with the designer stubble on his face. Those paying homage to him were dressed and tattooed similarly, their tee shirts mostly depicting scenes of diabolism.

“Check the back door to this place,” Darron said.

Tee moved to the men’s room, then, on his return, inspected the building architecture at the rear of the room and reported back. “The door is straight back. I saw some daylight coming through the crack in it, so I gave it a little shove. It is not locked.” Darron had heard the squeak, and saw the narrow shaft of daylight admitted when Tee made the shove.

Darron looked at Tee and silently delivered a signal which was clearly received. Both reached over the shoulders of those in front of them to lay down their beer bottles on the bar, then slowly moved to the rear of the room. Those few that could see that the abandoned mugs were still half-full followed them with their eyes, but nobody moved from their bar stool.

Darron walked directly to the table; Tee followed on his left wing.

Aiden was standing at the table, holding court with his back about three-quarters to Darron's approach. Arms at his side hanging naturally, Darron thrust his chest subtly into Aiden's chest, advanced one small step, and uttered one word: "Outside." The two men were about the same height, a little over six feet, but Darron's bulk was mostly muscle while Aiden's was flab. Darron's unexpected move caught Aiden off stride and made him stumble backward slightly before regaining his balance. Darron's chest was on his again before he could fully recover. Another step forward by Darron brought the two men, now essentially Siamese twins joined at the chest, a step closer to the door. Aiden stiffened and tried to slow his escort but could not stop the train of movement. A path began to open to their intended path forward.

Tee closed, putting his chest alongside Darron's to form Siamese triplets, and moved forward in lockstep with Tee, trapping Aiden between them in a huddle and shuffling along more-or-less in unison as a single unit as if choreographed, Darron and Tee powering a human bulldozer that swept away anything in its path while encapsulating their quarry.

Tee glanced back at the table where a chill had set in. One young man rose and started for them. Tee unsnapped the strap on the holster holding the .41, exposing the grips; the man stopped moving but remained standing at the table. None of the others at the table moved, sending a short dose of relief to Tee. He held both arms at his side, one hand close to the Remington on his thigh in Neanderthal posture. When they reached the back door, Darron nudged it open, sending a burst of bright sunlight into the dimly lit room. Aiden turned around and shambled outside without bulldozer assistance. The whole movement hardly raised any attention in the bar except for the area around the table in the back.

Darron gripped Aiden's arm behind his back, applying just enough pressure to allow him to walk and ready to instantly apply more if necessary. At the *Escalade*, Darron ordered, "Open it."

Extraction

"What do you guys want? I got some real good H. I'll give you a good deal. You can't get stuff this good anywhere around here. In fact, I'll give you a free start."

"Get in," Darron ordered. Tee was behind Darron, keeping his eyes on the back door of the bar. The door cracked open, Tee raised his pistol and flagrantly sighted it at the crack between door and door jam, and the door quickly closed.

Aiden unlocked the door electronically and got in the driver's seat. The strong odor of marijuana filled the car and leaked out the door; this time, Tee was sure of it.

Darron reached up to the switch on the front door and unlocked the rear door, then entered the back seat and set behind Aiden, his arm quickly switching to gain a hammer lock around the dealer's neck over the driver's seat.

"Hand me the piece," Darron said. "I know you have one stashed somewhere in here. Get it now."

"I ain't got no..." Darron locked his left hand onto his right wrist and applied pressure around Aiden's neck until he could no longer breathe. "OK, OK." Darron relaxed slightly and Aiden resumed more normal breathing.

Tee moved around the front of the vehicle, keeping his eyes fixed on the door of the bar, and slid in the front seat beside Aiden.

"Now," Darron said. Aiden made a few hesitant moves, then paused.

Tee glared at him, then raised his handgun and cracked the back of Aiden's hand with it. "The man said, 'Now.'"

Aiden huddled into the driver's seat and reached up under the instrument panel, using his left hand while nursing his right hand. Magically, a black holster appeared encasing a SIG Sauer P226, .40 Smith & Wesson caliber. Tee relieved him of it and asked, "Nice toy, the Cadillac of handguns, according to some. Any more toys in here? Better say so now; if we find them, you will get hurt."

Aiden reached down at the left side of his seat and produced a ten-inch knife, finely made and engraved on the handle.

"You've got a regular attack vehicle here. Is there more?" Darron said. Aiden shook his head to indicate no.

"Start the engine and drive out of town toward Bynum," Darron ordered. The driver hesitated as if he did not know what was expected of him, apparently not recognizing the name of the small town, Bynum, or just stalling.

"North, turn right at the corner." They entered Main Avenue, Highway 89 through Choteau. As they left the parking lot, Tee saw other headlights come on and recognized his rented pickup coming in behind them.

"Pick up your speed," Darron ordered.

"I'm going speed limit now. If I go faster, I get hassled by pig," Aiden objected, referring to a police officer.

"Do it." Darron reapplied arm pressure to the dealer's neck, which produced another ten miles per hour. As they left Choteau, he said, "Faster; I want to see seventy." Aiden slowly raised his speed to sixty, then held it steady. A strong jerk on his neck sent the big SUV into a swerve before Aiden straightened it out. "I said seventy," Darron said, and he got it.

They passed through the small, unincorporated town of Bynum at high speed, sending a citizen scurrying across the road from the post office, fortunately the only one out at the time.

As they left Bynum, Darron carefully watched the continuous fence line that paralleled the road, looking for a place where they could get off the highway. The endless, strongly fenced, empty fields held few options.

"Where we going, dude?" Aiden asked.

"Just drive."

Darron spotted what he was looking for: an open gate in the fence. The twin tracks inside the gate could hardly be called a road, but he reckoned the *Escalade* could handle it. Darron grabbed the opportunity.

"Slow down and turn through that open gate," he ordered.

Extraction

Aiden complied and proceeded into the field, holding to the tracks molded into the grass by vehicles that had worked the field.

“Turn around and stop here. Give me the keys. Leave the lights on. Get out.” Darron pocketed the keys and eased out the door behind Aiden, releasing the hammerlock and re-applying it outside the vehicle. He was quickly joined by Tee.

Another vehicle slowed on the highway and turned into the field. Tee assumed it would be Rob in Tee’s truck, but as it approached, he could hear the roar of a four-cylinder engine connected to a resonator muffler—not the sound of his rented pickup—and saw that it was a Japanese brand sedan. Tee turned around and opened the Cadillac’s door to use as a shield, and fixed his eyes on the incoming vehicle as it stopped about twenty yards away, in front of the Cadillac.

Darron upgraded the hammerlock. “Don’t get any ideas about joining your buddies,” he said.

All four doors opened on the sedan and people alighted from all of them, five in all, all young males in the familiar uniform dress recently seen in the bar.

As they started walking toward the opposing three, another vehicle slowed and turned off the highway onto the dirt road. It moved slowly until it approached the scene, then suddenly accelerated and went on by the field where the two vehicles were parked.

“Don’t stop; give it the gas and go on by,” Henry ordered. Rob stomped the accelerator pedal and the pickup downshifted, throwing dust behind it as it sped on down the field, by-passing the dry field where the others were parked and making its own road where none was obvious.

The sound of this engine, although barely audible, was familiar to Tee, and he eased out a grateful sigh as he watched the pickup get away from whatever was going to happen, of which he had no clue.

Waiting for the confrontation to begin, Darron continued searching for an end game that would send Aiden away from Choteau forever without injuring anyone. The odds weren't looking too good: five against two, and probably five guns against one, maybe two if Aiden's was loaded.

"How many rounds in the SIG?" he asked Tee.

Tee checked, and replied, "Full; ten rounds plus one in the chamber; eleven ready to go. Here, I'm handing it to you. Careful; I didn't check to see if the safety is on; I don't know whether it has a manual safety."

Darron reached for the gun and stuffed it in his belt.

By now, the five henchmen had moved to a position about half-way between their vehicle and Aiden's. In the half-moon light and light of the Cadillac's headlights, no guns were visible, but neither were their hands. Tee thought it was time to stop their advance.

"Hold it right there, boys. What can we do for you tonight?" Tee said, his tone mock-friendly.

"Let go Aiden," their apparent leader said, his English clear but obviously tinged with Spanish.

"I'm afraid not. He's in the process of being run out of town. Maybe he'll send you a post card when he gets resettled," Tee continued.

Now the handguns began to appear, their dull steel parts shining even in the dim light. Tee leveled his own at the leader.

"Kill the headlights. Keep slow; don't raise any dust. Now turn around, slowly; don't raise any more dust than you have to." Rob was following Henry's whispered instructions carefully as he stopped on a small hillock facing the scene below. Henry reached into the back seat for the leather rifle case. Silently cursing his failing mature eyes as he tried to make out what was going on, he said, "What do you see?"

"There's a bunch of guys between the cars. They were moving, but now they are stopped."

"Where's Darron and Tee?"

"I can't tell. They are probably behind the lights." The Cadillac headlights were aimed at an angle, not directly at the sedan, but some fringe spillover of light dimly illuminated the car and its former occupants.

Binggggg! The large-caliber bullet ricocheted off the hood and windshield of the *Escalade*. Darron and Aiden were on the far side of the vehicle, shielded by its mass of steel and glass and plastic, but Tee was exposed above and below the open front passenger door on the near side. He quickly entered the SUV, closed the door, and hunkered down below the windshield. "Give me the keys," he called to Darron, who pitched them to him over the front seat backrest. Tee turned on the ignition switch so the electric windows would work, and lowered the right front window.

Binggggg! sounded again, this time from Tee's .41 Magnum, and the windshield of the Honda collapsed into a sparkling waterfall of broken glass. To get there, the bullet passed within inches of the leader of the group, but he did not flinch even though the other four behind him instinctively ducked and wheeled around to see the damage to the car.

"Can you shoot iron sights?" Henry asked Rob.

"Sure. My first rifle had iron sights. The one I got now has a scope, a Leupold..."

"Never mind." Henry was pumping rounds into the magazine of his old rifle, still cursing his failing eyesight.

"Here's what I want you to do. Slip out of the truck—**no, not yet, wait until I tell you**—and aim at the front grill of that Jap car. Aim a little high; you'll get about two inches of drop at this range, by my judgement. We want to hit the radiator, not people, understand? The **radiator.**" Rob nodded. "We also want to scare the beJesus out of those turds. The first shot may hit something in the grill or bumper that will deflect it, so lock and load again and take another shot slightly lower or higher. I've got plenty of rounds, so keep firing until I tell you to stop. Aim

carefully and don't be in a hurry. Make each shot count. But no human targets; got it? If they go for Darron and Tee, be ready because I may change my mind about human targets.

"Now, you are going to open the door slowly while I cover the dome light. There's other lights that will come on inside the cab that I can't do anything about, so get out and close the door as fast as you can. We don't want to be showcasing ourselves. Ready?"

Rob racked a round into the receiver of the lever action Winchester and said, "Yes."

Crouching on his knees, Henry covered the dome light with his jacket, and said, "Quick, now, open the door and get out. **Go!**"

Rob athletically slipped out of the cab, closed the door, and crouched against the front fender, then aimed the old Winchester.

Kapuck! Neither Rob nor Henry had any idea where Rob's round hit, but seven heads heard the report and some saw the muzzle flash.

One gang member popped off a round in the general direction of Tee's truck; it went wild. Henry heard it hit the sheet metal of the truck but could not tell where, except that it was behind him somewhere at the rear, apparently harmless. A loud discussion ensued in Spanish, but before anything was settled, Rob hit the sedan a second time, this one ricocheting off metal and probably doing little damage. A few seconds later, a third shot hit, immediately followed by a rising plume of steam and a hissing sound audible all the way to the shooter.

"By jumpin' Jesus, you got it!" exclaimed Henry, making no attempt to whisper, his usual restrained demeanor cast aside. "Now try to hit a tire. No people, remember? Just a tire."

Darron stood from the crouch he had taken when Rob's first shot arrived. "Is that Henry?" he called over the roof of the Cadillac to Tee.

"I assume so. Looks like my truck."

Extraction

The gang dissociated into retreat, the car doors flew open and were not completely closed before the vehicle was underway.

Rob took one last shot as it made the turn back toward the Highway 89, and hit a rear tire before it's headlights came on and it went fish-tailing down the road, it's modified exhaust system making the little four-banger at wide-open throttle sound like a Mack truck.

As Rob drove up to the clearing, Tee stepped forward to the passenger side to meet the pair in the pickup. Henry emerged, raising his collar against the evening chill while Rob, coatless, seemed oblivious to the same chill.

"Nice shooting, there, Henry. Looks like they didn't like the odds with you plinking at them."

"Wasn't me. Rob did it. Shot exactly where I told him. Damn good job. Now what are you going to do with that piece of dung over there?" Henry motioned to Aiden as he spoke. "Looks like his luck has run out."

"That's a good question. Let's ask Darron," Tee replied, walking to the driver's side doors where Darron and Aiden were still standing.

"Suppose we take his fancy boots and set him walking, then roll this drugmobile off a cliff somewhere." Darron's teasing had the intended effect: Aiden stared down at his expensive boots and considered the loss of them and his *Escalade*, almost as big a disaster as walking back a dozen miles to Choteau in his sock feet, assuming they would let him keep his socks.

"Oh, oh, we may have missed our chance," Tee said, motioning to the highway. The revolving beacon of a sheriff's patrol car was approaching from the north and seeming to slow to turn into the field, then suddenly accelerated and continued southbound toward Choteau. A few seconds later, they heard its siren in the distance.

"Wonder what changed his mind?" Tee said, noting that the Cadillac's headlights were still on to easily show their location.

"My guess is he got a call on his radio," Henry offered. "If we are going to do something, we better do it before he comes back."

Tee said, "I'll make a suggestion: let's pull the fuel pump fuse on this hummer, lock it up and leave it here. That law will probably come back, and they can deal with it. The dealer, here, can stay and negotiate with the deputy or take off walking; his choice. Either way, they'll find the SIG and probably some funny stuff in the caddy, and the dealer will have some explaining to do."

"I like it," said Darron. "You look for that fuse while I get our man, here, to shed his shoes or boots or whatever they are. Start pulling them off, big man."

"No, no, you can't do that. What will I do? How can I get to Choteau, or anywhere?" Aiden protested, looking at the stubble in the field that he would have to walk on, then shrugging his shoulders and turning his palms up, his demeanor suddenly changing from swagger to pitiful victim.

"Well, you are well and truly screwed. Off with the boots, or would you rather I take them off for you?"

Reluctantly, Aiden sat on the ground and pulled off the short boots with a zipper up the side.

"Phew, did somebody run over a skunk," Tee said as he produced the critical fuse and several others he pulled for insurance. Rob laughed at Tee's question, and even Henry broke a smile. Tee reached in and tried to start the engine to confirm it was disabled. "I'm going to replace the SIG into its neat little compartment, and lock the doors; then I'll throw the keys out the window somewhere down the road."

"How much money have you got on you," Darron asked Aiden.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know."

"Then look and see," Tee suggested with feigned exasperation.

Extraction

Aiden pulled out his wallet and began to count. Darron could see the corners on several one hundred dollar bills as well as smaller denominations.

"Never mind. You've got enough to convince the sheriff that robbery was not a motive, and maybe you can buy a ride from somebody. Here's a little tip: don't come back to Choteau, not even for one minute. If we find you there, we will find a nice deep hole and dump you in it, stinking feet and all. Got it?" Darron was in the man's face as he delivered the ultimatum, hoping his bravado did not sound too contrived.

The four men headed for Tee's pickup, but before they could get started, a cruiser with its roof spinner flashing turned into their position, and a deputy sheriff emerged and approached the group warily with his sidearm drawn.

"Evening," he opened, without the customary "Good" prefix. "I'm Deputy Wes Bream, Teton County Sheriff's Office. What's going on here?"

"We were just saying good-bye to Aiden, here. He's decided to leave Teton County," Darron said. Aiden was looking at the ground in front of his feet as if there was nothing else in the world to see.

"Whose vehicle is this?" the deputy said, motioning with the barrel of his pistol at the *Escalade*. Darron was sure that he already knew whose it was.

"His," Darron answered, pointing to Aiden.

Wes Bream looked at Aiden. "This yours?"

"Yes, but I wasn't driving," Aiden lied. The deputy observed the silent reaction of the other four at the canard, but did not press the question.

The deputy tried the door. "You got the keys?" he asked Aiden, who shook his head indicating he did not.

"These must be them here on the ground," Tee said, handing them over. The deputy glared at Tee, then at Darron, both long and hard, and said, "Cute. Motor vehicle theft is a felony in this state."

"Aiden drove us here, didn't you Aiden?" Darron asked. The other three all indicated agreement while Aiden's silence abjured the charge.

"I'll ask the questions here." The strength of the two sides, one deputy against four, with Aiden somewhere in the middle, seemed to have no effect on Deputy Sherriff Wes Bream; he was clearly in charge, and showed no recognition of the imbalance.

"A vehicle fitting this description was reported going through Bynum at a high rate of speed. There seems to be a difference of opinion about who was driving, but since you are the owner, and these other four gentlemen agree that you were driving, I have probable cause to assume that their version is correct." He accepted the keys, opened the driver's side door, and scanned the inside with his flashlight, but did not enter the vehicle.

Turning back to the group, the deputy asked, "Why is he without shoes?"

As Darron was formulating an answer, one that would dispel any thought of them engaging in a farce, another flashing beacon turned in and joined them.

"Don't move," Wes Bream said as he left to confer with the new arrival. The two deputies then rejoined the group, both with guns in hand.

"Deputy Andrews is stationed in Pendroy. He investigated an incident down the road a mile or two. There was a disabled car. Engine blew, and a flat tire, no spare. The windshield was shattered, almost completely gone. Turns out they had some open containers in the car, and several firearms being checked for legality. Deputy Andrews got backup and turned over the driver and passengers to them, then proceeded up here. Seems like there might be some connection to this scene right here. Is that possible?"

Darron took over the interview, with Tee's blessing, Darron being the local resident. "Yes, they were here. They are...accomplices; I think that is the right word. They are associated with this man, named Aiden." Darron motioned to the

man bearing the name. The deputy seemed to pay little attention to the information, as if he already knew it all.

"Who blew the windshield out?"

"I did." Tee stepped forward.

"Are you permitted to carry and conceal?"

"Yes, I am."

"Let's see it."

Tee handed over the pistol, butt forward, and opened his wallet to produce the permit.

"Colorado. I think that it is valid in Montana. Joe: check it out" Deputy Joe Andrews retreated to his car and opened the radio. In a few minutes, he was back.

"It's valid."

"So, you took out the windshield and the radiator and a rear tire with this .41 Magnum?"

Henry sensed Rob rising from his slouch to claim the shooting prize, delighted to learn that he had hit a tire as well as the radiator, but Henry held him back with a glare that would have silenced Vesuvius.

Tee let it lie without answering, and Rob did too, with extreme effort.

Wes Bream checked the magazine and the chamber. "One round fired," he said, handing it back.

"I reloaded." Tee holstered his weapon and snapped the retaining strap.

"Anybody hurt?" the deputy asked. All shook their heads negatively. Darron hoped the lawman would not look closely at Aiden's neck where petechiae might be forming as a result of Darron applying his forearm.

"Let's see some identification. Driver's license will work if it's got a picture on it, and if the picture looks like you."

Darron, Tee, Henry and Rob dug out their driver's licenses, which sufficed. Aiden fumbled for his and seemed reluctant to offer it, but it was accepted without comment.

"So, this is your vehicle," Wes Bream said, referring to Aiden. "I need your registration and proof of insurance."

Aiden entered the car and retrieved the documents from the glove box confirming that it was registered to him.

Tee called out, "Take a look under the instrument panel, just to the left of the steering column. There's a piece under there."

The deputy holstered his gun and kneeled, which was unnecessary because the trap door was hanging open in plain view, exposing the SIG Sauer pistol. Wes took out a pencil and speared it through the trigger guard. He walked to his cruiser and bagged it, then returned.

"You'll find my prints on it," volunteered Darron. "We took it from this guy, then we returned it to the place where you found it."

"We?"

"My prints are on it, too," Tee chimed in.

"Theft of personal property is also illegal."

"We didn't steal it. We just took it away for a few minutes so he wouldn't shoot us." The simple logic of Tee's position seemed to be understood. "I'll bet you dinner that his prints are on it, and lunch that it is stolen." The deputy did not take either bet.

"Did you fire the SIG?" Wes asked.

"No. You'll find a full magazine and one in the chamber, just the way we found it when our friend over here handed it to us," Darron said, motioning to Aiden. "He also produced a knife hidden somewhere in the vehicle; you'll find it in the back seat."

Wes Bream said to his partner Joe Andrews, "See what's there." Joe found the knife and picked it up gingerly with a gloved hand. "Bag it," said Wes.

When Joe returned, Wes said, "Why is the hood not latched?"

Tee wondered whether the deputy would notice the empty fuse box, so he stepped forward and handed the fuses to him, saying, "It won't run without these."

The deputy studied the fuses, then studied Tee's face, then Darron's face, trying to piece together what events occurred and what were planned. He put the fuses in his pocket and turned

back to the unlatched engine compartment, opened the hood, and walked around it from side to side, scanning with his flashlight. Stopping at the windshield washer reservoir, he removed the cover, looked inside, reached down and removed a string draped over the edge of the reservoir. On the other end of the string was a plastic bag, a “baggie,” suspended over the liquid in the half-full reservoir so as to stay dry, the contraband looking like an oversized tea bag. He inspected the bag closely without opening it, then said, “Joe, bag this one, too.”

Moving to the back seat, he ran his hand slowly over the fine leather upholstery of the front seat back rest, inspecting closely the places his hand covered. At one place, where the curvature of the vertical seat back turned under to mate with the horizontal bench seat cushion, he stopped. All could hear the unique sound of hook and loop fabric material being separated. His large hands probed the opening for several seconds, then emerged with two more plastic bags and an amber-colored plastic bottle such as those in which prescription drugs are dispensed. Joe was waiting and knew what to do with them.

Wes repeated this procedure on the other upholstery, his motions becoming more cursory as they produced less additional contraband.

As the battery discharged on the Cadillac and the headlights continued to dim, Wes Bream confronted Aiden and read him his Miranda rights. Joe handcuffed him, now reduced to a sook, and led him to the cruiser.

“Here, you might want these,” Darron said, holding up Aiden’s boots. Joe took them, holding them at arm’s length as if they were, indeed, dead skunks, and threw them into the back seat with the prisoner.

“Who owns the pickup?” the deputy asked as he approached it.

“It’s mine, a rental,” Tee answered.

“Get the papers.”

Tee walked to the truck, trailed by the deputy Joe, opened the glove box, and removed the rental agreement and supporting documents. As he withdrew, he saw the Winchester

and its leather case in the back seat. Deftly, he used his off hand to push them to the floor and cover them with a jacket lying on the seat.

Joe perfunctorily scanned the exterior, and the interior through the windows, undulating flashlight in one hand and pistol in the other, and returned to the group without comment, apparently satisfied that it was not materially involved.

Darron's company of men, while pleased that Aiden was being arrested, waited uneasily to hear their fate. Wes obliged.

"I could jail all of you because you were involved in a shooting incident. You, Astonoffer, are local to Teton County, and you, Brenneman, are Cascade County. I will release you on your own reconnaissance. You, Redwine, and you, Wilhelm, are out of state. I can detain you if I believe you are a risk to flee the state. If Astonoffer and Brenneman will vouch that you will appear, I will also release you. All of you will need to come into the Teton County Sheriff's Office in Choteau and make a statement. You can come in tomorrow. If you don't, a warrant for your arrest will be issued. Of course, if another party brings charges against any of you, you will be charged and, depending on the charges, you may be arrested."

Henry recalled that he had seen Deputy Wes Bream in and around Choteau, although he did not know his name or rank, and he was fairly sure the deputy knew who he was as evidenced by the way he correctly pronounced Henry's last name, a name most people stumble over at least on first encounter.

"Do you want me to replace the fuses so this rig can be driven? I think I can figure it out. It may not start, though, looking at how dim the headlights are," Tee offered.

"No, we'll send a hook for it and impound it," Wes answered. "Here, Joe, bag these," he said, handing over the fuses. Then he locked the vehicle doors.

As the deputy spoke, his change of mood was palpable and the group began to relax from their high-alert condition. Reaction among the four varied over a wide spectrum: Darron

expected what he heard and remained confident that he would be cleared and set free; Tee was similarly confident but concerned that working it out might delay his departure with Rachel; Rob was a bit scared, this being his first scrape with the law, and a little concerned about being entrapped in the lie that Tee shot the sedan; and Henry was totally turned off by the whole government folderol and anxious to get home and forget the whole thing.

Without announcement, the two deputies headed for their respective cruisers, ending the meeting. Neither moved until Tee's truck was headed out.

"I'll ride in the back seat with the sharpshooter," Darron said as Tee climbed into the driver's seat; Henry waited until the others were loaded, then climbed into the front passenger seat.

Sensing Rob's disappointment at not getting credit for his marksmanship, and his concern for being drawn into a falsehood, Henry took advantage of the winding-down time to ease his mind. "Good move, Tee, taking the heat for wounding the Jap car. Rob took out the radiator and a tire with my old iron-sights Winchester, and didn't hurt anybody." Henry was subconsciously squinting one eye into a narrow slit as if he were sighting down the barrel of the Winchester himself. He continued: "Doubtful they would go to the trouble of trying to recover the bullets that took out the radiator and the rear tire, and compare them to the one that took out the windshield, even if they could be found, which would be chancy. We'll just call it our little secret unless the law surprises us." In the darkness, Henry knew Rob was smiling at being recognized at last, and eased back for the ride home.

It was just past midnight when Tee pulled into the driveway of Henry's cabin. The yard light, and most of the lights in the house, were on. The three ladies were in the yard before he could shut down the engine. Beth was first up.

"Is Darron alright?"

“He’s fine. He and Rob headed back to the Falls. He asked me to say good-bye for him, and asks that you call him when you get to a telephone,” Tee said. He barely got the words out before Rachel was in his arms, and Liz was in Henry’s.

“What happened?” Liz’s big question hung for a minute before Henry ended the dead air.

“Nothing much. They arrested the drug dealer. Then we all went home.”



Big Apple or Big Sky; which is it to be? The two places couldn't be more different, but both pull strongly on emotions and future plans. Are there reasonable compromises that can be made, or is the pull too strong to resist?

BIG APPLE OR BIG SKY

by Fred M Rhodes

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