

1

Pepper Marlow woke me up at midnight. Pepper always phoned me at midnight. Bartenders do that. I guess they figure that if they're up at that hour then so should everyone else be. O'Bannon's Saloon in Edison Park where Pepper bartends is a watering hole for Chicago cops. I've been known to throw a few back in there, but I haven't been in O'Bannon's in a little over a coon's age. I guess Pepper missed me.

"I'm worried about Eddie," Pepper yelled into the mouthpiece of the phone. The noise in the barroom made hearing him difficult. "He hasn't been around for a couple of nights. You know Eddie. O'Bannon's is his second home."

"More like his first," I said matching the strength of Pepper's voice decibel to decibel.

"I'll give you that," Pepper said. "All the guys here are worried about the bum. You know how Eddie hasn't been the same ever since his wife died."

The fact was, I didn't know. I lost track of my former homicide partner six months ago.

"You'll go and check on the bum won't you, Joey?"

I wanted to get back to sleep. Lately, I haven't been getting a full night's worth of sleep, so when I started on one I wanted to keep it going until morning.

"He's probably nursing a summer cold. I'll call him in the morning," I said.

Pepper didn't buy the brush-off.

"Go and check on him, Joe?"

"Now? Tonight?"

"Yea now. I'll make it up to ya."

"And how will you do that Pepper? You going to give me back my lost hours of sleep?"

"Joey Boy, you know how it works. You used to be a cop. We look after one another. Come on, go over there."

How could I refuse a sentiment put so eloquently? Reluctantly, I agreed. I hung up on Pepper and rolled out of bed. I pulled on some dirty clothes that didn't smell too bad and headed out the door.

My eyes were still fighting off the Sandman, so I eighty-sixed the idea of taking the Cadillac out of the garage. I hailed down a taxicab instead.

Eddie lived in Chinatown in an apartment above a Chinese laundry. The cab driver didn't want to take me there. I didn't blame him. Chinatown isn't safe at night. I carry a howitzer-sized handgun that will drop an elephant at fifty paces, but even I look both ways when I'm down there. A crisp new twenty-dollar bill changed the cab driver's mind.

The taxi cruised to a stop in front of the Chinese laundry. I sat for a moment staring at the building. I had been here once before shortly after Eddie moved into his apartment. I didn't like what I saw. The one bedroom apartment was scantily furnished. The carpet was worn and dirty, and the air felt wet with humidity from the washing machines below. The bedroom reeked of bleach. Eddie had a bungalow in Edison Park. I never understood why he sold that house and moved into this dump with the Chinks. I chalked it up to a broken heart.

The taxi driver started drumming his fingers on the steering wheel signaling that my time was up. I gathered myself and stepped out of his vehicle. The cab lunged away leaving me standing alone on a sidewalk in Chinatown.

The night was thick with fog and the smell of opium. Only one street lamp worked on my side of the street, and it gave off little light. A cat screeched, and a trashcan crashed to the ground. The sounds cut through the night making my heart pound faster than a drummer's double paradiddle.

I wasted no more time. I held my breath and beat a path to the side of the Chinese laundry. There a door opened to stairs leading to Eddie's second-floor apartment. I took the stairs in twos using a spec of light coming from the bulb above Eddie's apartment door as my beacon.

I stopped at the top of the stairs and caught my breath. I knocked on Eddie's door. He didn't answer, so I went for the spare key. I pried up the floorboard using my penknife. Lifting one end of the board, I reached under. My fingertips brushed against the key. I lifted it out from its hiding place, let the floorboard snap back in place, and opened the door.

The apartment was darker than the inside of an old shoe. It smelled like one too. I stood in the open doorway letting my eyes focus on the darkness.

"Hey Eddie, it is Joe. I'm coming in," I yelled out. Eddie slept with a gun tucked under his mattress. I didn't want to get shot while doing a good deed.

Eddie's weak voice called from the back bedroom. I patted down the wall by the door and found the light switch. What I saw in the room disgusted me. Empty wine bottles scattered the tabletops, crushed beer cans littered the floor and dirty dishes piled in the kitchen sink. Eddie was living like a derelict. I blamed myself for letting this happen. I should have been a better friend and partner. I should have looked after him more.

Eddie called to me again, and I followed his voice to the bedroom.

A table lamp was on next to his bed. Eddie was sitting up in bed, his elbows propping him up his tee shirt soaked to his skin. A heat wave had its mitts around Chicago's neck like a molten fist. The thermometer had reached the hardball stage seven out of the last ten days. It was the kind of heat that wrapped itself around you like a saran wrap jacket sweating your insides dry. The humidity from the laundry below made the room as hot as a Turkish bathhouse.

Eddie looked bad. Two red balls took the place of his eyes. His hair was thin his skin rice paper thin and transparent over brittle bone. An empty whiskey bottle was on the floor next to the bed. There was one more on the nightstand. Eddie was drinking himself to death.

"Jesus Eddie, what are you doing? Curing your cold at the expense of your liver?"

"What cold?" Eddie grumbled. His voice was raspy from years of cigarette smoking.

"Do me a favor Joe. Go to the corner store and get me a bottle. Will ya do that, Joe?"

"How about I fire up a pot of coffee instead? I can cook you some eggs."

"You'll have to choke a chicken first. There are no eggs."

"Then I'll go and find an all-night grocery and get you some soup or something to eat. You got to eat something, Eddie. There are no vitamins in that hooch you drink."

Eddie let his arms collapse. He dropped down on the mattress.

“Be that way,” he garbled. “You always were a pushy bastard.” He covered his mouth and coughed, wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “There’s a can of Campbell’s in the kitchen cabinet.”

I went back to the kitchen and dug the can of soup and a pan out of the cabinet. I cleaned the kitchen and living room while the soup heated. I found a loaf of day old bread in the refrigerator. Then carried two slices of the bread and a bowl of soup to Eddie. I sat next to his bed watching him eat. He ate another bowl of soup and afterward nodded off to sleep. I stayed while he slept.

Eddie woke up a few minutes before noon. He said that he felt much better. He took a shower and changed into clean clothes. We sat at his kitchen table eating toasted bread and drinking coffee. Like old friends, we reminisced about old times. After breakfast, he said that he was tired. He crawled back into bed and thanked me for being his friend. I promised to look in on him. Sleep hit Eddie fast. As a concerto of snoring began, I tip-toed out of the apartment. I locked the door behind me and replaced the spare key under the floorboard.

In daylight, Chinatown came alive. Colorful pagoda shaped buildings lined Main Street. Paper Chinese lanterns hung from lamp poles. I took a look up at Eddie’s apartment.

Little did I know then, but that day would be the last time I would see Eddie Fudge alive.