

Anthony Neil Smith

**CASTLE  
DANGER**  
**THE MENTAL STATES**



“So now we know the Mall isn’t monitoring its cameras, at least not tonight. Told you so.” Joel had a flashlight, leaning in the passenger side, checking the backseat, trying to keep away from the blood that had pooled across both front seats. The papers scattered on the floorboards were soaked, curled up into faded sponges. The blood was everywhere. On the seats, the floorboards, the steering wheel, the center console, the dash, the windshield. And now in my nose. “I’m going to be sick.”

I pulled out and took a deep breath, retreated to the half-wall that overlooked the parking lot. At the far edge, I caught a glimpse of the giant IKEA store. Another plane landing across the way at MSP. The smell from the blood, pungent. Even at a distance. I had to huff through my mouth a few times to get the smell and taste out. It hadn’t congealed yet. More watery than blood should be, but *that* was blood. I was sure of it.

Joel joined me at the wall. “How much should we be, like, *touching* stuff in the car?”

“Not at all. Not one thing. We’re already ... no, no, no.” Hung my head, rested it on the cool concrete. “I’ve got to call him.”

“Marquette?”

I was about to say yes, then remembered the most recent reshuffle of his campaign team. “The new guy. Tennyson. Everything goes through him now.”

“Like fuck. That wasn’t the deal.”

“Oh, please. Did you really think he’d stick to the deal? Not all of it, surely?”

“Listen.” He turned towards me. In my personal space. “This isn’t the sort of deal he can back out of. We’re the worst thing that could happen to him in this election. Call Andrew. And do it now. You’ve got his number. You think he won’t answer?”

Of course he was right. Of course. Andrew Marquette had a reason to take any call I made to him. I was one of the few people to know what actually happened to his brother Hans, the few who knew that she had actually been his sister Hannah. I was the one he asked to murder the chief officer of the Duluth police department, and I had promised to keep quiet about all of it as long as he stuck to the deal.

So I dialed the Senator.

Within ten minutes, we were swamped with police, ambulance, fire-rescue, and forensics. They’d pushed us off to the edges of the crime scene, behind the tape. Not a word was said about our breaking into Dylan’s car. It reminded me of the time my own car had been rifled through, Paula taking a receipt from my backseat to write me a cryptic message that, once deciphered, led me to her. Without her, we wouldn’t have found Hannah’s killer. But we also wouldn’t have gotten fired from the Duluth police, and Joel wouldn’t have shot Thorn’s partner. Neither of us would be working for the Senator. Chances are we’d have

still been on traffic duty, still hating each other's guts, and I would most likely still be Manny — confused, repressed, and unexposed to the doc's photos of post-op vaginas.

Sitting in the back of the Tahoe, doors wide open, Joel and I were getting sleepy in spite of the spinning squad lights. My clothes, a sweaty mess. My face, I could just feel the crud of the day drying across my cheeks. There was nothing for us to do except answer the same questions every time a new officer or detective found their way over to us. I wasn't sure if it was just some interrogation technique to make sure our stories stayed the same, or if they really didn't bother coordinating their questioning because each one wanted to take the lead on the case.

Either way, it was *booooooring*.

And it sure as hell wasn't helping us find Dylan.

Alas, that wasn't my concern anymore. I was only a worried coworker now. A friend of the victim. Whatever instincts I had to grab my fedora and slip on my gumshoes, neither of which I own, thank fuck, was quickly squashed by the scene in front of me, a cold concrete garage full of even colder cops who wanted me to stay the hell out of the way.

After another giant yawn that spread to Joel despite the fact that he was busily texting Robin to justify being out so late, Tennyson and Thorn showed up and made the very conscious effort of avoiding us while they talked to the people in charge. Finally, they looked our way and started over.

"Fuck," Joel said.

"I could've told you."

"Still ... fuck."

Tennyson started talking directly at me while still six feet away. "Why did I have to find this out from the Senator? What happened to calling me first?"

Thorn did the same with Joel. "Did you lose your mind there? Did you forget who's in charge? Of course, you did. That's what you do, isn't it, soldier?"

"Marine."

"Dickhead."

Tennyson chopped the air with the side of his hand. "Enough. I want answers."

My turn. "Joel picked me up, brought me here. It rattled me. I called Andrew. Just ... bad habit."

"In my presence, you'll call him the Senator, or Senator Marquette, is that clear?"

I nodded.

"I need to hear it." He hadn't raised his voice, yet somehow intensified it. Made you respect it in spite of your pride.

"Yes. Sir."

Then to Joel, "And you call Thorn first. On second thought, since neither of you bothered to follow up with us at all, maybe we demote you to phone bank workers. Or sign makers. Then there would be about forty people between you and us!"

Joel shrugged, his eyes wandering everywhere except our bosses' faces. "Yeah, got it."

Tennyson shook his head, but he wasn't stupid. He didn't need to cut us off at the knees. I'm sure that even if he didn't know *why*, exactly, the Senator must've told him we were too valuable to be fired. So this show of authority was just meant to rein us in.

Looking at the two of them stand shoulder to shoulder, I got the sense that they were equals as far as their campaign power went. Thorn was the only one who could pull the plug, but Tennyson was the one who set up the means of doing so.

“Any questions?” Thorn asked.

Well ... while I'd been sitting there, answering cop questions and trying not to fall asleep on Joel's shoulder — because if I'd done that, he'd probably have let me face-plant into the concrete — I'd thought about what I'd seen in the car. What I'd smelt. After the panic subsided, it all seemed a little too good to be true. Way more blood than there should be, spread over a larger location than typical in such cases.

“That's not Dylan's blood,” I said. “I'm pretty sure it's not even human blood.”

Wide eyes, I can tell you.

While we'd been waiting for the cops, we hadn't just sat on our asses. I'd interrupted Andrew at some dinner, but as suspected, he hadn't got annoyed. He'd just listened. And it had hit him hard.

“Dylan? No, not Dylan? Why? I can't ... I can't ... get someone fast! Get the cops! Jesus!”

They'd known each other for a long time. I'd long had the impression that Dylan was more of a younger brother to Andrew than Hans had ever been.

He had excused himself from the table, asked for his car. “Call me if there's news. Immediately. I'm going straight home. Jesus, Dylan. Dylan. Oh god.”

So I'd called the cops.

But when things went quiet again, a voice in my head started bugging me about the blood.

“It's too ... wet.”

Joel shined his flashlight in my eyes. “Let me check your pupils.”

“No, I'm serious, it's too wet. I only see blood like that from, like, frozen meat. It's got water in it. Too much water.”

I walked back to the car, knelt down outside the open door. I didn't want to mess up anything, or get my DNA mixed up in all of this — I'd never been in Dylan's car. Never had a reason. So I kept my distance and checked my pockets. Still had a wadded up cocktail napkin from the bar. I must have wiped a little beer off my fingers and absentmindedly shoved it in my jeans. Now I pulled it out, found a corner where I hadn't gotten anything on it, and dipped it into the pool on the driver's seat. The blood wicked quickly up the napkin. I pulled it out, stood up and, stupidly, pinched the wet part between thumb and forefinger.

“It's cold.”

“What did you expect?”

Used the rest of the napkin to wipe my fingertips. Put it back into my pocket. “It's cold like it's been frozen and thawed. If this was human blood spilled in the last several hours, it wouldn't be *that* cold. And if it had been spilled any time before that, it wouldn't be wet at all. It would be dry, dry and black.”

Joel flashed his light around the front, seemingly for no other reason than to avoid acknowledging my point, but then he said, “Leather seats. If he'd had cloth, probably

would've soaked it right up.”

So later, I told Tennyson and Thorn the same thing, leaving out the part about the napkin. I wanted to show off some Sherlock Holmes magical thinking for them.

Tennyson rubbed his mouth. Thorn looked over his shoulder at the team working the scene.

“All because of the leather seats,” I said. “Someone didn’t do their homework. But it shouldn’t matter. They knew someone would figure it out eventually.”

Thorn pointed at me. “Like you?”

“Hey, you know where I’ve been.”

“Not once you left the office.”

Tennyson placed a hand on his arm. “He was with me. Had a few beers and talked strategy.”

That got me some side-eye from Joel.

Thorn grunted, seemed to reconsider. “A prank?”

Tennyson shrugged. “Maybe? Sure as hell doesn’t feel as ... serious now.”

“Then where’s Dylan?”

Tennyson’s phone went. He looked down. “The Senator. Got to take it.” He walked away to the nearest empty corner.

Thorn turned his attention to Joel. “Where have you been for the last few hours, anyway?”

Joel jutted his chin out, crossed his arms. “Fucking your wife.”

Thorn didn’t even blink, just shot his hand out and gave the boy a slap. Not to hurt him, just to get his attention. “She said it felt like a toothpick. You ever try that again—”

“Ask Robin. We had dinner. I had a hunch, went to share it with Manny. Came here and we were right.”

Well, how about that? Joel lying to his boss, pulling me into it, and here we were again, knee-deep in mud. Thorn flicked his eyes at me. I nodded.

But a tiny part of me wondered if Joel could be trusted. The part that grew like a popcorn bag in the microwave as I imagined Joel suddenly turning into a good snoop ... but that was unfair. I shook it away. The microwave beeped. The popcorn bag deflated.

Tennyson came back over. “The Senator can’t come to the scene himself, of course. He’s on pins and needles. We won’t be sleeping tonight.” He turned to me, hand on my shoulder. “But you, we need you fresh tomorrow. Got a speech in Alexandria. Go home, get some sleep. Mr. Skovgaard, if you wouldn’t mind giving him a lift? Then head for the Senator’s house.”

That was that.

But as I turned to close the rear door of the Tahoe, Tennyson mumbled my name and waved me over to the side. He slipped me a folded piece of paper, almost like he was tipping a valet, then walked back to the leads on the scene for another discussion.

I got in the cab, tried to act normal. Joel was having none of it. “What was that?”

“What?”

“The note.”

I flitted it in my fingers. “Probably nothing.”

*Hoping it didn't say 'Meet me at ...' or 'Key to room # at hotel ...'*

But no, it was just paper, not a key card. In the past weeks I had been trying — and struggling — to grow accustomed to the sheer thought of what it meant to fuck a real man. Sure, it had been in my mind for much longer. *Much* longer. But the sex had only even been imaginary. I was getting increasingly comfortable with watching others do it in porn. But something that actually happened to me? Too soon. There was so much pent-up sexual frustration, so many identity issues I had to deal with before I could really think of dealing with somebody else — not to mention letting some other body deal with mine.

And yet I couldn't wait. I opened the note.

*Dinner, tomorrow night, 8:30, Spoon & Stable. BRING HER WITH YOU.*

I crumpled it up.

“So?”

I shook my head. “Just ... just ... instructions. People to call tomorrow.”

“Bullshit. Could've texted you. He wants to fuck you, is that it?”

Felt my cheeks go red. Mad red. “I'm not gay. He's not gay.”

“Yeah, but you're a woman.”

I almost said, *I'm not a woman!* Almost. And maybe that's why he was baiting me, to see if I would.

But this time I kept my cool. “I'll have to work with him. Some things are better not texted.” I lowered the window a smidge and tossed the paper out. “Quit projecting your sex fantasies on me, jackass.”

He drove me home without firing up a cigar, didn't even play DAC's bad career choice, so we rode the rest of the way in silence.

Until he pulled up outside my place, let me climb out, and slowly pointed at the hole his cigar ash had made in his pants. “You owe me new jeans.”

Then he sped away.

But Joel did not go home.

He texted Robin, told her to go to bed, this would take a while.

Then he met up with two other guys, former military. One was ex-Marine, the other ex-Army. One was now a State Trooper. The other a cop in Stillwater. One had lost a foot. The other his sense of purpose. Then again, that was a casualty they all mourned, which brings me to the reason why they were now sitting in Joel's truck. They'd met online, ex-Iraq discussion boards, whole bunch of guys trying to keep each other from killing themselves. In between reliving the firefights as if they were highlights of a college sports career.

These three had decided to gather at a VFW in St. Paul for some drinks and reminiscing, more drinks and political venting, more drinks and ...

Before too long they started going on 'patrol'. No orders from the stripes this time. No IEDs to worry about. No snipers. Just driving around the 'bad' neighborhoods — keeping