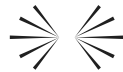


CHAPTER 1



I was drinking coffee and leaning on the bar in the Lincoln Tavern, waiting for Buzz to show up. Buzz being James Buster Wildrick, attorney at law and my best friend for coming on forty years. He would introduce himself to strangers as Jim; at the courthouse, right across the street, many of the staff referred to him as JB. To most who had known him since childhood, he was known only as Buzz, a family nickname derived from a shortening of his middle name. Buzz was late, the coffee was bad, and I was starting to get a headache. Plus, it was a dreary November evening, with sleet off and on since morning. Looked like it was going to be another bleak winter. Consequently, I wasn't in an upbeat mood. There was an old John Wayne western on the small black and white TV behind the bar, so that was something.

Local history had Abraham Lincoln, in the late fall of 1859, traveling to Northwest Indiana to meet with the principals of the Chicago Cincinnati Railroad Company. The purpose of said meeting was to discuss legal matters pertaining to the extension of rail service from Prairie Stop, Indiana, to Chicago. The story was that Lincoln also secretly met with a group of prominent civic and business leaders concerning the future of slavery, as well as his political prospects, the two issues turning out to be inextricably linked. According to the tale, the second meeting took place on the spot where the tavern now stood, hence the name. On the back wall, in one of the booths, there was a small engraved brass plaque, which proudly proclaimed "Abraham Lincoln dined here, November 20, 1859", below which someone had written, "and there still aren't any towels in the men's room." The date on my watch read November 20, 1989, so assuming the plaque and my math was accurate, in five days we would hit the 130th anniversary of men leaving the bathroom

with damp hands.

The accuracy of the Lincoln story had been debated, sometimes animatedly, but there was no purpose served getting upset because Buzz was late. It was his way. Having spent most of his life in the same small town, being one of its most prominent citizens, a high school football star who continued on to greater heights, Buzz couldn't walk down the street without being recognized and greeted by, well, just about everybody. And, being who he was, he couldn't let go with just a quick howdy and handshake. He had to ask about Aunt Bertha, and Cousin Earl, and whatever happened with that bypass surgery, or I heard your son was going to Purdue. He had an amazing memory for people; names, faces, sons, daughters, and the places and events connected with those people. Peculiar, because he was lousy remembering other stuff. He claimed he had left suits at the dry cleaners so long that when he got them back they had gone out of and back into style. As if on cue, my thoughts were interrupted by a forceful clap on the back, the impact of which caused me to spit a mouthful of the toxic coffee all over the bar.

"I ask you, would there be a better place to be on a beautiful fall day than Prairie Stop, Indiana?"

I turned, and Buzz reached out to shake my hand.

"The eternal optimist." I said, turning back to mop up the coffee with a napkin.

"What's to be pessimistic about? The Fighting Irish are undefeated with only one game left."

"In case you hadn't noticed, its forty degrees out and sleeting." I said, looking at him closer. "Last time I saw you, you had a beard."

"Partners didn't like it. Said it made me look cheesy, so it had to go."

Buzz looked like what he was, a former elite athlete gone slightly to seed. He was 30 pounds plus heavier than when he was a second team All-American defensive back at Notre Dame, but at 6'3" there was not much of paunch. His straw blond hair had whitened and receded over the years, but he now wore it longer in the back so that it curled around his ears and over his collar. The once chiseled face was lined and sagged a bit in places, but even at just north of forty there was still, at least occasionally, the same mischievous glint in his eyes he had at sixteen.

"You look like you got some sun," he said, looking at me.

"I've been spending a lot of time outdoors. I decided to go into the home improvement business."

"Makes sense ... the original man with three thumbs. What was that thing you built in shop? Nobody knew whether it was an ashtray or birdhouse. For I forget, thanks for coming down here. I may have something more up your alley than construction."

“Yeah? Raking leaves out at Wildrick Manor?”

“Nah, I got guys to do that. They’re all illegals from Mexico, so I only pay them pocket change.”

“You’re a regular Rockefeller. Ok, I’ll bite, what do you have for me?”

“ Let’s say it’s an important investigative matter. I’ll give you the details after I get a drink.”

Buzz looked around the mainly empty room to see if anyone he knew was there. There was a group at a table in the back, who I guessed, from their dark suits, animated gestures, loud conversation and laughter, were attorneys. Due to its location, the Lincoln was a popular hangout for lawyers. Buzz raised his hand in their general direction and one of them raised his glass in a salute back. Whatever was in the glass spilled out onto the guy next to him and there was a startled “hey!” followed by more raucous laughter.

“How are the twins?” I asked. Buzz had twin teenage girls, who I seemed to recall were in college.

“Ok. They ought to be. I’m shelling out near fifty grand in tuition a year.”

“Damn ... I never even made that much in a year,” I said.

He glanced down the bar and motioned to the bartender. She had looked up startled when I lost the mouthful of coffee.

Buzz eyed my cup. “Don’t tell me that’s just coffee you’re drinking. Last time I had just coffee in this place, I had the runs for three days.”

“Thanks for the warning. I just polished off my fourth cup. And it was an ash tray for birds. In shop, I mean.”

“What kind of birds?” Buzz asked, taking the bait.

“Larks.”

“I should have seen that coming. My mom used to smoke Larks.”

“I remember,” I said. “Your house smelled like a cigar factory for days after she had one of her card parties.”

Buzz looked over at the bartender, who was now standing and smiling across from us. She was blonde, attractive, and about thirty I guessed. Large violet eyes which I hadn’t noticed when I ordered the coffee. I’m surprised I didn’t recognize her, since I had spent a lot of time in the Lincoln back in my drinking days.

“Pam,” Buzz said, who returned her smile. “First, do you know this guy?” gesturing toward me.

“No. He came in and ordered coffee and has been quiet ever since.” She said, looking at me. “Not that I mind quiet.”

“This here is one of my oldest, bestest buddies, Logan Wells. We go way back, and I do mean way back. Logan, meet Pam, the finest bartender the old Lincoln has ever had. And I should know. I was here when the Great Emancipator threw the first drunk out.”

I had an image of Abraham Lincoln tossing someone through a plate glass window, as I recalled how Buzz and I met thirty years ago.

My family had moved to Indiana from western New York, my father landing a job building the steel mills that were then going up like cornfields along the shores of Lake Michigan. My father, like his father, was an ironworker by trade and part Indian by blood, Mohawk of the Iroquois Nation specifically. My grandfather worked with the ironworkers who built the skyscrapers of New York City. The Mohawk workers were always at the highest point of the structures, stepping easily from girder to girder, no safety lines, where a single misstep meant sudden death. Which recalled my dad's oft quoted definition of an optimist: someone who fell off the top of a fifty-story building and cheerfully proclaimed "alright so far" as he went by each floor.

My folks built a house in Prairie Stop, a small county seat an hour east of Chicago. There wasn't a whole lot to the place back then. It was a sleepy town of about fifteen thousand, with the county courthouse and the university being the main centers of activity. The steel mills changed that. The steelworkers, engineers and managers wanted to live away from the soot, grime and noise of the mills. They made good money, and there weren't enough decent places to buy, Gary and some of the other cities along the lake were by then beginning their freefall into urban decay. The steelworkers flooded to Prairie Stop, where new subdivisions sprang up seemingly overnight. It was 1960, a new decade, a new President, and a new energy and sense of purpose.

Our house was the first one on our street, cornfields behind us and on one side. Buzz's house was the last on the existing road that connected to ours. Although I was only eight, I vividly recall standing out in the dirt that was my backyard, wondering what to make of my new home, when Buzz emerged, barefoot and shirtless, from the high corn behind our house. He walked slowly over to me, then around me, as if to size me up. Then he stuck his hand out and said,

"You must be the new kid. I'm James Buster Wildrick, but everybody calls me Buzz." Then he paused and added, "I think you and me are going to be best friends."

Buzz elbowed me in the stomach. "Say something, would you? You're scaring me."

"Nice to meet you, Pam," I said. "You been working here long?"

"About a year," she replied.

"That explains it. I haven't been in here for a while."

"Logan here has been out of commission," Buzz said. "Got hit by a bus last winter and spent six months in the hospital, three of them in a coma. Barely made it," He was exaggerating, but not by much.

"It was a Buick, two months in the hospital, and only a week in a coma." I

rubbed my temple.

“How awful. What happened?”

“Line of duty accident.” Buzz said, before I could answer. “Remember the Thanksgiving blizzard last year?”

“How could I forget?” Pam said, shaking her head. “I had just moved here from Florida. It was horrendous. I was thinking at the time I had made a big mistake.”

“Lake effect snow. One disadvantage of living fifteen miles away from the southernmost point of Lake Michigan. Better get used to it. Anyhow, Logan was coming back from a crime scene. He stopped to help a woman who had slid off the road up near Stone Lake. Eighty-year-old guy driving home after his weekly poker game plows right into him.”

He paused and looked at the bottles lined up across the bar.

“Bring the monsignor here a shot of Bushmills for that stuff you call coffee. I’ll take a shot too and a draft. Hamm’s if you got it.”

“No Hamm’s. Bud, Bud Light and Old Style on draft,” Pam replied.

“I should know that. Jack Brickhouse would be shitting a brick. No pun intended. Although come to think of it, I bet he was a Cutty and water man. I’ll take Old Style.”

“Nothing for me.” I said, raising my hand, as she was turning to get the drinks, and she paused.

Buzz waved her off.

“Bring it. I’m not drinking alone.”

“Think you’re better than me, or just on the wagon?” he asked after she left.

“Both, but mainly doctor’s orders. He seemed to think it wouldn’t aid my recovery. Imagine that.”

“Good thing I go to a different doctor than you. Not sure I could make it through a day without a couple.”

Pam placed the drinks on the bar. “So, how bad was it?”

“A couple of broken legs, torn up knees, assorted internal injuries, including a lacerated spleen, and a concussion,” I said. “Apparently the only reason I survived was that my head landed up in the snow. The cold slowed the swelling in my brain until the ambulance showed up. Which was a while cause of the snow. Not sure if that would be ironic, or just a coincidence.”

“So, you’re a policeman?” Pam asked.

“No. Used to be. I am, or was, a special investigator for the Prairie County Prosecutor’s office.”

“And that’s another thing,” Buzz interjected, after draining his whiskey with one gulp. “Logan can’t go back to the Prosecutor’s Office because he can barely get around. Plus, he gets these bad headaches and has trouble