

The Old Huntsman

"The poets down here don't write nothing at all – they just stand back
and let it all be."

- **Bruce Springsteen, *Jungleland***

CHAPTER II
Dunston Checks Out

IT WAS one of those eery days; televisions everywhere were set to news channels, and the tickers scrolled with breaking headlines, each snippet scarier than the last. It was the worst terrorist act on U.S. soil since 9-11. Hundreds of people had died when the Sheraton in Chicago was bombed to rubble. Most bizarrely, there was only one survivor – a slightly singed but otherwise healthy and charismatic capuchin monkey. Within days it had a manager and slots booked on *Letterman*, *The View* and *Two And A Half Men*. Only in America, I thought. But I was not one to judge. They were taking solace from the little guy in a time of great pain.

It wasn't until I checked the forums that it really hit me personally. The thread started with the usual flippancy and bad jokes, but as the crisis grew and its gravity began to dawn, so too did a communal sense of anxiety. Then someone found it, in a thread about burritos. Monkeyfeet's last post.

Heading to Chicago for a few days!

Gotta catch the last show in the Bieber tour. My sticker book needs signing

Don't hate, appreciate

As the second battle deadline drew closer, and there was no further word from him or his puppetry, people began to seriously worry. But me – I already knew. I felt it in my gut, in my sinking heart. As surely as we'd be seeing cartoon music videos and pixel-perfect Flash games, something bad had happened to Monkeyfeet and it was my doing. No, not my doing – the damned Corona, that cursed typewriter that sat quietly in my book cabinet. It had a will of its own. And this time it had not just crafted the fantastic death of a rich cripple from the deep South, but put in place a chain of violent, villainous and gently comic events that would culminate in one of the world's great tragedies.

Room 1311

3:37 pm

"HEY LITTLE guy. Come on, it's safe!" There was an animal squeal from a deep recess within Austin's backpack, which had been placed at the end of the perfectly made hotel bed. "That jerk concierge nearly caught on to you, didn't he? That was scary, wasn't it? It's okay now. You can come out."

He'd named the monkey Clyde. He bought him – at least he assumed it was a he – at a curio shop in Chicago's Chinatown that morning, from a bristly old man who spoke no English at all and hardly even seemed to understand the numbers on the crisp green notes that were exchanged. At first Austin bought him for the sheer romantic novelty of owning a monkey. Then he felt guilty for engaging in trade that was surely of dubious legality. Ultimately he justified it to himself with the idea that if he hadn't intervened, the poor thing was probably going to end up as tonight's Chop Suey Special.

It peeked out from the zippered lip of the backpack and made a little growl. It was adorable, with scruffy blonde hair ringed by a black hood and white ears. Austin extended out a hand to peaceably familiarize himself, but it decided to be a bit more intimate, running up his arm immediately and perching on his shoulder.

"Okay. So that's how it's going to be," said Austin, and he stood there in silence for a long, long time, a bit unsure whether it was safe to even move.

"Room service? Can you put me through to room service?"

The monkey was upset; it needed food. It'd eaten all the peanuts in the mini-bar, the little chocolates laid out on the two pillows and had even had a taste of the curtains. Then Austin locked it in the bathroom and was trying to talk over its manic screams.

"Yes, could I order some food? Can I get, like, a cheese pizza? Okay. Okay. Also, now this is an odd one, can I get a banana split? Yes, that's fine, but can you to hold the ice-cream? And the chocolate? Oh, I can do that? That's great, I mean, yeah, that's exactly what I need. Three bananas. As soon as possible. Yep, room thirteen-eleven. Thank you."

Austin knocked on the bathroom door, felt instantly like an idiot, then pushed it open softly.

"Hey buddy," he said, peeking through the doorway. "We got some food coming! You like bananas? Clyde? Oh, God. Clyde. *Clyde*, don't do – Oh. Someone's going to need, uh, a little bath."

The monkey quite enjoyed the warm, sudsy water and Austin felt strangely at home scrubbing him off, singing *I'm a Believer* into the showerhead. But then the lights shut off, and all of a sudden everything was very, very dark.

"Strange," he said.

He dried Clyde off quickly with a towel and a hair blower, and let out the disgustingly grimy water in the tub. Wrapped up in the towel the monkey seemed content to doze off, so Austin stepped out to the hallway to see what the deal was with the lights. Outside there was only a dull red glow from the emergency system.

Someone opened a door across the hall – room 1313. It was a young woman, gorgeous, her dark hair wet and sticking to her bare shoulders. She was covering herself with a bed sheet and she looked across at Austin.

"Do you know what's going on?" she asked.

“Uh,” he said. “No. Hi.”

She sighed. “The phones are down, too. And I have no cell reception up here, for some stupid reason.”

“Oh. Well I’m sorry. You could use my–” There was a primal screech from inside his room.

“What was that?” asked the girl.

“Nothing. It’s not a monkey. I mean, I’m watching a movie.”

“Whatever.” She slipped back inside.

“Great work, Austin. Smooth.”

Clyde’s moment of peace had been an illusion. It had been forty-five minutes since the call to room service, and the monkey was getting louder and more aggressive. It was currently experimenting messily with the coffee and sugar sachets.

“Come on, guy,” he said. “I need you to be quiet.” He was starting to regret the whole idea. Clearly owning a monkey was a bit more complex than playing dress-up and ‘help daddy get beer’.

“Right, banana,” he said. “Maybe a banana soda will do. Banana soda? Man, you’re losing it. Clyde? Wait here. Be a good monkey. I’ll be back with food. Num, num, num.”

The hallway was still dark. Strangely, half of the doors were ajar, all the rooms black and empty. He rounded a few corners, slowly, half-thinking he could leave the monkey and go to the bar downstairs, just for a break. It was then that he came upon the unattended trolley that held his pizza, now cold, and three big bananas laid out on a silver platter.

“Weird,” he said. He looked around to check that nobody was watching, took a pizza slice, and ate it there in the hall. He grabbed the pizza – in a Dominos box, cheapskates – and the bananas. He was ready to head back when he heard the terrifying and unmistakable sound of three rapid gunshots.

“Jesus,” he said. It had come from the direction of his room. He ducked into the nearest open doorway, which was a cleaner’s cabinet that smelled

of disinfectant, and crouched down for a while. But there was no other noise and after a while he wondered if it was only his imagination.

Sadly it was not. When Austin approached his room he saw her, unclothed and awkwardly sprawled in the hallway, utterly motionless. The woman from room 1313. Dead.

Before he had a chance to even think about it, a shadowy figure at the end of the hall, carrying what looked like an Uzi, forced him to recede into the closest open doorway – the woman’s room. He quietly closed the door over enough that he could still peek out, and watched in horror as the woman, her eyes fixed open and her mouth wide in a stunted scream, was dragged slowly out of sight. It was only after many minutes in dark silence – maybe half an hour – that he was finally convinced he had not been seen.

The monkey was sitting in a chair, curled up as if watching the blank television. Austin wondered what had settled him down, until he stepped in a wet patch and found the uncorked bottle of champagne empty by the foot of the bed.

“Great. A monkey with taste,” he said. He peeled open one of the bananas. “You want this now? No? I didn’t think so.”

He ate two of them himself.

There was more gunfire, and it was nearby. Austin was lying under the bed. Every now and then he saw the shadows of passing figures, cast in the red light that seeped through the crack of the door. At these moments he held his breath and closed his eyes. He did not know what to do.

He felt something moving on the bed above him. The damned monkey. It started to chatter, lowly, conversing with itself, and Austin saw a pillow fly across the room.

“Shhhh!”

As if in response, it screamed. It was an unholy jungle scream, loud enough to alert not only anyone on that floor but the floors above and below. Within minutes a man wearing a balaclava – holding the biggest gun

Austin had ever seen – burst in the door and flashed a bright torch around the room.

“Is that a...?” the man unclipped a radio from his belt. “Boss, there’s a goddamned *monk*–”

As he stepped forward, he slipped on the banana peel that Austin had mislaid. Then Clyde pounced. It was as if all the bitterness and anger of being stolen away from his Guatemalan capuchin family, sold, and forced to wear a cape and dance for a stage-show in Jiangxi was let loose on this one unfortunate gunman.

By the time the terrorist managed to get to his feet, his balaclava had been torn to shreds and his face was covered in deep gashes. He threw the monkey off and kicked it, whimpering, under the bed. Then he stooped over to find it.

“Come out, you little fucker.”

The monkey was under there. Austin was not. With one swift hit from a Moet bottle, the terrorist was knocked out.

“God, oh god,” said Austin. He took the gun off the prone figure. Without thinking – as if to test the safety catch – he pulled the trigger. But there was no safety catch, and he’d just blown a mighty hole in the gunman’s back.

The man let out a final groan, and was dead.

“Can you hear me?”

The dead man’s radio had been chattering in short bursts.

“Can anyone hear this? This is Lieutenant Phillips of the Chicago Police Department. We are willing to negotiate.”

Clyde had cried after his beating. It was an awful cry, guttural, like that of a child but infinitely more hopeless. Now he was sobbing and picking at his hair atop the bed head.

When Austin had the guts to get up again he took himself to the window. On the street far below was an enormous ring of police vehicles, red and blue lights flashing arrhythmically, epileptically. Vast spotlights, too, were sweeping across the face of the building.

“Please,” said the radio. “Somebody talk to us, damn it!”

Austin took the walkie-talkie, and sat himself in the armchair facing the T.V.

“Help,” he said. “Help me.”

There was only static for a moment.

“Who is this?”

“My name is Austin. I’m, I’m in the hotel and I just killed someone. I’m sorry, I just killed him. I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay, son. It’s okay.”

Al was his name. He was reassuring. He told Austin that the terrorists had taken hostages, but that they would be released safely once demands were met. Only Al wasn’t too sure what those demands were just yet.

“Listen, buddy, I’m having a hard time down here. You have to give me information. Anything. Sounds. Overheard conversations. You have to feed that through to me. Alright?”

“Okay. Yeah, Al.”

“Listen. I have an idea. I think this is a robbery. Nothing adds up. There’s a new Bank of America HQ, a big one, in the building next door, and we can’t get in there – not with this going on. They could be taking every penny. But I can’t prove it. The feds are all in my face... they don’t buy it, they say it’s a bombing. I need some proof, Austin.”

“I can’t,” said Austin, with a sigh. “Just help me. I’m no hero, Al. I just came to Chicago to watch Justin Bieber, and he was pretty good I guess but now I have a monkey and I killed a man and *I’m scared*. I’m scared and I just want to go home. I just want to go back to Vermont.”

“Alright. Alright, son. I’ll do what I can. I just need one thing. An important thing.”

“Okay.”

“I need you to tell me your room number.”

The static ran. Austin felt his heart drop.

“Oh, no. No, no, no...”

“Austin? Austin? Which room are you in? Son? Son?”

But the radio had fallen silent.

The monkey was a genius. Somehow, of all the closet space and railings, dark nooks and doorways holed up in that bathroom, Clyde had put his clambering little hands on the one exit that Austin hadn't thought of. It was crazy, but it might just work. The ventilation.

It was slow work unscrewing the fan cover. By the time the first two screws were out Austin's back muscles were strained from the awkward spot wedged between the shower curtain and the wall, and his fingers were shaking so badly he was surprised he hadn't stabbed himself with the bread knife he was using. Eventually the last one popped out and the vent shaft was exposed, looking much smaller than it had to begin with and smelling like a decade of accumulated must.

There was a bang at the door, and a muted conversation. Someone was in his room.

“Fuck,” he said. There was no choice now. “Clyde, come on, boy. Get up here. We have to go now.”

For once, the monkey seemed to understand. It climbed nimbly over Austin's head and sat itself at the edge of the shaft. It squealed, and showed its yellowy teeth.

The voices were closer – close enough to hear.

“Sarge, we got a dead one here. I think it's Jake. Bastard got Jakey.”

Austin tried to pull himself up but his arms shook with the strain and gave out. Another try – harder now – and his head reached the dark crevice but he was stopped at his shoulders. There was no way he could fit, not without some trick of dislocation and he didn't have time for that.

“There's someone in the bathroom. Yep. Will do, Sarge.”

Austin looked up at the pathetic monkey.

“Go,” he said. “Damn it, go. Go on.”

The monkey looked unsure, peeking down the dark tunnel and then back to Austin.

“I won't forget you,” he said, and jammed the cover back on the vent at the same moment the bathroom door was kicked violently in.

“This is him? This is the one who mutilated Jake?”

“Yeah, boss.”

They were in some immense kind of boardroom. Over a hundred hostages were silent and lined along the opposite wall. But there seemed to be almost as many goons, in a mottled assortment of camouflage and military get-out.

“Shoot him.”

There was a gunshot and Austin fell to his knees, then his side. Searing pain went through his thigh bone and he felt something vital split inside.

“Fuck it, Bruce, I meant kill him.”

“Sorry, Sarge.”

“Never mind. How did that feel, kid? *Son?*”

Austin didn't speak.

“You still *scared*? Want to go back to your mommy in Vermont?” The pig-faced Sergeant laughed and laughed.

“You'll never,” said Austin. He took a deep breath. “You'll never get away with robbing that bank.”

“The bank?” The sergeant laughed again, longer and harder. “You are a stupid boy, aren't you? The bank? You think an organisation like this – like *us* “ – he spread his arms widely and spun around – “does not have all the hell forsaken *money* that we need?”

“I, I,” Austin stuttered.

“No, my son, this is vengeance. We will kill you, and we will kill these people. Then we will set off the bombs in the Plaza, and the Hyatt, and the Trump building” – the man spat – “and by morning filthy Chicago will be dust. Dust. Stupid boy,” he said, and lifted up his pistol.

“I am stupid,” said Austin. He took a deep breath. “I have been stupid. You made a fool out of me on the radio. But being stupid once is enough for me. And you reminded me of something, today.”

“What’s that, boy?”

“I do know how to use a simple radio.”

Austin motioned to pull something from his back pocket. As he lifted it, the sergeant started firing and the boy was dead by the time the walkie-talkie had fallen to the ground. But the green light was flashing and over the static came a voice from Chicago’s police department.

“You did good, son,” it spoke, then, muffled: “Get to those buildings! Move, move!”

“Fuck it,” said the Sergeant, and growled. He fired the remainder of his clip into the hostages. “Blow the damned place! Now!”

At just that moment, a frightened monkey tumbled from a ventilation shaft into the alley beside the hotel. It scampered away past a confused S.W.A.T. team, then was propelled by a thunderous and fiery explosion into the arms of the waiting media.

Austin XXXXXXXX – 21 years old, of Vermont, student, known to us as Monkeyfeet – died alongside two hundred and fifty five other innocent people that night in Chicago. If I could not sleep easily before, I am now a diagnosable insomniac. As I write this tonight, at deadline, and as you wait on your next round of entertainment, only one thing keeps me from my heavy guilt, my great, immutable stress. There is but one drive in me. The Corona must be destroyed.