

## Chapter Two

(excerpt)

**“Every man should believe in something: I believe I’ll have another drink.”**

- W. C. Fields

**T**he Grain o’ Truth Bar & Grill commands the west side of the Whitetail River at the edge of a business district cuddled alongside the river, north of a double arch limestone bridge. Beautiful bridge. Unique. Centerpiece of the town’s identity. Just today I saw it as part of the town’s logo on the side of the EMS vehicle and Deputy Doltch’s cruiser. I guess it’s an official bridge. Iconic.

I had noticed the bar and grill the day before and made a point to see what it offered beyond its interesting name. The “Grill” part drew me. And “Bar” produced a certain existential appeal, too.

A dozen vehicles hunkered down in the sunny parking lot, but one, a mint-condition pearl-gray '51 Packard, stood out among the Asian sedans and assorted pickup trucks with bumper stickers extolling the virtues of DeKalb Corn, Lutheran marriage, and Iowa football. I parked and ambled toward the entrance, gritting my teeth as I concealed my limp, and crossed the slate patio. I pushed through the solid-core oak door. Subdued lighting and air conditioning greeted me inside.

In the background, the jukebox offered up Carmen Quinn singing “Stardust.” I needed, in addition to food, something nice, something soothing, and Carmen delivered. Nice surprise. I expected to hear “Bubba Shot the Jukebox Last Night.”

An old, sunburned, string-bean of a man sat in a window booth, watching me. He wore a white t-shirt with a green Celtics tank top over it, camouflage Bermuda shorts, orange elbow and knee pads, and red socks. No shoes. A pair of black in-line skates were plunked down on the bench at his side. In front of him, a skid-marked white bicyclist’s helmet with a peeling Cubs decal rested next to a half-empty pint. His wispy white hair sweat-stuck to his bony head, and he nodded at me and lifted his beer in salute.

“Horace Norris is the name,” he said, smiling through the gap in his front teeth.

“Thomas O’Shea, sir.”

“With that name, then, it’s the top o’ the mornin’ to ye at The Grain o’ Truth Bar & Grill, sir!”

It wasn’t morning, it was early afternoon. I replied, “And the rest o’ the day t’ you.” I was in no mood to quibble over niceties like time reference errors. I’m Irish; the niceties often escape my countrymen and me, especially after dark.

The old man shifted in his booth, like a cat wiggling its backside before it pounces on prey. Then he lowered his voice, looked around conspiratorially, and said in a stage whisper, “I’m dyin’.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I replied, “Aren’t we all, now?”

Horace Norris smiled. “And ye can’t stop me.”

“Nor would I try, without your permission.”

The old man grinned thoughtfully and nodded his head. “I can live with that!”

I nodded, smiled, and looked around.

There was a decent lunch crowd in the place, but the establishment’s U-shaped bar, an ornate mission oak monster complete with a gleaming brass rail, drew my attention. Carved wooden shelves and an enormous mirror backed the bar, and on the walls a variety of old neon beer signs presented

themselves, including one for Pickett's, no longer made in Dubuque or anywhere else, to the deep sadness of connoisseurs.

Wooden booths along the walls, two antique pool tables, and several tables and chairs rounded out the furnishings. In the back a standard red "EXIT" sign glowed and, nearby, a lavender neon sign reading "rest rooms" in elaborate script decorated the wall. Tiffany lamps, or more probably their replicas, hung low over the pool tables and throughout the place.

The presence behind the exquisite bar commanded my interest. Taking in my conversation with Horace Norris stood a man, thick and strong looking, wearing a loose black t-shirt with "IOWA" across the front in block gold letters. I approached the bar, sat on a stool, and scrutinized the hand-written menu on whiteboard over the mirror behind the bar. The bartender acknowledged my presence with a nod of his head, but said nothing. He put down his Wall Street Journal.

"Beautiful bar."

"Thank you," he said, his voice a deep baritone, rich and rumbling.

I ordered the Specialty of the House, the Loony Burger, a 12-ounce ground round burger on a Kaiser roll, French fries included. The man silently prepared the food, working efficiently at the grill and deep fryer. When the meat sizzled and the fries bubbled in the hot oil, he returned to stand before me. "What would you like to drink, Mr. O'Shea?"

I ordered a Three Philosophers, not expecting him to have it. The bartender produced my favorite Belgian ale, popped the cap, and handed over the bottle and a frosted tulip glass. He said, "Excellent choice for a hot day." I poured the liquid, leaving a one-inch head, drank it down, and set the empty glass on the counter. He gave me another and I polished it off, too. A minor buzz edged into my head. Empty stomach syndrome combined with 9.8% alcohol.

"You call it the Looney Burger because one has to be crazy to order that much?"

The bartender, handsome in a rough way, my age, not quite as tall, inclined his head just a tad. His t-shirt hung loosely from thick trapezius muscles inserted into the base of his skull. He did not have a neck. The sleeves of the black t-shirt were tight. I noticed when he came back from starting my order that he wore black jeans and a black belt with a small turquoise and silver buckle.

His black and silver hair was combed straight back and gathered into a short, flat ponytail. Black eyes under thick salt-and-pepper brows scrutinized me. The man's hawk nose made him look menacing, although the eyes were merely intelligent.

He said, "I named it after me. It is my creation. It is my business. Loony Burger lacks dignity, but enjoys twisted commercial appeal. It works. I sell many Loony Burgers. Chance to sell out to big businessman from Waterloo for serious wampum. I declined. He envisioned chain. He calls every year with ever-growing offer."

"You named it after yourself?" The man nodded solemnly. "You're an Indian."

"You have a steel-trap mind. Custer could have used you."

"So what's your name, and don't tell me it's Burger," I said. "I've been there, and I know a German when I see one."

A hint of humor passed across the bartender's visage, either at what I had said or the name he was about to provide. His eyebrows danced independently of each other, giving his craggy face an aura of interior conflict.

"My name is Lunatic Mooning," he said, his rich voice adding luster to his name. The Loony in Loony Burger is short for 'Lunatic'."

“Lunatic Mooning?” I said to myself. He turned away and attended to my order, then brought the Loony Burger on a large, thick porcelain plate in one hand and, in the other hand, a green plastic tray lined with waxed paper overflowing with French fries. In the background, Nat Cole was singing about how, when he falls in love, it will be forever.

I looked at the man, selected a fry as thick as a hot dog, dunked it in a coffee-cup sized stainless-steel vat of ketchup shoved in next to the fries, and placed it in my mouth. It tasted good, fresh, clean. An excellent French fry seasoned with lemon pepper and garlic salt. Crispy on the edges. Outstanding. Good to be hungry.

“So, tell me about your name,” I said, picking up the Loony Burger with both hands.

“My mother, slave to Indian myth and tradition, named me after the first thing she saw after I was born. She gave birth to me in the state mental hospital in Mt. Pleasant, looked up, and saw a lunatic mooning her for all he was worth. Not a common name. I happen to like it.”

“Lucky for you your mother didn’t look out the window and see a squirrel with diarrhea. Otherwise you might not have liked your name so much.” I took a bite of the burger. Delicious.

The big Indian, his gaze intense and dark, looked at me, nodded slowly, and said, “Ugh.”

I finished chewing my first bite and swallowed, nodding in satisfaction. I took another bite of the burger. The inside of my mouth smiled and sighed. Thick, succulent meat with some kind of sauce I’d never tasted before, plus honey mustard and crisp dill pickle chips. Understanding the extent of my hunger, I ordered another Looney Burger, hold the fries. Then, “As long as I’m being nosey,” I said, “tell me about the name of your establishment.”

“With pleasure,” he said. “Good beer is made from good grain, and there is a grain of truth in every good beer. One grain of truth I have acquired after several good beers, often realized, is this: I don’t like people.”

Sensing a trap, I said, “But that’s the exact wrong reason to open a bar, isn’t it? Bar owners are gregarious, enjoy social interaction, want people to know their name. Haven’t you ever seen ‘Cheers’ re-runs?”

“Every man should engage in work that affirms his beliefs, and I have done so. I have strong beliefs, which once were mere biases but are fast becoming convictions, about the ultimate distastefulness of man. I opened this bar to prove it, and I haven’t been disappointed. The Grain o’ Truth. Everybody reinforces my predisposition about how unlikable people really are.”

“What about Horace Norris over there, he seems like a great old guy.”

“Sometimes it takes a while. Most people do not immediately reveal their character. There is a veneer behavior that makes real behaviors difficult to discern. With Horace, time will tell, as it does with everyone. Especially politicians.”

I paused, thinking about what Lunatic Mooning just said. Then I asked him, “So, you don’t like me?”

“I won’t,” he said simply. “But don’t take it personally. It’s just information.” Then, “Perhaps another Three Philosophers?”

## Chapter Four

(excerpt)

**“When anger rises, think of the consequences.”**

- Confucius

I parked in the nearly-empty lot at Lunatic's place. I had just stepped onto the slate front porch and reached for the door when a silver Corvette, filmed with dust, skidded into the parking lot and lurched to a stop, the engine killed by the driver's misuse of the clutch. A lean young man, late twenties, shaved head, earrings, lunged out of the car and started toward me. He held something in his hand, and as he drew nearer, I noticed that it was a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap. He popped it on his head and turned the bill backwards.

He wore jeans, a sleeveless red t-shirt, and cowboy boots. Several tattoos decorated his thin arms. I turned to go inside, heard the man running up behind me.

“Move it!” he muttered. I stepped back. He rushed by me and bulled his way inside. A tattoo of an elaborate cross graced the back of his neck. The smell of whiskey was strong.

I drifted inside, nodded at a stunned-looking Horace Norris, and edged over to the bar, not quite as hungry as I had been. The kid sat on a stool at the bar, so I took a seat around a corner from him, both to keep distance and to observe.

Moon moved over in front of the young man and put his hands on the bar. “Larry, I'm sorry about your brother. He was a good man.”

“You sayin' I ain't a good man, Injun? What would you know about it?”

Mooning raised an eyebrow, said, “I liked your brother, that's all. I am sorry he's dead. What can I get for you?”

“Everyone acts like Hugh was some kind of a saint or something, which he wasn't. If you only knew. Now, gimme a pitcher of Bud Light and a glass, and shut up about my brother.”

Lunatic looked at the man for a moment, then filled his order. The Ojibwa's eyes had changed. Somehow blacker, more intense. Almost glittering.

Larry said, “I bet you'd throw a party, drinks on the house, if I got run over by a mower.”

“Hugh was a good man. You aren't.”

“Mighty good at judging people, aren'tcha? So easy when you're perfect, right?”

Larry poured his pint glass full and chugged the contents, refilled the glass, looked around. At me. “What are you staring at, Pops?”

I wondered about “Pops,” first time ever I've been called that, but I just said, “Sorry. I didn't mean to stare. It's just that I might have seen you before. Recently,” I said, thinking more about his silver Corvette than the driver. Someone had had to be behind the wheel the day before.

“I doubt it. I ain't never seen you. You're new around here, am I right?”

“Yes,” I said, “I am. Too bad about your brother. I'm sorry for your loss.”

“Ain't no big deal, dude,” he said. He drank down half his beer and looked around the bar. His gaze came back to rest on the big Indian. He jerked his head at me and said to Lunatic, “See, the man over there has some manners. Common decency. But you gotta go judging people.”

Lunatic Mooning said, “A great writer once wrote that the truth doesn't change according to one's ability to stomach it.”

Larry glared at Moon and then threw the half-empty glass at the Ojibwa bartender, who dodged. The glass shattered on the bar behind him, breaking several glasses, beer and foam spraying. When I looked back from the damage, Larry had a stiletto in his hand.

When Lunatic came up from his crouch, he was holding a pistol grip, pump action, sawed-off shotgun. He chambered a round, and pointed it with one big hand at Larry's chest. Larry froze, his eyes spitting hatred. At that point my appetite was completely forgotten, but I was suddenly very thirsty.

Mooning said, "Larry, most people I shoot don't begin to smell until after they're dead, but you're clearly the exception. One more step and you'll be the latest addition to my compost pile. Now get out and go on and don't ever come back in here again. You can do your drinking at Shlop's. I am sorry about your brother, but as for you, well, you're just plain sorry. Now go, and stay gone."

A stream of curses spewed from Larry's mouth. Lunatic said, "If you throw that pigsticker, I'm pulling the trigger. Swear to God. I'll survive. You won't. I said leave and don't ever come back. You may leave the knife here on the bar."

Larry looked around, his eyes bloodshot and mean. He looked at me. "What you lookin' at, jerk?"

"I think you have supplied the operant word," I said.

Larry looked confused. "Don't mess with me, man. You'll be sorry. I'll take you out in a heartbeat. I'll remember you."

"Same here," I said, my heartbeat jacking up.

There was more invective from Larry, who stabbed the stiletto into the bar, spun off his barstool, and strode out the door. No one said anything until a big engine roared to life outside, tires squealed on parking lot blacktop, and sound receded.

Moon put the shotgun back out of sight, carefully wiggled the stiletto loose from the bar, then stashed it out of sight. He ran his fingertips over the place where Larry planted the knife.

"You have now met Larry Soderstrom, the brother from the dark side. Sorry I could not introduce you two formally. A social faux pas I will forever regret."

"He appears to have issues."

"He is a stinking mass of putrescence. And that's on his good days. The wrong brother died."

"You knew Hugh, I guess."

"He put to the test my theory on the ultimate distastefulness of man. An anomaly."

"What about his wife, Wendy?"

"Jury's still out. How did you know her name? Oh, you must have seen it on the news."

"I met her, sort of."

Mooning's eyes locked onto me with serious interest, and I wasn't sure I could be comfortable for very long with that look. He said, "How?"

"There you go with that Ojibwa talk again."

He cocked his head and did not smile.

"I was there. Just before EMS pulled in. And Molly something, a preacher's wife."

"Molly Heisler."

I nodded. "I saw Hugh on the ground. The tractor had run off into a ditch. The engine was still running."

Moon said nothing for a full minute. Then he said, "Larry was out there too?"

"I met a silver Corvette on the road just before I rounded a bend before the Soderstrom farm. I was admiring the mailbox when I saw Wendy running down the lane, blood-soaked. I tried to help. Too late. How many silver Corvettes do you have around here?"

The big Ojibwa bartender looked at me, tilted his head toward the front door. "Just that one." Then he turned to the mess and began cleaning up.