

HARRY HUNSICKER



THE NEXT

TIME YOU

DIE

"This second book in the Lee Oswald series guarantees that I will be buying everything with Harry Hunsicker's name on it. Already on my best of 2006 list."

—JON JORDAN, editor of
Crime Spree Magazine

A LEE HENRY OSWALD MYSTERY

THE NEXT
TIME
YOU DIE



HARRY HUNSICKER

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS.
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CHAPTER ONE

Billy Barringer snapped the guard's neck as if it were a piece of rotten firewood. The noise echoed against the cinder-block walls and tin roof of the maintenance shed. The dead man dropped to the floor and was completely still, the front of his khaki pants darkened with urine.

One down. One to go.

A small-framed man named Charity stood just inside the doorway, wearing regulation prison whites that matched Billy's clothing. Charity gulped several times and stared at the body crumpled on the floor.

Billy snapped his fingers and pointed to the door, indicating for him to keep watch. Charity licked his lips and squinted at Billy, his eyes dull and watery. Sweat dappled his forehead even though the thick walls kept the building relatively cool in the South Texas sunshine.

"Keep your eyes open, for chrissakes." Billy jabbed a finger at the entrance.

Charity blinked and seemed to emerge from his trance. He turned to the door and stared outside.

Billy grabbed the arms of the corpse and dragged the man behind the workbench, near where the lawn mowers were chained together. He tried to control his breathing. The guard had arrived a few minutes

ahead of schedule. Although minor, it was the first break in the routine since Billy had started work at the maintenance building eight months earlier, the assignment a result of his good behavior and an assistant warden with a taste for preteen girls that Billy's people on the outside had discovered.

Billy didn't like surprises, not when escaping from a maximum-security unit of the Texas Department of Corrections.

He mentally ran through the next few steps. Lunchtime on court day. The number of guards was lower than at any time during the week. Two sets of noninmate clothing for the two escapees. A key and combination to the employee parking lot, only a few hundred yards from the maintenance shed.

"Billy." Charity's high-pitched voice sounded frightened, as always. The second guard must be approaching. Billy grabbed a short length of two-by-four. He slid from behind the workbench and pressed himself against the wall next to the doorway.

The guard entered. He stopped after a couple of feet and blinked, the light in the dusty building dim after the June sun. He walked a few more paces and swiveled his head from one side to the other.

Billy stepped out of the shadows. The muscles in his shoulders and arms corded and strained against the thin cotton of his jumpsuit as he swung the chunk of pine at the guard's head.

The impact sounded like a cantaloupe hitting a kitchen floor.

The man fell in the exact same spot as the first guard. He started twitching. Billy rushed to pull off his pants in order to avoid the urine problem. Two minutes later he was dressed in the guard's uniform. The length was fine but the clothes hung loose on his frame. Eleven months of weights in the yard had turned him into all sinew and muscle, lean and sleek.

"Put that guy's stuff on." Billy pointed to the other guard.

Charity stared at the fully clothed dead man. "No way. Guy's pissed in his pants."

“Put on the clothes.” Billy tried to keep his voice even.

“But—”

“Get changed. Now.” Billy grabbed the inmate by his arm and felt the thin muscles, weak and slack like those only a man unfortunate enough to be named Charity would have. The smaller man began slowly pulling the clothes off the corpse.

Billy found the key and a piece of paper with the combination taped on the bottom of a gas can. He wondered how the two items came to be there but decided not to expend too much energy dwelling on such things.

“You didn’t have to kill them, did you?” Charity threw his prison whites on the floor.

“Not taking any chances,” Billy said. “Don’t want to stay on the inside. Do you?”

“No.” The smaller man slipped on the guard’s shirt and shuddered. “Ain’t *never* going back.”

Billy chuckled to himself. Prison was a bad place for people like Charity, a cell-block lay preacher following a muddled family tradition of piety and minor criminal activity.

When they were both dressed, the two men stood in the doorway. Billy looked at the parking lot, a shimmering acre of asphalt less than a half mile away. He ran a finger over the teeth of the key as if it were a talisman. Maybe five minutes to walk across the prison yard. Another thirty seconds to open the first gate with the key and then work the push-button combination lock on the second entrance.

The next step was tricky.

A green pickup was supposed to be waiting in the lot, keys on the floorboard. Somewhere in the second row. But how long was that row going to be? And would other guards be in the lot? Odds were in their favor since it wasn’t time for a shift change. But there was still a risk, however small.

Billy pulled the shirt tight against his shoulders in an effort to make the garment look like it fit. He swelled his chest and tried to project

himself as a prison guard. He stepped into the hot sun, Charity by his side. Together they walked toward the parking lot.

Billy was no stranger to betrayal. Betrayal by one of his closest friends had sent him to prison on a twenty-five-to-life sentence. Betrayal had earned Billy his living before prison. Betrayal was a way of life, a family tradition. Betrayal had also brought Billy a chance to escape.

A man with skin the color of buttermilk, wearing linen pants and a yellow silk shirt, stood with his hands in his pockets, staring at Billy. He said, "It's about time."

His name was Jesus Rundell, and he was a third-string fix-it man in the Houston branch of one of the border cartels. Billy, Charity, and Jesus were standing in the shade of a withered palm tree behind a boarded-up Esso station on a stretch of road ten miles west of Dilley, Texas, about halfway between Laredo and San Antonio.

"I went the speed limit," Billy said. "Didn't want to get stopped."

The plan had worked. They had walked out. Strolled past the towers with the guards, through the gate in the razor wire surrounding the parking lot, and into the waiting pickup. The next car, a four-year-old Crown Victoria, was behind the service station where it was supposed to be, along with new clothes in the backseat.

"You wouldn't had no trouble." Jesus pinched the crease of his pants between a thumb and forefinger. His shaved head gleamed in the sunlight.

Billy pulled on a pair of blue jeans and a white button-down shirt, both new-from-the-store fresh. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes and breathed in the creosote and stale fuel of the old gas station. Nothing was visible anywhere except palm trees and prickly pear cactus and thorny mesquite and the endless South Texas landscape, sandy and flat

all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. The cloudless sky was the color of hot chrome.

Billy squinted in the sunlight and stared at the man he had hoped he would never encounter again in this life or any other. Charity was a few feet away, changing also, the scared look still plastered on his face. The man in the linen pants hadn't started in on him. Yet.

"I told you the police wouldn't be a problem." Jesus grabbed his crotch in what appeared to be an unconscious gesture.

"What happens next?" Billy tucked in his shirt.

"I never much liked you." Jesus was massaging his groin now, deep caresses to his genitals through the thin material of the pants. "Fucking Barringers always thought they were better than everybody else."

"Each his own, I suppose." Billy flexed his fingers and kept his hands loose at his sides.

Jesus turned around and faced Charity. He spoke to Billy with his back turned. "So this is your cellmate. Pretty little thing, ain't he?"

Charity's face turned white. His teeth chattered even though the temperature was in the triple digits.

"The plan . . ." Billy said. "Where do we go from here?"

"We're all going to hell." Rundell walked to where Charity stood shivering. "It's just a matter of when."

"I t-t-thought we . . . were gonna go home." Charity's voice quivered.

Rundell placed one hand on the smaller man's shoulder. "What's the going rate for a blow job on the inside these days?"

Billy stepped between the two men. "Let's just get out of here, okay?"

Jesus removed his hand from Charity's shoulder and caressed his cheek before turning to Billy. "What was the guy's name? The one that busted you."

"Oswald. Like the guy that killed Kennedy. Lee Henry Oswald." Billy tried not to sound exasperated. This was old news. The bust and all the details had been heavily covered by the media at the time.

“Bet you spent most of the last year thinking about what it would feel like to wrap your hands around Mr. Oswald’s throat and give it a big old squeeze.”

Billy shrugged.

“Wonder what it would feel like to wrap my hands around *your* throat?”

Billy didn’t say anything. Charity’s breathing was raspy in the still air.

After a few moments, Jesus relaxed and smiled. “You owe me, in case you forgot. For getting your ass out of the pokey.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Billy willed his face to remain impassive. He stretched his arms behind him and walked away from Jesus, looking for something to use as a weapon.

Jesus went to the trunk of the Ford and removed a one-gallon gasoline container.

Billy spied an empty quart bottle of Corona.

“Tell me what I need to know.” Jesus’s voice was low and throaty now, a sure sign he was about to lose control.

Billy scooped up the beer bottle and turned around.

Jesus had a pistol in one hand, the container of fuel in the other.

Billy felt cold. His stomach fluttered. He smelled the gasoline.

Betrayal. Again.

CHAPTER TWO

My workload came from one of several distinct groups, a pattern I figured was typical for any moderately successful private investigator in a major metropolitan area.

Most PIs thought of the first group as their best clients. The business was steady and they paid well and on time. They were lawyers in all their various shades and flavors. What could be more recession-proof than litigation and the ancillary investigations required?

Next came the people missing something of value. An inheritance. A loved one. A spouse's sexual attention. The company's checkbook. Et cetera. This was a diverse group and paid in a diverse manner. Still, work was work.

Finally, there was the miscellaneous category. These were the people who walked on the dark side of the street. The half-bent cops. The occasional call girl with a dead politician stinking up a hotel room somewhere.

And my personal favorites: the dimwit wise guys who had screwed, stolen, or ingested something that didn't exactly belong to them and needed help, off the books and pronto. If they didn't try to kill you, this group always paid, no questions asked.

The tires of my Chevy Tahoe crunched in the gravel parking lot as

I came to a stop in front of a stone and brick building nestled under two old hackberry trees. I slid the gearshift into park, turned off the ignition, and listened to the motor tick. Two guys who looked like out-of-work musicians or maybe the creative team at a small ad agency sat at a picnic table and watched me as they drank from longneck bottles of beer. I watched back for a moment and then opened the door of my truck, steeling myself against the wave of heat and humidity typical of mid-September in Texas.

My concern was that the person who had requested this meeting didn't fall into any of the usual categories, or so it seemed, based on our initial, cryptic phone conversation. He'd said his name was Lucas Linville and he was a preacher of the Baptist persuasion, and wanting to meet in a drinking establishment. If that wasn't enough to give a body pause, I didn't know what was.

I walked across the gravel and dirt yard in front of Lee Harvey's, a bar located a few blocks south of the new Dallas police headquarters in a part of town a friend of mine refers to as the corner of Gun and Knife streets. I pushed open the front door and welcomed the dim light as a relief from the afternoon sun. The air-conditioning was set somewhere between the Arctic Circle and Iceland. The place smelled like beer and burgers and stale smoke.

Originally a house a century or so back, the bar occupied what had once been the living/dining area. It split the room in two, running parallel to the front wall, and had seating on either side. The bedrooms were to the left and had been converted into one big area that now contained a pool table. The kitchen was to the right.

I picked a stool on the opposite side, facing the front door. Nothing behind me except empty room, no other access points. The guy next to me had a portable oxygen tank slung over his shoulder, a cigarette in one hand and a draft beer in the other. He was dressed in a rumpled tuxedo, no tie. He looked to be somewhere between fifty and ninety years old, give or take.

I nodded hello to the bartender, a guy I sort of knew from previous visits, and ordered a Shiner Bock. Across the room the front door opened, and I squinted against the sunlight as the man I took to be Lucas Linville entered.

Five-eight or -nine. Skinny. Late fifties. The pink bow tie was the giveaway, the article of clothing he had mentioned he would be wearing. It was tied tightly around the neck of a beige dress shirt underneath a brown suit. Even from across the room, I could see the outfit was worn at the edges.

He blinked a couple of times against the gloom of the place and then walked to the bar, leaned in, and whispered something to the guy who had just served me a beer. The bartender cut a glance my way without breaking his conversation with Linville.

I nodded.

He pointed to me with an ashtray he'd been polishing.

Linville took a moment to examine his surroundings and then walked around the bar past Mr. Emphysema and took the empty stool next to me. He stuck out a hand and introduced himself. His breath smelled like Wrigley's Doublemint chewing gum, and I caught the faint aroma of drugstore aftershave on my hand where it had pressed against his palm.

Before I could say much of anything other than my name, Linville ordered a shot of Jim Beam with a Budweiser chaser and said, "Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

I didn't reply for a moment as I watched the bartender serve up my newest favorite concoction: a Baptist boilermaker. Might have to start going to church.

"I know my way around town pretty well," I said. A few blocks away a bullet had punched a hole through the side of my new Hugo Boss leather jacket a couple of winters ago. I was still pissed about it.

"I have a small ministry not far from here." He downed the glass of whiskey in one gulp, followed it up with a swig of beer. "This is a troubled part of town, wouldn't you say?"

“No offense.” I looked at my watch. “But I didn’t come here to talk about urban blight.”

Linville leaned back and stared at me, a blank expression on his face. “You find stuff for people, right?”

“Sometimes.” Category two: people missing something. I felt a little better. “Depends on what it is.”

“A file was stolen from my office yesterday.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything.

“My ministry helps the people on the fringes.” He steepled his fingers underneath his scrawny chin. “Drug addicts. Prostitutes. What society thinks of as the gutter.”

He paused for a drink of beer. “Sometimes the people who find themselves on the bottom started out on top.”

“Debutantes turned streetwalkers, next on Jerry Springer.” I’d been hired once to find the daughter of a social bigwig. It turned out a bus-boy at the country club had introduced the flaxen-haired lass to the joys of injectable methamphetamines. The situation turned out poorly for all concerned.

Linville nodded. “Yeah. More or less.”

“What was in the file?”

“Records on a former employee of mine, a young man named Reese.” Linville tugged on an earlobe as he talked. “Came from a prominent family. Mother was involved with all those charity balls. He could have done anything, been anything he wanted.”

“What was Reese’s problem?”

“He had trouble with opiates, and cocaine, too. Ended up on the streets in a bad way until I gave him a job.” Linville clinked the empty shot glass against his beer bottle and asked the bartender for another Jim Beam. “His family has been more than generous to my ministry.”

“When did he quit working for you?”

The older man frowned and ran his index finger around the rim of his beer can. “Four or five months ago.”

"It's an employment file," I said. "So that means it has his last name."

"Yes." He lowered his voice and looked around the room. "Reese Cunningham."

The name sounded vaguely familiar. It conjured up an image of yacht clubs and cotillion dances. I said, "And Mumsy and Daddy won't be too eager to fund your operation if it gets out that their precious angel was a homeless addict."

"Certain segments of society care about appearances at all costs." He downed his second shot.

"When did you notice it missing?"

"Yesterday, right after lunch."

"Anything else gone?"

He shook his head.

"Who had access—" I stopped and mentally slapped myself on the forehead. The people he ministered to were not exactly pillars of the community.

"I know what you're thinking." Linville's eyes glowed with alcohol, watery yet intense. "Only one other person had keys to my office."

"What's his name?" I got out a pen and grabbed a cocktail napkin from a pile by the beer taps.

"How do you know it was a he?"

I sighed. "Okay. What was *her* name?"

"Oh, never mind. *He* was my assistant." Linville rubbed the bridge of his nose, his voice now sounding distant. "Carlos. He didn't come to work today."

"Last name?"

"Jimenez."

The old guy on the other side of me erupted into a fit of coughing, his chest cavity sounding like a tin can full of gravel. When his wheezing subsided I said, "How long has he worked for you?"

"Must be six months now." Linville drained his beer. "Started as a court-ordered DWI thing. He's been clean ever since."

I fanned away a cloud of smoke from Mr. Emphysema's fresh cigarette. "Where does Carlos live?"

"A boardinghouse. In Oak Cliff." Linville grabbed my pen and scribbled something on the cocktail napkin. His hand trembled as he slid the paper in my direction.

I put the information in my pocket but didn't say anything.

"Discretion is—" Linville covered his mouth with one hand and hiccupped. "Uh . . . imperative. That's why I didn't call the police."

I mentioned my fee. He produced an already-made-out check. The amount was for a week's worth of my time, a sum of money incongruous with the man's shabby appearance. He described Carlos. Overweight, Hispanic, mid-twenties, a tattoo of the Virgin Mary on his left arm.

A shaft of sunlight penetrated the darkened room as the front door opened and two people entered. Mr. Emphysema coughed a couple of times and spat something on the floor. He ordered an Absolut martini, one hundred proof, straight up. I debated taking up smoking.

"One more question for now," I said. "Why haven't you tried to track down Carlos yourself?"

"My work demands a lot of time. And . . ." Linville stood and looked at two men who had just entered, ". . . I believe certain people mean me harm."

I stood also. The two newcomers flanked out, their attention plainly focused on Linville and me. Their hands were balled into fists. Everything about their demeanor screamed attack.

"Oh, dear." Linville's face drained of color. "Now I've got you involved."

The larger of the two produced a semiautomatic pistol from a pocket. He started toward us.

CHAPTER THREE

The two guys were rednecks. Cowboy hats. One in a Western-style printed shirt; the other, the one with the pistol, wore faded overalls. Lace-up Roper boots. Big, work-callused hands. They were the real thing, not some city cowpokes playacting.

Lee Harvey's was not a redneck bar. It was an urban place. Lee Harvey's was graphic designers with soul patch beards who wanted to pretend they were living on the edge, drinking a few brewskies in a bad neighborhood. Lee Harvey's was the NPR crowd slumming.

Which meant the rednecks weren't randomly looking for a fight. They were here for a reason. And the reason appeared to be Pastor Linville.

Redneck One, the guy in overalls with the gun, moved around the bar toward where we stood. "Are you Lee Oswald?"

"Who wants to know?" I tried to make sense of what was happening, how they knew my name.

"Gonna mess you up, boy." Redneck One spit a stream of tobacco juice on the floor.

"Why?" Not the best of comebacks but all I could manage. I grabbed for the Browning Hi Power on my right hip. Damned if I was going down without a fight.