

PRESSING FREEDOM

A Novel

ROGER
ARMBRUST



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AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER FOR A STATEWIDE NEWSPAPER connects the dots on an interstate jewel fencing scheme which leads to the capital city mayor's door and implicates a would-be governor. The reporter, a Vietnam vet who keeps his black ops background under wraps, is attacked by rogue cops, who also threaten his daughter and his girlfriend. His USMC training, unknown to his assailants, saves him from serious injury, but danger on the national scene draws his attention. With a former United States Senator who shares his concern for the unstable new administration in Washington, the reporter finds himself in the midst of a plot to return the federal government to stability, but by means that shock him to the core. A political thriller born of our current national turmoil, this first novel by a seasoned journalist will leave the reader with wide eyes and a quickened heartbeat.

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Parkhurst Brothers Publishers
MARION, MICHIGAN

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Parkhurst Brothers Publishers believes that the free and open exchange of ideas is essential for the maintenance of our freedoms. We support the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and encourage all citizens to study all sides of public policy questions, making up their own minds. Closed minds cost a society dearly.

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CONTENTS

1	THE BLACK CHEVROLET	7
2	GAZING AT ORION	25
3	LET THE PEOPLE SPEAK	48
4	“A LITTLE KARATE”	69
5	DEMONS REMEMBERED	80
6	JUST A BUSINESSMAN	93
7	“MAN IN RAIN”	107
8	HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT	122
9	BINGO	138
10	A CUCKOO CLOCK	162
11	A SLIGHT TREMOR	173
12	ENDGAME	184
	READER RESOURCES	203
	Q & A WITH AUTHOR	204
	AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY	211
	A PREVIEW	212

1

THE BLACK CHEVROLET

FRANKLIN STUDIED THE STEAMING MUG OF COFFEE, knowing it was a mistake. But he slurped it in, tongue scorched, throat branded, sacrificing to find an immediate fix—provide that nervous consciousness so he could focus on writing the news story.

Far River City Manager Todd McCloud surprised the Board of Directors last night, halting them before they closed their regular Thursday meeting, and proposing a city income tax. It is the first effort by any city leader to impose such a tax locally.

Mayor Storm Weber, expressing irritation with McCloud's action, told the Evening Ledger, "I don't favor taxes, period, much less a city income tax." Chamber of Commerce President Brad Potter offered a similar complaint

Franklin had been back with the *Ledger* three years

now. He knew from experience where the writing would go with this specific story, and where the tax issue would wind up politically. Local TV, radio stations, and the morning paper, *The Republic*, had already reported the general story. Bob Starling, *The Republic's* savvy city reporter, had recorded a solid piece explaining McCloud's proposal and the tax's legal implications. But he had struggled with a tight deadline, and wasn't able to concentrate on responses from the board or public.

So that would be Franklin's angle: quotes from the mayor, the board, the business community, the liberal activists pushing for the tax. This carried forward City Editor Ray Perry's philosophy of providing "fresh news" for the paper's afternoon and evening readers statewide.

7:15 a.m. Franklin had forty-five minutes to finish the piece for the state deadline. He would. Then offer an expanded version, with more colorful detail, for the city edition's 11:00 a.m. close.

"Franklin! You got it?"

Perry was glaring at him from the center-stage city desk. His bright blue eyes always glared, partly because of deadline stress, partly because of his magnified eyeglasses. When Franklin watched Perry's swollen eyes, he thought of Harry Truman, how his distorted lenses would display an expression of shock or surprise. Deceiving in both cases, because Truman had been extremely well-read, thoughtful, and highly aware. And that, too, was Perry, the type of

journalist who—if commanded to choose between sacrificing his wife or freedom of the press—would go alone into an office and write a thorough editorial about it before letting people know his decision.

“I got it! In your hands at 7:35!”

Perry studied him in silence, scratched his graying steel-wire goatee, and went back to editing copy on his computer.

By 9:00 a.m. Terry Lester, the new cub reporter, was dropping copies of the first edition on each writer’s desk. As expected, Franklin’s story held the top spot. The banner headline: *City Income Tax for Far River?*

Franklin read through the story for any typos or problems. He knew Perry would be doing that, too. He glanced over at the city desk. Perry’s head and upper body were hidden behind the open newspaper as he finished up the lead story’s inside jump. His legs were stretched out and crossed, body leaning back slightly. Franklin thought he looked like a steady, sleek schooner with a pin-striped white sail. The sail slowly lowered. Perry glared over at Franklin, gritted his teeth, and dipped a single nod, “yes.”

That was the near height of compliment from Ray Perry: his Pulitzer. Only once had Franklin and his cohorts heard Perry call out a compliment to a reporter. That was to Macy Collins, two years ago when he broke a state scandal that would eventually lead to the governor resigning.

“Collins!” Perry had shouted to him. “You got ‘im!”

From Perry, that was the Nobel.

Noon now. Perry was single-nodding “yes” again after reviewing the city edition’s front page. Franklin was irritable, involuntarily grinding his teeth, product of a third mug of coffee with no breakfast.

“Hey. Lunch.”

Will Hollis was standing beside his desk, his own involuntary nods of a nervous head keeping beat with some internal music blended with a few sneaks of puffing grass out an open bathroom window.

Franklin grinned. “Lunch. Yeah.”

At The Blue Plate a block away, Franklin ordered the meatloaf special and iced tea from Agnes, the pouchy, amiable waitress.

“You wanna roll?” asked Agnes.

“I don’t know,” Franklin smiled. “Do you?”

Agnes slapped him playfully on the shoulder and walked away.

Franklin looked at Hollis, who sat slouched and huffing his near-silent, breathless wheeze of a laugh.

“What’s going with you and Janie?” Franklin asked him. “She forgiven you for forgetting her birthday?”

Hollis’s glazed gray eyes, peering out from his wire-rim-circle glasses, gazed off into nowhere, then came back.

“I bought her a cuckoo clock,” Hollis wheeze-laughed.

“Excuse me; did you say a cuckoo clock?”

“Yeah. She loves fuckin’ cuckoo clocks. But she never

had one because her dad always hated them.”

“But she hasn’t lived at home for, what, ten years?”

“Twelve. Her dad’s been dead for ten. But she’s always been haunted by this parental-curse psychology, you know? This phobia that her dad’s spirit would haunt her, or something, if she ever got a cuckoo clock. So I busted that fuckin’ myth to pieces. The day after her birthday ... my amends, you know ... I hand her this beautifully-wrapped package. She rips it open and stares in shock at the clock. And I say, ‘Janie, you listen to me. You have always loved and wanted a clock like this. But you’ve had this crazy fear of your dad. Well, he’s not here now. I’m here now. I’m here to love you and protect you. Forever.’”

Franklin forced back the creeping snort.

“And she bought that line?”

Hollis was wheeze-laughing completely now, and gasped out a nearly inaudible “Yeah.”

Then they both were laughing.

“Is there a cuckoo-clock superstore somewhere?” Franklin cracked.

“Don’t know about that,” Hollis said. “A month ago, she and I were driving out on Old Farm Road. Ran across this shanty of a store with a fancy name—Classic Antiques. Janie wanted to buy a lamp for her aunt. She saw and drooled over a couple of cuckoos there. I remembered and went back. Got a pretty good price.”

Agnes clanked down the lunch special, with roll.

Back at the paper, Franklin was contemplating a Sunday feature on Far River's hope to expand west and south by annexing large areas of the county.

Suddenly, Perry was yelling.

"Franklin, the cops called! They just stopped an alleged drug-store robbery! Allegedly killed the alleged robber. Allegedly at Main and Fourteenth. Get on over there." Perry's height of ironic humor was indulging "alleged." Especially with information from politicians or the police.

"Where's Salisbury? He's the cop reporter."

Now Perry really *was* glaring.

"He's there. Needs back up. I want you over there to get the facts, then get the city manager and board's responses since they've been bitching about the crime rate. Call me when you're done."

"How am I going to call you?"

"Franklin, when are you gonna get a smartphone?"

"When you pay me more," he cracked with a smile, moving away from Perry's muffled grumbling.

By the time Franklin arrived, the ambulance was hauling away the body. Only a police captain and a couple more blues remained. Bart Salisbury, plump, slumped like a nose guard with too many tackles, was interviewing the captain. Ken Pearson, the paper's near-mute, ever-award-winning photographer, was storing his camera in his old gray Buick.

"Got some gold medals in that camera today, Kenny?"

Franklin asked lightly.

Pearson smiled and nodded affirmatively, wordlessly slipping into his ghostly car, waving and peeling out, disturbing the two blues.

Franklin studied the area, then stood waiting for Salisbury to finish his interview. He did, saw Franklin and, struggling to unload and light a filtered cigarette, walked over to him, his face seemingly puzzled at his cohort's presence.

"I'm not horning in, Salsy. Perry shoved me over here. Wants me to get the details and then query the mayor and board for their views."

"Rants on the exploding crime rate, right?"

"If it'll get 'em a vote, yeah."

Salisbury puffed away, peeking cautiously around to see if anyone was listening, a trait of paranoia Franklin had noticed in reporters who covered police departments.

"Guy musta been fuckin' high," Salisbury said. "According to Captain Edwards, he walked into the pharmacy, pulled a revolver, got money, then dashed out the front door onto the street still showing the gun. A patrol car happened to be passing. The two officers saw him running out, clearly armed. They stop, jump out, order him to halt. He points the gun at them. And that's his last minute on earth."

"Have you talked to the pharmacist?"

"Naw. I'm gonna do that now."

"Can I listen in?"

“Sure. C’mon.”

Back at the paper, Franklin sat at his phone, interviewing Jim Butler, a lawyer and city board member. Butler hummed on about the need for “a reasonable approach to attacking the crime rate.” Franklin listened and took notes on his computer, silently amused at the image of a reasonable assault. A computer icon and obnoxious “plunk” notified him of a new email. It was Salisbury sending him a copy of his just-filed story on the hold-up and shooting. Off the phone, Franklin began reading it. Salisbury’s stories always were solid—brisk, brief sentences heavy on specifics.

Halfway through the reading, his phone rang.

“Reeves Franklin.”

A man’s low voice sounded nervous, timid.

“I, uh, I’d like to talk to someone about the police shooting a guy at the Main Street pharmacy.”

“You mean the incident this afternoon?”

“Yeah.”

“Bart Salisbury, our police reporter, is handling that. But he’s not here right now. Can I help you?”

“I just saw a report on TV.” Silence.

“Yeah? And?”

“They said a patrol car was passing by and saw this guy run out with a gun. That he aimed it at the two officers, and they shot him.”

“Yeah, Salisbury’s story reports that. It’s the information the police released.”

Silence. Then:

“That’s not right.”

“What’s not right?”

“What the police are saying. That’s not what happened.”

“How do you know?”

“I was at the Sweden Crème across the street, getting a shake. I noticed a black Chevy pull up on the side street by the pharmacy, but didn’t think much about it.”

“A black Chevy.”

“Yeah.”

“At the pharmacy. So?”

“Then, two guys got out of the car. They barricaded themselves against it, facing the pharmacy. They were dressed in military type gear, you know? Helmets, flak jackets, carrying automatic rifles. That really got my attention. Made me move over and put my car between me and all that. I was in the parking lot cater-corner from them, you know?”

Franklin’s mind began to calculate the scene. He knew the police had a special undercover team; they traveled in black Chevys. No other Chevys he’d seen in Far River looked like those, with their dull finish indicating the car bodies were armored. He leaned forward and started quietly typing on his keyboard, his notes of the conversation lining up on his monitor.

“Yeah, I know where the Sweden Crème is. What time was this?”

“Aw ... twelve-thirty maybe. It all happened pretty fast.”

“Go on.”

“This guy came running out of the pharmacy’s side door. Right across from them. And they unloaded on him. Shot him down.”

“Not a passing patrol car? But a black Chevy, parked, and two armed men in military-style gear waiting on him to come out?”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“He came out the side door, not the front, like the police said?”

“Yeah.”

Franklin’s gut was starting to knot, combined aftermath of the early morning coffees morphing with meatloaf, and sudden gravity of a possible police assassination. Then that distant past image suddenly flashing before him: the eye peering through the beaded curtain. He pushed it away, forcing himself back to the interview.

“Did the guy have a gun?”

“I couldn’t tell. Maybe.”

“What do you mean, ‘maybe?’”

“Well, it looked like he was holding something, now you ask. But he wasn’t waving it or pointing it like you would a gun. I don’t know what it was.”

“Then what happened?”

“Then a patrol car suddenly pulled up. Two officers got

out and went over to the guy's body to look at it. The other guys didn't even speak to them. They just got in their car and drove off. Except ..."

"Yeah?"

"Well, before they did, they stopped and looked around, as if to see if anybody was watching. One saw me and pointed at me. The other guy looked. Then they both got in their car and got out of there."

"One pointed at you?"

"Yeah. But they didn't do anything."

"Could you identify them?"

"Gosh ... It would be hard. They both wore helmets and sunglasses. They looked alike."

"Did you get a number on the patrol car? Maybe a license plate on the Chevy?"

"Naw. Shit, I was pretty rattled. And after that one guy pointed at me, and they left, I got the hell out of there."

"Could I have your name?"

"Aw ... man ... I don't think so. If that was the police killing that guy, I don't want them coming after me. I just hope they didn't photograph me or anything."

"What if I met with you. Anonymously. Don't use your name?"

"Aw ... man ... naw. I can't do that. I called because that report I heard on TV wasn't close to what I saw. I thought somebody should know. Hey ... you're not recording or tracing this, are you?"

Click.

Franklin reviewed his notes. Then he scrolled to the top of the page, wrote a brief summary, and clicked “Print.” Rising and slipping the page from the printer, he checked the wood-frame River City clock on the far wall:

5:17

Salisbury, Hollis, and the staff faithful would have gathered at The Caboose by now, taking advantage of happy hour. Franklin folded the page, grabbed his ancient blue blazer, slipped the paper in its breast pocket, and pulled the coat on as he headed out the side door.



Aptly named, The Caboose squeezed a lacquered rectangular bar, a dozen cocktail tables, and a small bandstand into a multi-windowed corner of shops lining Kennesaw Boulevard in Historic Highridge. The calm, talented Basil Matthews turned the small piano’s keys into relaxing jazz.

The *Ledger* crew crowded around two tables, their booze and conversations flowing consistently the same as they had for decades: Government is screwed up. Business is screwed up. Unions are screwed up. Education’s screwed up. Society’s screwed up. TV and radio news are screwed up. Thank god we’ve got newspapers to save civilization.

Franklin had shared in the monologs as a learn-the-ropes reporter in the late ‘70s, cut away for New York at decade’s end, hung on to Greenwich Village and newsprint turning to Internet until 2014, then retired back to Far River

where he had planned to sit on his butt and write sonnets while somebody else tried to stalk news.

But he found he couldn't stay away.

"You oughta be in a fishing boat," Perry had scowled with a smile as Franklin sat with him at the city desk. "You don't wanna tread through this crap anymore."

"I'm dyin' here," Franklin had mumbled back. "How about tossing me a few general assignments?"

Perry did. Also calling Franklin in to cover for senior reporters when they took their two-week vacations. The two veterans had followed that staggered pattern for three years now.

Franklin and his seltzer-and-lime drink snuggled into a table between the chatty Salisbury and still-mute Pearson.

"You still off the sauce, I see," Salisbury chided softly. "How long now?"

"Quarter century," Franklin muttered with a forced grin.

"Whoa! That makes me feel old," the police reporter moaned.

"Salsy, we *are* old," Franklin replied flatly.

Pearson sniffed a laugh, but said nothing.

"Got a little surprise for you," Franklin told Salsy, pulling the folded paper from his pocket and placing it on the table.

Salsy unfolded it and read. He seemed to stop breathing for a second. Then cracked a gallows smile.

“You get me a Pulitzer here, Reeves?”

“Make of it what you will,” Franklin grinned. “Make that cop shop hop.”

“Reeves, my man! Reeveeeves!”

Hollis was gazing with glassy eyes from across the table, his smile indicating his ascendancy to a distant galaxy.



7:45 pm.

Franklin’s maroon Toyota carried him through The Hills into a tree-thick subdivision where he parked outside a church, then headed to its basement. The Grace Place held meetings day and night. Franklin still made at least five a week, remembering his top priority: Sobriety, with a higher power first. Humans second. Yet it was only through these humans that he had first connected with a higher power. And he constantly met with them to recall that fact, and to return the favor.

After the gathering, he sat over a Sloe-Eyed Cow barbeque with Luke Whitman, a quick-witted lawyer and old friend.

“What do you hear about the city’s annexation effort?” Whitman queried. Franklin knew Luke always tossed out a question he wanted to answer himself.

“Just starting to look at it. What do you hear?”

“Lots of land tracts for development out there,” he grinned. “Lots of land with anonymous owners who could really use city services to up the sale prices.”

“You got some anonymous folks you can help me morph into front-page stories?”

“Awww, Reeves. You know I gotta honor attorney-client privileges. I never wanna cause trouble.”

“Naw. None of you former prosecutors ever want to cause a problem.”

They both laughed softly.

“How’s Betty?” Franklin asked.

“She’s about to retire. Get outta that investment crap. Nearly sunk us in 2008. But, boy, she rallied. And I was lucky enough to win a couple of big cases against nursing home chains.”

“I read about those. One in North Carolina. The other, where, Wisconsin?”

“Land of the cheese and beer.”

“Which you didn’t partake in.”

“Well, the cheese was good.”

“Anybody on the city board got a land track in the annexation area?”

“Maybe.”

“Any city hall employees?”

“Maybe. Of course, I can say that much because I don’t have any board members or employees for clients.”

Franklin knew that’s as far as Luke would take it. But it was enough to warm the blood.

“City editor wants me to drive through that fifty-five square-mile area and write a feature about the proposed

annexation.”

“Ray Perry is a wise man,” Luke drawled.



10:45.

Lights on in the Hillwood townhouse. Cassie was still up, lying on the couch, reading *Pride and Prejudice* ... again. Her dark hair short and neatly trimmed, sprinkled with bits of gray, her slender body clothed in navy-blue sweats, she seemed a sleek panther at ease after a chase. A Chopin nocturne dreamed on the stereo.

She raised her upper body to let Franklin slip in next to her, then rested her head in his lap. They both remained silent for a while, her continuing to read, him beginning to breathe deeply, focusing on relaxing.

It was their usual routine on a Friday evening. Saturday evening, they would dine out together, maybe hit a movie, live event, or party. Sunday, he'd cook her breakfast, her favorite omelet with salmon and basil, croissants and an espresso. They'd watch the evening mysteries on PBS, then she'd drive back to her small, well-kept Highridge home. During the week, they slept apart, allowing space for her to write her third novel, him to work on poetry and privately deal with sponsees.

Franklin noticed her yellow pad and pencil on the coffee table. She had sprung an idea and jotted down notes. She'd later incorporate them into the novel, or file them away for a later story.

Finally her soft voice kissed the silence.

“How ya doin’, babe?”

“I’m enthralled by your hands.”

“Never seen withered stems before?”

They both laughed softly.

“You lie,” Franklin drawled in a near whisper.

He reached in his shirt pocket, lifted out a square-folded page, opened it and handed it to her. She read, no sound but the starts and stops of her breathing. Even Chopin seemed to pay attention.

YOUR HANDS

I love to watch your hands gently folding
on your lap, unfolding and crossing, shield
like Ammannati’s Venus enfolding
her vagina—wary, caring, to yield
only for fiery Vulcan. Love to touch
your hands, dorsal delicate as your face,
feel your vein lines flowing life-blood with such
passion. Love to kiss your hands, gently trace
palms’ lifelines with my lips, wet tongue explore
graceful ocean of your pores, taste lotion
of your blessed secretions. What can mean more
than your hands’ adagio, slow motion
of your fingers caressing my resting hands,
guiding them home to your enchanting lands?



She inhaled quickly, let out an easy sigh.

“You write this for one of those young cuties at the paper?”

“I think not.”

Her head still in his lap, she lifted her hands to his chest. He held them both, kissing them softly. Then her upper body rose, her hands reaching, touching his face, bringing his lips to hers, her clear eyes flowing through him.

Chopin prayed.