

Scheduled to DIE

DON BISSETT

a Nathan Parker novel

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Prologue

He had just taken a bite of his sandwich when the blast of hot gas erupted from behind, driving his head and chest against the tabletop and engulfing him in flames.

Seconds before this life-ending moment, he had been discussing retirement plans across this same table with his best friend. After decades of dedicated work, and with a level of financial success that he never imagined possible, the time had come to call it quits. He was ready for that new phase of his life.

Now, none of that mattered. He would never get to retire, never do all the travel on his bucket list, travel that had been postponed so many times because work always came first. He would never get to refocus his attention on his two children. And spend more time with his lovely new young wife. So many missed opportunities.

But he didn't realize any of this in that last moment of life. He didn't even feel the heat of the blast, the outward rush of fiery air that flattened his head against the tabletop, the flames that consumed his body. For him, life simply ended while having a quiet lunch with a friend.

Chapter 1

“Mr. Parker,” said the host of this Friday evening program. “Welcome to our show. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to be with us.” Then she turned toward the camera. “I’m Lucinda Furren, and this is The Rest of the News.”

Lucinda Furren. More than attractive. Pretty, with long honey-colored hair parted down the middle, the shiny strands with their wavy ends flowing loosely over her shoulders. High cheekbones, smooth skin, just a light touch of natural make-up. She exuded charm. At the moment, she beamed a broad smile in my direction, and her eyes sparkled in the bright lights. The sight put me at ease.

Yet she also had a reputation as an aggressive interviewer, one who often grilled her guests for the dirty details. Lucinda would probe and prod, digging for an angle to turn stories into sensationalism. That was why I didn’t want to be here, under the glare of the lights and cameras.

I told my boss, we shouldn’t be doing this. But he assured me that this would be an easy gig, simply a scripted tell-me-about-it interview. It represented a rare opportunity for good publicity for Nation’s Best Insurance, my employer in Montana. The prospect of having one of their fraud investigators on TV, to offset the bad press that often falls on the insurance industry, was simply too tempting to let slip away. Therefore, my management insisted that I accept the invitation to this event.

So here I sat in a live on-air discussion in front of a studio audience in New York City, instead of just doing my investigative work. I was eager to get on to my next assignment, which my boss mentioned in passing had something to do with a gas explosion at a restaurant. But this appearance on TV had been deemed more important, so here I sat. At the moment, I had no clue just how accurate I’d been in saying this was a bad idea.

Lucinda continued. “Mr. Parker. You’ve had some very traumatic experiences. It must have been horrible when those two people died during your trip to San Francisco.”

“Yes, that was bad. The investigation took a dangerous turn.”

She smiled understandingly. In spite of my nervousness and the bad memories connected to the deaths of those two people, I started to relax, to feel comfortable. I waited patiently for the next scripted question.

Lucinda smiled again and spoke calmly. “Why did you kill those people in San Francisco?”

What? I must have misunderstood. That wasn’t in the script.

A murmur of alarm arose from the studio audience. I saw them lean sideways toward each other to whisper their shock and awe. That was why people wanted to be in the audience. They wanted to be shocked. They wanted to be awed. So now they stared at me, waiting for my defensive response. All the cameras swiveled to focus on me. My nerves twitched. The bright lights overhead seemed even harsher than before.

On the trip she referred to, I had uncovered a conspiracy and probably saved a lot of lives. In spite of that, she just accused me of killing two people. Certainly two people died in the mess

in San Francisco, but I didn't kill them. Yes, I was there. Yes, I created the situation. But the bad guys killed each other in the melee. I didn't pull the triggers that ended their lives.

The brutal heat from the intense overhead lights burned through me. The room temperature seemed to be rising. I felt feverish and could sense perspiration popping out of every pore. And my tie felt like a noose around my neck. Now I wasn't at ease, not in the least.

Lucinda Furren prompted me with a tilt of her head. The smile vanished. She had finished with her brief period of politeness. Her voice now took on a cold hard edge. I had dreaded this moment, and here it was.

"What about San Francisco, Mr. Parker?"

I took a deep breath to compose myself, and answered calmly. "Yes, two people died. But as you know, I didn't kill anyone in San Francisco."

A loud thump split the air as she pounded the coffee table between us with an open palm. "But you did in Montana!" she protested. "You killed several people up there!" A glint of devilish pleasure appeared in her eyes. She saw me squirming, and she clearly enjoyed it. I had been put on the spot with nowhere to hide.

A young reporter, she clearly wanted to establish a reputation that would propel her to the upper ranks in her field. She would probably do that, regardless of who got hurt along the way. Lucinda Furren. Lucy Furren to her close colleagues and friends. The rest of the world just called her Lucifer.

Lucifer clearly had some agenda other than tell me about it. For me, this interview turned sourer than my worst fears. Yes, I had killed people in Montana, but it was clearly self-defense. She knew that. Yet now she used the situation, and she used me, to make some sensational headline, though I still didn't know what her particular angle might be. My company anticipated good press from this. In the interest of self-preservation, I had to regain some measure of control of the direction of this interview.

I chose to shoot back with a defensive response. "Are you familiar with the phrase justifiable homicide?" As soon as the words tumbled from my mouth, I knew that tactic wouldn't work.

She gestured toward me and raised her voice in indignation. "So you're in favor of vigilante justice? Taking the law into your own hands?" And there it was, vigilante justice, the hidden agenda for today's show.

Lucifer paused for only a second before pressing deeper into my discomfort zone. "At one time you were a cop. What happened to your moral compass?"

Moral compass? Really?

I didn't know how to handle this situation. I had no experience at this. Anything I could think to say likely would tighten the noose around my neck and draw me deeper into her trap.

Lucifer curtly prompted me. "Mr. Parker?"

"Packer!" I blurted out.

A moment of confusion clouded her face. "No, I said Parker."

“Packer!” I repeated confidently.

I had remembered something from the media training hammered into me earlier in the week. That training embedded into my brain a morsel of information that might disentangle me from her line of questioning: when the going gets tough, choose to answer a different question, or change the subject entirely. So I did. I suspected that my use of that morsel of information wasn’t quite what the media trainer had in mind. But it seemed like a tactic worth trying.

Lucifer squinted her eyes and tilted her head slightly. She looked at me like I’d lost my mind. For a moment, she was speechless. My incomprehensible comment seemed to fall out of her comfort zone.

“Packers,” I said. “How about those Green Bay Packers? Super Bowl champs two years ago. Didn’t they have a great season?” A smattering of laughter and applause arose from the studio audience. One guy, who wore a Packers’ jersey, stood up. He raised his arms over his head, as if to signal a touchdown.

Lucifer lowered her chin and glared at me from under her scrunched brow. The sparkle in her eyes was replaced by a dark penetrating stare. She hated losing the rapt attention of her audience. Especially because of a nobody like me. Her next words were filled with venom. “You’re avoiding my question about the people you killed in Montana. So you must have something to hide.” An evil smile creased her face. “This is your chance to clear your conscience. Speak out against vigilante justice.”

“The Packers had another great season. Too bad they missed making the Super Bowl last year.” Another hushed smattering of applause arose from the audience.

Lucifer hissed with her acid tongue. “Focus on the topic, Mr. Parker.”

“Patriot!”

She shook her head briefly, as if that would clarify my response. “What?”

“The New England Patriots. That’s the team I picked from the American Conference. New England still has a strong team.” Hoots and applause erupted from another section in the back of the room. One of the cameramen behind Lucifer flashed me a thumbs-up sign. “Yeah, too bad they lost the big game.”

“Lucinda, I probably didn’t tell you that my full name is Nathan Hale Parker. Nathan Hale was a patriot in the Revolutionary War. My mom was a Revolutionary War fanatic. So I had to go with the Patriots.” That was followed by another brief round of applause from the back of the room.

Lucifer glared at me. Her face tightened. Then she fiercely turned back to the camera, forced a smile onto her face, and spoke through clenched teeth. “It’s time for a word from our sponsor. We’ll be right back.”

Within seconds, someone in the film crew spoke. “And we’re clear.”

Lucifer jumped from her seat, turned her back to the audience, and urgently spoke to someone in her entourage. “Get him out of my sight!” Then she stormed off the stage.

A surge of relief washed over me. It was over, at least for now. Even though I’d scored

some points with the audience and one cameraman, I didn't feel like a winner. I had angered Lucifer. Not a good outcome. She would grind away at me and at my employer, looking for weaknesses to exploit for headlines. Tonight marked the start of a crusade against me and against Nation's Best Insurance, so I knew there would be hell to pay back at the home office in Montana.

But for now, I was free. And there was a positive outcome from this. My company would never again ask me to do public speaking. I could easily live with that.

I left the stage. The handlers from my employer approached. They were sent to keep me in line. Having failed, they too would face a reprimand from the bosses back home.

I didn't want to talk to my handlers, didn't want to talk to anyone. Before they could intercept me, I exited through a side door. A long walk into the evening darkness would let me clear my head and maybe help me forget all about this debacle with Lucinda Furren. Then I could focus on that investigation into a gas explosion at a restaurant in Ohio.

Yet, in a few days I'd look back on this evening as a mere bump in the road compared to the turmoil that would soon engulf me.