

REVENGE ROAD

A Novel by Philip S. Watson

Chapter 1

Lane Harper, thirty-eight, exited the elevator and headed down the long narrow corridor. At the end was a single door with frosted glass and tarnished gold letters that read PRIVATE. Through the glass he saw flashing colors but heard no sound. He pushed a button by the entrance. Soon a vague shadow appeared behind the glass and the door opened.

“Lane, I still can’t get enough of this new video equipment.” Janet Smith’s voice was high-pitched and excited like a child. “Our clients will love it.” With an amazed expression, she motioned to the flashing screens.

Lane came in and locked the door behind him. He stood and scanned the high-ceilinged, rectangle room. Mounted into the wall eight feet above the floor were twelve separate flat screens, each silently pulsing with action of race cars, football, tennis, basketball. One screen had ancient black-and-white footage with Cassius Clay in the ring, dancing and shadowboxing in

the corner.

“What I think is so cool,” Janet giggled, “is that all the panels can turn into one big screen. That’ll be fantastic when we want to show our clients the Super Bowl or World Series or other sports events.”

Lane picked up the remote and changed around the flashing pictures. “Men buy toys like cars and boats and soon get bored. Not so with games. So gambling on games is my business.”

He strolled over to the wall where a hundred photos hung. Most were action shots, football, Dallas Cowboys, jersey number 42, Lane Harper, strong safety. A glass cabinet held a dozen footballs, dated and autographed. Another section of the wall showed action photos of college games, Oklahoma University, Lane Harper tackling, intercepting, running.

On the fourth and top floor of a century-old building, his office stood at the edge of downtown, dwarfed on one side by chrome and glass skyscrapers. The room was one vast open area scattered with tables and chairs.

His name was not on a lease and he paid rent in cash. If there was trouble, the building owner agreed—for an up-front negotiated fee—to claim that Lane Harper was a vagrant squatter.

A bell rang. Lane went to the door and opened it. When the man stepped inside, he slipped a police badge off his belt and raised it above his head.

“Dallas Vice,” Lane said to Janet while pointing at Rainbow Mackey.

Janet’s face blanched and her bottom lip trembled.

Though trained not to show his true feelings, it was impossible for the cop to suppress the amused look on his face.

Rainbow Mackey was a hard-edged, two-fisted looking dude who gave people an impulse to cross the street and get away. A bodybuilder physique—huge shoulders, arms, chest.

His voice was deep, almost guttural. But if he wasn't confronting criminals, his natural manner was gentle, almost shy. He worked undercover for various police departments and some Federal contracts.

Rainbow shook his head, irritated. "Don't worry ma'am, you're not getting busted by me. Not today anyway." He turned to Lane and winked.

Janet patted her hand against her chest and let out a relieved breath. "My God that scared me. I could just see our brand new fifty-thousand dollar video system thrown into a dump truck and hauled off."

Rainbow gave her a sharp, scolding look. "Young lady, aren't you more afraid of getting your lovely self hauled off to jail?"

Janet glared at Rainbow with a look that said she didn't like his question. Before she could reply, Lane cut in. "Anything's possible." He gave Rainbow a thoughtful gaze. "I have no illusions. That's why I've got several layers of protection."

Rainbow had smooth nut brown skin, full lips, big wide eyes he usually hid behind Oakley sunglasses, thick, coal-black hair pulled tight and tied in a ponytail, and a small gold earring in the left lobe. His jeans were tight over thick legs, a black T-shirt showing a trim waist.

"Our clients are solid citizens," Janet said, and gave a dismissive flip of her hand. "One's even a Dallas Police captain." She gave a cocky smile. "He's been an extra good client."

Rainbow rolled his eyes, unimpressed. Lane turned to Janet. "Knock it off. I want Rainbow on our team."

The three took seats around a table that held a chess board with large, hand-carved pieces. Rainbow turned and looked around the room. The cozy aroma of old leather furniture mingled with the smell of fresh paint and brewed coffee. A bank of windows held a view of the

sprawling Farmers' Market, packed with vendors selling vegetables, fruit, floral products.

"Well, I heard this place was clean and polished and funky all at once." Then he let out a long sigh. "Let's hear it. I owe you. So how can I pay you?"

"We're friends, Rainbow. Always." Lane paused and let the words hang, his expression held some pain. "But what I need is information. Knowing our clients, their background and history, is the number one way to avoid trouble down the road."

"In this business," Rainbow chuckled in a way that wasn't funny. "I'd say that's just one of your problems."

Janet spoke up. "Lane knows probability theory better than an MIT Ph.D. He can predict an outcome with almost mathematical certainty."

"I know numbers and how to calculate betting lines," Lane said, nodding. "But people and their backgrounds are just as important. There I need help."

Rainbow leaned back. He was Arapaho Indian and probably had some Mexican. He had been born into the poverty of Northern Mexico, and Mackey was not the name he'd been born with. By his eighth birthday he had learned English watching TV on a dirt floor in a Juarez bar. Though he never discovered how or why, at nine he landed in a Catholic orphanage in Victoria, Texas. Eleven years later, the army made him a U. S. citizen after he became a Special Forces operator.

"Sometimes bookies get muddled," Rainbow said, tapping his finger against his chin. "Lose both sides of the bet and have to pay double. Collect zero."

Lane nodded, acknowledged Rainbow was right.

"But that's rare," Janet added. "With Lane's math skills, we've not gotten muddled this year or last."

Rainbow frowned, obviously thinking, then shrugged. "Okay." He pulled a pen and notebook from his back pocket. "I'll see what I can do."

Lane checked his watch. "In an hour I'm getting on a guy's private jet. He's invited me for a weekend on his yacht out in the Gulf. I want to know if he's got issues. Guy's name is John Adair."

"We know," Janet added, "that Adair is a high roller and he likes to gamble. Question is, does he have it under control? For bookmaking, out-of-control gamblers are Al Qaeda in a bomb vest."

"Can you be more specific?" Rainbow said and wrote on a page of his notebook.

"What's he like up close? It's well known he's an intellectual made-for-media eccentric. But is that code for lunatic?"

"Adair is rich and famous," Janet added. "But would he be a bad bet on our side of the ledger?"

"Do his enemies outnumber his friends?" Rainbow shrugged like it was a suggestion, but also showing that he knew what their questions were adding up to.

Lane gave an approving nod. He liked Rainbow's jaded attitude about gambling coupled with his people smarts. Lane knew yes-men were deadly to management.

"What's Adair like when he loses?" Janet added. "Because Lane has shown me that, in the long run, gamblers always lose. All gamblers."

"Why does he want you?" Rainbow snorted. "No shortage of bookies to take a bet."

"Good question." Then Lane nodded to the Indian cop. "How about you answer that one, Rainbow."

"I bet I can tell you," Janet said. "Adair is a glamour guy. So he wants a bookie who

once wore the blue star on a silver helmet, an ex-Dallas Cowboy.” Janet turned to Rainbow.
“Lane brings both glamour and nostalgia to our bookmaking business.”

“I’m getting things in order for fall football. Getting high rollers like John Adair into my client base is part of my off-season work.”

“I hate the off-season,” Janet said with a groan. “I wish football were year round.”

Rainbow flipped a page in his notebook. “When are you planning to be back in town?”

“Figure on three days.”

Rainbow gave a casual shrug. “I should have something by then.”

“Hey,” Janet said, looking at Rainbow. “I don’t recall the name Mackey in our client list. You said you owed Lane?”

“Another kind of debt,” Rainbow said with a somber expression that said drop-the-subject. “Something better than money.” He flipped the notebook closed and stuffed it in his jean pocket.

Lane gave Rainbow a wistful glance then stood and clapped his hands. “Okay, good meeting. Now I’m off to the Gulf Coast.”

* * *

The helicopter co-pilot half-turned in the seat and pointed to his head phones then nodded toward another pair hanging on the bulkhead. Lane reached over and slid them on. Spongy rubber donuts turned the deafening mechanical whine into a hum and he easily understood the co-pilot.

Lane Harper wore khaki pants and a long sleeve cotton shirt, and though six-two, few would guess he had played college football and then two years professional. Even fewer would guess he was a mathematical genius, though he’d had decent grades in the sciences at Oklahoma

University. His hair was cut military style, and it would be two months growing down to his collar before he'd re-visit the barber. Lane rarely laughed or showed any strong emotion, something he often pondered to himself as to why that was.

“Doctor Adair has got one serious party-time weekend lined up,” the voice crackled through the head phones. “We’re dropping you off along a mountain basin about a hundred miles from shore. Rich with snapper. Good shark fishing too.” The co-pilot held up his fists and posed a jerking struggle with a fishing reel. “Ever hooked a hundred pound shark?”

Lane shook his head. The back seat headphones were for ears only and didn't have a wrap around mouthpiece. The co-pilot grinned and gave Lane a thumbs-up then turned back and faced forward. Minutes later he pointed through the windshield and the pilot gave a sharp nod. The turbo quieted and Lane felt the craft descending. He checked his watch, fifty-five minutes airborne, straight out into the Gulf.

* * *

Less than three hours earlier Lane had boarded in Dallas, the only passenger in the six-seat Cessna Citation business jet. An hour later in Houston the plane had taxied to a stop at an isolated tarmac reserved for private jets. When the side door steps settled on the tarmac, a man stood waiting. He wore a multi-pocketed grey flight suit and white helmet with dark navigational visors. As Lane stepped out, the helicopter pilot grabbed his bag out of his hand and motioned for him to follow. Fifty or so yards away they reached the helo pad where a blue-and-red Bell Ranger stood with the rotor and tail prop spinning, ready for take off.

In minutes, they were over the Gulf of Mexico with the shoreline disappearing fast. Then it was water as far as Lane could see, with oil tankers, cargo ships, fishing trawlers, and pleasure craft, all churning a greenish white wake as they moved among the occasional off-shore oil rig.

The helicopter was flying low, Lane guessed less than a thousand feet above the Gulf, hammering at a speed well over a hundred miles per hour. Soon the ships thinned out, and it was nothing but open sea.

Lane was having fun and lost track of time. The Ranger passed over what looked like a commercial boat. The helicopter banked hard and made a tight turn, circling back and dropping fast. Then it braked and hovered in slow, settling down on an “X” marked platform at the fantail. The co-pilot pushed his door out and jumped down, then slid open the side panel and grabbed Lane’s bag and set it on the boat deck.

Lane stepped out and the co-pilot yelled in his ear. “Down below the beer’s on ice.” He pointed toward a set of stairs. “Steaks sizzling on the grill.” He looked at his watch and grimaced. “We’ve got to pick up a few more at Galveston and Freeport and get them out here.” He slapped Lane on the shoulder. “Buddy, you’re gonna have one hell of a weekend.” He gave a huge grin then slid the side door closed and got in the co-pilot seat. The chopper lifted and Lane’s ball cap was sucked off his head. It blew fifty feet behind the boat and fell spinning onto the smooth surface of the ocean.

The mechanical drone of the chopper faded fast, and the bird became a mere dot then disappeared into the afternoon sky. Standing on the deck at the rear of the boat, Lane looked toward the stern and guessed the length to be about two-hundred feet, a decent-sized craft. But it was a rugged commercial rig, definitely not the luxury yacht that John Adair’s invitation had boasted.

* * *

He lifted his bag and headed for the stairs. Not a single sound, and no vibration. The main engines were not running and he didn’t hear any auxiliary power. That seemed odd. He

moved toward the front of the boat, along the side rail until he came to the stairs leading to the pilot house. He stopped and yelled “hello.” No reply. He climbed the steps and found the door to the wheel room open. No one was around. Lights were turned off. Lane went to the ship steer-wheel and saw the helm was locked. The boat didn’t feel like it was drifting. But where was the crew?

He went down two flights of stairs to the main deck walkway and strolled around, all the while yelling out “hello.” Back to the steps leading to the pilot house, he now had the strange feeling that he was the only person on the boat.

He started around the outer walkway a second time, opening doors. The first was a room strewn with piles of well-worn rope with oblong floats, discolored and mangled buoys. The space smelled of rot and mildew. He closed the door and turned down the latch. At the bow he saw the anchor chain taut and in the water. Along the walkway on the portside he came to another door. It was the galley, a large room on the main deck. He flipped a wall switch. No lights came on. He went into the kitchen. Three commercial sized refrigerators were empty, the power off. The stove room had no cans of food on the shelves, only a few chipped plates and cups. The eating area had a counter with six padded stools, three floor-mounted tables and a couple of booths built into the wall. He saw a stack of magazines on a booth seat. The lighting was dim, and he moved the stack close to a porthole. *Time, Sports Illustrated, Car and Driver, Yacht World*, all with subscription dates over a year old.

He got out his cell phone. The screen read ‘no service.’ He stepped outside, took the stairs to the top deck and set the phone on a cross bar away from any structural interference. Waiting for the cell to get a signal, he moved to both port and starboard sides of the top deck and again yelled “hello.” No sounds except for the occasional wave lapping the side of the boat. Not

a breeze, no cawing of gulls.

Could he actually be on this boat alone? A hundred miles at sea? The quiet rattled his ears and nerves. His clothes now had the smell of diesel fuel.

He went back to the cell and read the screen. 'No service.' He checked his watch. Fifty-four in the afternoon. In about two hours it would be sundown. He powered off the cell to save the battery. Without power or electricity, this boat was going to be a dark and uncomfortable place to spend the night. Lane got a sinking feeling in his gut. Then he decided. With what daylight was left, he'd search the place. Try to find out what the hell was going on.