

Chapter One of Exceeding Expectations

January 2, 1962

Glancing down at the Porsche's speedometer Jack eased up on the gas. The nearest car was a mile back, but a cop could be hiding around the next bend. Being stopped by the police did not fit into Jack's plan. He blamed the excitement. And guilt. Composing the single page to his daughters had been agony. There was no nice way to say he intended to kill himself. There were no comforting euphemisms for suicide. No words to excuse a mortal sin. And worst of all, no way to ease the pain his beloved girls would experience. But they, and everyone else, had to believe his intention was absolute and irreversible or the plan would fail. After several miserable gut-wrenching attempts, Jack wrote how much he loved them and said that this was something he had to do to protect them.

Knowing he could rely on Petal's steely strength, Jack's letter to his wife was more direct. He had explained that he was doing this to save her and his girls from scandal and disgrace. And as he was making this noble sacrifice, he knew she could be relied on to be good to his daughters. Petal might not be the maternal sort, but no one could accuse her of being tight-fisted. After reading the letter, his dying declaration, and waiting for two Chivas Regal's straight to take effect, she would call a few select members of her powerful family, and her attorney. The results of those calls would be a discreet obituary in *The New York Times*, another in the local paper, hinting at a long-term debilitating disease, and no further investigation. A quiet memorial service would be held in Manhattan, Petal's preferred place of residence, and she would be stunning in black for the next six to ten weeks, depending on her social calendar.

The best thing about his plan was its simplicity. He would wait until two or three in the morning when the roads would be deserted, park the car on the middle of a bridge and disappear into the night. The bridge and town had been carefully selected – less than a five-mile walk to the railroad to prevent someone later recalling giving a lift to a stranger. And the town had to be small – an insignificant speck on the map. The smaller the town, Jack had reasoned, the less sophisticated the police force. Fielding, Florida, a town that lacked a drug store, supermarket, bank, and beauty parlor was ideal. Serious crime in Fielding probably consisted of intimidating the kids who tipped over outhouses on Halloween and jailing the same town drunk every Friday night. A costly abandoned car, coupled with the later discovered suicide notes, guaranteed Jack would be the topic of intense gossip for years, and the object of a bumbling investigation for no more than a week. The Porsche would get more attention than the lack of a corpse in an area where alligators outnumbered house pets, and a Ford with all four fenders intact was considered a damned fine automobile.

Once he boarded a train he'd be fine. Men who rode the rails kept secrets. They were members of a tribe of vagabonds who preferred the town around the next curve – adventurous men ready to share a pot of tramp stew with another kindred spirit. And he was eager to join them. For the last two and half decades, his life had revolved around his girls. Jack had chosen that life and never once regretted it. A man couldn't have finer daughters than Amelia and Charlotte. But they were grown now and maybe he had earned himself a change. He thought he

might head for Texas, a leviathan-sized state where a man's past was not apt to be questioned. And Texas was known for its horses. He loved horses — riding them, watching them trot, canter, toss their heads, nurse their foals. Gorgeous, glorious creatures they were.

After several hours of driving through towns too small to boast a stop sign, Jack reached his destination. A weather-beaten building with a concave roof housed the grocery that doubled as Fielding's post office. He gave his letters to a leathery man behind the counter and gazed at a jar of pickles with interest. He had been so focused on reaching his destination he had forgotten to eat lunch. "Is there a place around here to get something to eat?" "Just Wiley's. Kind of a bar/restaurant down the street. Lost its sign in the last hurricane, but you'll find it."

An orange neon light in the window erratically flickered *Budweiser*. Jack glanced inside. It was more bar than restaurant, and grimy. Lacking an alternative, he entered. A wall of vacant knotty-pine booths faced a long bar backed by a mirror so streaked with fly droppings and smoke, that reflected images appeared cloudy. Five or six patrons turned to note his presence and then quickly resumed what they had been doing. Jack proceeded to the bar's last booth and took a seat where he could oversee the comings and goings. The gym bag containing twenty-seven thousand dollars he stowed under the table.

A blowsy overweight waitress with an elaborate hairdo and a too-tight skirt approached. "Need a menu?" she asked as she wiped the table with a dingy towel.

"What time do you stop serving food?"

"The kitchen closes at eight."

Jack removed his buck suede jacket and placed it on the seat beside him. Assuming this place closed at midnight, he had five long hours to kill. "Bring me a draft beer and a hamburger. And if you could spare a newspaper, I'd appreciate it."

She soon returned with his beer and a ten-page weekly tabloid filled with notices of church events, and feed and grain ads. It was a typical weekday night in a small town bar: plenty of griping and boasting, lengthy recitations of what could have been and should have been, a few stale jokes, more men than women, a lot of talk, little action.

"Would you turn up the radio?" a customer called from the far end of the bar. "That's me and Wanda's favorite song."

The bartender adjusted the dial. A twangy melancholy western tune drowned out the dull background noise.

"Turn it down! Turn that blasted thing down!" several customers shouted in unison.

The bartender found an agreeable level of volume and conversation resumed. It started to rain about nine — a light drizzle at first and then a steady hard-driving downpour. On her return trip from the ladies room, a woman in her late thirties, attractive in a tired way, paused to inquire if Jack would be in town for a while. He politely explained that he was just passing through and she rejoined her companions at the bar.

"That would be eighty cents, including the beer. Would you mind settling up now?" the waitress asked at nine-thirty. "I'm leaving in a few minutes. Buddy, that's the bartender, he'll take care of you. I'm going home to my kids." Jack handed her a dollar and told her to keep the change. At ten o'clock Jack went to the men's room and ducked into a stall. Removing the bills from the gym bag Jack distributed them around the money belt. Twenty-seven thousand dollars. Money painstakingly gleaned from his checking account in amounts that wouldn't later arouse

suspicion. It wouldn't finance the way of life he had been enjoying very long, but it could buy ten new Chevrolets. More than enough for a fresh start.

Customers, who had been checking their watches and shaking their heads for the last hour or more, decided the rain was not going to let up. One by one, they finished their beers, turned up their collars, cursed the weather and dashed into the street.

"Last call," the owner announced to Jack and two stragglers. "Closing at eleven cause of this miserable weather."

"No more for me. I gotta go to work tomorrow," the older of the two remaining men announced. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and paid his tab. Jack closed his eyes and listened to rain pounding the wood roof. The last customer drank his beer and stared out the front window at the unrelenting downpour. He was about Jack's size and weight, somewhere in his twenties – a kid. His light brown hair was home-cut and in need of a trim. His pants were deeply creased and stained with what Jack guessed to be grease. A handyman, or maybe a mechanic who worked nearby.

Jack grabbed the empty gym bag, handed a dollar bill to the bartender, and headed for the door. The kid blocked the exit.

"My truck's about a mile or so down the road. It weren't raining when I started out. I'd be grateful, mister, if you could give me a ride," the kid said.

Jack appraised the kid grinning back at him. Crooked teeth vied with one another for space, and his tired green eyes spoke of a resilience born of hardship. The faded denim shirt he wore over a grimy T-shirt would provide no protection from the cold and rain. Jack looked at the bartender owner hoping for some indication that this kid was a local, but the bartender was busy counting the day's receipts. "You having any trouble with that truck?" Jack tapped his chest. "This old ticker of mine doesn't work as good as it used to," he lied. "If you need a hand with that truck, I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to help."

"I got no trouble with the truck. Runs dandy," he assured Jack. "I left it at a farmhouse to be unloaded. Sold them folks a cord of firewood. But they had to unload and stack it themselves. That was the deal. They unload it and stack it themselves whilst I go into town."

Jack weighed the risk. He had twenty-seven thousand dollars in the money belt, but this kid didn't know that. All he knew was that it was pouring, it was cold and he needed a ride. Eleven o'clock was far too early for Jack to carry out his plan. All that awaited him was two or three hours of boredom in a parked car. "What's your name, kid?"

"Folks mostly call me Iowa."

"My name's Jack and the Porsche across the street is mine. Wait here. No sense both of us getting soaked." By the time Jack reached the car and jumped in, his hair and clothes were drenched. Mostly Iowa had fared little better. "Which direction?" Jack asked his passenger.

"You're headin' the right way. Just follow the road a piece. I'll tell you where to turn."

"Is it on the left or the right?"

"Left."

"I expect you live around here."

"Just passin' through."

They soon left the residential part of town. The driving rain and incessant flip-flop flip-flop of the windshield wipers blurred his vision. Jack tried the high beams and quickly switched back.

Pointing to a dim light on what appeared to be a house he asked, "It that it?"

"Nope. That ain't it. It's up yonder a bit."

"When I first saw you, Iowa, I said to myself, now there's a fellow who knows his way around cars. You a mechanic?"

"I fiddled with cars some. Nothing as swanky as this."

For the next two or three miles there wasn't a break in the road — not a path, planted field, farmhouse or shed, only endless sawgrass and pine trees. "That had to be some hike into town. Are you sure we didn't pass it? You did say it was on the left?"

"Yep. On the left."

While Jack had been struggling to locate the elusive house and truck, Mostly Iowa had been facing right. Damn! What an idiot he had been! A solitary man wearing expensive clothes and a flashy gold watch. A new Porsche — obviously his. A mysterious gym bag that had never left his side. A transient loner who needed a ride. "We must have passed it. I'm going to turn around."

"Just pull over here!" Mostly Iowa's eyes were cold. His right hand expertly cradled a knife.

Targeted like a deer by a hungry kid. Stalked! Jack's foot remained on the accelerator. "You don't want to do this, Iowa. How about I slow down to ten, fifteen miles an hour and you jump out? We part friends and forget this ever happened."

"You stop this here car or I'll stick you like a pig. It wouldn't bother me none to kill you."

Now Jack was a man who liked a good laugh as much as the next guy, but irony had its place. Dying the very night he scheduled his fake suicide was not his idea of a joke. Iowa grabbed Jack's right arm. "Stop this car or I'll cut out your gizzard and leave it for the birds."

"I'm not stopping the car as long as you got that knife," Jack said in a calm friendly voice. He could feel the frightening tip of the steel blade through his suede jacket. "Toss it out the window and I'll stop the car."

Iowa grabbed the steering wheel. The Porsche hydroplaned and fish-tailed, barely avoiding trees on both sides of the road.

By intuitively releasing his grip, the finely engineered racing car realigned itself. Jack glanced at his passenger looking for some hint of humanity, still hoping to change the kid's mind, yet very much aware of the danger. "You're going to get us both killed. We're doing twenty miles an hour. The ground is soft from the rain. Open the door and roll out."

"Not a chance in hell, you miserable fuck. You're going to die."

The knife slashed the jacket and dug into the money belt. If it weren't for the thick wad of bills, the blade would be boring into his rib cage. Jack deliberately swerved the car right and then left. Iowa grabbed the wheel. Using the butt of his right fist Jack smashed his attacker's hand. Iowa howled with pain and dropped the knife. He alternated curses with punches aimed at Jack's head.

Jack fought to simultaneously keep the car on the road with his left hand and ward off his attacker with his right. A pothole caught Iowa off balance. He slid away. Jack used the opportunity to use the bent right arm that had been guarding his chest and lash out, landing an explosive blow with his clenched fist. He could feel the bridge of Iowa's nose collapse, hear the bones crack.

"Goddamn you! You jackass. You busted my nose!" Iowa fumbled beneath the seat.

Seeing the dreaded knife reappear, Jack made the only decision left. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He braced himself and floored the Porsche, aiming the passenger side at a massive oak tree. Iowa reached for the wheel again, too late. The car hit the tree with a violent jolt, throwing both men forward. A branch smashed the windshield a microsecond before Jack's head reached it. The glass shattered harmlessly, but his chest had struck the steering wheel with an impact that left him gasping for air. The motor groaned and sputtered as Jack waited with his eyes closed. His chest ached with every breath. Tentatively touching his forehead he discovered a swelling throbbing bump. Jack opened his eyes. Mostly Iowa had not fared as well. He lay slumped against the door. Blood from the broken nose bathed his face, neck, and shirt. Jack didn't know if he was dead or unconscious, but he wouldn't be a threat for a while.

"Why didn't you jump when you had the chance?" Jack asked the limp figure. "Soon as I find out what kind of shape I'm in, I'll figure out what I'm going to do with you. If I can walk back to town, I'll send someone out to help. And that's better than you deserve, you dumb bastard, considering you were trying to kill me."

Limb by limb, joint by joint, Jack tested his extremities. His arms, hands, and fingers moved, painfully, but they didn't appear to be broken. He flexed one leg and then the other. "My legs seem okay," he informed his silent companion. His chest and shoulders ached. "Probably cracked a few ribs and there's a buzzing in my ears. Going to be sore for a while, as well as black and blue, but I'm alive. What about it, Iowa? You going to make it?"

Jack leaned across the inert body expecting to hear a heartbeat. Nothing. Silence. The kid was dead! Jesus Christ! He hadn't intended to kill the kid. His goal had been to prevent his own imminent demise.

"Now look what you did, Iowa. You tried to kill me and you ended up killing yourself. God damn dumb kid!" he said to keep his teeth from chattering. "God damn dumb kid!" His entire right side throbbed and he was trembling. "Got to get out of here."

He tried the door handle. It turned, but the bowed door would not budge. He threw all his weight against it and grimaced. It groaned in sympathy and swung open causing him to crash onto the muddy ground. The rain had subsided to a trickle. Jack wiped his hands on soggy moss and sat down to think beside the demolished car.

There was nothing more that could be done for Iowa. His problems were over. Jack's problems had tripled. In a day or two, Petal and the girls would read the letters he had mailed. A first-class plan wiped out because he wanted to help out a dumb kid. Okay, he told himself, if faking his suicide by leaving the Porsche on a bridge was no longer possible, he simply needed a new plan. A new plan. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The Porsche would be traced to him. They would find a dead kid in his car. If he disappeared now he would be accused of murder. Unless . . . Unless . . . Iowa was about his size. The police would assume the body belonged to Jack Morgan if – if it was unrecognizable. But how? The car and its contents would have to be burnt beyond recognition. He could do that. Provided he kept calm, and no one came along in the interim, it was a good alternative plan.

Jack removed the ruined suede jacket. It could go on the corpse. A scrap of burnt suede would add to the illusion, as would his wedding band. He had intended to sell it before he reached Texas, but it would be better used now. As he removed the ring he noticed his prized

gold watch. They might look for it. It was too bad about the watch, but it too had to go.

The tight quarters inside the crumpled Porsche, coupled with Jack's reluctance to touch the bloody corpse made the exchange time consuming, exhausting, and grisly. As a final touch, Jack traded shoes with the dead man before shoving him into position behind the wheel.

An hour had passed since the crash and no one had driven by. His luck was holding. Now he needed matches. Matches or a cigarette lighter. His pockets yielded neither. His plan would fail because he lacked a pack of matches that every bar and restaurant supplied free. Think, he told himself. There had to be a solution. The Porsche's cigarette lighter. Would it still work? Leaning over Iowa's body, Jack located it and pressed it. Thirty seconds later it popped out glowing red. God bless the Germans! Every twenty or thirty years, it took a war to remind them who was boss, but they sure knew how to build a car. Jack looked for something to start the fire. Downed branches were too wet. A dry rag. He kept a towel in the trunk.

Jack walked to the rear of the car to unlock the trunk but it wouldn't release. He kicked it with his heel. Another sharp kick. The trunk creaked open. A white, still-folded hand towel lay tucked in a corner. A few more minutes and it would be over.

He stuffed as much of the towel as would fit into the gas tank, then replaced the ignition key. As he was about to press the cigarette lighter he remembered the knife. What if it were found with the remains? Palm beach socialite Jack Morgan didn't carry a switchblade. He would have to find it. Ten minutes passed as he searched the car and the corpse. He was about to give up when he felt it lodged under the passenger seat. He folded it, tucked it into his belt, and inserted the dependable lighter.

Half a football field away Jack leaned against a tree and waited. Several times the flame appeared to die, only to flare up again. And then the rag ignited with an enormous *pop* – followed by *ear-splitting thunder*. Roaring flames, the height of a church steeple leapt from the car's rear. Jack could no longer make out Iowa's silhouette in the flames. Just a few more minutes, he told himself. The smoke and heat from the blaze reddened his face and seared his lungs. When it was time to leave Jack strode away in Iowa's ill-fitting shoes, away from the wrecked Porsche, the town of Fielding, and his past. Then he heard it. A train whistle. The magical hollow sound of a train whistle. And it wasn't far off. Damn, if he wasn't a lucky so-and-so. One of God's favorite children. Jesus tolerated the pious, sober, and abstinent. Yes, He tolerated the tiresome righteous and their smug unforgiving Christian smiles. And He had little pity for the tyrant, the merciless, and the cruel. But Jesus loved the ordinary sinner. Isn't that what the bible taught? The Almighty loved sinners. Without sinners there would have been no reason for Jesus to come to earth and experience the joy and pain of mortals.

Intoxicating freedom mingled with the chilling air. Jack could forget the chafing money belt, cheap ill-fitting shoes, sore feet, and aching muscles. He had a new name and a thousand new possibilities. The next time he found himself with a drink in his hand he would remember Iowa and raise his glass to the tragic dumb kid.

"This one's for you, Iowa, you miserable misguided creature," he would say. "May the good Lord take mercy on your soul and your time in Purgatory be brief."

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