

A SHATTERED CIRCLE

by Kevin Egan

CHAPTER 1

Ken Palmer felt the big old Buick pull to the right when he was halfway across the field. He was off-road, in a car not designed for off-road driving, and instead of stopping to confirm what he already suspected he kept his foot on the gas. The double dirt track crossed an alfalfa field owned by a client. The alfalfa was just starting to push up among last year's stalks, the field blending into a dull greenish-brown as it stretched into the distance.

The car pulled harder, and Palmer gripped the steering wheel tighter, twisting himself to keep the wheels on the double track that now curved sharply left as the Beaverkill showed itself beyond the tree trunks. His suspicion blossomed into conviction; his right front tire was going flat. But he had no reason to stop, no reason to change plans. He had re-scheduled his appointments and adjourned his cases for his annual day of hooky. A flat tire was not about to stop him.

It was mid-April, which meant that fishermen from all over creation had descended on the Trout Fishing Capital of the World. Most of the outsiders gravitated to the public fishing areas about twenty miles south, where the Willowemoc joined the Beaverkill at a place called Junction Pool. This land was owned by one of Palmer's clients who hadn't sold out to the state, which meant this three-mile section of the Upper Beaverkill was private property. Palmer could fly-fish the day away without any company. And he definitely did not want any company because company and the river did not mix well for him. He'd invited the prospective client now and then, once entertained a lawyer up from the big city. None appreciate the river; none mustered the quiet patience necessary to make the day worthwhile. And so, a wiser man now, it was just him. One day a year, for many years.

The track ended at a thin line of trees, then turned into hardpan as solid as asphalt. Palmer got out to check the tire. It was flat, all right, but not shredded. Cell phone service was spotty, but he raised enough of a signal to connect with Simcoe's Garage.

"Ken Palmer here. Need someone to change a tire."

"You in a rush?" said Darwin.

Palmer explained where he was.

"I'll see who I can rustle up. Just as long as you ain't in a hurry."

"I ain't," said Palmer.

Darwin would rustle up somebody. The garage was a hang-out for every idler between Lew Beach and Roscoe. Somebody would be willing to take a ride to change an old man's flat tire and pocket a few bucks.

Palmer opened the trunk of the car, where he neatly laid out all his gear. He stepped into his waders, then pulled on his vest, which had pockets for his flies, tippetts, leaders, even his cell phone if he were of a mind. He wasn't. He peeled back the rubberized liner to expose the spare tire, then tossed the phone onto the front seat of the car. He couldn't truly disconnect from the office with that thing in his pocket.

The hardpan sloped down to the river, meeting the water at a tiny patch of sand. Upstream was a stretch of riffles, but they smoothed out as the water dived into a deep, wide pool where Palmer knew the trout liked to gather. He waded out till the water was knee-deep and he could see the dark edge of the pool. He flicked his wrist and launched a blue-winged

olive mayfly toward the pool.

In that moment, everything fell away. The flat tire, the office, the clients clamoring about their problems. It was the perfect day. Bright overcast, mild temperature, the birds chirping, the soothing rush of the river against his waders. He didn't give a damn when Darwin Simcoe sent someone to change his tire. He was here for the day.

He caught four browns the first hour, then switched out the blue-winged olive mayfly for a little black caddisfly and caught three more. He heard a car pull up, a door slam, and then he saw a man looking appraisingly at the flat tire. The man waved, and Palmer waved back.

Palmer flicked his wrist and whipped the fly over the pool. A trout struck, and he hooked it. This is some lucky day, he thought as he reeled in the trout. He grabbed it, lifted it out of the water, turned toward the bank to display his latest prize. But the man did not look his way. He had the spare tire leaning against the back bumper and was elbow deep in the trunk, rooting around for the jack.

Oh well, thought Palmer, not every local gives a damn about trout. He pinned the rod under his arm, squeezed the fish's mouth, and worked out the hook. Eight caught, eight released. Still early.

He stayed in the water, flicking flies over the pool until he heard the trunk slam and saw the man dusting his hands. The man did not look familiar; at least he wasn't a Swayze or a Berkeley or Reid, the usual collection who hung out at the garage, eating pork rinds and generally getting in the way until Darwin pressed them into service. But he had done his job and done it quickly, and so Palmer slogged toward the sand patch, running numbers in his head. Twenty seemed too much, but ten not enough. Fifteen, he decided. He'd give the man fifteen bucks.

The man crossed the hardpan slope. Maybe he wasn't a Swayze or a Berkeley or a Reid, but as he got closer, there was something about the slope of his shoulders, the swing of his arms, and the tilt of his head that struck something in the cortex of Palmer's brain.

Palmer set his fly rod down on a large flat rock. The water was ankle deep here. He patted his waders, trying to remember if he had his wallet in his pants pocket or if he'd left it on the seat of the car along with his cell phone.

The man came down off the slope, onto the sand, and then into the water.

"Mr. Palmer?" he said.

"Yes," said Palmer.

"Mr. Kenneth Palmer?"

Palmer nodded.

"I changed your tire."

"Thank you." Palmer located his wallet in his back left pocket and worked his hand inside his waders. "Just want to pay you for your trouble."

"No trouble, Mr. Palmer. Besides, I'm here to pay you."

"Pay me?" Palmer's hand reached his wallet. "For what?"

The man mumbled a name.

"Who?" said Palmer.

The man cleared his throat and repeated the name.

"But you're not one of them," said Palmer.

"That was the whole point, wasn't it?" said the man. A smile slowly spread across his face, then he lunged.

Palmer backed away, but the man grabbed him in a bear hug. Palmer bucked and thrashed, but with one arm in his waders and the other pinned to his side, he couldn't break the man's hold. The man waded out to his waist, tightening his arms around Palmer's chest as

if to squeeze every molecule of air out of Palmer's lungs. At the edge of the pool, he loosened his hold. Palmer managed one long breath before the man spun him around and shoved him face down.

Palmer tried to get his feet under him, but the man pressed him deeper into the cold, smooth water. Palmer flailed his arms and kicked his legs, but the water dampened the force of his blows. Three feet away, he could see the edge of the pool where the eight trout he had caught and released on his day of hooky now hid in the dark depths. His lungs hurt; his neck hurt. He kicked one more time. The air exploded from his lungs, and as he drew in a chest full of cold water, he saw the darkness of the pool swirling up to envelop him.

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