

The Bookseller

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A selected excerpt for FantasyReaders.com

John Stoner sat with his chair tipped back against the wall, sampling random bits of conversations around the tavern as he casually watched the game of Eight Ball unfolding on the pool table in the center of the room. One player continued looking at the table from every angle trying to discover the best shot while the other player chattered non-stop about nothing in particular in a clear attempt to make distraction part of the contest. Another man at a nearby table watched the game with the focus of a circling barracuda as he sipped on a glass of beer.

There was nothing he liked better than hanging out in a strange bar and watching people interact as they hustled pool or darts or simply played mind games with the other patrons. He considered the opportunity to study an ever-changing set of subjects one of the major perks of his job. It usually didn't take him long to pick out the different personalities and after twenty years on the road he knew them all.

In every crowded bar there was always one person who was convinced he had all the answers to the political problems of the world or a clear understanding of the principles at work in the division between Moslems and Christians. There was usually someone who appeared to have a slight mental deficiency, but was truly seeking out a target for some kind of flimflam. And, of course there was always the resident sports expert who knew all about his favorite teams and was always ready and willing to engage in a wager or an argument, depending on which became available first.

There were other advantages to being point man for one of the largest construction firms in the country. There was always a key to a new car in his pocket, an expense account that was never questioned and more horny women than any mortal man deserved. But it was the freedom he treasured most, the freedom to secure the most luxurious lodgings, to eat and drink in the best establishments and to entertain lavishly. He couldn't imagine trading it all for the promotion they'd offered, the promotion that came with an office overlooking Central Park and a bonus package complete with stock options.

A position that chained him to a desk all day simply wasn't his cup of tea. There were plenty of people cut out for that kind of work, but not him. He'd stay on the road and stick with the job he was really good at; the job he enjoyed; the job that paid him more money than he ever imagined possible.

He looked around the pub, glancing at each face for a moment, thinking about this place called Freetown, Massachusetts. For twenty years he'd seen the country from coast to coast. He'd seen the fast pace of life in the big cities and the tranquility of living in small towns. He'd experienced the life style differences between southern Florida and northern Idaho, he'd lived with the political division between the North and South and the cultural divide between the East and West coasts, but nowhere had he ever experienced anything like Freetown.

He was good at the game he played and only occasionally did he ever get caught studying his subjects. And even then it was usually women that found him looking, which was okay. A little eye contact was the first step in initiating a short-term sexual encounter, but in Freetown the eye contact kept occurring and it wasn't just the women. It didn't take him long to realize he wasn't getting caught. He was doing the catching. Everybody in the bar was checking him out. When he thought about it he realized it had all started two days before at the future construction site.

The very first order of business had been a helicopter survey from above the dense pine and oak forest that crowded right up to the shoulder of Slab Bridge Road. The old house hidden in the woods had undoubtedly been a grand mansion in its day. From the air it had seemed like the remains of a long deserted castle. That was when it had all started, although at the time it hadn't seemed significant.

"Looks like we're drawing a crowd," the pilot shouted over the blade noise as they made the third pass over the woods. A number of people were standing on the road next to their vehicles watching the helicopter as it circled the area.

"They must not get out much," Stoner yelled.

"I think the house is the source of some local legends. They're probably afraid we're going to awaken some dark forces or some such bullshit."

"Are the folks of Massachusetts a little flaky like that?"

"Are you kidding?" the pilot demanded with a laugh. "These people still talk about the Salem Witch Trials like they were yesterday."

The first encounter with the locals had seemed trivial at best, but the following day when he'd driven to the site for a closer assessment they were back, watching from a distance. He'd done the neighborly thing and waved, but there had been no response except from one old farmer wearing bib overalls and no shirt. He had stopped in the middle of the road a few yards away and spit a stream of tobacco juice into the gravel at the edge of the blacktop.

"We don't need no faraways pokin' 'round in what should be left alone. Go back to wherever you come from an' leave us to our own." The old man stared at him for a moment, and then turned away, walking back to his faded red pickup truck.

In retrospect neither incident alone seemed terribly odd, but with the scrutiny from the locals in the tavern added the slant was beginning to change.

John was ready to finish his beer and return to the hotel, leaving the game of studying strangers for another time and place, when one of the locals walked over to his table and set a fresh beer in front of him. He was a big man with a youthful face and long blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"Everybody's been talking about you, mister. Mind if I have a seat?"

"How could I refuse?" he asked as he picked up the beer and gave a little nod.

"Thanks for the Bud. I'm John Stoner."

"Mister, everybody in town knows your name. What we don't know is why you've been poking around the woods out at *the house*."

John took a drink of the beer and returned the bottle to the table. "I wish you wouldn't call me mister when you know my name and since you were kind enough to buy me this beer I'd like to know yours. Do you think we can start over?"

The man relaxed a little and offered a slight smile. "Okay, *John*. I guess I wasn't being too neighborly. I'm Jimmy Vigers," he said and extended a big hand toward John.

John watched his own hand nearly disappear in Jimmy's grip as they shook hands.

"Folks around town have been talking about you. First they see a helicopter circling the woods, and then you checked in at the Holiday Inn over in Bristol. Nobody made the connection until they saw you walking around out there. What's going on, John?"

"First you tell me about this place you call 'the house'. The helicopter pilot said it was the source of some local legends," John said as he raised the beer bottle to his lips.

“That house has been out there in the woods for a long time. It was there when my grandfather was a kid. I suppose it’d be accurate to say that most people around these parts think it’s haunted. Actually most people think it’s worse than just haunted. They think the old place is possessed.”

John studied the man’s face, looking for some clue as to whether or not he was a part of the referenced group, but his expression was that of a seasoned poker player. “So, Jimmy, is that what you believe?”

“Not so fast, John Stoner. You owe me an answer. What’s going on out there?” he asked as he picked up his beer and leaned back in the chair that seemed too small for him.

“Construction. I’m point man for a firm that’s going to clear that section of woods and build a shopping mall on the site of your haunted house. I’m here to do a final assessment of the property and hire people from the community to prepare the site for the construction crew.”

“They can’t do that,” Jimmy said as he leaned forward, his eyes momentarily blazing with anger. “They have to build it somewhere else.”

“That won’t happen. The site was purchased five years ago and the plans were started almost immediately. There’s too much time and money invested. Besides, this mall will do one hell of a lot more for Freetown and the area than this legend...this haunting or whatever it is. Legends eventually die and it’s time for this one to go.”

“John, everybody in this town is touched one way or the other by that place in the woods. There are some folks in this town who will drive ten miles out of their way to avoid that stretch of road. There are others who feel it’s a link to the past and their heritage. There are some that have a real special relationship with the place. Nobody wants to see it demolished. You’ll have a damn tough time finding any local people interested in helping you out.”

“Jimmy, none of that matters one bit, but here’s to all the people of Freetown,” John said as he raised his bottle in a salute. “I respect their beliefs, their heritage and special relationships with the place, but none of them will stand in the way of progress and progress is exactly what we’re talking about. It’s not about me or you or anyone else in this bar; it’s about corporate plans, board meetings and stockholders. Trying to stop this construction would be like trying to stop the tide from coming in, so you and I may as well have a few more beers and celebrate that which will soon be gone.”

Jimmy looked stunned by the last remarks. His eyes wandered across John’s face as if the pattern of freckles dotting his complexion held the secret to stopping the construction. “John, you don’t understand,” he whispered. “There’s a tradition...” He stopped and looked directly into John’s eyes. “Apponequet Lakers. That’s what my high school varsity club is called. I was a member...guess I still am. Football was my sport,” he said as he looked away, tipped the bottle up and drained the last of the beer.

“I’d like to return the favor and buy you a brewski. What’s the bar maid’s name?”

Jimmy looked over at the bar. “That’s my friend Sally,” he said with a smile. “She’s probably my best friend. We went to school together.”

“You Lakers like Tequila?” John asked softly.

“We’ve been known to kill an occasional bottle.”

John pushed his chair back, stood up and walked over to the end of the bar where an old man with white hair was sitting. “Hello,” he said as he leaned against the brass railing.

The old man glanced sideways at Stoner and then moved to the next stool. "Ain't got nothin' to say to a fool like you, mister."

"Just trying to be friendly, old man."

"Go be friendly somewhere else. We don't want no faraways stinkin' up the air."

"Carl, shut the hell up," Sally said as she walked past him. "What can I get for you, John Stoner?" she asked as she studied him with sparkling blue eyes.

"I guess Jimmy wasn't kidding when he said everybody in town knew my name."

"That's what a small town's like. What else did Jimmy tell you?" she asked with a coy smile.

For a moment John simply returned her gaze, taking in a remarkably beautiful face framed in curly blonde hair. "He said you're his friend, best friend, actually. What's your name?"

"Sally Ashley," she said with a smile. "Any friend of Jimmy's is my friend."

"Glad to meet you Sally. Maybe later after the bar closes we can grab a cup of coffee somewhere."

"I think I'd like that. What can I get you?"

"One Bud, one Pabst, two shot glasses and a bottle of Tequila."

A moment later John returned to the table and set the bottles, shot glasses and a dish of lemon wedges in the center of the table. "I like Sally," he said as he dropped back onto his chair. "I suggested we stop for coffee later. I hope she doesn't have a boyfriend."

"Not Sally," Jimmy said as he pulled his beer over in front of him. "She loves men in general, but has never wanted to be tied down. She's been like that for as long as I've known her."

"How long is that?" John asked as he picked up the bottle of Tequila and broke the seal.

"I started the ninth grade here and I've been out of school for eleven years. So I guess I've known her for about fifteen years."

"Where did you live before that?" John asked as he filled the two shot glasses and capped the bottle.

"My parents are from Freetown. When they got married they moved to Dublin, Ohio. Ever hear of it?"

"Sure," he said as he sprinkled salt on his hand. "It's near Columbus. We put a new wing on the hospital a few years back." He slid one of the shot glasses across the table to Jimmy. "I'd like to drink to the Freetown Lakers," he said as he raised his shot glass toward Jimmy.

"To the Lakers," Jimmy said as he clicked his glass against John's and tossed the shot into his mouth. "When I was fifteen we moved back."

"You don't like the salt and lemon thing?" he asked as he watched Jimmy savoring the flavor.

Jimmy shook his head as he picked up his beer and chased the Tequila. "A long time ago I decided the lemon was the worst part."

John shrugged his shoulders and brushed the salt off his hand. "When in Rome..." He threw back the shot and grimaced as he grabbed his beer and took a quick drink. "I guess it takes some time to get used to drinking it that way." He picked up the bottle and filled both glasses again. "Right before you started talking about the Lakers you said there was a tradition, something about that old house?"

Jimmy pulled the shot glass over in front of him and took a quick look around the bar. "It's a secret Lakers Varsity tradition," he responded quietly as he leaned forward. "I'm not sure when it started, except my grandfather knew about it. Of course he never spoke to me about it until we moved back to Freetown and I started playing football. It's funny how we had this secret that my dad didn't know about. He never played sports in high school."

"Tell me about it."

"Not so directly," he whispered with a subtle shake of his head. "This bar has always been a hangout for Lakers and in case you haven't noticed...everybody in the place is checking you out."

"Oh, I've noticed," he said with a slight smile as he raised his shot glass toward Jimmy. "Here's to secrets."

Jimmy raised his glass, clinked it against John's and they both tossed the Tequila back into their mouths.

"Jimmy, you don't strike me as being truly affected by this legend. I don't see you driving ten miles out of the way to avoid that piece of road. Why are you different?"

Jimmy shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose it's because I was never a little boy in Freetown or any of the other little towns in the area. I never had a steady diet of the stories. Hell, the scariest thing in Dublin when I was little was a motorcycle gang calling themselves *Satan's Dogs*. In retrospect they were nothing, but to a nine year old it was serious shit. At nine I was no bigger than my classmates, but the summer I turned ten I started into a growing spurt. My mom says I grew four inches that summer before I went back to school. That fall my gym teacher was amazed by how much I'd grown and suggested that I start lifting weights, which I did. And I kept growing. When I turned fourteen I was five foot ten and could bench two hundred pounds. It didn't take me long to realize I had nothing to fear from that motorcycle gang. A year later when we moved back to Freetown I was a little over six foot, benching two-fifty and afraid of nothing, including the local ghost stories. I think I made a big impression on the football coach. He came right to our house a week after we moved in and asked if I'd ever played the game, which I hadn't."

"What position did you play?" John asked as he glanced at the meaty hand, which nearly hid the beer bottle.

"I guess they wanted me to play the defensive line until they saw how fast I could run. It was a surprise to everyone including myself. Hell, I'd worked my legs for years and never tested them out on anything but more weight. Our starting halfback took one hell of a hit in the middle of the third game. He broke his leg in two places and coughed up the ball in the process. The coach put me in at defensive linebacker and pulled out the starter for the offensive position on the next set of downs. I was the biggest kid on the team, but I didn't know shit about the game. He was just buying time so he could figure out what to do." Jimmy broke off long enough to take a swig of beer. He gestured toward the Tequila as he returned to his story.

"On the second play the other team fumbled. The damn football just hit the ground, did a couple funny bounces and landed right at my feet," he said as he watched John fill the shot glasses. "I looked at that ball for what seemed like an hour, looked up and all these players from both teams were running right at me. I knew if I fell on the ball I was going to get buried in a pileup, so I grabbed the damn thing and ran without really

understanding that it was the right thing to do. I guess I was pretty fast,” he said with a chuckle. “I scored my first touchdown on that run, which was amazing to me, but my coach was blown away. He met me on the sideline, hugged me and told me to catch my breath because I was going back out as the offensive halfback. I broke the Lakers rushing record that year and scored eight more touchdowns.”

“So, as a freshman you were the football hero. I always wondered if that translated into lots of cheerleader pussy.”

Jimmy laughed as he raised the beer bottle to his lips and took a drink. “I can’t say it didn’t improve my social life, but I don’t recall any cheerleaders,” he said as he returned the bottle to the table. He laughed again. “Not my freshman year, anyway, but that’s another story. Let me finish this one.”

“Well, by all means, carry on,” John said as he slid a shot glass across the table.

“Everybody was impressed with my game, including Lakers Varsity. I was inducted into the club at the end of the season, which, for a freshman simply didn’t happen. Sometimes sophomores made it, but generally LV was a club for juniors and seniors. And really, I was in the club but more of a tag along than anything else, because I hadn’t been initiated. There was some kind of club secret I wasn’t privy to and wouldn’t be until after I was certified as a full-fledged member. Initiation was the following August, the day after the last summer practice. Tim Albertan and Lonny Fisher, both seniors, were going into LV at the same time. We were told to return to the stadium the next night about nine o’clock. We were to wear jeans, hiking boots and a sweatshirt and bring a flashlight, a large screwdriver or crowbar and all the courage we could find.” Jimmy stopped the story long enough to pick up the Tequila and down it.

“Hell, I’d only been in Freetown a little over a year and based on the instructions, I knew where we were going. The other two had no idea. I guess they figured nobody was that crazy, but that was the tradition...and the secret.” Jimmy stopped and looked John directly in the eyes. “As far as I know you’re the first outsider to ever hear this, so don’t repeat it while you’re in Freetown or anywhere else in the area.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” John said as he lifted his shot glass and threw back the Tequila. “As an honorary member of LV I promise I’ll take this secret to my grave.”

Jimmy smiled. “You’re a good man, John Stoner,” he said as he raised the beer bottle to his lips. He took a long drink and drained the last of the amber liquid.

“Want another, Jimmy?”

“Yeah, but you’ve bought enough,” he said as he reached across the table, picked up John’s bottle and sloshed the beer gently. “You’re falling a little behind.”

“Hey, remember Richard Dreyfus’ line in *Jaws* when he’s out on the bow pulpit attaching the tracking device to one of the barrels? Robert Shaw has the harpoon gun ready, the shark’s coming around and he’s yelling for him to hurry.”

“Don’t wait for me,” Jimmy quoted with a laugh as he stood up. “Sally,” he shouted. “A Pabst and a Bud.” He laughed again as he returned to his seat. “That movie scared the shit out of a lot of people.”

“Yeah, I know. I was one of them, but we can talk about that later. Finish your story.”

“So, I met Tim and Lonny at the stadium the following evening and we were picked up by a bunch of LV upper classmen. The three of us piled into one of those real big vans with six others and we headed out of town. It’s still unbelievable that Tim and

Lonny had no clue. They must have been fuckin' idiots. We were only about a half a mile from *the house* when it hit them. God, they started squealing like a couple little girls," he said as Sally walked up to the table.

"You two are carrying on like school buddies," she said as she put her hand on the back of John's neck and set the bottles in the middle of the table. "And here I thought you were a stranger in town, John. Don't get wasted and go home on me, I'm looking forward to a cup of coffee when I close." She caressed his neck for a moment, then bent down and put her lips next to his ear. "I know a great place for breakfast," she whispered before withdrawing from the table.

"Sally, put those on my tab," Jimmy said as he watched her walk away. He smiled as he turned his attention back to John. "I think you're going to get lucky tonight if you don't have too much more of that cactus juice."

"I'm not at my limit yet," John said as he uncapped the bottle and pulled Jimmy's shot glass over next to his. "Go on with your story."

"There were nine of us standing in the middle of Old Slab Bridge Road in front of the van. The headlights were on and everybody had a flashlight, but other than the moonlight it was pitch black. That house was a quarter of a mile into the woods and we could hear the wind howling in the eaves. To complete the LV initiation the three of us had to go into the woods and each of us had to bring back a piece of the house," Jimmy said as he picked up his shot glass. "There were only three of us in the group that had to go into the woods, but everybody was edgy. There were noises coming from the woods, typical noises you hear around *any* woods, but every one of those guys was listening closely. They were all scared shitless and the more they focused on the noises around them the more they heard. It wasn't long before the night was alive with sound." He downed the Tequila, slammed the glass down on the table and smiled at John, who had just flinched. "I'm not sure what spooked everybody. It might have been an owl taking off to do its hunting or a gust of wind rattling through the trees. Maybe it was several things at once. Whatever it was it must have scared more than just one of them because all of a sudden everybody was running for the van, everybody but me. I was standing there laughing my ass off. I guess I stopped laughing when the van tore out of there without me. I was pissed. It was a long walk back to school. In all the confusion they thought I'd gotten back in the van. I knew they'd come back for me when they realized I wasn't with them. And then it hit me. Going into the woods with a group was one thing. Going in alone was something completely different. I had a rare opportunity to become a school legend, all I had to do was go in by myself, follow the instructions and be standing there in the road with a piece of the house when they came back for me. So I started into the woods and headed in the direction of that house as fast as I could because I wasn't sure how long they'd be gone. I was running through the trees with the beam of my flashlight cutting a tunnel through the darkness. That's when things got spooky." He picked up his beer and took a long drink.

"Jimmy, what the hell do you mean, things got spooky?" John asked as he picked up his own beer.

"The area came alive with sounds. Not animal sounds or wind noise, but something like many voices whispering so softly that they were barely audible. I kept running. Swarms of bugs were flying up into my face, wild rose bushes were grabbing at my clothes, tree limbs seemed to be reaching out for me from the darkness and that

whispering...it was getting louder.” He stopped and looked at John. “I think I need one more shot to get through this story. He watched John fill a single shot glass and push it across the table to him. “I wasn’t scared,” he said as he picked up the glass, “I was annoyed. I got over my fear of *Satan’s Dogs* by believing anything that could actually hurt me could be hurt back. I believed it then and I believe it now. So, like I said, I wasn’t scared. I stopped and yelled as loud as I could. I yelled something like ‘You’re not scaring me and I’m not leaving until I get what I came for!’ And just like that it all stopped. The bugs stopped swarming and the whispering stopped. I started running again and it was almost like the trees were opening up and letting me through. It wasn’t long before I was standing in front of that house, and God was it a sight,” he said and threw back the shot.

“It was an enormous wood and stone structure with little remaining of the paint. Heavy vines from nearby trees draped across what remained of the roof and went through some of the window openings. God, I bet those vines covered the interior walls. Dead leaves were piled against the foundation like drifts of brown snow. The riser boards of the steps leading up to the decaying porch were warped, with ends curling up and pulling away from the frame. The pillars supporting the porch roof were split floor to ceiling with the remains of rotted wood piled at their bases. I don’t know why I didn’t just grab one of those warped boards on the steps instead of walking up on that porch, but that’s what I did. Talk about stupid, that whole place could have come down on me, but I guess I wanted something a little more special than a warped board. I was standing there in the middle of all this decay and horrible smell of rot, shining the flashlight around looking for my prize when it happened,” he said as he picked up his beer and took a drink.

“That’s when *what* happened,” John demanded.

“The goddamn doorknob fell off and rolled over to my feet.”

“Oh, my God,” John cried. “I would’ve shit my pants.”

“John, that’s not all. I bent down, picked up the doorknob and the whispering started again. And in a whisper of a voice as clear as yours something said ‘goooo’, just like that. I left, John. I wasn’t scared, but I left. There was something there. I still don’t think it could have hurt me, but something was there. When the guys came back for me I was standing in the middle of the road tossing that doorknob into the air and catching it like a baseball. From that day on I was known around school as *The Iceman*.”

John leaned back in his chair and shook his head. “That’s some story, Jimmy. I would’ve been scared shitless to walk into the woods alone. Hell, just listening to your story was bad enough.”

“You know, I was right. I became an LV legend, but a version of that story, a version that kept our secret safe went well beyond the walls of Apponequet High School. I don’t think I ever stepped onto the football field after that without the other team knowing me as *The Iceman*. I had a reputation and I carried it onto the gridiron like a battle flag.”

“Here’s to that Apponequet High School legend, *The Iceman*,” John said as he raised his beer bottle in a salute, clinking it against Jimmy’s. He took a long drink before returning the bottle to the table. “Jimmy, you’re a hell of a guy. I think I could use you on my crew. You could help me put together the work force, you know these people.”

“I appreciate your notion that I could help you, but I’ve got a job. Besides, I wasn’t kidding about these people around here. They won’t help you, they’re afraid of

that place. They'll be even more afraid when they find out what's going on, afraid that whatever's out there will end up in their attic or basement."

"Jimmy, I'm going to make you an offer, but I don't want your answer now. I want you to think it over tonight. Meet me back here tomorrow night and give me your answer. Can you do that?"

"I'm listening."

"Two thousand dollar sign on bonus, fifteen hundred a week and a chance to go direct with the corporation if you like the work. The project should last at least two months."

Jimmy started to say something but John stopped him with a halting gesture. "Think about it."

"Alright, John. I'll think about it," he said as he stood up and extended his hand. "Regardless of what happens, it was good to meet you."

"It was good to meet you, too," John said as he stood and they shook hands. "I'll see you right here tomorrow night."

"You got it, John," he said as a grin spread across his face. "You have fun with Sally tonight, but be good to her or I'll have to kick your ass."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Jimmy."