

COOPER'S DEALE

by

KI Thompson



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CHAPTER ONE

This element, P-u, was first detected in a cyclotron at Berkeley in 1940.”

Francis James Gripp looked up from his work to see Alex Trebec on the television screen, perfectly groomed and coiffed, without a trace of perspiration. Frank had been examining the density gauge he had stolen from his job at the Department of Transportation. It measured the compaction of recently constructed roads and contained nuclear material.

“What is plutonium,” Frank murmured at the television.

“How’d you know that, Frank?” Abel Gripp lit another cigarette with the burning stub of his last one.

Frank glanced at his brother, who was munching on a pepperoni pizza with their cousin Clarence. The contrast between his skinny, pock-marked kid brother and their lumbering-ox relative was striking. The only thing they had in common was their IQ, which ran in the negative numbers. While Frank also had a slender physique, he had supplemented his workouts with body building so that his muscles were more pronounced and his build more solid than Abel’s.

“Learned it in the army,” Frank replied, still absorbed by the gauge. He picked up a package of C-4, a plastic explosive, and removed it from the Baggie.

“Yeah, I bet they taught you a bunch of neat stuff about

blowing stuff up in the army, huh, Frank?” Clarence guffawed, then briefly choked on a mouthful of pizza. He held a beefy hand up to his mouth and hacked the contents into his palm.

Frank ignored his cousin. His pea brain couldn’t comprehend the complexities of Frank’s life in the military. Special Forces had indeed taught him much about explosives—and life. Frank figured he’d still be in the military, if it hadn’t been for the so-called friendly-fire incident. His lieutenant had hated him and had intentionally detonated the munitions that cost him part of his right foot and a chunk of his thigh. The botched repair job at the VA hospital had left him almost crippled, but somehow, through sheer will, he had managed to walk again.

Suddenly something outside the window drew his attention from the claylike C-4. Rising from the kitchen table, he opened the back door on the warm, mid-June day and scanned the yard. He had been jittery the past few days, like someone was watching him. Searching the overgrown weeds that smothered the rusting, faded orange Allis-Chalmers tractor, he strained his ears but heard only the *Jeopardy* music in the background and a chirping Baltimore oriole, its orange underbelly contrasting sharply with the muddy greens and browns of the thicket.

The tractor made him recall a time when his father let him sit on his lap while he plowed the fields. It was one of his few positive memories. His parents were gone now, and his life in the military had forced him to leave the farm in the hands of his brother, who just let it go to pot. After a few minutes longer, he hobbled back to the kitchen.

“Angelina Jolie,” Clarence burped out after chugging his Heineken.

“What is Angelina Jolie,” the contestant responded.

“See, I told ya.” Clarence jabbed Abel in the shoulder.

“Ow. But you didn’t say ‘What is.’ You have to say ‘What is Angelina Jolie.’ Otherwise you lose.”

Abel rubbed his shoulder. Clarence was a huge Neanderthal of a guy, with tufts of wiry black hair sticking out from his collar

and shirt sleeves. Abel hated it when he punched him, even if he was just playing. He was always finding new bruises where Clarence's fist had landed.

"Nah, I could've had another shot and said, 'What is.'"

"I hate that. If you answer wrong, you shouldn't get a second chance. That's the one thing I hate about this show. People get a chance to correct themselves. It's not fair." Abel took his games seriously. He took a deep drag on his cigarette.

"Would you two shut the fuck up?" Frank said. "Take out these parts, Clarence, and burn them so there's nothing left. See if you can get that right."

Frank snagged a slice of pizza and limped into his office to the computer. He'd give part of his other foot to have the help of his buddy Wayne Newton. Not the singer, his army buddy. But Wayne was dead, his white grave marker at Arlington lost among the thousands of little grave markers that crowded the hillsides at the national cemetery. Wayne had been with him from boot camp to the Gulf War in '91, where a lucky shot from an Iraqi soldier nailed him. Stupid.

Now all he had was his idiot brother and, worse, their dimwitted cousin. His aunt had dumped Clarence and his equally moronic sister at their doorstep twenty-five years ago. She was somewhere in Vegas. She supposedly wanted to be a showgirl, but probably wound up prostituting herself on the Strip. Clarence's sister followed the circus as a concessionaire, handing out cheap plastic toys to anyone who managed to throw a ring around a Coke bottle. Nobody knew who their father was.

He sighed, bit into his pizza, and swigged his beer. Oh well, Abel and Clarence would have to do. They wouldn't be as effective as Wayne, but what Clarence lacked in brains he made up for in brawn. And Abel always did what Frank told him.

The brains part of this job belonged to him anyway. It was his plan, his idea. And he was doing this for Wayne, in his memory. Well, he was doing this for himself too. *Goddamn government*. If it wasn't for them, he would still have his foot and leg intact, and

Wayne would still be alive. They owed him. He logged into eBay and searched for any sales of uranium. He smiled inwardly at the current bid on an auction for uranium-238: easily affordable at less than \$20. Thirty-one grams of uranium was enough, he hoped.

Clarence hauled the pieces of wiring and used parts Frank had thrown away to the barrel out back. Of all the crap Frank had forced him to do the last two years, he hated this the most. When he reached the blackened barrel, he hurled the stuff into it and knocked it over backward, like he'd done a few times in the past months. Some of the parts tumbled down into the water and disappeared in the murky depths of the Chesapeake Bay.

If he couldn't see it, nobody else could, so he righted the barrel and dumped the rest of the trash inside. After dousing the garbage with some gasoline, he lit a cigarette and stood back. When he tossed the match inside the barrel he felt the whoosh of air as the parts ignited.



Meanwhile, across the bay, Tommy Cooper sat hunched over in the safety of his home, a neat tree house in the top of a huge red oak on his grandmother's farm. The loblolly pines that dotted the rest of the shore nearly ruined his view of the house across the inlet, but not quite. Using his green plastic binoculars, he watched the three men who came and went all day.

The man in camouflage reminded him of a snipe, the big hairy one a pelican, and the skinny guy a sandpiper. But why did that other man, in a tan shirt and blue jeans, spend most of his time up to his knees in the murky waters behind a rusty old tractor? The crane—that's what he called him—acted like he was playing hide-and-seek with the three men in the house. But they weren't very good at the game. Right now one of them came to the door but didn't even leave the porch. He just went back inside. Stupid.

The man in the tan shirt was carrying something, and Tommy squinted through his binoculars to see what it was. A warm breeze made the tops of the pines sway and dance, and they blocked his view for a minute. When the breeze died down, he could tell that the man had a camera and was taking pictures.

The crane stalked through the water and weeds, stepping with his long legs slowly along the water's edge. Any minute he might dive into the water and spear a fish. He was quick, but he didn't seem to mind waiting for hours in the hot sun.

The big pelican had come out of the house and was burning stuff in a barrel. Tommy laughed every time this happened. It was almost as good as the Fourth of July fireworks—especially when the barrel fell over and the pelican hopped around and kicked it. It was as interesting as the time Jeff Olson thought he got cooties from a girl who kissed him on Valentine's Day.

Jeff was his best friend, and Tommy helped him get the cooties off with some spit and sandpaper. Jeff's kite getting stuck in Tommy's tree made them become buddies. When Jeff climbed the tree to get it down, Tommy nearly ran away. He was afraid Jeff would make fun of him. But Jeff liked his cool house and wanted to be his best friend.

"Tommy Jay Cooper, it's suppertime." His grandmother always bothered him when he was having fun.

"Aw, Grandma, not now. Something really interesting is goin' on over there. Can I eat later?"

"You'll eat now or I'll be up that tree and whup you in a New York minute, boy. I'm not that old. I used to climb trees all the time, when your grandpa was off plowing the fields." She rested on the stump at the base of the oak and placed Tommy's supper in the metal bucket tied by a rope to a tree branch. "Those were the days, back when we had over two hundred acres of corn, some good broilers, and four cows. We didn't need nothin' back then. And what we did need, we sold our grain and paid cash for at Hadley's store. Mind my words, boy—no credit. Never needed credit."

“Credit’s bad,” Tommy replied, like he was supposed to.

“Darn tootin’.”

She finished placing the meal in the bucket and Tommy hoisted it up. As it went up, a flash of bright light reflecting off the bucket blinded her. Closing her eyes, she stepped away from the tree and out into the open yard. When she opened them again, she shaded her eyes with her hand and blinked up at the sky, trying to see through the white splotches.

A deafening roar came out of nowhere and she slowly turned in circles, trying to understand what was happening. Something was blocking the sun now and heading right for her. She started to run to get out from under it, thinking it must be an airplane.

CHAPTER TWO

Addy Cooper sat at her cheap gray metal desk, a spreadsheet open on her computer. She tried to make sense of the numbers, twisting a clump of her unruly hair, then blinked rapidly to clear her fuzzy vision. She had worked and reworked the columns all morning and still couldn't quite balance the accounts. Something was missing. Peeping through the blinds at her window, she glimpsed the sun setting over the buildings along San Francisco Bay.

"More coffee?"

She swiveled to see the receptionist hovering in the doorway, holding an almost-empty pot of coffee.

"No thanks." Addy groaned. "I'll be up all night as it is."

"It's after five. I'm leaving. Aren't you going home?"

Addy sighed. "I wish. But I can't leave until the books are done. Have a good weekend."

She returned to her spreadsheet, but a few seconds later she noticed the little clock on her screen. Maureen would be pissed, especially since this was Friday. The demands of Addy's job annoyed her partner, and they fought endlessly over it. About to reach for the phone and dreading the call she'd have to make, she heard a loud scuffle in the lobby. She and a few other employees headed there.

A group of men in suits fanned out through the office, jerking file cabinets open and entering employee offices. Addy's boss was bent over the reception desk as one man handcuffed him and read his Miranda rights.

"What's going on?" The scene bewildered Addy.

"FBI." An agent flashed his ID. "No one is to leave the building while we search the premises." He motioned two agents to the back wall, where several black metal filing cabinets stood. The agents began to dump the files into boxes marked "Evidence."

"Do you have a warrant?" Addy asked the question automatically, reacting to the events unfolding before her and having viewed too many episodes of *Law and Order*. She had little idea of the legal issues involved.

The agent who had identified himself stared at her. He hitched up his pants, but gravity, and the circumference of his belly, kept them up only temporarily. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm Addy Cooper." Her voice cracked, betraying her exterior calm. "I work here, and that's our boss you're handcuffing. What's he being accused of?"

He reached into his inside jacket pocket and removed a packet of papers. Unfolding them and holding them up, he moved closer, invading her personal space. She didn't want to appear intimidated, so she stood her ground but leaned back slightly.

"Here's your warrant, Ms. Cooper. We're confiscating Wor Import Export property on suspicion of illegal activity involving the black market. We suspect your boss is importing Russian brides and exporting bootleg copies of prereleased movies. What exactly is your role here?"

"I'm an accountant." Addy began to tremble as she realized the seriousness of the crime. She had met many Russian-speaking women through her boss, who explained that they were friends or relatives visiting from abroad. She rarely encountered them again and thought nothing of it. As for videos or DVDs, hundreds of

boxes left the warehouse daily, but she assumed they contained machine parts.

“We’ll need to question you too, Ms. Cooper. The rest of you return to your offices. You will be interviewed and released as soon as possible.”

The other employees of Wor Import Export shuffled away, a few warily staring over a shoulder at Addy. The agent who appeared to be in charge of the raid led her into the first office off the lobby.

Once more Addy chanced a peek at the clock on the wall and sighed. Yup, Maureen was going to be really pissed. Her shoulders sagged and she suddenly felt a hundred years old. Would life ever get any better than this?



If Liberty McDonald loved one thing, it was seeing justice done. She hung back in the crowd of onlookers as the Chicago PD and fellow FBI agents hauled the bad guys away. The longer Special Agent Jerry Cruikshank talked to the media, the more her temper rose. Jerry would claim all the credit for the arrest, even though her undercover activity had nailed the bastards. Besides, she looked better in front of the camera than he did. *What a slob.* It might help if he invested in a decent suit. The camera loved her strong features and devilish grin. And the ladies regarded her pretty highly as well.

Liberty couldn’t suppress a broad grin as the suspect was led out of the building. Of all the assholes being arrested today, he was the one she was most proud of nailing. The greedy kingpin was responsible for dumping toxic waste directly into Lake Michigan—had told his drivers to back the trucks up there at night to get rid of his company’s chemical waste. God knew how much damage he had caused by the time she was assigned the job of discovering the source of the pollution.

As he walked by, she reflexively shrank back, not wanting him to recognize her and possibly put the pieces together regarding her involvement. But she really wanted to grab the bastard and beat the shit out of him. The poor flora and fauna. It would take years of work to restore the area. *Scum like that ought to be taken out back and shot. Screw the trial.*

Her cell phone rang and she moved far enough away not to be heard.

“Liberty.”

“When this is over, we need you in Maryland. Spend what time you need there closing out that case, then fly out to Baltimore. Pick up a rental car there, and it’s about two hours to Deale.”

“What’s up?”

“You’ll get the details later, but there’s unusual activity along that area of the Chesapeake. Radioactive elements in the water supply. They’re not at high levels yet, but they’re recent, within the past couple of months, and seem to be increasing. Some local reporter says he has information relevant to the case—possibly a terrorist threat. Hook up with him when you get there. Again, that will all be in the file.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“We don’t know what we’re dealing with, so be careful.”

“Always.”

Liberty flipped the phone shut and shook her head. Guys like her handler always warned, “Be careful.” Easy for them to say, being tucked away in some cushy darkened room on the phone all day. They never stuck their necks out, never had to worry about looking over their shoulder all the time. But she’d be bored out of her skull with a job like that. She needed the outdoors more than she needed sex, and that was saying a lot—not that she ever had to worry about getting any.

She sauntered down the street toward her car parked several blocks away. Passing a shop window, she paused to check out her

reflection. Her jeans were perfect—tight and just the right shade of faded blue. They accentuated her muscular thighs and narrow waist, and she tucked her shirt in where it had come out. Satisfied that everything was strategically placed the way she liked it, she finger-combed her hair and resumed walking.



Back in California Addy and the other employees weren't released from their temporary confinement until almost ten o'clock. Her boss had been taken away long ago. What would become of him, and what would become of her job? She told the others she would try to find out more from the FBI in the morning and call them.

Heading out of Alameda in her blue Volvo, she considered calling Maureen as she crossed the bridge into Oakland, but knew it wouldn't matter. Maureen could care less what the explanation would be this time. She would haughtily toss her thick red curls and point a polished fingernail at her, saying Addy loved her job more than she loved her. Lately, Addy had begun to believe her.

The lights inside were on and she knew Maureen was waiting. After she parked, a knot formed in her gut and with each step her body tensed. Four pieces of luggage and several boxes greeted her in the entryway.

"Maureen?"

She dropped her briefcase on the floor and entered the living room, where Maureen sat on the couch, arms folded across her chest.

"I can explain," Addy weakly began.

Maureen held up her hand, signaling her unwillingness to listen.

"I've had enough," she said. "BJ will be here any minute. If I missed anything or if I get any mail, I've left you an address to forward them."

“Who’s BJ?” The abruptness of Maureen’s declaration stunned Addy.

Before Maureen could answer, the doorbell rang and she ran to answer it.

“Hey, babe.” A short, muscular woman wearing the brown shirt and shorts of a UPS driver wrapped a meaty arm around Maureen’s waist. Maureen quickly squirmed her way out of the woman’s grasp, brushing a loose red curl back into place.

“BJ, this is Addy.” Maureen gestured.

“You’re leaving me for her?” How could Maureen toss her aside so casually—and for a UPS driver, no less? Maureen had clearly been more than just a parcel recipient to the butch woman. This second shock of the day staggered Addy.

“BJ has regular hours and gets paid big bucks for any overtime *she* works,” Maureen said. “I’m tired of sitting around waiting for you every night while you waste your life in that dreary, dead-end job. I want more out of life.”

“So you’ve opted for the excitement that only a UPS driver can give you.”

“Don’t be snide, Addy. I’ve taken all the crap I can from you these last four years. I hope you enjoy your miserable life. Come on, BJ, let’s go.”

Maureen picked up the luggage while BJ easily hefted the large boxes and dropped them onto a waiting dolly outside the door.

Addy stood in the entryway long after the front door had slammed, the silence unnerving. Although the house was small, it suddenly felt cavernous. She stared at the walls, hoping they’d provide an answer to her dilemma. But she was exhausted, too drained to worry about the future.

She dragged herself up the stairs and into their bedroom, the bed and dressers in disarray from Maureen’s hasty departure. The mess left Addy’s orderly brain unsettled. She smoothed the bedspread out, picked up a few articles of clothing from the floor and put them away, then walked to the closet.

Every aching bone in her body cried out for sleep. She undressed, hanging her skirt and jacket neatly on their hangers, placed her pumps on the shoe rack, toes pointing inward, and climbed into bed. The cool sheets calmed her and she instantly relaxed.

Where was Maureen moving? Maureen was on her health insurance plan at work. Monday, she would ask personnel to remove her name from both the health and life insurance policies. Maureen would probably get better coverage with UPS anyway.