

CHAPTER 21

Awailing harmonica greeted Morley as he made his way up the stairs to his apartment. The times were most definitely a-changing, he mused to himself. The air in the stairwell was fetid and still until he reached the main room, where the fans and open windows allowed a cross breeze and a fresh, if warm, breath of air. Despite the late hour, he had expected to find Henna slumped half-asleep in one of the big chairs, work on her current canvas completed for the day. The room was empty, the lights off, and a raspy Dylan played softly on the stereo. A faint light on the porch glowed briefly, then disappeared as quickly as a summer firefly would. The familiar hint of perfumed smoke curled into the main room, taken inside by a warm breeze. Billy sat outside, smoking hashish. Morley deposited his valise by the desk in the corner of the room and sat down in the chair next to him. Neither spoke for several minutes as they stared at the darkness before them, listening to the traffic on Main Street two blocks away.

“This is a somber moment,” said Billy.

“Why is that?” replied Morley.

Billy held up a plastic sandwich bag. Morley squinted in the darkness and made out a square of mustard-colored hashish about the size of a quarter resting in the corner of the bag.

“The end of an era,” said Billy.

Morley laughed in disbelief.

“No, really,” Billy said. “I’m actually sick of this shit. My time is done.”

“Sure,” Morley said. “We’ll see.”

“I’m out of here in less than two months, my friend,” Billy said. “I’ve fucked off and been fucked up long enough. It gets to a point where we’re too old, I think. And I busted my ass to get into law school. I don’t want to fuck that up.”

Another breeze swept across the porch and they sat, reflective and silent again for a few moments. Billy softly stoned and Morley tired, hungry, and feeling empty and disappointed Henna wasn’t there.

“Yeah, I’m starting to see what you mean,” said Morley, thinking about himself and Henna and where, if anywhere, they might be in the future—if there was a future for them.

Billy passed a small slip of paper to Morley. Henna was always leaving them around the apartment for Morley. She once left one on the cardboard tube of an empty roll of toilet paper, instructing him to replace it with a new roll, which had been placed by her on the bathroom floor underneath the dispenser. There was too little light to make out her diminutive handwriting. Morley gestured for Billy’s lighter and thumbed the flame alive.

The note read: *No see you before you leave. Boo-boo. Miss you already. You’re OK Morley. Freer.*

Her notes to him always ended with “You’re OK Morley.” He wasn’t sure if she was trying to convey comfort or reassurance—comfort in her feelings for him, or reassuring him that he was, indeed, okay. He never asked her about it, not wanting to jinx the sentiment.

“She taped that to my forehead when I got here so I wouldn’t forget,” Billy said. “She’s something else.”

Yes, *she is*, Morley silently agreed.

“So what’s your MOS?” asked Billy.

“What?”

“Where are you off to, and when are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Morley said. “Chicago for a week, then I fly into Wichita for the wheat tour, and I’ll end up back here the week after next.”

“What the hell is a wheat tour?” Billy asked. “It sounds awful.”

“Part of the job, my friend,” Morley said. “I get to drive all over Kansas with a bunch of millers, traders, and agriculture guys, estimating the condition and size of crops. Walk the fields during the day and get drunk at night, is what I’ve been told.”

“Well, half awful.”

“And I get to do it again at the end of July in North Dakota, except at the end of that, you and I meet up in Denver.”

“Excellent,” Billy shot back, filling the pipe with a section of the square of hash.

It had been arranged. Morley would fly from Fargo to Minneapolis and then take a plane to Denver at the end of the North Dakota spring wheat crop tour, which straddled late July and early August. Billy would drive the Ninety-Eight across I-70 and pick Morley up at Stapleton, and they would fish for a week. The area they had chosen was known as the Dream Stream, situated along a stretch of river between two reservoirs on the eastern slope of the Continental Divide. There were cheap cabins and plenty of local bars nearby. It was to be Billy’s send-off before he left for Berkley and three years of hunkered-down memorization. The idea of mindless hours spent studying gave Morley the hives, but he knew Billy was well suited for it. He also knew Billy would be a good lawyer, because he was such a lousy writer.

Billy exhaled a big toke from the pipe, giving the impression that most of his soul had departed his body. He slumped back in his chair, once again reflective and stoned, and offered the pipe to Morley.

“Well, if it’s the last for you, then it can be the last for me,” Morley said, taking the pipe and the lighter.

He held the hot metal pipe and lit the bowl; the edges of the piece of hash glowed beneath a layer of ash. Morley took in a deep breath and held it in his lungs, which burned sweetly until they felt like they would explode. He released the pressure, and the dreaminess of the hash bathed his head.

“Shit,” Morley said, coughing and handing the pipe back to Billy. “I’m definitely done.”

Billy laughed and took another toke before stuffing the last remaining hashish pieces into the pipe. Morley went into the kitchen to get a beer for himself and a fresh one for Billy, who kept smoking away. They drank their beers and reminisced about pranks they pulled in high school. Billy recounted the time they stole bowling balls from the Plaza Bowl and waited until late at night to roll them down the hill at the top of Wornall Road. The first ball hit a bump next to the Alameda Plaza Hotel, which sent the black orb bouncing as high as sixty feet before shattering on the pavement. The second bounced and lodged in the branches of a tree along

one of the small parkways. The third, and last, rolled by Leo, went through the windshield of a parked car, which was, thankfully, unoccupied.

"Jesus, I can't believe we didn't go to jail for some of the shit we pulled," Morley laughed.

"No, dumbass, we went to the Marines," Billy said, which had the effect of dampening the moment, and they sat quietly again. Their mood, set by the high, fell into a still reality.

"I'm worried about Leo," said Billy.

"He does drink a lot," said Morley. "A lot more than I remembered."

"Too much." Billy said. "I've been called to come get him from The Pike a couple of times. He's got two DUIs as it is."

"I didn't know that."

"He's in a bad place."

"I'll keep an eye on him when you're gone," Morley said.

"It's not your job, Em," Billy said.

"Sure it is, Billy," Morley replied. "You've been looking after him; now it's my turn."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"Well, what is it you're saying?"

"We've got to start being responsible for ourselves," Billy said, hoping Morley would get the point. "We can't be the Terrible Trio for the rest of our lives."

"Fuck, you're stoned," Morley replied.

"Yeah, but no," Billy said. Morley detected a serious, sincere tone in his voice.

"Don't mean nothing," Morley blurted out.

Billy let it drop. He took the last hit of hashish from the pipe and tapped out the ash on the armrest of the chair. An ambulance, its siren screaming, sped down Main Street. In the distance, they watched a helicopter circle, its spotlight illuminating the ground below before heading off in a new direction. The discomfort about Leo passed, and Billy tentatively broached a new subject, likely more sensitive to Morley than Leo.

"I like Henna," Billy said. "She's different."

"Yeah, Freer's okay," Morley said.

"So what's with you two?" Billy said, hoping to probe deeper.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, are you two..."

"Fucking? Is that what you're asking?"

Billy's silence and the expression on his face answered Morley's question.

"No, we're just friends," Morley said. "It's intricate."

"Hey man, I'm not trying to get into your business," Billy said. "It's just that..."

"It's just that, what?" Morley asked, pressing Billy.

"It's just that Henna's been, well, well-traveled," Billy said. "Not that there's anything wrong with that, believe me."

"Why are you being such an asshole?" Morley asked. "Are you trying to tell me you and Henna...?"

"No, no, not at all," Billy said, effusively. "I know you, Em. I've known you your whole life, and I've never seen you like this before."

"Like what?" Morley asked.

"Wake the fuck up, man. You're in love."

Billy's observation left Morley speechless. He had not allowed himself ever to think it, and now Billy put it on the table for Morley to see for himself.

"For all your distance and hardassness, you've always been a big pussy when it comes to that," Billy said. "I just don't want you to get hurt."