

Mickey was on overnight duty, and much to Freddy's surprise, Jake invited Freddy to go out for the evening.

"I wanted to get away from my desk," Jake explained as they were finishing big slices of peach pie at the Blue Moon. "As if Steiner's fire isn't enough to worry about, Bascomb, the guy who's storing the doors in the Teller Building, is getting to be a real pain in the neck. He finally finds a warehouse for his doors and windows and stuff, then says he can't have the place until July tenth. So, along comes July tenth and he tells me he has to have racks built to hold the doors, so could he have a week or so to get 'em built. Fine, I say, like a real dummy, forgetting he's already got the racks the stuff is sitting on now. Well, finally he sends a truck down from Cleveland. The workmen take six doors down in the freight elevator, load 'em in the truck, and when they get in the elevator to go up for another load, nothing happens. The damn elevator's broken. Bascomb comes crying. He needs time to get the elevator fixed. So, what can I do? His workmen refuse to make trips up and down the stairs. I can't force him to throw the stuff out the window, so I'm stuck."

"That's not the reason you wanted to be away from the firehouse," Freddy said, watching one of the waitresses. "You never wanna go anywhere, Jake. You want Mickey alone in the station, that's all. I know what you're thinking."

"Okay, you're right. I want him to know I trust him and have complete confidence in his ability to handle anything that comes up."

"Do you?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay, so Mickey's on duty and we got no plans for the rest of the evening, so what do ya wanna do?"

Jake chuckled, "I don't know. I only got as far as deciding we should go out for supper."

Freddy pointed at Jake with his fork. "We can go swimming at Laura's farm. She said we could go anytime we wanted to, remember?"

"Hah, not me, pal. She thinks I'm the worst person on earth, in case you forgot. According to her it's all my fault that Dan's on the run. It's all my fault that her life got ruined because her husband finally got caught doing whatever crap he was doing for God-knows-how-many-years before you and I got here. And, it's all my fault because I found the baby. Un-uh, you can go swimming if you want to, but if I was to show up there, she'd probably run me through with a manure fork."

"Well, it was just a thought... Hey, let's go to New Colton; there's a couple of decent speaks there, and no one'd know who we are."

"Naw, I don't think so."

"Aw, c'mon, Jake, where's your spirit of adventure? And besides, how is Mickey gonna believe you trust him to run things if you're only a couple of minutes away? That's all there is to it, we gotta be out of town." Freddy stood up, already impatient to get underway. "C'mon, you pay the bill and I'll meetcha at the firehouse. I'll tell Mickey what we're doin' and get the Chevy warmed up."

"I didn't say I was going to buy you supper, Freddy, and I didn't agree to go to some speak in New Colton," Jake protested.

"But you'd do both," Freddy said, leaving Jake to pay the check.

"For chrissake, Freddy, this is all farms," Jake complained as the Chevy bucked into a pothole on Weston Road in the town of New Colton.

"Trust me, I know the place," Freddy replied. "There it is, right where that maroon Chrysler is turning left. Leave it to me, Jake, I know what I'm doing. I've been here before."

"How come you never said anything about it?"

Freddy parked the Chevy next to the Chrysler. "I don't tell you everything, pal. Besides, you'd know all these places, too, if you ever went out."

"Don't start on your Jake-you-should-go-out campaign again, Freddy. When I want to date, I

will, and that's that.ö

öSee, there you go, jumping to conclusions,ö Freddy said as they walked towards an innocuous-looking bungalow, öI never said a single word about dating. For your information, Jake, you and I have gone out for the evening tonight and we sure as hell aren't on a date.ö

An hour later Jake was on his third ginger ale and second helping of little sandwiches and tarts from the buffet table. Freddy was well into his third rum and Coke, and had found a dancing partner whose breasts threatened to spill out the front of her kelly green dress.

öShe looks like she's about fifteen. You're asking for trouble, pal,ö Jake warned when Freddy came back to the table.

öIf she's in here, she ain't fifteen,ö Freddy retorted.

Jake said, öFive bucks says she's under twenty.ö

öYou're on.ö

When Freddy left the table, Jake went back to the buffet table and then found a friendly poker game. He didn't see Freddy again until it was time to leave.

öI shoulda listened to ya,ö Freddy grumbled as Jake drove the Chevy back towards Woodhill. The drinks had pretty much worn off, but Freddy had a ways to go before Jake would consider him sober.

öShe turned out to be a freak. Held onta me like a goddam leech. I just about broke my ribs tryin' not to laugh at her, until I started feelin' sorry for her for bein' so stupid. I hate having to feel sorry for people! Not only that, I only got five bucks for winning our bet, and you made twenty-two at poker, and you're a lousy poker player. In fact, Jake, I don't know how you coulda won unless all those other guys were more rotten players than you. The only thing you play good is that stupid backgammon which no one in the whole world plays any more except maybe a couple of idiots in Egypt. I mean, what good is it to be a champion player of something no one plays, huh? I don't believe it. Twenty-two bucks!ö

öI had a good time, Freddy. Thanks for taking me there. And there's something else I want to thank you for.ö

öDon't thank me, just gimme the twenty-two bucks.ö

öNo, no, I'm being serious.ö

öSo am I.ö

öFreddy, for chrissake, willya let me thank you without having a major crisis about it?ö

öOkay, thank me. What are you thanking me for?ö

öFor pushing me into going to the hospital this morning.ö

öYou're kidding.ö Freddy had been slouching in the passenger seat, but now he sat up straight.

öNo I'm not. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Once I got in there and reminded myself I wasn't a patient I was okay. I even went into the x-ray department with Mickey and talked to the man who took the x-ray picture.ö

öYeah, Mickey told me, and just so you don't blame him, he was not the person who told me you came this closeö ö Freddy shoved his thumb and index finger, held about an inch apart, in front of Jake's noseö öto passing out in the emergency room.ö

Jake slammed his fist on the steering wheel. öI knew it! One little problem and everyone and their grandmother knows about it! So, who's the bigmouth who told?ö

öOne of the nurses told Casey, and he told me, but don't blame him, he was only worried about you. By the way, Jake, since we're being serious, what are you gonna do about Mickey?ö

öWhat do you mean?ö

öYou know. In case he has one of those spells again.ö

öFreddy, there's nothing wrong with Mickey. He's perfectly capable of doing his job and I don't want you planting the smallest seed of doubt in his mind, you understand? He pulled Steiner out of that house, and unfortunately he fell apart for a few minutes afterward. That's all there was to it.ö

öYeah, but he didn't fall apart because of pulling Steiner out, pal. He was havin' a nightmare

about Phil and Gordie. It wouldn't have been so bad if they were like yours and only happened when you were sleeping in your own bed, but he was wide awake when it happened. He went back in time, like some kinda science fiction novel. You can't tell me that that's a normal reaction to doing your job. Look, Jake, you and me have brought people outta burning buildings more'n once, and neither one of us went nuts afterwards, did we? We were both there when Gordie's blood went spurting and I was right there with you when you got hit in the leg, and I swear on a stack of bibles, Jake, I never once had a nightmare about it, not once. I was so goddam thankful that the three of us were okay. Freddy broke off abruptly and gazed out the passenger side window.