

T W O

King Con

The Florida midday sun cooked the half acre of used cars at Bob's Auto Ranch in Coral Gables. Shimmering heat waves danced along the tops of Beamers and Bent Eights, parked in shiny rows, dressed in cheap new fifty-dollar paint jobs. They begged customers shamelessly with BUY ME and TAKE ME HOME signs propped under the windshield wipers. Faded red and blue plastic triangular flags hung listlessly from guy wires in the stagnant heat like dead balloons after a birthday party. It had been a slow morning . . . mostly tire-kickers and be-backs.

Because he was sure Joe Rina was still trying to kill him, Beano Bates had dyed his hair blond and had added a mustache, which he needed to lighten constantly. He still wasn't completely recovered from the beating with a nine-iron that had happened six months ago. Remarkably, the brutal assault had not diminished his good looks. If anything, he appeared slightly more rugged. But Beano had been forced to hide, and not only from the Rina brothers. . . . Last week, he had made his second surprise appearance on *America's Most Wanted*.

Beano had been sitting in his fourteen-dollar-a-night motel

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apartment, feeding Roger-the-Dodger a Big Mac, when his segment had aired. The brown and black fox terrier looked up from his quarter-pounder and barked angrily, perking up his ears and snarling at the TV, as if he knew the whole story was bullshit. Beano looked lovingly at the dog. . . . You couldn't find that kind of fierce loyalty in criminal partners anymore.

On the TV, John Walsh droned on as a picture of Beano with his old dark hair color popped up on the blue screen behind him. "Beano X. Bates," Walsh said seriously, "is perhaps the most notorious and successful con-man operating in the United States today. A gifted actor, Bates can quickly separate you from your fortune. Among con men there is always an acknowledged king of the hustle, referred to in the game as 'King Con.' Beano Bates currently holds that infamous title. If you see this man, don't buy *anything* from him. Don't let him near your money or bank account, but call us here at *America's Most Wanted* or get in touch with your local police."

"Some con man," Beano muttered in disgust, as he wrapped the rest of Roger's half-eaten burger in a bag, saving it for later.

For the last two weeks, Beano had been selling dead-sleds and junkers to unsuspecting blue-hairs at Bob's Auto Ranch. He was on commission, not salary, trying to move the tired collection of stripped-down preacher cars and ominously noisy cement mixers that Bob was offering "on excellent terms." Despite the depressing inventory, Beano had done well at the Auto Ranch because he could convince anybody of just about anything. Bullshit was his greatest gift. He had made friends with the few attractive women who had wandered in, deciding he was more interesting than the rusting clunkers he was selling. He had dated one or two of them, but Beano was tired and was having trouble putting much energy into anything.

That particular afternoon, Beano was trying to sell a cancerous green Ford station wagon that Bob had taken in trade ten

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days ago. The car was basically lunched, but the service department had added some lipstick. They screwed beauty bolts onto the engine block and coaxed the tired, mashed-potato transmission back to life. They had sprayed and power-waxed the new green paint. The '86 Country Squire had ninety thousand miles on the odometer. In a final act of criminal camouflage, Bob's chief mechanic had rocked the clock back to fifty. It now sat dripping oil in the oppressive afternoon heat, a sagging road warrior dressed for its last inspection.

"A great high-occupancy vehicle. Ford sure knows how t'make 'em," Beano said with expansive awe to the mean-spirited old man who was teetering around, looking in the back, trying to put up the fold-down seat that was on broken hinges. "'Course, all those minor defects will be addressed prior to ownership transfer." Beano smiled as the geezer tried to peel up the carpet and look at the floor to see if there was rust.

"Stinks back here," the old man said, looking at Beano and wrinkling his nose. "Carpets all got mildew."

Beano looked at him, not really caring if he sold the wagon. He fired a half-hearted line of bullshit over the dying transaction: "I'm not supposed to say this, 'cause Bob tries to protect all of our famous customers . . . but this car was originally owned by . . ." He stopped and looked at the old man carefully. "Y'know what? This isn't the right car for you. There's at least ten others we could look at."

"Owned by who?" the man said, his papery, thin skin reddening with faint interest as he looked at Beano with eyes yellowed by age and a bad diet.

"Well, I'm not supposed . . ." Beano paused and shook his head. "Can't say . . . sorry."

"Who? I can keep a secret."

Beano let a silent war of conscience play on his expressive actor's face, then caved in. "This car belonged to Vinnie Testaverde when he was still playing quarterback for the 'Canes.

Reason it's got that kinda funky odor back there is, Vinnie told me he hadda park it at Morris Field behind the Athletic Department there at the University of Miami and people kept breaking in when he was at away games, hopin' to get like, whatta ya call it?"

"Souvenirs?" the old man contributed.

"Right, souvenirs." Beano nodded. "With the back window smashed, carpets kept getting all wet when it rained."

The deal hovered on the precipice of this new fact for a few heart-stopping moments as the old man contemplated driving Vinnie Testaverde's car.

"'Course, you can't tell anyone, 'cause Bob doesn't give out the ownership pedigrees on these cars. I think it's nuts, but Bob, he's got a real thing about it." Beano was starting to get dizzy because he still hadn't fully recovered from the devastating beating and the midday sun was killing him. He wanted to go sit on his metal chair in the shade of the office, drink some iced tea out of his thermos, and curse John Walsh for making him live like a homeless fugitive.

Finally the old man looked up, a crafty defiance in his yellow geezer eyes. "You want fifteen hunnert dollars. . . . I'll go twelve," he said, beginning the familiar dance that used-car barkers call "the grind."

"Even if it wasn't Vinnie Testaverde's car, Bob won't let it go for twelve," Beano said, wishing he could get to the chair in the shade of the dealer's shed. Ever since the vicious beating, he'd been having intermittent double vision. The old man was beginning to split in two right before him, his whiskery cranial image moving slightly to the right so that he now looked like a double exposure. Despite this distraction, Beano knew the sale was his. Then he had a strange twinge of remorse for his cranky client because he knew the Ford wagon was tired iron. These bouts of conscience had never hit him before. . . . He had never stopped to consider the fate of a mark, but since the assault in

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the parking lot at the Greenborough Country Club, for some god-forsaken reason, he'd started reflecting on the damage he had caused in other people's lives. He'd always told himself that marks were born to be fleeced, that he and Roger-the-Dodger had to eat, but lately these excuses seemed shallow. So he had taken the job at Bob's Auto Ranch, where he could use his charm and gift of gab in a semi-legitimate hustle. It was a temporary rest stop on his road to a new life.

By six o'clock the deal was closed at fourteen hundred dollars and the old man drove the listing wagon off the lot. Beano had promised to try to get him an autographed picture of Vinnie Testaverde, which was not going to be hard at all because he had ten of them left in his desk. He'd written the university and told them he was starting a booster club. He received the photos of the ex-Hurricane superstar in the mail from the Athletic Department ten days later. He'd also spent an extra one hundred dollars and ordered a Vinnie Testaverde autographed football from the Baltimore Ravens, where he was now playing. Beano was now good enough on the signature to fool the old Vinster himself. Beano would mail the picture to the geezer next week with an inscription from Testaverde saying how much Vinnie missed his old rusted-out beater, which had really been owned by an airport yellow cab company before Bob's paint shop had sprayed it green.

That night, Beano took Roger-the-Dodger out for a celebratory dinner of Chicken McNuggets and beer. The terrier sat on the front seat of Beano's newly acquired, low-profile '88 blue Escort and sipped the beer out of an oversized cup while he chewed breaded McNuggets. He was licking his lips, almost grinning. Beano had owned Roger for almost a year. He had been training him to be a shill: to shit on cue and to look expensive, which was often hard for ten-dollar pound-mutts, but Roger had natural talent. He knew how to project attitude. He could strut. Beano had perfected a variety of dog cons. He had a forged

Kennel Club certificate that said Roger was a Bauchatrain Terrier and that his name was Sir Anthony of Aquitaine. Roger was also a great ice breaker. While a targeted mark smiled and scratched the terrier behind the ears, Beano would make his opening move. An added plus was that in a bust, Roger would hold his dirt. His pal Roger would never testify against him in court. The terrier was showing real signs of being a world-class sharper, but that was before Beano, using a dead man's I.D., got caught cheating Joe Rina at cards and got blasted onto the path of righteousness with a nine-iron.

"Don't slobber, Roge," he said, and the dog seemed to understand as he slowed down, lapping up his Coors Light with more restraint. "We gotta get us some traction. I know I promised I was gonna try and get Tom Jenner into a golf hustle, but he's an angry bastard when he loses, and with this double vision, I couldn't drop a putt in a wastebasket."

Roger-the-Dodger stopped drinking beer and looked up at Beano like a hold-up man who sensed his getaway driver might be losing his nerve. The dog definitely seemed worried.

Deep down, underneath all of the other stuff, the excuses about his vision and the bullshit about *America's Most Wanted*, there was a lurking realization. Beano knew that the beating by Joe Rina had introduced him to a cold, withering fear he had never known before. He had a numbing, paralyzing reaction every time he remembered the assault. Sweat would cover him like a fearful cocoon. Unreasonable panic wracked him. The most distressing note in this new mental orchestra was in the string section of his recently discovered conscience. He had started to remember the faces of his marks. He pushed his greed aside, and for the first time began to see them as people he had lied to and robbed. He tried to unburden his guilt by remembering the con man's excuse: *You can never cheat an honest man*. It didn't help. In quiet moments after work, when he was in the cheap one-bedroom motel apartment two blocks from the ocean, and while Roger was snoring at the

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foot of his bed, Beano started to wonder if he should get out of grifting. He had been overwhelmed lately by intense loneliness. His profession had isolated him. He had no friends, only people he knew. A con man couldn't afford to let himself become vulnerable. His problem was, if he went off the hustle, what would he do with himself? He'd been a sharper all of his life. He had no other worthwhile skills.

It had all started when he was six, working for his mom and dad, doing roofing scams. The Bates family was a huge, disjointed criminal enterprise. The National Crime Information Center and FBI guessed that there were more than three thousand Bates family members grifting all across the United States. Beano couldn't confirm or deny that fact, because he'd met only a hundred or so of his cousins, but every major town he'd ever been in had members of his family in the phone book, and his father told him they were all on the bubble. Con games were the family business. Members of his family all used X. as their middle initial, and by simply looking under Bates in any city's phone directory you could find his relatives. Most Bates family members played driveway and roofing hustles. They had elevated these two short cons to an art form.

Beano's parents had been nomads, constantly roaming, living in trailer parks and changing towns to stay ahead of the law. His mother and father would drive down streets in every new town they hit in their rusting Winnebago, looking for houses that had loose roof shingles. Then his father would park the motor home down the street from a prospective mark's house, get out sawhorses and hammers, and send adorable six-year-old Beano back to knock on the mark's front door.

"Sir," he would say in his sweet choirboy voice, "my daddy is down the street putting a new roof on your neighbor's house." It was a lie, but he would point his short, pudgy little arm at his father's Winnebago, now alive with manufactured activity down the block. The mark would smile and crane his or her neck to see.

“Anyway,” he would continue, always looking straight into the pigeon’s eyes to communicate guileless sincerity, “Daddy noticed that your roof has lots of loose shingles. We have more shingles than we need for your neighbor’s job. If you want, my daddy could make you a very good price on fixing your roof.”

“Shouldn’t you be in school, young man?” was a common question, and then little six-year-old Beano would drop the closer. . . . “My little sister has this real bad sickness and we gotta make enough money this summer for her to start her chem . . . chemo . . . something.”

“Chemotherapy?” the mark would contribute, and Beano would nod sadly. This fact would hang over the opening pitch like the angel of death. He rarely failed to “steer” the mark.

His father, Jacob, would come down at lunchtime and look studiously at the roof. He would refuse donations for the nonexistent sister’s chemo, claiming family pride. “We ain’t much for charity, but thanks and God bless you for your Christian concern,” Jacob would say, often finding a tear in his eye and brushing its moisture visibly onto his cheek. Then he would climb up on the roof, rub his chin, and agree to do the whole roof for two thousand dollars, which by any estimate was a helluva deal. New roofs back then went for between five and ten thousand. Now, all thoughts of Beano’s cancer-ridden sister were banished by the mark’s greed: *These stupid hillbillies are gonna fix my roof for less than the material cost.* With that realization, the mark was hooked.

The next day the Bates family would arrive early. Beano would retrieve the sawhorse and ladder from the top of their motor home and carry it to the house. The homeowners would look out their windows and marvel at this tragic, industrious family, especially that cute, hard-working little boy. By nine A.M., Jacob would be up on the roof hammering loudly, making as much noise as possible to drive the family out. Once they were gone, Beano and his mother, Connie, would join Jacob up on the roof. They would hammer the loose shingles down and

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quickly paint the roof with heavy number-nine-weight motor oil. When the mark returned home, his “new” roof would be dark brown and glistening. Jacob X. Bates would take the cash from the grateful homeowner along with well-wishes for the dying sister, and Beano’s family would get the hell out of Dodge. The next heavy rain might fill the mark’s living room with motor oil, but by then they would be in the next state.

As a young man, Beano showed promise for much more. He had learned to run big cons from his uncle, “Paper Collar” John Bates. He ran boiler rooms and bucket shops, Blue River real-estate scams and green goods hustles. He played the pigeon drop and did three Big Store cons. He could dress up and be whatever he needed to be. He had a soft ear and could affect almost any accent or dialect. He was a master of disguises . . . a scratch golfer, a cardplayer without peer, and he would always find a way to shade the odds in his favor.

Now it seemed, at the age of thirty-four, after rising to the pinnacle of his chosen profession, after having John Walsh dub him “King Con” on national TV, he was about to flounder on the rocks of unreasonable panic. It was unbelievable and it shocked him, but Beano Bates had completely lost his nerve.

“Stop staring at me,” he said sharply to the brown and black terrier, who continued to sit on the front seat of the Escort and look at him with canine concern. “At least if I quit, you won’t ever have to shit on cue again. . . . You won’t ever have to try and look like a five-thousand-dollar Baunchatrain Terrier,” he said hotly.

Roger looked disappointed. He glanced out the window at the lighted golden arches. He sniffed at his beer without interest. Then he circled a place on the front seat three times before dropping anchor and putting his chin on his paws. He never took his gaze off Beano, watching him like a concerned parent.