

CHAPTER ONE

Fat-assed Sheriff Grimm sat in the car, urging Deputy Duff toward the house where they could both see trouble glaring at them through the window.

"Piece of cake," said the Sheriff.

"I wouldn't mind some back-up," said Duff, knowing the response before he heard it.

"It's an eviction, not a drug-bust," said Grimm. "If you can't handle this, what the hell's the point?"

Duff glared at his superior for a moment. He wanted to say that the point was to get Grimm's fat ass out of the car and into trouble for at least once before Duff's career was over. The point was to reduce the chance that Duff would end up with yet another broken nose by providing at least a psychological edge when confronting the seriously drunk and irate menace eyeing them through the window. The point was...suddenly Duff could no longer think what the point to any of it was. It all seemed too stupid to contemplate any longer.

"I tell you what," Duff said. "I'll go up there alone--again. I'll carry out the eviction order alone--again. And after that I'll drag your fat ass out of the car and beat you senseless right in the middle of the street. How's that sound?"

The Sheriff smiled uncertainly.

"Sounds like half a plan."

"What part don't you care for?"

"It's a little short on details. Like for instance how are

you suddenly going to get to be man enough to do it?"

"I thought I'd improvise," said Duff. "The tough part is going to be dragging your fat ass out of the car in the first place."

"I'm a little tired of the fat ass remarks," said the Sheriff whose prominent posterior was due more to genetics than overweight. Standing well over six feet, he was several inches taller than Duff and just as solid.

"I understand women like men's asses these days," Duff said. "That seems to be the thing."

"Some do," Grimm said carefully.

"So I hear...Not that I know anything about women."

"So I hear," said the Sheriff.

"So what do you do, stuff your pants to make yourself look sexier? You sitting on several pillows? Is that what makes you so appealing?"

"I'm not the one to ask about the source of my appeal. I always assumed it was natural goodness shining through."

Duff contemplated Grimm for another moment. The Sheriff grinned back confidently under hooded eyes. Lounge lizard eyes, Duff called them. Somebody's parody of sexy. Or maybe the real thing, Duff corrected himself bitterly. The fat ass obviously knew a bit more about sex appeal than Duff did. The sheriff was the one sleeping with Duff's wife, after all, not Duff.

"That's it," the Sheriff said. "You look all tough and fearsome now. Get up there and put that look on the guy peeking

through the curtains. You'll scare him right out of there."

"After I beat you senseless, I'm going to take your pants off and leave you naked in the street," said Duff. He got out of the car. "Leave that fat ass out in the breeze for everyone to admire."

"Now there's a detail," said the Sheriff. "Sounds just a little homosexual, of course. Might be open to interpretation, but hey, it's your statement."

"Don't go away, fat ass," Duff said, starting towards the house.

The tenant was not peeking from behind the curtain. Unfortunately. He was standing in full view, hands on his hips, glowering. Bare chested, a beer can in one hammy fist, he looked about the size and temperament of a hungry bear. It was better to face a man armed only with a beer can and a large dose of truculence than one waiting behind the door with a shotgun, of course, but neither was Duff's idea of a real good time. As he had done daily for the past three years since he became a deputy Sheriff of New Haven County, Duff wondered why. Wasn't there some job more worthy of his talents? Wasn't there some occupation that would call more on the intellectual side of his nature, the sensitive, nurturing part of himself?

For that matter, wasn't there some way to talk this behemoth into leaving peacefully? The tenant filled the doorway, still glowering. His eyes were focusing far too well--he wasn't drunk enough to be clumsy. As usual, Duff's timing was off. He should

have arrived one six pack later.

"I'm Deputy Sheriff Arvid Duff," said Duff, showing his badge in case his uniform weren't identification enough. "Sitting at a safe distance in the car there is the High Sheriff of New Haven County. An elected position. I tell you that in case you're a voter."

"What's the difference between a sheriff and a fucking cop?"

"A frequently asked question. The fucking cop gets more respect, for one thing. We pretty much just serve subpoenae."

"Subpoenae? That what you got between your legs? A sub peni?" The tenant laughed without a trace of amusement.

"Nice of you to ask and how interesting that you're interested. What I have for you is an eviction notice." Duff displayed the unimpressive document. "We also serve these."

"Fuck that."

"Today's the day, Mr. Wennig. This is the final notice. You've known about this for weeks, and now is the hour."

"I'm not leaving. That bastard landlord has got me living in substandard conditions here. He turned the power off two weeks ago. He don't paint, he don't fix nothing. I say fuck him."

"That's your prerogative. Fuck him all you want. I have a court order to evict you. So how about if you just come on out peacefully and make this easy all around."

"What if I don't? What are you going to do, shoot me?"

Duff glanced at the pistol holstered on his hip as if wondering how it got there. "I almost never shoot it. I might

pistol whip you with it if I have to."

The tenant barked an uneasy laugh. He was not quite as certain of himself as he had been a moment before. Duff noticed the change happily.

"Metal on flesh hurts like a bugger, Mr. Wennig," Duff continued. He watched the man's eyes, hoping to see any decision there first before it translated into action. It was a method that seldom worked, but Duff liked the theory of it.

"Step on outside now," Duff said, making his tone as conciliatory as possible.

"Just do it!" Grimm called from the car, as if eviction were a sport in a sneaker commercial.

"His name is Winston Grimm," said Duff. "I'd vote against him if I were you."

"What are you waiting for?" called another voice. Duff turned and saw an obese man standing next to a Lincoln Town Car that was parked behind the Sheriff's cruiser. The fat man had a crown of fuzzy hair going bald straight up the middle as if a golfer had taken a serious divot out of his scalp. Wise, the landlord, had arrived. Several people in the surrounding houses had come out to look as well. Eviction was fast becoming a spectator sport.

When Duff turned his attention back to the tenant, the man was already in motion, spurred to action by his hatred for the landlord which he was now transferring to Duff. He pushed open the screen and emerged with a baseball bat sprung mysteriously

to hand.

Duff ducked the first swing but was off balance and when he should have been leaping for the man his feet went out from under him and he fell on his backside. He heard a loud guffaw from Grimm as he rolled to the side, frantically dodging the baseball bat on its second pass.

"Get him out of my house," the landlord yelled. As if Duff were being dilatory, engaging the man in a dance rather than trying to stay conscious and more or less of a piece.

"Hold still," the tenant advised, swinging again. The deputy's agility surprised him and each swipe of the bat had turned Wennig on his heels with the force of the futile effort. On the third miss the bat banged into the front of the house with Wennig corkscrewed around and severely out of equilibrium himself. The shock of the collision of wood on wood jolted his shoulders, shivered his hands and set his arms to shaking. This was not as easy nor as fun as he had anticipated.

Duff was on his feet now and he stepped inside the next swing so that the man's forearms caught him on the nose but the bat missed him entirely. His eyes teared and he felt blood spurt onto his face and his lip.

"I'm going to shoot you if you keep this up," Duff said. He had Wennig by the throat with one hand, the other clutched the man's forearm, making further full-bodied swings impossible.

Wennig bent his wrists and tapped Duff on the head with the bat, just hard enough to hurt like hell. Duff released his throat

and hit the man hard in the stomach. In retaliation Wennig tapped Duff on the skull again then belched loudly in Duff's face, reeking of beer. Duff cursed and struck him with his fist again, this time digging for a kidney. He moved his head enough to miss the third tap with the bat and Wennig hit himself on the side of the head, the bat scraping past his ear and then thunking solidly onto his collarbone.

"Fuck this," said the tenant, aware that he was being hurt more than he had planned on. His initial fury had been spent on the first several futile swings of the bat and he had gotten little satisfaction from the fracas since. His strength was ebbing, the beer was taking unfavorable effect and the deputy was becoming really annoyed.

"I give up," Wennig whispered, hoping the landlord and the neighbors wouldn't hear. "You can stop hitting me."

"Put the bat down," Duff said. He hit Wennig again, this time connecting successfully with a kidney.

"Ooh, ooh, ooh," Wennig exclaimed, wincing, pulling back and lifting a leg to protect his internal organs.

"Drop the bat."

The tenant fully intended to drop the bat but at the last minute he could not resist the opportunity to get in one more blow. He waggled his wrists and caught Duff on the elbow then fell hard as Duff kicked his one upright leg from under him. His head hit solidly on the ground. He looked up to see the deputy dancing over him, holding his elbow and snarling with pain. The

deputy's face was streaming blood. Wennig wondered if the neighbors would think that he had won the fight. He hoped they would.

"Got your funny bone," the tenant said triumphantly. He then closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Duff went into the house and washed his face and stuffed toilet paper into each nostril. His nose was broken again, which was just as well as the damned thing seemed to break with the slightest tap and he didn't want to give Grimm the satisfaction of thinking he broke it. He didn't want to give Grimm any satisfaction at all.

As he left the bathroom the landlord entered and exclaimed at the state of his property. "Look at this fucking mess," Wise said. As if Duff had nothing else to do but itemize the disorder. This was his fourth eviction for the obese landlord, and it was enough. The man treated his tenants like animals and they acted like animals in return and so it went, the pattern chasing itself in a circle that was broken only intermittently by little flurries of excitement like today's.

"I ought to torch it," the landlord said.

"I'm an officer of the law, you know," said Duff, pushing past the man to get to the door.

"What's that mean?" the landlord asked, not waiting for an answer as he shook his head and wondered aloud at how some people lived.

"It means if you're considering arson, don't. You're now on

record with an officer of the court as having contemplated it."

"God, you're a tight ass. Try living in the real world, Duff," the landlord said. "You could do a lot better for yourself if you'd just ease up."

"Is that a bribe, Wise?"

"You wish. No wonder you're not getting anywhere in life."

Duff felt himself color with embarrassment. What did the landlord know about Duff's admittedly halting progress in life? Was it some sort of reference to Tina's affair with Grimm? Duff had only learned about it last night himself, but that didn't mean that others had not been aware of it for as long as it had been going on. And now long was that? Tina had said that she had slept with Grimm only once, but then Tina had just been confronted and was not lying with her customary aplomb. He knew she wasn't telling the truth, but that knowledge alone gave him no clue as to the real facts. For all Duff knew they could have been coupling illicitly for weeks. Months. All three years of Duff's employment in the Sheriff's Department. Much too easily he imagined half of his acquaintances and all of Tina's, well-informed co-conspirators, watching Duff with a mixture of contempt, pity and amusement as he dutifully performed his role as faithful husband to a wife who fucked the fat ass sheriff. Women talked about these things, they told each other stuff. They didn't talk to *Duff*, but he knew they talked to each other. If one of them was aware of the affair, they were all aware.

The landlord righted an overturned chair and tried to

balance it on its three remaining legs. Wise was not a man accustomed to standing for long periods. He perched precariously like an uncertain acrobat, exaggerating the difficulty to increase the later appreciation when he successfully balanced it atop his chin.

"You do a good job," the landlord was saying, his eyes still covering the room, assessing the damage. "You got guts. There are opportunities for such a man..." He stopped abruptly as he looked directly at Duff for the first time. "You're a mess. Clean up."

"I'm not finished," Duff said.

"We could talk sometime," said the landlord. "But I can see this ain't the time."

"I'm struggling not to arrest you," said Duff.

"What for?"

"That's the only thing that stops me."

"See, that's the attitude I'm talking about. Give a little, bend a little. That's what you don't do. Think of yourself as part of a larger community. You got certain gifts, learn to share with others so they can share with you."

I shared my wife, Duff thought. How's that?

The landlord continued. "Your boss is a reasonable man. He knows how to bend. You could learn from him."

"So I been told," Duff said. "Excuse me, I got to commit felonious assault now."

"Come see me when you're finished," said Wise. "I might have a proposition for you."

"I hope it's illegal," said Duff. "So I can arrest your ass."

"See, there you go again. You're only a deputy sheriff. You're not the crusading district attorney. I know what you get paid."

"That's where you're wrong," said Duff. "In about ten minutes I'm going to be out of work."

Duff walked to the car where Grimm sat, smirking.

"You ought to see yourself," said the Sheriff. "Your face is a fucking mess. Go around looking like that, no wonder."

"No wonder what?"

Grimm shook his head. "Let's go, we got work to do."

Duff got him in a head lock and dragged him out of the car, which was not as difficult as he had expected. Hitting him once in the mouth gave Grimm sufficient motivation to scramble out on his own.

"Now look here," Grimm said, spitting blood. Duff hit him in the face again as he tried to finish the thought. Grimm looked genuinely surprised.

"What the hell do you think you're doing...?"

Duff kicked at the sheriff's knee then hit him in the stomach, driving the bigger man back against the car.

"I'm surprised you haven't figured it out yet," Duff said. "Smart ass like you. I told you what I was going to do."

He bobbed and weaved, keeping low in the event that Grimm's fists, now waving defensively around his face, might strike out.

"All right, that's enough," said Grimm. Duff wondered that the man still didn't understand what was coming. He stepped under the waving hands and dug both fists at the kidneys. The right hand connected.

"Oh, Christ," Grimm exclaimed, sagging halfway to the ground before righting himself and backing away. Duff stepped in and hit him over the heart, then hooked to his ear.

Grimm reeled into the middle of the street. As Duff came at him the sheriff clawed for his pistol.

"Pull that and I'll stuff it down your throat," Duff said. Grimm removed his hand.

"I'm not going to let you do this," Grimm said. He felt his mouth with his fingers, disturbed by what he found there.

"Stop me," Duff said. He feinted at Grimm's face and when the bigger man jerked his hands up Duff dug to the body again, setting himself for each blow, easy as slugging the heavy bag in the gym--but ever so much more gratifying.

Grimm finally fell as the result of a blow to the solar plexus that left him gasping desperately for air. He struggled briefly as Duff started to pull off his pants but when his deputy kicked him hard in the ass he gave up and allowed himself to be stripped to his shorts in the middle of the street.

"This has something to do with your wife," Grimm said, reasoning that at this point he had very little more to lose by mentioning Tina. It had come to seem likely that Duff knew of their relationship.

Duff removed the wallet from Grimm's pants and tossed it on the Sheriff's chest. Grimm winced as if it were a stone dropped from a great height. Duff flipped the empty trousers over his shoulder.

"You're a violent man, Duff."

"I'm not fucking anybody's wife," Duff replied.

"Including your own," said Grimm who immediately wondered what suicidal impulse had made him say it. "I didn't mean that," he said.

Duff stared at him speculatively, his head tilted to one side. He looked to Grimm like a vulture speculating over its prey.

"What are you going to do now?" Grimm asked.

"I'm thinking about kicking you to death," Duff said.

Wise moved heavily into the street.

"Looks to me like he's done," said the landlord. "Don't want to overdo it."

"Why not?"

"Beating shit out of your boss for revenge is one thing. Doing it for sport is another."

"How do you know I'm doing it for revenge?" Duff asked.

Wise shrugged. "Things get around."

Duff closed his eyes for a moment. His worst fears seemed realized. How big a loop must it be for Wise to be part of it? Was there anyone left who did *not* know that Duff had been cuckolded?

"It's not that big a town," Wise continued.

Duff opened his eyes and saw Grimm scuttling away on his hands and heels like a crab. He looked suddenly pathetic. The rage drained away and Duff felt ashamed. Grimm was big and fit and yet Duff had never felt like such a bully. He shook his head. One of the wads of toilet paper fell from his nose, followed by a flood of blood.

"I broke your nose," said Grimm, suddenly pleased with himself.

"You didn't break shit," Duff said. He didn't remember Grimm even taking a swing. Pathetic. Kicking the bastard would make as much sense as hitting a pillow. "I hope you and Tina have a happy life. You deserve each other."

"Christ, we're not getting *married*," Grimm said. He had retreated twenty yards away and looked ready to run. "I was just *fucking* her. It's not like we're in love."

Whipped but still defiant. And he didn't look embarrassed about standing pantsless in the street, either. Duff looked at the neighbors who were still smirking about Grimm's last remark. Duff sighed and walked away. The fat-assed bastard had even topped his exit line.