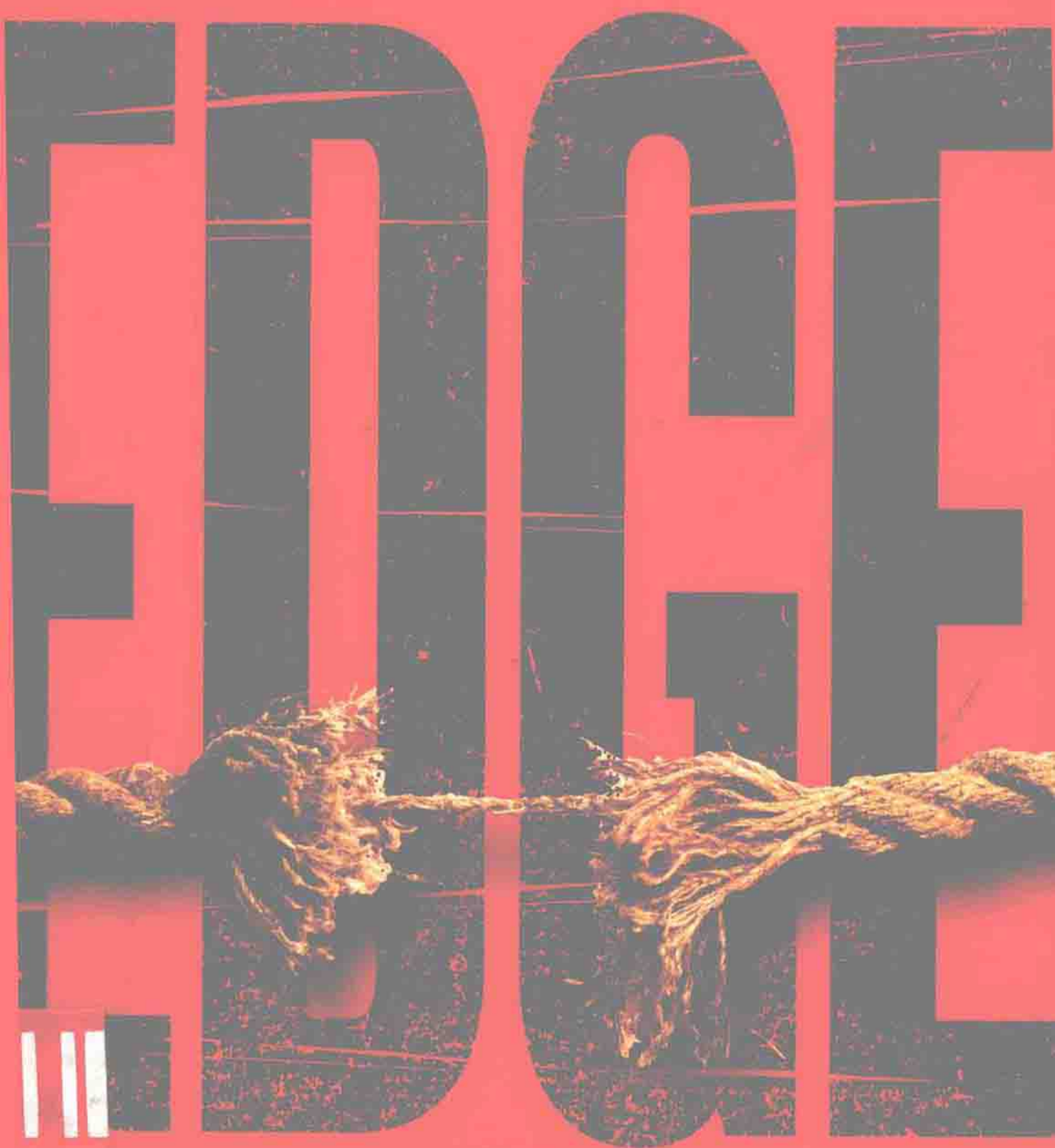


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THE BONE COLLECTOR AND *THE BURNING WIRE*



EDGE

JEFFERY DEAVER

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EDGE

June 2004

THE RULES OF PLAY

THE MAN WHO wanted to kill the young woman sitting beside me was three-quarters of a mile behind us, as we drove through a pastoral setting of tobacco and cotton fields this humid morning.

A glance in the rearview mirror revealed a sliver of car, moving at a comfortable pace with the traffic, piloted by a man who by all appearances seemed hardly different from any one of a hundred drivers on this recently resurfaced divided highway.

"Officer Fallow?" Alissa began. Then, as I'd been urging her for the past week: "Abe?"

"Yes."

"Is he still there?" She'd seen my gaze.

"Yes. And so's our tail," I added for reassurance. My protégé was behind the killer, two or three car lengths. He was not the only person from our organization on the job.

"Okay," Alissa whispered. The woman, in her

midthirties, was a whistle-blower against a government contractor that did a lot of work for the army. The company was adamant that it had done nothing wrong and claimed it welcomed an investigation. But there'd been an attempt on Alissa's life a week ago and—since I'd been in the army with one of the senior commanders at Bragg—Defense had called me in to guard her. As head of the organization I don't do much fieldwork any longer but I was glad to get out, to tell the truth. My typical day was ten hours at my desk in our Alexandria office. And in the past month it had been closer to twelve or fourteen, as we coordinated the protection of five high-level organized crime informants, before handing them over to Witness Protection for their face-lifts.

It was good to be back in the saddle, if only for a week or so.

I hit a speed dial button, calling my protégé.

"It's Abe," I said into my hands-free. "Where is he now?"

"Make it a half mile. Moving up slowly."

The hitter, whose identity we didn't know, was in a nondescript Hyundai sedan, gray.

I was behind an eighteen-foot truck, CAROLINA POULTRY PROCESSING COMPANY painted on the side. It was empty and being driven by one of our transport people. In front of that was a car identical to the one I was driving.

"We've got two miles till the swap," I said.

Four voices acknowledged this over four very encrypted com devices.

I disconnected.

Without looking at her, I said to Alissa, "It's going to be fine."

"I just . . ." she said in a whisper. "I don't know." She fell silent and stared into the side-view mirror as if the man who wanted to kill her were right behind us.

"It's all going just like we planned."

When innocent people find themselves in situations that require the presence and protection of people like me, their reaction more often than not is as much bewilderment as fear. Mortality is tough to process.

But keeping people safe, keeping people alive, is a business like any other. I frequently told this to my protégé and the others in the office, probably irritating them to no end with both the repetition and the stodgy tone. But I kept on saying it because you can't forget, ever. It's a business, with rigid procedures that we study the way surgeons learn to slice flesh precisely and pilots learn to keep tons of metal safely aloft. These techniques have been honed over the years and they worked.

Business . . .

Of course, it was also true that the hitter who was behind us at the moment, intent on killing the woman next to me, treated *his* job as a business too. I knew this sure as steel. He was just as serious as I was, had studied procedures as diligently as I had, was smart, IQ-wise and streetwise, and he had advantages over me: His rules were unencumbered by *my* constraints—the Constitution and the laws promulgated thereunder.

Still, I believe there is an advantage in being in the right. In all my years of doing this work I'd never lost a principal. And I wasn't going to lose Alissa.

A business . . . which meant remaining calm as a surgeon, calm as a pilot.

Alissa was not calm, of course. She was breathing hard, worrying her cuff as she stared at a sprawling magnolia tree we were passing, an outrider of a chestnut forest, bordering a huge cotton field, the tufts bursting. She was uneasily spinning a thin diamond bracelet—a treat to herself on a recent birthday. She now glanced at the jewelry and then her palms, which were sweating, and placed her hands on her navy blue skirt. Under my care, Alissa had worn dark clothing exclusively. It was camouflage but not because she was the target of a professional killer; it was about her weight, which she'd wrestled with since adolescence. I knew this because we'd shared meals and I'd seen the battle up close. She'd also talked quite a bit about her struggle with weight. Some principals don't need or want camaraderie. Others, like Alissa, need us to be friends. I don't do well in that role but I try and can generally pull it off.

We passed a sign. The exit was a mile and a half away.

A business requires simple, smart planning. You can't be reactive in this line of work and though I hate the word "proactive" (as opposed to what, *anfiactive?*), the concept is vital to what we do. In this instance, to deliver Alissa safe and sound to the prosecutor for her depositions, I needed to keep the hitter in play. Since my protégé had been following him for hours, we knew where he was and could have taken him at any moment. But if we'd done that, whoever had hired him would simply call somebody else to finish the job. I wanted to keep him on the road for the better part of the day—long

enough for Alissa to get into the U.S. Attorney's office and give him sufficient information via deposition so that she would no longer be at risk. Once the testimony's down, the hitter has no incentive to eliminate a witness.

The plan I'd devised, with my protégé's help, was for me to pass the Carolina Poultry truck and pull in front of it. The hitter would speed up to keep us in sight but before he got close the truck and I would exit simultaneously. Because of the curve in the road and the ramp I'd picked, the hitter wouldn't be able to see my car but would spot the decoy. Alissa and I would then take a complicated route to a hotel in Raleigh, where the prosecutor awaited, while the decoy would eventually end up at the courthouse in Charlotte, three hours away. By the time the hitter realized that he'd been following a bogus target, it would be too late. He'd call his primary—his employer—and most likely the hit would be called off. We'd move in, arrest the hitter and try to trace him back to the primary.

About a mile ahead was the turnoff. The chicken truck was about thirty feet ahead.

I regarded Alissa, now playing with a gold and amethyst necklace. Her mother had given it to her on her seventeenth birthday, more expensive than the family could afford but an unspoken consolation prize for the absence of an invitation to the prom. People tend to share quite a lot with those who are saving their lives.

My phone buzzed. "Yes?" I asked my protégé.

"The subject's moved up a bit. About two hundred yards behind the truck."

"We're almost there," I said. "Let's go."

I passed the poultry truck quickly and pulled in behind the decoy—a tight fit. It was driven by a man from our organization; the passenger was an FBI agent who resembled Alissa. There'd been some fun in the office when we picked somebody to play the role of me. I have a round head and ears that protrude a fraction of an inch more than I would like. I've got wiry red hair and I'm not tall. So in the office they apparently spent an hour or two in an impromptu contest to find the most elf-like officer to impersonate me.

"Status?" I asked into the phone.

"He's changed lanes and is accelerating a little."

He wouldn't like not seeing me, I reflected.

I heard, "Hold on . . . hold on."

I would remember to tell my protégé to mind the unnecessary verbal filler; while the words were scrambled by our phones, the fact there'd been a transmission could be detected. He'd learn the lesson fast and retain it.

"I'm coming up on the exit. . . . Okay. Here we go."

Still doing about sixty, I eased into the exit lane and swung around the curve, which was surrounded by thick trees. The chicken truck was right on my bumper.

My protégé reported, "Good. Subject didn't even look your way. He's got the decoy in sight and the speed's dropping back to the limit."

I paused at the red light where the ramp fed into Route 18, then turned right. The poultry truck turned left.

"Subject is continuing on the route," came my protégé's voice. "Seems to be working fine." His

voice was cool. I'm pretty detached about operations but he does me one better. He rarely smiles, never jokes and in truth I don't know much about him, though we've worked together, often closely, for several years. I'd like to change that about him—his somberness—not for the sake of the job, since he really is very, very good, but simply because I wish he took more pleasure in what we do. The endeavor of keeping people safe can be satisfying, even joyous. Especially when it comes to protecting families, which we do with some frequency.

I told him to keep me updated and we disconnected.

"So," Alissa asked, "we're safe?"

"We're safe," I told her, hiking the speed up to fifty in a forty-five zone. In fifteen minutes we were meandering along a route that would take us to the outskirts of Raleigh, where we'd meet the prosecutor for the depositions.

The sky was overcast and the scenery was probably what it had been for dozens of years: bungalow farmhouses, shacks, trailers and motor vehicles in terminal condition but still functioning if the nursing and luck were right. A gas station offering a brand I'd never heard of. Dogs tooting at fleas lazily. Women in stressed jeans, overseeing their broods. Men with beer-lean faces and expanding guts, sitting on porches, waiting for nothing. Most likely wondering at our car—containing the sort of people you don't see much in this neighborhood: a man in a white shirt, dark suit and tie and a woman with a business haircut.

Then we were past the residences and on a road bisecting more fields. I noted the cotton plants,

shedding their growth like popcorn, and I thought of how this same land 150 years ago would have been carpeted with an identical crop; the Civil War, and the people for whom it was fought, were never far from one's mind when you were in the South.

My phone rang and I answered.

My protégé's voice was urgent. "Abe."

Shoulders tense, I asked, "Has he turned off the highway?" I wasn't too concerned; we'd exited over a half hour ago. The hitter would be forty miles away by now.

"No, still following the decoy. But something just happened. He made a call on his mobile. When he disconnected, it was odd: He was wiping his face. I moved up two car lengths. It looked like he'd been crying."

My breath came quickly as I considered possible reasons for this. Finally one credible, disturbing scenario rose to the top: What if the hitter had suspected we'd try a decoy and had used one of his own? He'd forced somebody who resembled him—just like the elfin man in *our* decoy car—to follow us. The call my protégé had just witnessed might have been between the driver and the real perp, who was perhaps holding the man's wife or child hostage.

But this, then, meant that the real hitter could be somewhere else and—

A flash of white streaked toward us as a Ford pickup truck appeared from the driveway of a sagging, deserted gas station to the left and bounded over the highway. The truck, its front protected by push bars, slammed into our driver's side and shoved us neatly through a tall stand of weeds into

a shallow ravine. Alissa screamed and I grunted in pain and heard my protégé calling my name, then the mobile and the hands-free flew into the car, propelled by the deploying airbag.

We crashed down a five-foot descent and came to an undramatic stop at the soupy bottom of a shallow creek.

Oh, he'd planned his attack perfectly and before I could even click the seat belt to get to my gun, he'd swung a mallet through the driver's window, shattering it and stunning me with the same blow. My Glock was ripped off my belt and pocketed. Dislocated shoulder, I thought, not much blood. I spat broken glass from my mouth and looked to Alissa. She too was stunned but didn't seem hurt badly. The hitter wasn't holding his gun, only the mallet, and I thought that if she fled now she'd have a chance to tumble through the underbrush and escape. Not much of a chance but something. She had to move immediately, though. "Alissa, run, to the left! You can do it! Now!"

She yanked the door open and rolled out.

I looked back at the road. All I could see was the white truck parked on the shoulder near a creek where you might hunt frogs for bait, like a dozen other trucks I'd seen en route. It perfectly blocked anyone's view from the road. Just like I'd used a truck to mask *my* escape, I reflected grimly.

The hitter was now reaching in to unlatch my door. I squinted in pain, grateful for the man's delay. It meant that Alissa could gain more distance. My people would know our exact position through GPS and could have police here in fifteen or twenty minutes. She might make it. Please, I thought, turning

toward the path she'd be escaping down, the shallow creekbed.

Except that she wasn't running anywhere.

Tears rolling down her cheeks, she was standing next to the car with her head down, arms crossed over her round chest. Was she hurt more badly than I'd thought?

My door was opened and the hitter dragged me out onto the ground, where he expertly slipped nylon restraints on my hands. He released me and I sagged into the sour-scented mud, beside busy crickets.

Restraints? I wondered. I looked at Alissa again, now leaning against the car, unable to look my way. "Please." She was speaking to our attacker. "My mother?"

No, she wasn't stunned and wasn't hurt badly and I realized the reason she wasn't running: because she had no reason to.

She wasn't the target.

I was.

The whole terrible truth was obvious. The man standing over me had somehow gotten to Alissa several weeks before and threatened to hurt her mother—to force Alissa to make up a story about corruption at the government contractor. Because it involved an army base where I knew the commander, the perp had bet that I'd be the shepherd to guard her. For the past week Alissa had been giving this man details about our security procedures. He wasn't a hitter; he was a *lifter*, hired to extract information from me. Of course: about the organized crime case I'd just worked. I knew the new identities of the five witnesses who'd testified at the

trial. I knew where Witness Protection was placing them.

Gasping for breath through the tears, Alissa was saying, "You told me. . . ."

But the lifter was ignoring her, looking at his watch and placing a call, I deduced, to the man in the decoy car, followed by my protégé, fifty miles away. He didn't get through. The decoy would have been pulled over, as soon as our crash registered through the mobile phone call.

This meant the lifter knew he didn't have as much time as he would have liked. I wondered how long I could hold out against the torture.

"Please," Alissa whispered again. "My mother. You said if I did what you wanted . . . Please, is she all right?"

The lifter glanced toward her and, as an afterthought, it seemed, took a pistol from his belt and shot her twice in the head.

I grimaced, felt the sting of despair.

He took a battered manila envelope from his inside jacket and, opening it, knelt beside me and shook the contents onto the ground. I couldn't see what they were. He pulled off my shoes and socks.

In a soft voice he asked, "You know the information I need?"

I nodded yes.

"Will you tell me?"

If I could hold out for fifteen minutes there was a chance local police would get here while I was still alive. I shook my head no.

Impassive, as if my response were neither good or bad, he set to work.

Hold out for fifteen minutes, I told myself.

I gave my first scream thirty seconds later. Another followed shortly after that and from then on every exhalation was a shrill cry. Tears flowed and pain raged like fire throughout my body.

Thirteen minutes, I reflected. Twelve . . .

But, though I couldn't say for certain, probably no more than six or seven passed before I gasped, "Stop, stop!" He did. And I told him exactly what he wanted to know.

He jotted the information and stood. Keys to the truck dangled in his left hand. In his right was the pistol. He aimed the automatic toward the center of my forehead and what I felt was mostly relief, a terrible relief, that at least the pain would cease.

The man eased back and squinted slightly in anticipation of the gunshot, and I found myself w—

September 2010

SATURDAY

The object of the game is to invade and capture the opponent's Castle or slay his Royalty. . . .

—FROM THE INSTRUCTIONS TO THE
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