

# 1

## A CREATURE OF HABIT

*Thursday—August 7, 1947*  
*Southern Cook County, IL*  
*Early Dawn*

Halfway up the steep gravel drive, he jammed the Commodore into second gear, raced around the side of the roadhouse and nosed the car into the cedar-sided carport at the back edge of the property. The structure was actually more of a three-sided garage than a carport, with a cobblestone floor, a glass-paned window on all sides, and a shingled gable roof.

He pulled the .38 caliber revolver from under the seat, stepped out and tucked the gun into his belt. He reached across the seat for the thermos of coffee, hammered the lock button, and slammed the door.

Wesley Donnigan was steaming. He was never in a pleasant mood in the morning, but today he was particularly aggravated by the old fart on the tractor pulling a wagon load of manure and blocking the entrance to his fine establishment. Wesley hadn't planned to start his day by plowing through an ocean of cow shit in his freshly waxed Hudson.

*Those damn things shouldn't be allowed on the road*, he thought, as he stood looking at the nasty brown clumps plastered across the rear of his otherwise gleaming car.

Wesley tucked the thermos under his arm and headed up the walkway toward his tavern. He put the key into the latch, jiggled it slightly, and with a firm twist, snapped the lock on the back door open. He walked slowly along the short hallway toward his gaming room.

Three pocket billiards tables stood in the center of the room, and scattered around the perimeter were clusters of slot machines.

Wesley stood for a while, looking for anything out of place, then headed for the front bar room.

The moment he stepped through the door he had his right hand inside his jacket, caressing the wooden handle on the .38. The neighborhood wasn't a concern, but Wesley had a good reason for the bulge in his waistband—he'd screwed a lot of people over the years. He had plenty of enemies, there was no doubt about that.

The bar room was dark, and what little light there was came from the street lamp across the highway and the two canopy lights at either end of the front porch. There was also a trace of light from the large neon sign glowing in the center of the plate-glass window.

DONNIGAN'S SALOON  
Cocktails & Cold Beer

Wesley kept the sign on all night. *It's good advertising*, he thought. *Besides, I parted with a shitload of dough to see my name in lights. Why shouldn't I shout it to the world?*

He unlocked the office where he conducted his daily business and flipped on the single light fixture in the center of the ceiling. His eyes darted quickly around the room, taking an inventory of his domain. He removed the tan leather pouch from a drawer in the massive oak desk, and placed it on the desktop along with the revolver.

It was stuffy in the office, and the temperature outside was on the way up. It had reached ninety degrees at noon the day before and was headed there again. Wesley yanked the chain on the cast iron ceiling fan, and while the blades began to push the stale air around the room, he moved to the inner wall, routinely switching on the radio that sat on a liquor cabinet directly below the lavishly framed painting that hung there. On the radio, a man was babbling something about stifling humidity and “old folks dropping like flies.”

The coffee was still steaming when he poured it into the green carnival-glass mug. He pulled a bottle of Early Times from the cabinet and dumped in a long splash. “Abracadabra,” Wesley muttered, as the aroma of the Early-morning elixir found his nostrils. “Good to the last drop.”

He lit a cigarette and took a drag while he eyeballed his artwork. It was an oil painting of LaSalle Street in the heart of Chicago. The perspective was looking south on LaSalle from Adams Street, with the Board of Trade Building rising in the background. Wesley had done a lot of business at the Rookery Building, on that corner. He leaned closer and focused on the street level café, examining the scene, as if he expected to see himself sitting at one of the tables tucking an envelope of cash into his pocket, something he'd done on many occasions.

The painting hung over a wall safe, but it wasn't there to conceal it. *First place they check. Most criminals aren't as dumb as they look.*

To Wesley, the painting was a badge of honor, a testament to his stature. He would be celebrating his forty-fourth birthday in two days, owned a thriving business, a new car was parked outside, and a five-hundred dollar painting of the Chicago financial district hung on his office wall.

*What more could a man ask for on a muggy August morning?* A cynical look came over his face when he recalled his meager beginnings, and all he had conquered to ascend to his station in life.

*He'd also been lucky, especially in regard to the war*, he thought, as he took another drag on the half-burned Chesterfield.

In August of 1940 the draft board required all men between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five to register for the draft. Those inducted were obligated for two years.

After the Japs swooped in on Pearl Harbor in December of '41, even the *old codgers* were told to hobble on down to the courthouse and enter the contest. In other words, if you were a man, and breathing, there was a chance your life might take a sudden turn. At that point, any man called was in for the duration of the war.

Fifty-million men registered for the draft, thirty-six million were classified, and ten million marched off to Europe or the Pacific. Wesley wasn't one of them.

Instead, he took the chunk-of-change his mother's spinster sister had left him when she croaked and started the business he had wanted from the time he was a kid hocking candy bars at the corner drug store. While the other poor saps were having their asses shot off on some

mosquito-infested island, Wesley Donnigan was setting up shop and rubbing elbows with some unsavory characters who knew how to make money in a number of *unlawful* ways.

He carefully removed the painting from the double support-hooks and leaned it against the wall. He spun the tumblers, swung open the door of the safe, retrieved the bulging string-bound manila envelope, and dumped the cash onto the center of the desk. Wednesdays were normally good, but last night the patrons seemed particularly high-spirited and eager to part with their hard earned wages. The jukebox had wailed from early evening until closing, and the slot machines had sung right along, always a sign of money flowing. In short, *there was an abundance of drunks in the joint trying to forget their problems, most of which, he thought, the sorry souls probably created for themselves.*

He began snapping the bills into stacks as if he were playing a promising game of solitaire, counting the beer-marinated cash with the zeal of Ebenezer Scrooge before the *ghost-of-shit-to-come* had worked him over.

Disgustedly, he set aside the two I.O.U.s nestled between the bills.

*These are probably from the same two dickheads who show up every Wednesday night with big thirsts and little money, and manage to convince my bleeding-heart bartender to fund the last act of their performance.*

When the first such incident occurred about two years ago, Wesley invited the fifty-year-old man into his office and read him the *riot act*.

“From now on, if I find any more of these little love notes in the till, they’d better have your John Hancock on them. I’m not running a goddamned soup kitchen here! Do I make myself clear, Henry? Oh, and by the way, the two-dollars and thirty-cents you owe me better be on my desk when I come in tomorrow or don’t bother making the trip!”

It didn’t take Henry long to get the message. This incident, and a few more intense sessions in Wesley’s private domain, and Henry became one of the aforementioned people with an impassioned loathing of Mr. Wesley Donnigan.

Every weekday morning—the bank was closed on Saturday and Sunday—brought the same routine for Wesley. He would come to the bar, count the loot from the safe, grade the condition of his establishment, and head for Jenny’s Diner for some ham and eggs before the bank—or “the lettuce patch” as he often referred to it—opened for business. He would make the deposit, retrieve the bank for the register, and be back in the saloon promptly at eleven to get the ship underway.

Wesley’s workday concluded with a ritual as well. He’d sit at the end of the bar, drink a draft beer with a sidecar of his favorite Kentucky whiskey, and scribble out a list of *don’t forgets*—Wesley called it *The Moron List*—for the bartender and waitresses.

When he left for the day, he would render his usual over-the-shoulder directive as he stepped out the door. “This damn ship had better be watertight when I get here in the morning, or someone will be walking the plank!”

At closing time, the bartender was expected to dump the cash and receipts into the open safe, close the door, and give the tumbler a spin or two. *As idiot-proof as I can make it*, thought Wesley. No one knew the combination to the safe, and that’s the way he wanted it.

He trusted no one, expected the worst, and didn’t care who he injured. Most people who had heard his blustering rambles would say that, in *his* mind, Wesley Donnigan *was* a sea captain, with

commanding power over a witless crew that needed direction at every turn. People talked about him frequently behind his back. The name *Captain Bligh* often came up in those conversations.

Clearly, routine behavior wasn't a good thing for a man like Wesley. It would be much too easy for someone to map out his patterns and lie in wait for a big slice of *sweet revenge*. However, Wesley couldn't help himself. He was the proverbial *creature of habit*, and that was how a *creature* behaved.

His old man had told him repeatedly, "Wesley, my boy, if you expect to amount to a hill of dung, you got to get your ass in gear and do *something*, put some structure in your life. Grab a piece of paper and a pencil." His father waited with palpable impatience while Wesley hurried off to collect the requested writing materials. "Now, make me a list of the shit you're plannin' to do today, and *standin' around* had better not be on the fuckin' list." He would usually grumble this with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, a cloud of smoke and alcohol hovering around his head, and the back of his calloused hand crashing into Wesley's jaw. The old man had a convincing nature about him, especially to a twelve-year-old boy.

His father would always close with, "Son, I'm not trying to *fool* ya—I'm trying to *school* ya," followed by a howling laugh in appreciation of his own blistering wit. Wesley had received a lot of *schooling* during his youth, and he'd learned his lessons well. Butch Donnigan had seen to that.

Wesley was about to begin his early morning inspection when Dave Garroway came on the air. "Good morning, Chicagoland," Dave exclaimed, his distinctive theme music playing in the background. "We've got a great show today, folks. Jane will be telling you how to beat the heat, and I've got a special treat for you—the Mills Brothers are here to talk about their upcoming gig at the Aragon Ballroom, and who knows? I may convince them to sing for you, so stick around, your coffee will taste better if you drink it with Dave;" more of Dave's theme song, then a commercial.

\* \* \*

A Maxwell House coffee jingle rang out as Wesley started his tour of the building. He actually relished this part of his morning routine; he *liked* discovering a *screw-up* by one of his *beloved* employees.

*There's nothing better than giving a good mid-day ass chewing*, he thought, as he snapped on the wall-mounted light fixture with a tug of the tarnished brass chain and ambled down the hallway. Perhaps he would discover a tray of dirty glasses cluttering an unwiped table, food left out to spoil, or a wet towel hanging over the back of a chair. All such violations would warrant a good thrashing; however, among the worst offenses was the dreaded unlocked window.

The windows all had wrought iron bars, but an unlocked or partially open window was an invitation to some ne'er-do-well, and deserving of severe punishment for the employee who committed the transgression. The last such incident had occurred about three months ago, when a window had been left open a crack, and a raccoon from the surrounding woods had squeezed through the opening, ransacked the kitchen, and nearly destroyed a newly-felted pocket billiards table in Wesley's gaming room. That little escapade had not only cost him money, but clientele—more money. The smell of the nasty critter lingered for weeks. Wesley had been forced to close off the room for a period of time while he had the place fumigated. To Wesley's chagrin, a big

portion of his gambling crowd began to hang out at The Lobby, a pool hall in the basement of a local fleabag with a row of slots and a high-stakes poker game every Friday night. Over time, the lost patrons began to wander back in, but many, those who didn't like Wesley to begin with, were lost forever.

As Wesley justice would have it, that little screw-up cost the guilty waitress a week's pay and her job. "I'll give you that much," Wesley told Bonnie. "You *do* show up on time. Unfortunately, it seems you leave your fucking brain at the curb. Maybe you'll find it on your way out. Now gather your shit and hit the bricks!"

Bonnie Yanson left the bar with tears streaming down her face and was never seen again at the saloon. Wesley had been looking for a reason to fire her. She had become a thorn in his side.

*She was the woman with all the answers, the big sister the younger waitresses turned to when they were looking to cry their hearts out. I don't need her kind around putting ideas into their mindless heads.*

He lit another cigarette, tucked his trusty companion back into his waistband, and walked toward the front bar room. While he moved along, Garroway announced the arrival of the Mills Brothers and followed it with, "Don't go away, because when we return, we're going to hear them sing their number one hit from a few years back—*You Always Hurt the One You love.*"

The words struck Wesley's mind like a bolt of lightning. Images of the incident back in May began to materialize; a vision of Marcia's blood-streaked face began to swell in his brain.

*Did she actually believe I wouldn't find her?* he thought, while he walked across the wood-planked floor. He was a man of structure, organized and deliberate. After she had done her disappearing act, he had conjured up a plan, a list of the things he would do to track her down and bring her home. *The list didn't include any fuckin' standin' around!*

Wesley knew men who hung out in dark places, the type of men who could get information, one way or another, especially when there was a payday involved. He hadn't found her *yet*, but the noose was tightening.

*A little more probing and she'll be back in my loving arms. I didn't hit her that hard. Everything would have been ship-shape if she had only listened to reason. After all, isn't it a woman's duty to stand by her man?* Wesley thought, as he continued his inspection.

He shot a quick glance behind the bar. Satisfied that things were in order, he walked to the front door, squeezed the thumb latch, and tugged on the door.

*No unlocked doors as yet, but in light of the crew I have working for me, I wouldn't be all that surprised to discover one.*

He pulled his keys from his pocket, unlocked the door, and stepped out onto the expansive concrete porch.

While he stood there, he thought back to when he had purchased the business. The previous owner had lost his shirt in a sour business deal, and Wesley jumped on the opportunity to relieve the financially strapped man of his capsized mortgage.

He had always admired the building. The black wrought iron porch railing against the red brick and the position it occupied at the top of the hill, set back from the road, gave it a stately look.

A locomotive was rolling by on the railroad tracks across the highway. His eyes followed the engine as it moved along, but subconsciously his brain was still checking off the tasks at hand, the mental-list he followed each day to keep the ship on course.

He stepped back inside, locked the front door, and headed for his office, satisfied that all was well in Donnigan's Saloon.

The lyrics of the Mills Brothers' song echoed through the dimly lit hallway, and again Wesley's thoughts shifted to Marcia, the look on her face when she realized he'd seen her with Johnny Parks.

"After *all* I did for her," Wesley mumbled. *The bitch had the nerve to leave without so much as a note. There would be the devil to pay, and I'm just the man to collect—*

His train of thought was broken when he heard a noise.

He rushed through the gaming room to a rear window and peered through the bars in the direction of the carport. The galvanized trash can that normally stood at the corner of the structure was lying on its side in the middle of the lawn. Instinctively, he reached for the .38. Suddenly, a cat leapt from the shadow of the carport, darted first toward the roadhouse, did a midair flip, and reversed direction when he saw Wesley in the window. He watched as the stocky calico shot across the lawn and into the gully at the back edge of his property.

*Damn feline hairball.* He'd seen the cat rummaging through the garbage on several occasions. "You'll get yours," he muttered. *Nothing that a piece of leftover perch and a dash of rat poison can't fix.*

He turned and walked toward his office where he would await the arrival of Max Harmon, his bodyguard and devoted errand boy.

\* \* \*

Wesley dumped another splash of whiskey into his coffee and took a long drink while he inspected the drawings on the desk in front of him. They were renderings of the interior layout of the renovated building that would soon house the new tavern he was opening west of Chicago.

Cook County was becoming a tough place to do business. The Outfit was squeezing all the joints with slot machines, making it increasingly more difficult for a man to make a *dishonest* living. He'd always laid out more than his share of protection money, but every time he turned around, someone was reaching into his pocket for more. Wesley called it "the Irish surtax."

It wasn't that he was hurting for dough; business was booming. Nonetheless, he resented the way the wops operated. *I do the work, and they collect a bigger and bigger chunk of the take—not exactly what I had in mind when I opened the damn joint.*

He looked at his watch and took another drag on his cigarette. *A quarter after six. Max should have been here by now.*

Wesley had planned to finish his early morning activities, and have Max drive him to Aurora, IL, where he would do a walkthrough of his new establishment. On the return trip they would make a couple stops to collect on a few overdue gambling debts. Max Harmon was good at that kind of assignment; he always left a *memorable impression* on those he met.

On Wednesdays, Max would typically spend the afternoon at the racetrack, and nine times out of ten he would get too drunk to drive. He'd call his girlfriend, she would dump him into the

back seat of the car, and drive to her place, a short distance from the roadhouse. They would shack up for the night, and the following morning, when Max came out of his drunken stupor, he'd walk the half-mile and report in for duty—*but not today*.

*Expecting Numb-Nuts to be here at six is about the same as expecting him to count to twenty without removing his shoes and socks*, Wesley thought, while he stood looking impatiently out the window. *He's a good man to have on your side if you need a little muscle. Just don't ask him to do anything that calls for thinking.*

He gave a final cursory look around the office, grabbed the leather pouch and headed for the door.

*Looks like a change of plans is in order. He locked the door and walked toward the carport. I'll have breakfast, swing by and roust Max out of the sack, and do my banking while Numb-Nuts washes the cow shit off the car. Shampooing the car won't be the only penance he'll endure for fucking up my day.* Wesley's creative juices were flowing—nefarious punishments were already popping into his brain.

He tucked the .38 under the front seat and slid behind the wheel, the mohair upholstery creating enough static electricity to give him an annoying zap when he stuck the key into the ignition. He backed the car out, shifted into first, and eased the Hudson forward, around the carport and along the gravel driveway toward the highway below.

\* \* \*

Later that same day, Claudia Miller, teller, sat in the lunchroom of the First National Bank of Chicago Pointe, eating a tuna salad sandwich. She was musing about the lovely morning she had experienced. Not until she consciously thought about it did she realize why she felt so good. There had been no early morning barrage of sexual innuendo, sarcasm, and piercing glares to taint her morning. Mr. Wesley Donnigan hadn't conducted his business as usual.

Claudia couldn't help but wonder—why? Not that she was concerned about the man—he repulsed her—but simply because she couldn't recall another day, in recent times, when he'd failed to appear.

*Why ruin a good thing?* she thought, and quickly vanquished all thoughts of the man.

\* \* \*

A few miles down the road, the folks at Jenny's Diner had experienced a similarly peaceful morning.

# 2

## FOLLOW THE TRACKS

*Bargetown, IL*

*Thursday—August 7, 1947*

*Afternoon*

Bert Thatcher, Bargetown's chief of police for the last twenty years, was standing about a hundred yards down the railroad tracks when Grady Colston spotted him from the highway.

Grady slowly worked his way down the steep, moss-covered concrete embankment under the overpass. A foot in the wrong place and he would be on his ass, sliding toward the thick patch of bramble below.

When he reached level ground, he walked along the narrow, overgrown path to a small clearing where he had access to the tracks. A dozen crows were circling overhead, and from a nearby grove of pines, he could hear the annoying chatter of a host of others. He climbed the mound of ballast, stepped between the rails, and began moving from one tie to the next, carefully avoiding the pools of oil that had collected in several locations along the way. The last time he'd walked a stretch of tracks he had to scrap the pants he was wearing and use turpentine to remove the tar and oil that coated his newly polished Florsheims.

Grady had been a railroad detective for more than two decades. He had walked miles of track. *Not my favorite part of the job*, he thought, as he moved gingerly along, instinctively looking for anything that didn't fit the scene.

He could smell the diesel fuel from the exhaust vents in the corrugated-metal Quonset hut in the lot adjacent to the tracks. The mechanics were busy inside. He could hear the sound of motors and metal-to-metal hammering. The sign on the front of the building read:

### WILKES DIESEL ENGINE REPAIR

As he approached, he could see patches of sweat adorning the Chief's khaki shirt. His dark green trousers were sharply creased, and there was a narrow black stripe running down the outside seam. The green matched the wide-brimmed straw campaign hat that sat high on his head. His holster was slung low around his waist to accommodate his melon-sized belly, and the .45 revolver looked a lot like the one Joel McCrea used to shoot his way through Indian Territory in a movie Grady had seen a year ago.

He'd never met Bert Thatcher, but recognized him from photographs. Bert was puffing on a cigar, studying the scene around the body that lay at his feet. Grady extended his hand. Bert grabbed it, squeezed, and pumped like he was trying to bring water up from a dry well.

"Good to finally meet you, Mr. Colston."



“It’s a pleasure, please, call me Grady. I don’t know why we haven’t bumped into each other over the years, Chief. We’ve both been at this business a long time.”

“I saw you around the depot a time or two. Meant to introduce myself, but wasn’t quick enough on the draw. You were gone before I could get to you.”

“How did you know I was in town?”

“I had my secretary call the Illinois Central office about an hour ago to get some information on the train schedules, and they told her you were here. Good thing they were able to get ahold of you before you checked out. I’m bettin’ you’ve dealt with a lot more stiffs over the years than I have, and I’ve got a strong feelin’ I’m going to need all the help I can get on this one.”

Bert reached down, lifted the gray tarp from the body, and tossed it aside. It was a man’s body, lying face down, outside and parallel to one of the track rails. The light green short-sleeved shirt and dark pants he wore were matted with dried blood that had flowed from a place below his right shoulder, where his arm had been attached.

“Where the hell is his arm?” Grady asked, scanning the area for a clue.