

*The Girl
in the Cage*

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CHAPTER ONE

THIS WAS the time in mid-August when the days were warm and sunny and the nights were getting cool and crisp. It was 10.02 Monday morning and I was on a routine traffic patrol on U.S. 2, west of Concord, Massachusetts. I was driving State Police cruiser 51 at thirty miles an hour, checking the list of cars on my patrol card and watching the traffic. But I don't think my mind was on my work much, not with my marriage less than two weeks away.

I was coming over the hill toward Bedford when the shortwave radio buzzed and said, "K calling cruiser fifty-one."

I flipped the switch on my radio and picked up the handphone. I said, "Fifty-one on. Go ahead, K."

The radio said, "Signal seven, immediately."

"Fifty-one received. Will do." I flipped the switch over.

"K" was Troop A Headquarters in Framingham, and a Signal seven was an order to return to my station, the Concord Barracks. I turned the cruiser around and hurried back.

In the duty office, Sergeant Joe Hearn told me I was wanted at General Headquarters in Boston for special assignment.

"Plain clothes," he said, making an entry in the log that I was off patrol. "No weapon, no badge, no identification. Nothing. Pack a bag and prepare to stay away for a while."

"For how long?" I asked.

"They didn't say."

I went up to my room and took off my uniform. I put on my civilian clothes, locked my gun, gunbelt and equipment in the closet and came downstairs again. Sergeant Hearn was at the teletype checking me out with Framingham.

"What's the assignment, Joe?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "It's hush-hush. But I hope it doesn't take long. I'm short two men as it is."

"I hope it's a damn quick job," I said.

"Oh, my aching bridegroom," he said. "That's right, you're getting married a week from Sunday." He shook his head sadly. "It's a tough break, kid. What are you going to tell Ellen?"

"What can I tell her? I don't know how long I'll be gone." I was a little mad about it. I dropped my suitcase with a thud near the desk.

"Don't ruin my floor," Hearn said. "I'm waiting out an inspection to-day and I just had it waxed."

"Dammit," I said. "My day off was to-morrow. I was going home to see Ellen."

"I've heard the words and music before," he said.

"Do me a favour, Joe. Phone Ellen and tell her I've been called away on an assignment."

"You do it yourself, kid. Get Ellen used to these things. Break her in now. This is only the beginning for her. A trooper's wife——"

"Oh, cripes, don't give me the business." I scribbled Ellen's phone number on a piece of paper. "Be sure and phone her for me, Joe."

I picked up my bag and left the office. I went around to the back of the barracks where my '46 Ford coupé was. I brought it around to the front of the Colonial brick building and drove by the well-manicured

lawn and evergreens. The gardener had the sprinklers going and there was a smell of freshly cut grass. I went out on to the Concord Turnpike, passed the grim walls of the Concord Reformatory and headed east toward Boston.

At 11.15 I was at State Police G.H.Q. on Commonwealth Avenue, Boston. On the second floor I checked in with Major Carradine, the executive officer of the uniformed branch. He told me to report to Detective-Lieutenant Ed Newpole. That made me feel a little better. Newpole was an old friend of my father's when my father was with the State Police, and I had worked with Newpole once before in western Mass.

I went down the corridor to a small frosted-glass cubbyhole, and there was Ed Newpole sitting behind a desk that was too small for his long, bony frame.

"Ralph Lindsey," he said, looking up from a bunch of papers. "Come in."

I stepped inside and set my bag down. I looked at Newpole. He had lank brown hair and a weather-beaten, craggy face with a soft, sorrowful expression to it. When he untangled his long legs and stood up, you would see he was a tall, stoop-shouldered, gangling man in a rumpled tweedy suit.

He stood up, reached out and shook my hand. "How's Old Walt?" he asked. He always called my father "Old Walt."

"He's fine, Lieutenant," I said. "Please tell me the scoop on this job. I'm getting married in two weeks."

"Little Ellen," he mused. He sat down and leaned back in the creaking chair. "Sweet kid, Ellen. You work fast and we'll get you back in time for the wedding."

"You sure?" I asked. "Sir, there's a lot of money and preparation going into this wedding. Without me there it'll be a complete bust. You sure I'll be back in time?"

"I hope," he said sadly. "We'll try our best. But who can be sure of anything these days?" His eyes squinted. "I'm sorry, Ralph, but I need a man who's had auto car mechanic experience. You had it in the army. Right?"

"In Korea. But mostly with trucks, Lieutenant."

"Good enough. I also need a man who looks young enough to pass for about nineteen. You can. You're twenty-three but you've got a baby face." Newpole stood up again. He went over to a big wall map. "Here's the set-up. A stolen car gang."

He pointed at the map, drawing a circle with his finger, taking in the Dedham—Walpole—Norwood—Stoughton area. "Twenty cars stolen in four months. Eight of them in the last month. The insurance companies are howling because not a single one of them has been recovered." He scratched the end of his nose. "That's a little strange, son, not to recover any of them."

"Yes, sir."

"All late models," he said. "Popular-priced cars. Chevs, Fords, Plymouths, Pontiacs, Dodges, nothing bigger. Whatever the scheme is, it looks foolproof. Most of these cars have been taken from dancehall parking lots, outside of juke box joints. Does that give you any ideas, son?"

"Places where young people hang out, sir."

"Yes," Newpole said. "A gang that can mingle with young folk. All right, we've got one good lead. Last week there was a dance at Wrentham. The local Chief

of Police was checking the parking lot while the dance was going on. He saw three people near a car. When he came up, one of the three ran. The Chief grabbed the other two, a boy and a girl. The boy was a kid of eighteen named Scott Cluett. The Chief examined the car they were near. It was a '53 Ford Victoria and, inside, the ignition wires were hooked with a jumper. So the Chief brought Cluett and the girl into town and questioned them."

Newpole rubbed his nose reflectively and half-smiled. "Cluett had a pretty good alibi. He said he was at the dance with the girl, Irma Bean, and he had the ticket stubs to prove it. He said he was going toward his own car in the parking lot when he saw somebody fooling around with the Ford. Just then the Chief grabbed him and his girl, and the other guy ran off. Cluett acted a little sore about it."

"Well, it could happen," I said.

"Sure," Newpole said. "But it's funny Cluett and the girl were so close and couldn't give a description of the thief. And the Chief is no fool, either. He had the Ford brought in and also sent Cluett's name to our Wrentham Barracks. Wrentham teletyped us here at G.H.Q. and we ran a tracer on Cluett. He had a record. He'd been sent up to Shirley three times for stealing cars. What's more, Cluett lives in Carlton with a maiden aunt who hasn't much money. He has a job in Carlton working as a car mech. for a guy named Osanger. Cluett owns a new Mercury convertible. A thirty-five-hundred-dollar job. That Mercury is a lot of car for a car mech. in a small town."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Did you pick up Cluett?"

Newpole opened a desk drawer and took out a picture. He said, "Study this for a minute."

I looked at the picture of Cluett, front and profile view. He had pale, clear eyes with a frank, honest expression in them. His hair was light, curly and crew-cut. His nose was straight and he had a full-lipped mouth. The card gave his age as eighteen, his height as 5' 11½", his weight 170.

"No," Newpole said. "We didn't go near Cluett ourselves. For a purpose, that is. Cluett looks nice, but he's a tough kid and we don't have any evidence on him. There were no clear prints on the car. He might talk to us and he might not. Let's say he does talk. He might only be able to give us a small piece of the operation. There's more than Cluett in this. It's too big for any eighteen-year-old kid. If we muckle on to Cluett, the others beat it and set up shop somewhere else. So, as far as Cluett is concerned, the Wrentham Chief asked a few questions and let him go."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Where do I come in?"

"It's a tough set-up for the state detectives," Newpole said. "We have to work it out of Carlton. It's a small town. A stranger, an older man who comes in, can be spotted a mile away. It calls for a youngster. You can do it, Ralph."

"Yes, sir," I said. "How?"

"Undercover. There's always a shortage of mechs. in small towns. You come into Carlton looking for a job. We think Osanger can use another man. If you can get into his shop, perfect. You'll be next to Cluett. If not, you get another job in town, or in a town close by. But you'll meet Cluett and get friendly with him."

I nodded, but I didn't like it. It probably would work, but it might also take time. I was thinking that a man gets married only once in his life—ordinarily. I mean. And he has a right to a decent church wedding

and to be with his nervous bride-to-be on his one day off. Ellen was twenty and a little skittish about the wedding and I guess I was just as bad.

Another thing, the brass were strict about these undercover jobs. I couldn't even phone Ellen from time to time to tell her I was alive and healthy and that I wouldn't leave her waiting at the church.

I swear Newpole was uncanny. He knew what I was thinking. He said softly, "It's tough, I know. But you're the only man who fits the bill for us. The detectives are all too old. You're a new trooper. You've never been in the area and you have no friends or relatives there. Right?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"We're not expecting you to break this case by yourself, son. It's like a bowling alley. You're the pin boy. You set up the pins. We'll do the bowling."

"Lieutenant," I said. "Let's start the job quick and end it quick."

"Sure," he said briskly. "What are you carrying with you?"

"Nothing." I turned my pants pockets inside out to show they were empty.

"Labels?"

I opened my jacket. "I took them out."

"Shirt?"

"Bought it in Filene's basement. It's new."

"Underwear?"

"I can't go around without underwear, Lieutenant."

He grinned. "Buy some new vests and shorts. Yours have laundry marks on them. You'll draw your expense money from the bookkeeper upstairs." He tossed an old, dilapidated wallet at me.

I caught it. Inside there was a cellophane case with a

worn social security number made out to a Ralph Lincoln. There was also a driver's licence with the name Ralph Lincoln and a West Brookline Street, Boston, address.

"We've given you the name of Ralph Lincoln," Newpole said. "Somebody behind you calls out 'Lincoln' and you'll turn around quick because it sounds like Lindsey. Anybody tries to check on you and they'll find there's a file on you with the Boston cops. You did sixty days on Deer Island this year for car theft. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"The West Brookline Street address is okay. Anybody checks there and they'll find the landlady's name is Mrs. Ann Sokolsky and you lived there four months. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're leaving Boston because the cops are in your hair. You're going to stay out of Boston until the heat cools off a little. Don't talk about it. In fact, don't talk about anything. You're a smart, tough young hoodlum and you keep your lip buttoned. Let them find out these things for themselves. Don't volunteer any information and deny everything. Got that, too?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He was reaching into his desk drawer again. He brought out something in a grey flannel cloth. He unwrapped the cloth. It looked like a big Colt automatic.

"Here's your weapon," Newpole said. "Don't carry it on you. Put it away in your bag."

I took up the gun. It wasn't a Colt. It was a Belgian 9 MM pistol, a Browning Fabrique Nationale with a

thick, wide butt that carried a box magazine holding thirteen cartridges.

"I got the gun from Ballistics upstairs," Newpole said. "It's a common enough weapon."

"It's enough gun for anybody," I said, hefting it.

"Lots of young punks carry them. I wouldn't want you carrying a service revolver. But don't use the gun unless you're backed up against the wall and there's no other way out."

"Yes, sir," I said, putting the pistol away in my bag.

He spoke to me for a half-hour more, coaching me how to act and talk. He gave me a phone number so that I could call him and report. Then we shook hands and I went upstairs and drew my expense money. I didn't phone Ellen or my family. I knew Sergeant Joe Hearn would do that.

CHAPTER TWO

I DROVE INTO Carlton at four in the afternoon. Drowsy little Main Street ran about four blocks. There was the usual assortment of small-town stores, and a little brick post office. I passed a two-storey white frame building with two massive white columns in front. That was the Town Hall. Next to it was another white frame building, a small, single-storied job with bars on the windows. There was a faded blue sign that said POLICE. Out in front of the building, sitting in a chair and leaning back against the wall, was a man who looked to be about sixty-five. A blue, visored cap with a gold-braided strap was tilted back on his head. On

the front of the cap, between two gold wreaths, was the word *Chief*. The man was wearing a white shirt with a gold badge pinned to it. He was cleaning his fingernails with a toothpick, his heavy jowls moving slowly over a big wad of tobacco—a man at peace with the world and not going anywhere. As my Ford went by slowly, he looked up curiously, blinked his eyes in the warm sun, then went back to his manicure.

At the end of Main Street I found a small, one-pump petrol station. Behind it was a small shop, nothing more than a little corrugated-iron shed. I drove up alongside the pump and stopped.

A wizened little man in brown overalls came out of the shed, took off my petrol cap and pushed the hose nozzle in.

“How much?” he called.

“Fill her up,” I said. I got out and stretched my legs. “How’s business here, Pop?”

The man didn’t answer for a moment. “Small, but steady.”

“I’m an all-round mech.,” I said. “Could you use a man?”

He reflected, then shook his head. “Wish I could, boy. But there’s barely enough work for me.” The petrol splashed out of the tank and he slowed the flow. “You looking for a job?”

“Well, I wasn’t asking for my sister,” I said.

He shut off the flow of petrol and put the cap on the tank. Then he brought over a watering can and washed the fender where the petrol had spilled. “You might try Osanger,” he said. “Ken runs a pretty busy shop and I heard he was looking for a man.”

“Where’s his place?”

"River Street. You go back two blocks and turn left. It's the street before the railroad station."

"Thanks, Pop," I said. "What do I owe you?"

He looked at the meter on the pump, peering at it with his neck outstretched like a turkey gobbler. "Three-eighty. How's your oil and water?"

"All right," I said.

I paid him. He took the money and scratched himself under the armpit. "I don't know what luck you'll have with Ken Osanger. He's a fussy kind of a guy. Maybe you'd want to try Waldock. He's got a used car lot over on Elm Street. He has one mechanic. Maybe he's got another spot open."

"I'll try both," I said, getting back into the car.

"There ain't much mech. work in Carlton," the man said. "Seems to me you'd be better off trying Stoughton or Wrentham. They ain't far."

"I like it here in Carlton," I said. "It's a town to get stuck on."

"I guess you must be joshing me," the man said dolefully.

"No, it's the truth," I said. "Where can I rent a room?"

He looked at me shrewdly. "How much do you want to pay?"

"Something cheap," I said. "I'm short on dough."

"Cheap." He mused. "Mrs. Kincaid's got some rooms over on Depot Street, across from the railroad station. You ain't going to get nothing fancy, though. No private bath or anything."

"I don't expect no Statler."

"All right," he said. "You try Mrs. Kincaid."

I started the car, put it into gear and moved slowly out.

"Hey," he called, in afterthought. "Don't expect too much at Kincaid's. It ain't too clean there, either."

It was an old house, once white, but now a soot-grey. I went up the sagging front steps. There was a dirt-streaked window with dusty grey curtains and a sign that said ROOMS. I rang the bell. I waited. The door opened and a musty, acrid smell wafted out to me.

The woman holding the door was small and shrivelled and had mousy, stringy hair. There were tiny, red broken veins in her wrinkled face. She was wearing an oversized housedress. The flowered pattern couldn't hide the fact it was none too clean.

"You're Mrs. Kincaid?" I asked.

She sniffed suspiciously. "What do you want?"

"Somebody told me you had a room to rent."

"Oh, come on in," she said. A simpering smile broke the lines in her face. "You'll have to excuse the looks of the place. I ain't had time yet to clean to-day."

We went through a dark entrance hall that smelled of rancid lard. There were drifts of dust in the corners. We went up a rickety stairway to a dirty, littered hallway. She opened a door.

"Lovely room," she said. "It only needs to be tidied a little."

I went inside. There was a white iron bed, the paint half flaked off. The mattress, covered with a pallid rose bedspread, was lumpy, concave. The bureau had one leg missing and the veneer was peeled off on one side. The windows were opaque with dust. There was an unpleasant smell of mice and dead vermin.

She went over quickly, opened the windows and drew a pair of cracked green shades halfway down. She removed soot from the sill with a swipe of her palm,