Hear Him Roar

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Ten minutes later Don and I strolled into Sufficient Grounds, a cafe facing Old Olives Park. I had never been here before, and I was only here now because this pain and commotion in my stomach had me wanting to eat something quickly, to see if that might settle things a bit.

We took a table next to one wall, Don facing the street door while I looked back toward the counter and kitchen. The counter was tall and stately, done up like a judge’s bench, and the wall behind was painted to look like a row of ivy-covered columns. Between two of the columns a blind Dame Justice stood holding her scales.

From beyond the bench a girl approached us, skinny and ghastly pale. Except for her shoes, which had three-inch platforms and were candy-apple red, she was dressed all in black. For her parents’ sake I was glad she had on the black tights: the black skirt was about as wide as a shirt-cuff. Her hair was twice as long on one side as on the other. It was closer to maroon than to any other color I can name.

She stood next to our table for close to half a minute before I decided to quit waiting to be greeted. I asked her if they served bacon and eggs.

“We serve the Subpoena,” she said, and reached a twiggy arm across the table to grab one of the folded menus. She opened the menu and pointed with the end of her pen to the place where it explained that the Subpoena was two eggs, bacon, hashbrowns, and toast.
I ordered the Subpoena and Don, who’d eaten already, asked for a cup of coffee. After the girl walked away he pulled out a map of the area and spread it across the tabletop. I followed his thick index finger as it pointed to various spots, each marked with a red X, up and down the river parkway where the department was setting traps. When he saw my questioning look he explained that Seth, the tracker whose dogs had treed Verity’s mother, refused to bring his dogs in again for fear the chase might take them across some busy road where they’d be in danger of getting hit. That explained why they would be using traps.

“That’s not what confuses me,” I said. “I’m wondering why the traps are being set. Nobody has any evidence a mountain lion killed this little boy, do they?”

The girl arrived with our coffees and plunked them down on the map. “You didn’t see the tape,” she said. She had a way of looking nowhere when she talked, so you couldn’t be sure whom she addressed. Maybe she was talking to herself? Before I could decide, she was walking away.

“What tape?” I asked Don.

“Probably a tape worm,” he said and turned back to watch her make her way to the kitchen. He wagged his head a minute. “I take that back. A tape worm would starve trying to live off a host like that.” He took a sip of coffee and turned his attention back to the map. “Now you and me, Sayers, the trap we’re going to set up is—”

“I asked you about evidence,” I said.

He looked up at me and grinned. “That’s the beauty of it, Charles. At this point you don’t need much evidence.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because we got the public will on our side. People want action on this. We have to deliver.”

I reminded him that the law forbade taking a lion before it had done anything wrong.

“Depredation on the goat in Olives takes care of that,” he said through a shit-eating grin. “Gives us all the license we need.”
Pretty soon the girl came with my breakfast.

I pointed at the map. “These traps are going in all up and down the river, on both banks. What guarantee do you have that the right lion gets caught?”

My question hit him like a low-hanging branch. But he recovered quickly. His smile was mischievous, lit with the hope that I was just being sarcastic. When I didn’t smile back all the light fled his face. He spoke to me as to a desperately slow student.

“Any lion’s the right lion, for our purposes. That’s the beauty of it. The lion lovers have their heads in the sand. They’re in no position to be crying foul about anything we do now. It’s their law that put everybody in danger.”

“At least as far as the public’s concerned.”

“What the public thinks is all that matters,” he said with the strained patience of one explaining color to a blind man.

“The truth’s irrelevant, I suppose.”

Don had known me long enough to realize I was no dummy. He had only been talking to me like a dummy because he’d hoped it was a lack of brains, not an excess of scruples, that was blinding me to the beauty of the present situation. With that hope dashed, he sat quietly for a second and sipped at his coffee. I took the opportunity to work on my Subpeona, which tasted fine but didn’t sit well at all.

When Don finally spoke again it was in his most level key. “Sayers, the truth is we have a lion problem here. If we have to use a little sleight-of-hand to make things safer for people, the ends justify the means.”

Some of this attitude I recognized, the concern for people’s safety that I’d learned over the years was a true part of Don’s nature. One of our big responsibilities when we’d worked together had been keeping people safe from sick fish. Don had been zealous about it, even when that meant the two of us going toe-to-toe with rich fish-farmers like Willard Freely, who had a lot of pull at the Capitol. The sleight-of-hand business was new.
I was about to bring this up when the waitress caught my eye. She was standing near the counter, beyond Don, with her back to me. Her right arm was straight down at her side, but her left was raised like the arm of a clock at ten minutes before the hour. I was so struck by the grace and the strangeness of this pose that I didn’t really wonder what she might be doing. Not until her head turned slowly to the left, all the way back till she saw me and confirmed I was watching. Then she turned her gaze toward the end of the raised arm. Following, I saw that she was pointing toward a television screen I hadn’t even noticed, perched on a wall bracket up near the ceiling.

On the screen I saw the “mountain lion” from that videotape made by Chet Burns, the Marlin Perkins wannabe Don and I had interviewed the week before. They were playing it on the morning news. Don was talking again, but I tuned him out as I watched the brown tabby walking and grooming and lounging in the grass. Ghost cat indeed!

Of course it was possible that Chet Burns had acted on his own, that he had heard about this story and gotten in touch with the TV station himself. It was also possible that the tape Don and I gave Cliff Carter had been kept on hand for just such an occasion, that Carter had leaked it to the media in order to further his designs. I had both possibilities in mind when I interrupted Don and told him to check the TV. I knew where the tape had come from as soon as I saw how purple he turned.

Before he could say anything I excused myself and went to the bathroom, where I wavered briefly above my own dim reflection, then lost my breakfast.