

The Sheriff of Skid Row

2498 Words

When you have nothing left you find out who your friends are. Seven years ago, Ray Dempsey learned that after his career, marriage, self-worth, and sobriety collapsed in public scandal. Former coworkers closed ranks. No family took him in. Evicted, divorced, zero credit, he lived out of his car until it was repossessed, stranding him in “The Zone,” a 15-block encampment in downtown Phoenix. Days were spent staving off heatstroke, nights downing pilfered pills and Popov vodka, until one afternoon he stumbled into Artie’s camp, an oasis amid the despair. Artie was the mayor of their traveling village who gave out nicknames to new arrivals, christening Ray the “Sheriff,” a bit on-the-nose given his notoriety. A fellow veteran 30 years senior, Artie diagnosed Dempsey’s post-Iraq PTSD before the VA got around to it. Gradually, he got Ray clean then gave him a mission.

One January night over a campfire, Dempsey said, “I’m a mess Artie, but you have it together. Why are you still here?”

Artie smiled. “Because this is where my friends are. People with no place else to go. Some, like you, can leave once their luck improves. Most won’t. The Zone’s a city in a city. We’ve got petty theft, overdoses, fistfights to break up. You can help me, Ray. You have the training to protect us.”

Dempsey stared into the flames. “I can’t do that anymore.”

“Don’t think you’re unsalvageable. We need you, Sheriff.”

On Memorial Day, Artie wanted to go dumpster diving at a construction site, partly to steal scrap to pawn, mainly for spite since their camp was being uprooted to build condominiums. Dempsey declined. Artie understood: “It’s not the Sheriff’s style.” Instead, two outsiders named the Professor and Mary Ann tagged along.

The Sheriff of Skid Row

The trio never returned. The next morning, Artie was found in an alley barely a block away. A shotgun blast had obliterated his face. That close, Dempsey would've heard the gunfire. It was a body dump. Whatever went down, he wasn't there for his friend.

Artie's distant relatives chose cremation over the potter's field. His final estate fit into a backpack.

Dempsey never believed in heaven. Hell, however, surrounded him.

Police raided the Zone at dawn tearing down blue tarps and tattered dome tents as Detective Sergeant Dave Cutler watched with a rookie patrolman.

"Don't call them homeless, they're unhoused. Remember they're people," the rookie scoffed, mimicking the shrill social worker who briefed the task force on rules of engagement. "How do *people* live like this? We should get hazard pay."

"You'll live," the detective said. The rookie, a SWAT wannabe, sweated in tactical gear. Cutler sported a guayabera shirt covering his paunch and Sig-Sauer.

"What'd you do to get this woke detail, Sarge?"

"Homicide case I'm working."

"You think the suspect's *here*," the rookie whispered.

Cutler sipped coffee. "Person of interest."

"Can I help?"

"Nope."

Cutler walked away. Now the sun was up, the temp nearing ninety. Dozens of souls roused from their tents, bleary-eyed, wondering where they'd go next. Contrary to popular belief, many had jobs, cleaning motels, loading trucks at Amazon warehouses, but couldn't make rent. Plenty were abused women, runaways. The remainder decked the DSM-5's Christmas tree

The Sheriff of Skid Row

of untreated mental disorders, shuffling through the Maricopa County Jail's revolving door. Cutler spotted several perps he could bust for warrants. But to his chagrin, he didn't see the person he was looking for. The witness in the wind.

Cutler sighed: shouldn't get his hopes up. Eight thousand homeless lived in the metro area, hundreds downtown. Local businesses protested. Bleeding hearts were running dry. City Hall busted tent cities like Whack-A-Mole but couldn't turn the tide. Their solution was to keep shoving the camps out of sight so you could ignore them. The ostrich defense.

Just then Cutler heard screaming. The rookie had two transients cornered. The first cowered in fear. The second, 6'5 tall yet rail-thin, was guarding him.

It couldn't be. He'd heard a rumor he hit the skids after being drummed out of the Department, then radio silence. Cutler figured he fled Arizona or ate a bullet, who could blame him? Yet here he was, seven years later, albeit with a patchy beard and shaggy bangs shading his eyes: Officer Ray Dempsey.

"Step aside, Sasquatch" the rookie ordered. "Your pal shoved me."

"It's not his fault," Dempsey said.

"Let him explain."

"He's nonverbal. Autistic. You're dysregulating him by yelling."

"Well, you're interfering with a peace officer." The rookie pulled his Taser.

Cutler ran over, "Stand down, I know this guy."

Last time he saw Dempsey was after the Critical Incident Review Board took his badge away after a bad shooting. If those bureaucrats were there that day, they'd have pulled the trigger too, but these days no cop survived a trip through the cable news-social media outrage machine. Especially when you kill an innocent man.

The Sheriff of Skid Row

The rookie caught his breath. “That bum’s your person of interest?”

Cutler chuckled. “No, he used to be my partner.”

“**Sorry about that,**” Cutler said once they were alone. “I hear they call you Sheriff?”

“Hate the nickname, but it’s from a fallen comrade.” Dempsey paused. “Artie.”

Cutler’s pulse spiked. “That wouldn’t be Arthur Adams?”

Dempsey nodded.

“I’m investigating his murder. Buy you breakfast, Ray?”

They sat in a booth at a 7th Street diner. The waitress gave the stink-eye taking their order.

Dempsey spoke hesitantly like a radio skipping stations, finding only static. He seemed rattled by the background noise, clanking dishes and overlapping conversations. Cutler decided he’d buy the poor guy’s pancakes then pull the plug. Pressing him about the murder was too much. But suddenly Dempsey’s eyes steeled: “What do you know about Artie, Dave?”

“Lived off the grid so long he hardly left a paper trail. Court-martialed out of Vietnam for punching his CO, then once stateside, drifts around the southwest before settling here. Over the past fifty years he’s been arrested a dozen times, vagrancy, loitering, low-rent B&Es that weren’t worth prosecuting. But everybody I’ve interviewed swears he was a kind man. Some call him a saint.”

“He saved my life.”

“Ray, I want to find his killer. But I’ll be honest. This case isn’t a priority for the brass. It’s what detectives in less politically correct times called NHI.”

“No humans involved. Don’t waste Department time or resources.”

The Sheriff of Skid Row

“That’s not my mantra. I know the hijinks Artie was up to that night and I don’t care. My theory is he had a friend with him who saw what went down, got away, and is now in hiding. I’m trying to find that eyewitness. Can you help me?”

Dempsey bit a cracked lip, “There were two, actually.” He told him about Artie’s accomplices.

“Mary Ann.” Cutler took notes. “That’s her real name?”

“No. Artie was going through a *Gilligan’s Island* phase.”

“Pretty girl?”

“Maybe before the crystal meth. She seemed on the upswing, though.”

“The Professor?”

“Used to be a graduate student at ASU. Got expelled for threatening his thesis advisor.”

“That’s suspicious. History of violence?”

“Sweet kid. Misunderstood. Plus, he didn’t own a twelve-gauge.”

“What do you think happened, Ray?”

“They must’ve stumbled into something at the construction site. Drug deal, human trafficking? You interview the builder?”

Cutler learned in, conspiratorially. “Real estate developer’s a big shot named Blake Westbrook. Intel is the FBI’s investigating him for laundering money for the Russian mafia but since Westbrook’s tight with half the Legislature, there’s political pressure to shut it down. I’m investigating off the books and need airtight evidence before confronting him. But most homeless don’t like talking to cops.”

“They’d talk to me. I could ask around--”

The Sheriff of Skid Row

Cutler grimaced. "I appreciate that, partner. You can reach folks I can't. But be careful. We don't know where this leads. I'll run these aliases first. How can I contact you now that your camp's...gone?"

Dempsey smiled, nearly a complete set of teeth. "I'll be around."

With a full belly, Dempsey canvassed downtown. He visited the shelters, soup kitchens, and spoke to his sidewalk brothers and sisters. It was mostly idle chitchat, dead ends. But at the rescue mission, he caught a tip that Mary Ann left to live with her sister, a snowbird with an ancient Airstream. He felt elated and left a message at the station for Cutler. Walking by an unfinished high-rise, he almost missed the vinyl banner: *Luxury Condos for Sale: Opening Soon*. There was a sales office with a bored receptionist behind a desk. On a whim Dempsey walked inside.

Eventually the receptionist looked up from her iPhone, startled. "We don't have public restrooms."

"Maybe I'm in the market."

"Funny. Leave or I'm calling the cops."

Dempsey held up his hands. "Funny, I came to talk to your security team. I saw these dudes with some copper wiring they might've ripped off from here. That stuff's valuable." He pointed at a camera overhead. "If I could see your footage, I can ID them."

She smacked gum. "You want, like, a reward?"

"Trying to be a good citizen."

"Don't move." She went around the corner for 90 seconds. "They said to call our security manager. He's a real cop with PPD, works here on nights and weekends."

The Sheriff of Skid Row

The receptionist slid a business card across the counter. He guessed the name before it reached him.

Dempsey couldn't sleep. It wasn't the park bench. He knew the nightmares were coming. Sometimes he'd be back in Baghdad, but mostly it was the hallway at Sonoran Vista High School. Every time he couldn't change what happened.

Dempsey and Cutler were detailed as school resource officers and on their lunch break when the call came over the radio: *Active shooter. This is not a drill.* Siren blaring, they came back into chaos. Students spilled out of the building, some jumping out classroom windows. Cutler, the senior officer yelled to wait for backup. Dempsey rushed inside.

Rounding the corner with his Glock, he entered a long hallway lined with lockers and abandoned backpacks. Inside a classroom, he saw a teenager on the ground, nose bloodied, then a red-faced man shouldering an AR-15. In his tunnel-vision, Dempsey swore he yelled to drop it, but the truth is he couldn't find the words. Their eyes locked for a split-second. Pulling the trigger three times, he dropped the man cold on the checkered tile.

Ears still ringing, Dempsey heard a woman scream, "You shot the wrong one!"

The shooting investigation revealed he'd killed Mr. Macias, the wrestling coach and civics teacher. Moments earlier, Macias had tackled the shooter, an ex-student with a plagiarized manifesto, access to his grandfather's gun safe, and bad aim. Three students were wounded by shrapnel before Macias intervened. Macias was the only fatality and that was the headline: *COP KILLS HERO*. The shooting drew condemnation from all corners of the endless gun debate. Dempsey's career was over, but a worse fate was coming. He would never forget the man's eyes searching for an answer that wasn't coming, as Cutler shook him, crying, why didn't you listen to me?

The Sheriff of Skid Row

“This better be good, brother. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

They met at Library Park, a five-minute walk from police headquarters. Dempsey looked hungover. “Been busy,” he said.

“No doubt. So where can I find the girl?”

“She’s in a trailer park with her sister.”

“Fantastic. Give me the address.”

“It’s going to cost you.”

Cutler exhaled. “Fine. You need food, booze, spot in a good shelter--”

Dempsey interrupted. “Ten thousand cash or I tell her to run.”

“You’re shaking me down?” Cutler sneered. “That’s some finder’s fee after all we’ve been through.”

“But it’s a twofer. I’ll kill her for you. It’s your endgame, isn’t it Dave.”

Cutler turned crimson. “You were crazy as a cop, even before you capped that teacher. But now you’re on a different planet.”

Dempsey handed him the business card.

Cutler acted confused. “My off-duty employment? Half the force needs second jobs to survive in this economy. Plus, I’m paying alimony and child support to two exes. Who cares?”

“You forgot to tell me you’re working for Westbrook, the condo kingpin. But he can’t sell luxury lofts surrounded by homeless camps. So, he hired you to clean up the Zone, no holds barred. And you were there that night on guard duty. I don’t know how it happened, but you blew away Artie, dumped his body, then erased the security footage.” Dempsey shrugged, “If I put this together, a broken-down bum, what more will Internal Affairs uncover?”

“You’re blackmailing me.”

The Sheriff of Skid Row

“No, we help each other out. I’ll take care of your loose ends. You get me off the street. We’re still partners, right?”

Cutler scratched his double chin. “Ten’s a bit rich for one meth-head, so can you take out the sister too? Blur who the target was.”

“What about the Professor?”

“He’s already been voted off the island. Tragic accident. We have a deal?”

Dempsey didn’t flinch. “Let’s meet at the diner, eight PM. Give me a clean gun, half upfront.”

“What’s your getaway plan? Hell, how are you getting there?”

“Valley Metro.”

Cutler almost lost his poker face. His hitman at the mercy of mass transit. But it played better this way. Double-cross Dempsey afterwards. Make him a patsy. Still, it was shameful, four murders to cover up one stupid mistake.

Dempsey was running late. Cutler arrived 30 minutes early, his half-eaten omelet now cold.

The diner was empty, but something was wrong. Then his phone pinged from Dispatch: *Double homicide at the trailer park off Glendale Avenue. Detectives enroute. Shooter unknown.*

Minutes crawled by. Cutler guzzled coffee.

Finally, Dempsey strolled in. “Sorry, the bus was running late.”

“You did it *already*?”

“Didn’t want you to beat me to the punch like the Professor.”

“How’d you get a gun so fast?”

“This is America, Dave.”

Cutler passed the manila envelope. “That’s only 5K. Half upfront remember?”

The Sheriff of Skid Row

Dempsey shrugged, “Five’s enough to escape the Zone.”

Cutler laughed, confused. “You’re giving me a discount?”

“More money won’t change my life. But I’d like to die someplace cooler.”

Approaching the door, Cutler spotted the takedown team in the parking lot. Detectives he knew, drinking buddies. Was this crackpot careless enough to draw them here? Then it hit him: Dempsey had turned informant. This was a sting. He was the target.

Cutler drew his sidearm. “You rat bastard. You didn’t kill them.”

“Surprise.” Dempsey’s voice cracked. The women were safe.

Cutler sighed. “It was an accident, the old man. The other two said let’s run, that fat pig can’t catch us. I racked the shotgun to fire a warning shot. He jumped in front. The DA would’ve pressed charges, pulled my pension. I didn’t want to end up like you, no offense.”

He put the gun to his temple.

“Don’t.”

“Why not? My life’s over.”

“A friend once told me you can survive anything.”

“Artie?”

“It was you.”

After Cutler surrendered, Dempsey noticed something for the first time in years.

He felt alive.