

Hunter

© Wendy Neeld 2005

I hate these shitty little towns. Hate 'em with a passion. Maybe they remind me of something I'd rather forget. I grew up in one of these little shit holes, a mining town that died when the environmentalists screamed about the inefficiency of fossil fuels and the big companies started polluting third world countries instead of the Appalachians. I grew up there, yeah, and as a little kid I loved the damn place. But the landscape changed when I got a little older. All those old guys coughing up black phlegm make great adopted grandfathers, but they lose their appeal when you start seeing them as specters of your future. I got out.

But here I was again, the Budweiser sweating on the grimy bar at my elbow, the sweaty glass reflecting the neon lights in a sickly yellow prism. I had been in this bar a thousand times in a thousand different towns, and every time it made me want to take a bath. I glanced around at the curved shapes hunched over the bar, lined faces illuminated in the flickers of the television set perched precariously behind the bartender. They looked tired, and they probably were. Tired from an entire life of scraping by. I felt the burn of sympathy, and I hastily took a swig of beer to put it out. You couldn't afford sympathy in my business.

And what business would that be? I'm in sales. At least that's what I have on my business card, and that's what I tell the women I meet and usually fail to pick up. For the most part, that's absolutely true. I sell a new future for the towns that time forgot. I represent a firm interested in revitalizing small towns like this one. They're investing in land, surveying and buying up properties in and around small towns, then assessing the greatest profit potential for the town and investing in realizing that potential. Some towns they see as vacation spots, creating bed and breakfasts and craft shops; others they see as untapped industry potential and invest in revitalizing industries long thought unprofitable. This company cares about small town America; they want to restore the small town to its place as the heart of the country.

Sounds great, doesn't it? It would be, if the company really existed. It doesn't, but so many people think it should that its actual existence doesn't matter all that much, at least not while I'm selling people investments in the company. The old folks hear that their town might go back to the bustling place they remember from their glory days. The younger folks hear that they might be able to get a job, to live in a place that isn't the end of the earth anymore. They all hear what they want to hear, and they invest. And by the time the bubble bursts, I'm gone. Yeah, it's a con. Some people would say it's criminal and cruel. Me, I try to focus on the positive instead of the negative; I sell hope and motivation. Maybe some of those folks who invest in my mysterious company will realize that no one is going to help them change their town; they need to get off their rear ends and do it themselves. No matter what, for a few weeks, they have more hope and pride in their town. And, of course, I get to eat. For me, that comprises a happy ending right off the bat.

The down side of my business, of course, is that it brings me back to shitty little towns like this. Some days I feel as though I live in my past, punished for the questionable legality of my profession by being doomed to a hell of boarded up storefronts, dark bars, and closed faces. I let my gaze slide over the crowd at the bar one more time. It was always the same; these men were as closed as the businesses on main street, or magnolia street, or whatever it was called here. In an unspoken agreement, they gathered here every night, clustering around the familiar curve of the bar for protection from the teeth of the monster called progress, and they drank themselves into believing that tomorrow would be different. Like most of the places I'd been to, the crowd was male; women weren't a part of the club. Shit, the whole thing was depressing. I drained the rest of the bottle, holding my breath to kill the bitter taste of the weak liquid. It was time to go to work.

Leaning back against the faded paneling behind me, I listened to the hum of conversation, picking out individual voices, words, snippets of conversation. Information is the most valuable commodity in my line of work, and if getting it meant ending up in a seemingly endless string of fetid, smoky bars like this, then I had to consider the air pollution and the Budweiser as occupational hazards. The darkest secrets were whispered in these places, bits of information that were useless to their owners and priceless to me. This was where you could find out the real movers and shakers in a town, where you could pick up the right words and the right ideas to touch the nerves. Spend enough hours in the semi-dark world of the local bar and you could play the town like a violin.

The words drifted through the cigarette smoke, and I sorted through them. There were the usual conversations about the wife, the kids, and the arthritis. But here and there I overheard something worth listening to. Tonight it was two men in well-washed mechanic's shirts huddling together a few seats away from my corner of the bar. One was in his thirties, a youngster yet in the hierarchy of the bar, and the other was grey-haired: the wise sage and the brash young fellow. I caught a few words and gently leaned forward to catch the rest of the conversation.

"...think we should lock the place up and not let anyone go up there."

"Ain't gonna go y'any good. Evil's evil, and it ain't gonna be stopped by some damn quar-an-teen."

I put down the beer bottle with a thud. A lot of interesting words get tossed around in conversations in a local bar. "Evil" is not usually one of them.