

## CHAPTER ONE

THIS IS WRONG. These are not my words. Or rather, these are my words, but you have to remember that as you are reading them you could also be writing them down.

This, too, is wrong. It was not Montreal but in fact Mannheim where I first met Chris De Boer, and I was playing, more or less, for Adler of the German Elite League as I recall. I met him at a bar that, back when I'd initially arrived in that country, I'd developed the habit of getting kicked out of quite regularly, and consequently I'd not returned to in some time. In the parlance of the profession I was what was, and still is, called an enforcer. Don't think that I'm all that much impressed by that as a title, although it would have meant all that much more to my father.

Now I don't remember what all he was wearing that night, but I do remember that Chris was standing behind the bar when I first took notice of him, chatting quietly with some seemingly good-natured skinheads on the other side. It was Saturday night and we had just lost that night and afterwards, tired of speaking broken German and wanting to be alone a while, I had come in for some Greyhounds and some televised Hong Kong horseracing to calm my nerves a little. Heaven, I believe the place was called, but try not to read too much into that either. After the Greyhounds I hooked back several shots in succession with this teenaged, unabashedly implanted, seemingly permanently sunburned waitress, and then told her I must be going. She had been toying with the idea of the two of us going off somewhere sunny for the weekend, but I told her I must

decline. I'm not very good company these days, I assured her, but she didn't seem to care one way or the other. So then I suggested she join me in the washroom for a quick puppet show, but then she didn't seem all that impressed with such acts of exhibitionism either.

"Well then I know a girl around here who might like to join us," I said, at which point she took a drink from her tray and tossed it against my face. Ignoring the attack, I brushed the beaded moisture from my chin. Then I went on in English: "Henrietta used to be a man, but knows everything you need to know about being a woman. He really is a lovely girl."

The waitress tossed another drink at me and walked stiffly away. Fortunately they'd come from a recently abandoned table and contained little more than ice by the time they made it onto me.

Something pressed against me from behind—it was De Boer, or as I knew him then, de bartender, and he was standing on my side of the bar smiling politely, breathing lightly, one hand clasped firmly over my shoulder.

"Hey weren't you barred from here a few months back?" he asked in English, stifling a yawn with his forearm. "Someone told me you were barred from here a few months back."

"Who told you I was barred? Günter? The chef? Really? Well fuck Günter the righteous chef," I said.

He frowned. "He's only a fry cook."

"Seriously? Then he's a liar. A fryer and a liar. A frying, lying, good for nothing cook," I said, not really knowing where I was going with this, and not really caring either.

I returned to my drink and my steadily increasing hate of all things fried until a certain gesture shattered my resentments: the bartender was offering to buy me a drink. "Think of it as a congratulatory drink," he said, grinning good-naturedly. "You know, for your reincarnation so to speak."

He returned behind the counter, poured a Greyhound, and set it down before me on the bar. Then he introduced himself as Chris De Boer, a name that, I must admit, meant absolutely nothing to me at the time. We shook hands. I thanked him very much for the free

alcohol, and then asked if he'd seen the game that night. He said he had, indicating with a nod the television in the far corner of the bar.

"It wasn't a very good game though."

"It wasn't, no."

I took the straw from my drink and placed it alongside the others on the bar—twelve straws. It would be time to be leaving soon.

"So what do you think about the trade?" he asked, wiping mechanically at a section of the bar. Not knowing which trade he was referring to, and not wanting to appear too out of touch, I didn't answer, choosing instead to taste my drink and draw my head down between my shoulders until what I thought was a reasonable amount of time had elapsed. Now there is this popular misconception amongst those without money that those of us with money have little or no interest in receiving a free drink. But in reality it is just the opposite. Poor people enjoy spending their own money. Wealthy people enjoy spending other peoples' money. Both cases being a simple function of principle and pride. And besides, this was a Greyhound, my signature drink since back in the Sault, this time, though, made with pink grapefruit juice. I really developed a thing for the pink grapefruit juice back in Mannheim.

"You don't sound too German, Chris," I said, routinely flexing my fingers and cracking my knuckles, and he was about to respond to whatever it was I meant by this when someone called for him to start a Guinness. Guinness is poured very slowly, at least when poured properly it is, and while the Guinness was pouring I watched Chris slowly work his way down and around to the far side of the horseshoe-shaped bar. To be honest, he was hardly remarkable in his appearance, except in those most conventional of ways—hardly the horse to hitch your sum total of hopes and dreams to anyway—and yet it was surely the breeding that engendered the appeal and eventually the obsession, and I suppose that for most of us that was more than enough. He was youthful and athletic looking. He kept his dark brown hair quite short. The smile he used was nice enough—that is, whenever he managed to smile with more than just the mouth of it, it was. He was handsome, not beautiful but handsome, and then

just enough to be in danger of manifesting his fantasies in some obscure way. In the end, then, Chris De Boer was certainly a study in something, although I have no idea what, and yet with everything that is being written and said in conjunction with his father's recent death I feel it imperative I come clean myself.

He returned and finished the Guinness and handed it over the bar. Someone else said something else and he smiled, blowing off the joke with a nod. By and by he was back to leaning against the bar directly across from me. Heaven was not all that busy that night and there was plenty of time for procrastination that I could see.

Finally, as I had nothing really interesting to ask, and as he had nothing really interesting to say, he turned his attention to the glass washer, taking out glasses and arranging them against the back bar in neatly ordered stacks. Eventually he returned, this time with a copy of *USA Today*.

"I can't believe it," he said, indicating the front page photograph of two girls crying.

"Can't believe what?" I asked, not caring, determined to preserve my overwhelming ignorance of that gender intact.

"Another kid opened fire on his classmates," he said. "I can't believe it."

He looked like he was about to say something more, but then decided against it, and looking to reinforce my position of ignorance I pushed the paper away. I was proceeding on the admittedly dim theory that if a customer did not ask a question, well then a bartender would have nothing to say. But then he took a drink from a coffee cup and I asked what was in the cup.

"Same as you," he said, and I was led by way of association to the question of which brand of vodka he used, to the conclusion that it was probably one of the premium varieties. One great thing about drinking is that after a while nothing exists of the world but thoughts about drinking. It is also interesting that thoughts about drinking often lead to more actual drinking which, for the drinker, is the entire reason for being. And that is when you know you have drunk too much: when you can no longer tell the difference between them. And

so, just to be sure, I stopped thinking. Although I did continue drinking just in case.

Chris looked like he wanted to say something again, and so, yielding to the pressure, I asked what he was thinking about, and satisfied with my degree of curiosity he pointed to the photograph in the paper. "That kid going on a killing spree at school."

"So?" I shrugged, still refusing to think, still confused with this trying to ascend so suddenly from the depths of a good vodka-drunk to the knowledge of something in reality you do not wish to understand. Someone called for a drink and failed to get one. I watched that someone stomp angrily away. And suddenly, struggling heroically in the face of overwhelming odds, I found myself scrambling to find something in the way of wisdom to impart here.

Beating me to it, Chris tapped the photograph and observed, "It's like when you're driving down the street and there's a car coming towards you in the other lane. Well now what's to stop that car from suddenly veering into your lane and hitting you head on? Nothing. That is, nothing but a set of values instilled in that driver, instilled in that car, instilled in that system of mechanical humanity bearing down on you at over one hundred clicks an hour."

He paused, suddenly aware of just how intently I was looking at him. He wanted to know if I was listening and I was. After all, here was the first real hint of genuine conversation directed my way in months, and on top of that it was in English as well.

"Honestly now," he continued, "what's to stop that driver from pulling hard left on the wheel and plowing right into you? What's to stop him from flying right over that little white line and hammering you head-on? Nothing but a phantom set of values based solely on what someone else somewhere else believed to be somehow right and wrong." It was like every morning when I went off to work in my hunter green Ford Taurus, he maintained, I was engaging in what was little more than an act of blind faith. Faith in the fact that driver coming towards me was not going to suddenly decide to run me off the road. Faith in the fact that driver had been raised appropriately and with the proper amount of instruction, and that his belief in the

sanctity of life had not been violated at some point by his society's failure to deal with those issues he held most sacred somehow. Faith in the fact that he was not insane. In the fact that he was not a manic-depressive. And that he was not out on a mission of vengeance against his former employer who, it just so happened, drove something resembling a hunter green Ford Taurus himself. Faith in his problem solving skills. In his ability to know right from wrong. In the values of those people who taught him right from wrong, and those who taught them, and so on and so on and so forth ad nauseam. Faith in the values of the carmakers. In the values of those subcontracted to design and build the steering system for those carmakers. In the braking system. In the fuel system. In the values of the guys on the floor who build those systems et cetera. Faith in the roadwork. Faith in the weather. Faith in the fellow who made his latté that morning and that, for minimum wage plus tips, he would not take out his own frustrations and vengeful intentions on our hapless driver here. Hell, faith in the fact my own Taurus wouldn't suddenly jump the line and run headlong into his. "In other words," Chris said, "blind faith in the values of an entire society not to break up and suddenly let you down."

"Is that all?" I said sarcastically—I said a lot of things sarcastically that season, that being my sarcastic season—to which he replied "Pardon?" but I was in no mood to compound the obvious mistake of speaking out of turn with the further embarrassment of explaining myself herein. Instead I hovered thoughtfully over my drink, wondering whether I'd just been told an interesting anecdote about religion and all its various incongruities, or whether I'd just been told the bartender had recently survived a minor car accident of some sort. Since it was no big deal either way, I decided to forget it, and as you can see, I did not. I did, however, start to think about my next drink, and whether or not I should offer to buy Chris one.

He studied me a moment, then stepped forward again. "That kid's classmates, they had faith you know. Sure they did. That kind of faith that led them to school that morning and into the sightlines of a seemingly normal, obviously disturbed, automatic rifle-carrying kid. That kind of faith in a society's values that very much let them

down." It seemed to Chris that our entire culture had been raised on a mother's milk of blind faith, and although he wasn't quite sure, he thought perhaps the best-before date on that sort of thing had pretty much expired of late.

He said something else—I forget what—and then, almost as if feeling my glassy-eyed disconnection somehow transferring itself to him, and wanting no part of it, he acted as though he hadn't said anything, and I acted as though I hadn't heard anything, and as soon as he moved away to the glass washer, which was immediately, I glanced up at the television and started thinking about horses again.

Finally, seeing as we were in need of some sort of relief here, comic or otherwise, and seeing as I was relying on a bartender to explain to me what I didn't understand about myself, I tried obstinately to yawn. It was an unequivocal success.

"So what you're saying is, you're gay," I said, yawning blatantly once again, and believing it. As a final defence against understanding I have always taken refuge in scornful superiority based on size, sex and sexual preference, and this occasion in Mannheim proved no exception. He looked at me, blinkingly, as the big-breasted, drink-tossing waitress called out for another round behind him. Someone else called out for something else and failed to get whatever he was after as well. In terms of service, Chris was a rather poor bartender in my opinion.

"And besides," I said, "it's the yellow line."

"Pardon?"

"Yellow line. You said white line, but it's the yellow line that separates heterogeneous lanes of traffic. White lines separate homogeneous lanes of traffic."

He smiled, arching a sceptical eyebrow for emphasis. "Homogeneous lanes of traffic, huh."

"Homogeneous lanes of traffic, my friend."

He backed away to the washer, stopping just long enough to pour the waitress some wine. I pressed on.

"So what you're saying is, you're having a little trouble coming to grips with all these shootings."

“No, what I’m saying is, I’m having a little trouble coming to grips with *faith*.”

Well almost any display of genuine spiritual contemplation draws a stunned tribute from me, and when I had no response to what he was saying he shook his head despondently and drifted quietly away. Eventually, however, he returned, and finished what he had to say by telling me what it was he really wanted to say.

“I mean do we trust something because it’s true? Or is it simply true because we trust it.”

“Trust? Who said anything about trust? I could have sworn we were talking blind faith here.”

“Homogeneous heterogeneity.”

“Pardon?”

“Same difference,” he said.

I finished my drink. Chris offered to buy me another but I declined—faces were starting to smudge and the walls were closing in. I stood up and thrust myself clear of the counter, all the while watching the television in the far rear corner of the bar. I was thinking about the horses back on my mother’s family’s farm.

He returned with a bottle of *Cuervo 1800* and poured out two shots. He picked up a glass and said, “Gentlemen, to blind faith.”

“To getting blind,” I said, and we hooked back our tequila together.

Still wincing from that shot, he poured out two more. “To the piss,” he said.

“To the piss,” I repeated, and we hooked back our tequila together.

He poured out two more.

“Gentlemen, to the Caps.”

“The Caps?”

“Yeah, the Capitals.”

“The *Washington* Capitals?” I said. “What the hell for?”

“Well, for picking up the rights.”

“Rights? What rights?”

“Christ, don’t tell me you didn’t know.”

He placed his shot glass on the bar and opened the *USA Today* to the Sports section.

“There,” he said, pointing. “They just picked you up.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Look, it’s right here in black and white. ‘Washington signs Bill Purdy of Mannheim Adler.’ Congratulations, Bull, your prayers have been answered. You’ve been granted one last reprieve from the china shop of the world.”