

from HEADLONG, chapter 11

I needed to hit someone. I headed for Newton police headquarters.

A young female officer sat at a high desk centered on a wide hallway, sandy hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"I'm Nick Young, reporter for *The View*. Who's the investigating officer for the Tillman case?" All chipper, as if what's the forecast today.

She eyeballed me, head to toe. Los Lobos t-shirt. Shorts. Flip-flops. Whatever. It was four million degrees outside. "Reporter? For who?"

"*The View*." I said it the way you might say *Time* magazine. She suppressed a smirk.

"That would be Detective Hill."

Two men walked along the hall behind her, one older than me, one younger. The older one looking harried.

"Would he be in?"

She turned her head. "Dennis, are you in?"

The older cop in the hall looked at some papers in his hand, said, "Who wants to know?"

"Reporter." She paused for emphasis. "*The View*."

Something in the papers he didn't like. "Shit." He grabbed the other cop by the shirtsleeve, they started back the way they'd come, toward a row of offices along the far wall. "No," he said on his way past, right arm extended straight out, like a football halfback straight-arming would-be tacklers. "I'm not

in." He pointed in the direction of the offices, called out, "Halverson."

The desk officer went back to doing nothing and half a minute later the fresh-faced press officer in his crisp uniform stood at my side. "How can I help you, Mr. Young?" He remained the kid who delighted in denying people access.

I put on the perma-grin and introduced him to my professional capacity.

"You're interested in the Tillman case," he said.

"I'm doing a column on it." I had quickly discovered that advantage. You could always say you were working on a column, and it could always be sort of true.

Halverson led me to his small, sparse office. "What can I tell you?" he said. "The investigation is ongoing."

"You know any more than a possibly suspicious black Lexus that might have been in the neighborhood?"

"There are a number of leads, all of which are being investigated. None of them are ready to be made public."

"A month of digging and that's what you've got. Must be frustrating." I was testing Halverson's extensive goodwill. At least I had that.

His phone rang and he grabbed it. A couple of quick "yesses" into the receiver and done. "Excuse me," he said. "I'll be back."

I waited a respectful ten seconds and meandered down the hallway in the direction I'd seen Detective Hill disappear. At the end of the short hallway I found a small kitchen - refrigerator, coffee pot. At the coffee pot I found Detective

Hill. I walked up next to him. He glanced over at me. Poured coffee into a mug. Then pulled a second mug down from a shelf, poured coffee into that, slid it across the counter to me.

"You're a tricky one." He had a high forehead and tired gray eyes. A ring of dark hair and a thinning stripe on top. A fervent gum chewer.

"I've had practice." I hoisted the mug. "Thanks. Quitting smoking?"

"It's that obvious?" He shrugged. "So what, you think I'm going to tell you more than he would?"

"Probably not. I'm just naturally prickly. When I'm told I can't be somewhere that's where I want to be."

"Occupational hazard?"

"Guess so." I sipped the coffee. Black. I didn't want to break the moment by asking for milk. "Know what I'm curious about?"

"Nope."

"I'm curious about how a crime committed in broad daylight can remain such a puzzle. I don't mean that as a knock against you, or the department. I just don't understand. I mean it's now a robbery and a homicide, right?"

He let me puzzle on that a minute while he chewed his gum. "I know how you got to be so good at what you do," he said. "It's your people skills."

Halverson had appeared in the doorway, leaning against the frame. He didn't look happy.

"It's okay, Scott. I got this."

Halverson lingered long enough to let his stare bore through my chest, then stalked off.

Detective Hill crossed his arms. "It happens that way sometimes. More often than you might expect. If there's no witnesses, no prints, you depend a lot on luck. A piece of information falls out. You push and push at every seam you can find and some of the time, sooner or later, something gives. But sometimes it doesn't."

"So you've got nothing."

He worked his gum. "I didn't say that."

"You've got something more than the Lexus?"

"I didn't say that either."

"You got an owner for the Lexus?"

"That would help, wouldn't it?"

"You're not helping."

He grinned. "Not my job."

My turn to shrug. "So can I come back, do this again some time?"

He snapped his gum. "You can try."

*

This was no longer strictly a janitors' strike. Traffic Blockade II had multiple agendas and the intensity had ratcheted up along with the humidity. A crowd of thousands again clogged the Back Bay on cue at 5:00, blocking the Dartmouth Street-Huntington Avenue-Mass Pike artery. I meandered the stretch of

Dartmouth in front of the Westin Hotel, sweating into my madras shirt and assessing the crowd.

Still a healthy contingent of purple t-shirt people, with a sturdy supply of Justice for Janitors banners and a steady hum of conversations in Spanish, but the anti-globalist crowd, among others, had ramped up its presence. Young, edgy. Palpable restlessness and disillusionment. A short, solid woman in a red bandana worked the crowd up past the Westin, toward Stuart Street. What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? Now. A boy with a striped Oxford shirt and a mohawk passed out flyers titled "Where's the Media on the WTO?" Vegetarian bodies jostling. Agitation. A woman's voice from somewhere behind me, "a celebration of food that is culturally diverse and healthy." Signs. "Dump Global Capitalism," "Just Say No to WTO," "We Are Winning." A chubby cop in an orange traffic safety vest, like an out-of-place crossing guard, stiff on the sidewalk, arms at his sides, fingers fidgeting.

My phone. Eric. "There's a traffic blockade, Back Bay."

"I know. I'm there."

"Good. You know it's not the only party in town?"

"What do you mean?"

"Demonstrators chained to entrances again at Endicott, First, et cetera."

"A lot?"

"More than last time. How is it there?"

"Big party. Tense, and just getting going."

"Send me pix."

A line of young people in black t-shirts and fatigue pants snaked through the crowd, looking and sounding militaristic. A boy with a mop of black curls and an early attempt at facial hair tried to spark a chant of "take the streets." A line of black-clad cops on Dartmouth, in front of the library, wide stances. More signs: "Capitalism Is the Real Enemy," "Take it All Down," "Teamsters for Justice."

A trio of janitors beside me – two men and a woman, purple t-shirts and jeans – discussed things in Spanish. An edge in their voices.

Where was Bo? What was he doing?

The approaching streets already a loud parking lot. Gridlock. Horns. Shouted curses. Police lights reflected in the windows of Neiman-Marcus. Cops stuck in gridlock, too. A chant building, bouncing around me.

*Hey hey, ho ho
Corporate greed has got to go*

Angry car horns like punctuation. Sirens. My whole body clammy.

A handful of conventioners watched the show from the bar at Turner Fisheries.

My phone rang again. AJ.

"My dog has developed a taste for sugar cookies. Should I blame you?"

That got a smile. "Not guilty. I don't buy cookies. But I'm in the middle of the janitors thing. Can we talk later?"

"Done. Be safe."

The crowd seemed younger than that of the previous week. Muscled torsos, tight t-shirts, bandanas holding off sweat, like an Outward Bound crew gone urban. I felt hemmed in. Pockets of BAFA recruits kept it responsible-looking, but even there, a wider agenda started to show. More signs: "House People Not Profits," "Housing Is a Human Right."

Police presence. A line of uniformed cops ringed the outer perimeter of the blockade area. Another group in full riot gear – black vests, black boots, helmets and face shields, batons – marched in formation down Huntington, four abreast. This time no one dispersed just because the police had arrived.

There was a festive element. A beach ball floated through the crowd, arms rising to keep it aloft. I made my way up Dartmouth toward St. James, slowly worming my way between bodies. Hoping somewhere in the midst of this chaos I'd find Bo. A banner, red and black paint on a white bed sheet: *Resist Corporate Rule*. Another with the SLAM fist stenciled on it.

A line of riot squad cops formed a barrier across Dartmouth at St. James. Behind them, a line of gridlocked cars, then two lanes of perpendicular gridlock on Dartmouth. Overheated drivers who had gotten out of vehicles shouted at the mess from beyond the cops.

Protesters pressed from the near side. A chant began, got loud fast.

This is what democracy looks like.

This is what democracy looks like.

Someone had a cowbell. I was close enough I could see spit fly from the lips of one of the chanters onto a cop's face shield. Blue police lights bounced off store windows – Kinko's, Starbucks. The street felt cramped. Claustrophobic. Stifling. I inched toward the sidewalk. Nowhere to go.

This is what democracy looks like.

This is what democracy looks like.

Again, my phone. Eric's turn. "Quite a day. Enterprising hackers have redirected some Endicott funds to their favorite causes."

This had to be coordinated. "Know who?"

"Seattle10. SLAM. Both. Unclear."

"Eric, it's crazy loud here. I gotta go."

"Get fresh stuff from Tillman, the union. And Tweet. Buzz already has tweets, a full post, pix. I need you on this, Nick."

"Can't talk. Too loud. Gotta go." I wasn't about to tell him I didn't know how to Tweet. Didn't even have a smart phone. Hell, I congratulated myself for bringing a notebook.

Shouts. Car horns louder. Cacophony. A fist fight in front of Kinko's. From what I could see, mostly shoving. A few punches. Commotion at the Copley Plaza, a half dozen people with signs –

"Carnival Against Capitalism," "Strangle Greed" – gathered on the red carpet outside the lobby. The doorman looked for help.

The press of bodies. Wedged against someone's damp shirt. A woman's voice on a bullhorn: *You have the right to be here. These are public streets.* I had my arms, elbows in constant motion, gently but firmly asserting breathing space. I took a couple pictures. From over where the fight was, a sidewalk newspaper box tumbled. Papers spilled into the street.

This is what democracy looks like.

Car horns. A cop's voice? *Move back. Stay back.* The cowbell. You couldn't see the cops' faces. Everyone moving. Jostling. In waves. One cop nudging back demonstrators with a forearm.

This is what democracy looks like.

I had a text. Eric. *If no tweet, text me stuff. FYI: protesters jamming Starbucks, too. Keep your eyes open.* A window appeared over Eric's message. *Lin calling. Answer. Ignore.* I pressed ignore.

Another newspaper box toppled. The crash of metal. The sound tensed me. Then shouts. The cop who'd been nudging had knocked someone off balance. Down. No room to fall. The domino effect took out a half-dozen bodies, rippled. We all bounced off each other. Wobbled. Batons came up as the surge moved back toward the cops. I took a picture.

Clear the streets loud from behind them.

A police helicopter overhead. We were being pushed back. I almost lost my footing. Propped up by a woman behind me, who gently pushed me back toward the line of cops. Bodies fell. The police line broken now. Individual officers advancing. Another line of riot squadders appeared from somewhere. I caught an elbow in the head, a baton in the back before I realized the cop was there. His baton push carried me into a woman in front of me, who nearly lost her feet, careened into a teen in front of her. "What the *fuck*, man?" The teen looked like a football guy, a kid spoiling to make something happen, but he turned and saw the woman then me then the cop, moving slowly steadily, a rip tide. A man's urgent voice over a bullhorn: *This is a peaceful protest. This is a peaceful protest.* Somewhere out there, a thousand drivers honked a thousand car horns. Now two police helicopters circled overhead, strobing all sound.

I let the officer's baton and my own momentum carry me to the sidewalk. A buzz of voices behind me. Shouts. A woman's scream. Two cops elbowed past, dragging a woman by an arm, the back of her shirt. Shouting. *Fuck you, pigs.* Other calls. *Assholes.* Almost a plea – *nonviolence. Nonviolence.*

We Are Winning emerged in red spray paint on Starbucks' front window. Another wave pushed onto the sidewalk and I wormed into it to stay close to the curb. A baton caught me in the gut – a cop shoving by with a bearded youth in tow, plastic zip cuffs, grinning.

The bullhorn, somewhere close.

This is a nonviolent protest.

His words had no effect. He was thirty feet from me and I could scarcely hear him.

Things happened fast. Demonstrators who'd moved beyond the police line tagged a limo and an SUV parked on Dartmouth, cans of spray paint. Clusters of people fighting to get closer, others to get away. Someone else had the bullhorn, started a chant, call and response.

No justice, no peace. No justice, no peace.

Riot squad cops, sunlight bouncing off helmets and shields. Scrambling bodies. More fell. I stepped over one, tried to offer a hand up, got shoved along. My gut ached. My lower back. The scuffle by the newspaper boxes in front of Starbucks had grown. A group of people - some of the Outward Bound-ish crew? - rocked an SUV, trying to roll it. Among them, an angry t-shirt that looked familiar. A sandy-haired teen. A group of cops used batons freely to fight toward that. I followed close in their wake, craning for a better look. I caught something - an elbow, a baton - in the thigh. Then spray paint on a police car at the corner of St. James and a crowd around one of the patrol cars, rocking it side to side. Helicopters circling. I'd lost sight of the sandy-haired teen.

"Shit." I was bumped, jostled, carried around. Elbowed in the head. Trying to keep my arms at my sides. My eyes alert. Where was Bo, what was he doing.

The patrol car tipped. Angry shouts of triumph. A collective gasp. More scurrying bodies. Newspaper boxes toppled. Flames shot up from one, then a second. Smoke from the other side

of the street, and then more. Tear gas. A crash. Someone had thrown a newspaper box through the windshield of an SUV. Still, in the distance, a cacophony of car horns. Panicked eyes. I pulled the bottom of my shirt up over the lower half of my face. My eyes burned. People pushed past, leaving, or trying to. Everyone looked the same: a blur. Piercing sirens. Riot squad cops grabbing arms, restraining. I bounced hard into the side of a police van. Disoriented. Looking for a way out. Fuzzy vision. Bodies shoved to the ground, arms held behind backs. Another crash. Starbucks plate glass window gone. More cops than not around me. *Go the other way? No choice. Go where you're carried.* Broken glass underfoot. I caught a baton in the ear. My head rang. Vision blurred, burning. A stricken-looking man in a coffee-splattered shirt emerged from Starbucks and slid down the sidewalk. Momentum carried me past the police van, where cops loaded a steady stream of protesters. I sensed an opening, kept moving up Dartmouth. Broke clear of crowd, into traffic. Drivers stunned mostly into silence. I stumbled to the sidewalk, aching and scared shitless. Sat on the steps of the bank trying to blink my eyes clear. Shirt stuck to my back. Made my way to the men's room at the Back Bay T station where I washed my face – rinsed out my eyes – four, five times until I could see again. Sat myself in a stall – five minutes, ten – until I could stop shaking. My head pounding. Aches everywhere. A part of me said *get back out there. Find Bo. Get pictures.* I don't think so. *Get the hell out of Dodge.* I hopped the Orange Line because it was handy. Leaned back in my seat. Head spinning. Assessed my aches.

Very sore head. The worst was my back. Kidney. Could they have ruptured something. The fuck was I doing, anyway? Never mind that now. Dialed Bo. Surprise – no answer. Texted my pictures to Eric.

I started to consider the whole thing in terms of the news coverage. The union would catch hell, and from what I could see, didn't deserve it. They'd been glommed onto, and were now going to suffer for the sins of their supporters, most of whom made more than seven dollars an hour. I knew I should call Tillman, Sarkis, Juliana. I didn't have it in me. Not even close. My arms trembled all the way home.

I didn't see Lin sitting on the front steps until I got to them. I had a pretty good idea what effect my not calling was having on her. But I needed to talk to Bo. I felt I was protecting him, and that I was uniquely qualified to do so. It's one thing to hold onto that justification through silence, distance. It's another to try when a worried mother is face to face with you.

"Don't do this, Nick. If we're friends. If we ever were. Don't do this to me."

I'd stopped a few feet short of where she sat hugging her knees on the step. My kidneys throbbed.

I pressed my lips together. Stared at the sidewalk.

In the shadows that hid her own shadows, Lin looked young and small.

"It's not like that," I said.

"What is it like?"

In the shadows, I could see the shape of her face, but not the features. I didn't move closer.

"I don't know what to say."

"You have no right." The kind of quiet that only a summer night can be. "Loyalty. Friendship. Great. I get it." She ran a hand through her hair. "But he's my son."

Sticky. Not even a hint of a breeze. I didn't disagree with her position. I thought a minute longer. "I don't know that he's in trouble," I said. "I don't *know* of anything you should worry about."

She stood. Closed the distance between us. Her watchfulness had rescued me more than once when I was a stupid, reckless teen. Had forged a good life for she and Bo. But it wasn't the only way. Not always the best way.

She stared me down. She looked as weary as I felt. "You're splitting hairs over my son's safety and well-being. I want you to know how malicious and fucked-up that looks from where I sit."

"I need you to trust me, Lin."

She shook her head. The muscles in her neck strained. I swore she was holding back the urge to punch me. "I trust your motives. I don't trust your judgment." She must have seen how much that stung; her face softened a little. "You look like hell."

"I was a spectator at a riot."

"Ice," she said, and left me to slither into the house, tend my wounds, and find out how fucked our city was.

It doesn't make me a prophet to say I was right. The incident led the eleven o'clock news. Even made the national headline reel on CNN - "In Boston today, an eruption of labor and activist violence" with video footage of demonstrators rolling the police car, quick cut to spray-painted SUVs to smashed Starbucks, to demonstrators chained to Endicott entrance, to the State Street logo, to a protest sign I hadn't seen before - "Our City Is not Livable" - and then on to dropping Federal Reserve rates.

Locally, of course, it dominated the news. I held ice to my head and watched every second. Convinced I would live. From a safe distance, it seemed surreal. Chaos. I was struck by the volume of signs. Spotted purple balloons. Close-ups of police dragging cuffed demonstrators past cameras. A dumpster tipped on its side, contents on fire. Then footage of the aftermath. A push broom sweeping up glass. Yellow police tape around Starbucks. A tow truck righting the tipped patrol car.

My phone rang. A local number. I answered it.

"Nick Young?"

"Yeah?"

"Tom Webster, NewsRadio 59. We noticed that Tim Dunn referenced you in his *Herald* column Tuesday, and wanted to get your take on today's events, and in particular on Chris Tillman's comments tonight."

Fuck me. I was old school. I did not like the idea of being part of the story. On my TV, images of jammed Starbucks stores. I had no idea what Tillman had said. Maybe if I were a real

journalist, I would have. *Leave me alone. I want to go to bed.* I made a slightly more gracious but no more informative response to the radio guy and ended the call.

On the TV, blow-dried blowhard Alvin Fraser did a studio commentary against a background montage of picket lines, snarled traffic, garbage-clogged lobbies and anarchists. And I listened. More fool me.

"A labor dispute is one thing, but when that escalates into violence and property destruction, it becomes something else. Radical fringe groups have attached themselves to this strike. The janitors – and their union – simply aren't doing enough to stop that."

Alvin Fraser, voice of balance and reason. Switched to Seven News and a red-faced Chris Tillman with a microphone in his face. "Let me be clear about this. We are not in negotiation. We have not been in negotiation. We will not be in negotiation. As for these appalling events, let's call it what it is – domestic terrorism."