

Shotgun Lullaby

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CHAPTER ONE

If Walmart is too swank for your taste, maybe a little pricey, you shop at Ocean State Job Lot.

Me and Gus Biletnikov were parked outside one, waiting for a thief to get off work.

Marlborough, Massachusetts. Strip mall on Route 20, a busy east-west road that'll take you all the way across the state if you're not in a hurry. The strip mall had grown without any real plan—only locals knew which half-assed access roads led to what. An off-brand supermarket, an off-brand clothing store, a rental center, a good barbecue joint, a CVS.

An Ocean State Job Lot.

I spotted the guy leaving the store for the night. Whipping off his blue smock before he was three steps out the door, balling it in a fist. He headed for a black early-nineties Mustang. The Mustang: immaculate, maybe the nicest car in the lot.

I said, "That Andrade?"

Gus nodded. "The one and only. Should I duck?"

"Don't bother."

"You mind if I just wet my pants then?"

I started my truck, dropped it in drive. Turned off the dome light,

unlatched my door, held it ajar. Slow-rolled toward Andrade, angling up behind him.

I was on him before he looked. With my dome light off, he couldn't see inside the truck. So the first he knew of me was when I slammed my door into him.

Andrade grabbed his right elbow and went down. I stopped, hopped out, stepped on his chest. "Gus Biletnikov does not owe you any money," I said.

"I sold that little prick a Focus," Andrade said. "I gave him a break, took half up front even though I doubted he was good for the rest. He still owes me six-fifty."

I leaned into the boot on his chest. "You sold Roy a piece of shit."

Confusion flashed in Andrade's eyes. I ignored it. "You rolled back the odometer. You cooked up the inspection sticker yourself. The six-fifty *might* make the car roadworthy. He doesn't owe you a god-damn nickel."

Andrade looked at the sodium light above us, waited for his breath to come back. A car slowed to watch. I stared. It rolled on past.

"Fucking junkie owes me six fifty," Andrade finally said. "I know who you are. I got friends too, tough guy."

Give him credit for guts.

I sighed. Took his right hand, raised it, pistoned his elbow into the busted tarmac.

Twice.

The first time, it made a ball-bat sound. The second time, it made a crunchy sound.

I dropped his arm. "Gus Biletnikov does not owe you any money."

Andrade passed out. It was the first smart thing he'd done.

Then I drove Gus back to Framingham.

He was speechless for a while.

But only for a while.

"I've seen some shit," he finally said, "but that was . . . Conway, you are the *man!*"

I drove.

He said, "My roommate and I had a few encounters with these heavy gangster types. Did I ever tell you about that?"

He said, "You ever hear the term 'noble savage'? You are primitive, man. You are . . . *pure!*"

I drove.

He said, "Who's Roy?"

"My son," I said. "Why?"

"Aha."

"Aha what?" I said. "How do you know Roy?"

"Never mind."

I drove.

And thought.

A few miles later, replaying the parking-lot scene in my head, I figured out how Gus had picked up Roy's name. I felt stupid and simple and easy to read. My face went hot.

When we hit downtown Framingham, Gus said, "I live here, over the sub shop."

It was a halfway house called Almost Home. I know a bunch of guys who've spent time there. A couple are still sober, far as I know.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow at six thirty," I said as he climbed out. "We'll hit a meeting in Milford. You can get up and speak. You're good at that."

"Oh."

I started to pull away, happy for the silence. But stopped, waved Gus to the open passenger window. "I don't know anything about this Andrade," I said. "Watch yourself."

"Will do. Now here's the thing about that meeting tomorrow . . ."

I pulled away.

The kid could run his mouth. I liked him anyway.

Gus Biletnikov had stood out from the second he banister-slid into the church basement for the weekly meeting of the Barnburners, the AA group that saved my life. The Barnburners are semifamous in the tight world of AA. Judges, cops, and counselors send us drunks and addicts who are teetering. Who are set to die or live or go to prison forever, with much depending on how their next few weeks turn out.

The judges, cops, and counselors know we're a hardcore group, so they warn the fresh fish that when they hit the basement of Saint Anne's, they'd best keep their ears open and their mouths shut.

The addicts are usually intimidated enough to take the advice.

Not Gus.

He truly had hopped on the banister and slid sidesaddle to the bottom, hollering "Whee!" like a seven-year-old. Then he'd bopped through the double doors into the big room, causing enough commotion that I stopped fiddling with the microphone and stared.

And opened my mouth.

He looked just like my son.

It was so obvious that a couple of Barnburners I knew well looked from Gus to me and back. They'd seen pictures. They thought the lippy, skinny kid tossing his bangs from his eyes was Roy.

Other than in looks, though, he wasn't anything like Roy.

Roy's suspicious of the world. He *hides* behind his bangs, staring out at the world like a stray dog that knows he's going to get hit—but doesn't know who by.

This kid, on the other hand . . . he knew he'd created a commotion. And he loved it. Took three giant strides forward, navigating the aisle between the folding chairs. Put both hands over his heart like a hambone actor and said, "Ah am *here!* Ah am *here!* Ah am *here*, Lord, to be saved by the mighty, mighty Barnburners!"

Then he dropped to a knee like Elvis Presley, made a big show of

crossing himself, sidestepped over to a chair, and plopped down next to a fiftyish woman who looked at him like he was from Mars.

Gus never did learn how close he came to getting an old-fashioned bum's rush that night. Skinny Dennis and Pablo, bikers from Medway who would've lassoed a freight train for me, raised their eyebrows at the back of the room. If I nodded, they would take the kid by his armpits and jeans pockets, quickstep him up the stairs, and see how far they could toss him into the parking lot. It wouldn't be the first time.

I damn near nodded.

But the kid had figured out instinctively that in this room, I had some juice.

He was meeting my eyes.

He was not afraid.

And he looked like my son.

I shook my head at Skinny Dennis and Pablo. They went back to their conversation.

We Barnburners set up Saint Anne's our own way. Most of the folding chairs face the podium, of course. But there's a little bump-out in the room's northwest corner, and for as long as I've been around, somebody sets a dozen or so chairs at an angle that lets the leaders and old-timers keep an eye on the entire joint.

To newcomers, they look like seats for a jury. And that's about right.

They're reserved for the Meeting After the Meeting crowd.

I'm part of that crowd, so throughout that night's meeting, I got an eyeful of the kid who turned out to be Gus Biletnikov. He mugged and made exaggerated nods and got a big kick out of himself. Once, while a black woman spoke, he said, "Testify, sister!"

I knew Skinny Dennis and Pablo were itching to toss the kid. Truth be told, I was with them. After the meeting, I figured, I would nod once to the bikers. They would escort the punk to the parking

lot and explain that we Barnburners specialized in serious AA for serious people and he'd best find himself another meeting.

But something happened at the end.

As always, we closed by joining hands and saying the Lord's Prayer.

It's hard to explain, but during the prayer, I always feel like I've *done* something. Like I've risen above myself, maybe even done something to be proud of—if sitting on your ass for an hour can fit that description. The prayer is the best part of the meeting. Sometimes it's the best part of my week.

Instinct made me open one eye during that evening's prayer.

I looked at the wiseass kid.

He wasn't being a wiseass.

His hands gripped those of the folks on either side of him. His lips moved as he prayed. His eyes were shut tight.

And he was crying honest tears.

And that meant he wasn't all bad.

So there was no bum's rush after all. Instead, twenty minutes later, my Meeting After the Meeting pals assigned me to connect with the new kid, to see what he was all about.

I didn't mind.

And that didn't have anything to do with the fact that the kid looked just like Roy.

Hardly anything.

The assignment led me to ask around among counselors and parole officers and rehab operators. Which led me to Almost Home and to Gus Biletnikov. Who, it turned out, had a problem with a shitbox car he'd bought from Andrade.

The morning after I pulped Andrade's elbow, I had an Infiniti on the lift for its 125,000-mile service when a cruiser pulled into my small parking lot. White Crown Vic, FRAMINGHAM in blue filling its flank.

Matt Bogardis climbed from the cruiser. Matt's a good guy, a big guy. The cop gear on his belt jangled and clanked as he came and stood behind the Infiniti. He watched me put on the differential cover with a fourteen-millimeter hand socket.

Matt said, "Wouldn't the job go faster if you used the air gun?"

"The gun's for taking things off. Hand tools are for putting things back together. Ram a bolt in with an air gun, you can strip the threads."

"I've seen a lot of mechanics put things together with air guns."

"Dealerships, Jiffy Lubes, Midas Mufflers," I said. "Those aren't mechanics. They're trained chimpanzees. Only they're not trained."

"Picky bastard, huh?" Matt said it to Floriano Mendes, my partner. Floriano was kicking support arms beneath a Civic at the next lift over.

"Tell me about it," Floriano said.

Matt watched us work.

"Marlborough cops are wondering were you out that way last night," he said after a while. "Route 20? The Ocean State Job Lot?"

"No."

"Reason they're wondering," he said, "some guy got the shit kicked out of him. Kid named Andrade, works at the Job Lot."

"Don't know him."

"Parking lot security cam caught an F-250 like yours. Light in color, like yours. Partial plate that kinda-sorta-maybe starts the way yours does."

I snugged up the last bolt. "Kinda-sorta-maybe, huh?"

He shrugged.

I said, "What's Andrade say?"

"Not a damn word. He was pissed the hospital called us in the first place. Said he'd take care of it himself."

I wiped the differential cover with a shop rag. "Can't help you, Matt."

"Thought so." He paused. "Andrade sells used cars on the side. Shitboxes, nothing over fifteen hundred bucks. He bootlegs the

inspection stickers and sells to people who can't afford anything better. Illegals, mostly. They get pulled over and the cop notices the sticker, they're shit outta luck."

"Marlborough cops all bummed out because he got beat up?"

"I didn't get that feeling. But Conway"—he waited until I looked at him—"one of these days, you'll beat up the wrong guy. He'll have a gun, or a bunch of shitfaced buddies. There's only so much I can do. I'm a cop who you know, but I'm not your friend the cop. See the difference?"

I nodded and watched Matt jangle and clank back to his cruiser. Good guy.

A soft spring rain was starting as I pulled over for Gus. He waited under the sub shop's green awning, finishing off a bag of potato chips. Didn't notice me for a few seconds. Under the light brown hair, longish, that fell across his forehead with no real part, he had round brown eyes. Looked even younger than he was, with a peach-fuzz face and a chin that made him look a little like an elf. When you spoke with him, he had a presence, but looking at him there on the sidewalk, I realized he was shorter and skinnier than Roy.

He spotted me. Wiped hands on pants, climbed in. "Anybody else coming?"

"Charlene'll meet us there with a carload of Barnburners."

Gus lip-puffed hair from his eyes. "As I was saying last night, I'm not sure this is the ideal night for me to lose my AA virginity. I'd feel more comfortable doing a little recon, get my drift? Observing and absorbing. I mean, if I speak tonight, doesn't that rob an AA veteran, somebody like yourself, of a chance to lay some wisdom on the flock?"

"You'll speak tonight."

"Jesus!" He pounded a fist on his thigh, then folded his arms in a five-year-old's pout. Which is identical to a junkie's pout.

We drove.

“The Barnburners asked me to show you the ropes,” I said after a while. “These are the ropes. You want me off your back? Then find a sponsor, get a job, show some progress. Until then, I’m it. Barnburner-appointed.”

“The Barnburners this, the Barnburners that. You talk like they’re the C-I-fucking-A. As far as I can see, they’re a bunch of cliquy old alkies.”

Without taking my eyes off the road, I grabbed a handful of his button-down shirt. “The Barnburners saved my life. I do what they ask me to do. Sometimes I throw a scare into shitbirds like Andrade. Sometimes I slap some sense into bigmouth college boys fresh out of rehab.” I let go of his shirt all at once, feeling like a jerk. “You’ll speak tonight.”

He shut up for the rest of the ride. I glanced at him a lot. Wanted to say I was sorry, but couldn’t. And couldn’t figure out why I couldn’t.

I chaired the Milford meeting. Gymnasium, Catholic school next to a Wendy’s. Through the gym’s open windows, you could hear tires hiss on wet pavement. You could smell french fries.

Usually, the chairman doesn’t do much except introduce speakers and pull the raffle ticket. But most of Charlene’s promised Barnburners had crapped out, and the ones who did show kept their stories short.

I finally introduced Gus. He rose, dragged himself to the podium, faced the room.

Then he opened his mouth, and he did damn well. Better than any first-timer had a right to. I’d known he would, natural-born bullshit-ter that he was. He told his drunk log and his drug log, made everybody laugh a few times, pumped out clichés about learning from old-timers like me, and sat to genuine applause.

As I returned to the podium, I shook Gus's hand. Whispered that I was proud of him. Meant it. Hoped he knew I was sorry for roughing him up.

I was fresh out of speakers and had fifteen minutes to fill.

Hell.

I looked at Charlene. She batted her eyes at me, laughing inside, knowing I didn't like to speak but was trapped.

Deep breath. "I'm Conway," I said. "I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict."

Hi, Conway.

I squared up and told my story.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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