

The Bastard is Dead

Chapter 1

The 180 riders in the peloton took the sharp right turn at 55 kilometres per hour and then lined up for the final push to the finish line by the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. Most of the 30,000 people lining the barricades of the 500-metre-long straightaway saw only a blur of colour as the cyclists bumped and elbowed for space. The danger was palpable to the onlookers, most of them shrieking encouragement.

Behind the straining riders came the cavalcade of team cars. In the second vehicle, an apple-red Volkswagen Jetta used by the Global Products team and piled high with six bikes, directeur sportif Pierre McManus yelled “Allez, allez, allez, go, go, go” into his radio speaker although he knew his lead riders were too focused to pay much attention. But he was on an adrenaline rush and so he yelled louder and louder.

As soon as the riders zipped by the turnoff for the team cars, two yellow-clad Tour de France officials hopped into the road and started madly waving the vehicles off to the right and into the parking lot set aside for them.

“Allez, allez, Raoul!” McManus screamed at his top sprinter as he turned right, coming within 10 metres of one wide-eyed official.

That’s when his heart stopped.

Chapter 2

A dozen kilometres away in the old part of Villeneuve-Loubet, Paul Burke poured a little water into his pastis while keeping an eye on the small, ancient television that Claude had hooked up for the outside customers at his Café de Neptune. Burke sipped the licorice drink to ensure he had the right blend of water and alcohol, but quickly forgot about it as the cyclists, many of them standing on their pedals and feverishly manoeuvring their bikes, sprinted the last 200 metres to the finish line. He felt someone standing beside him, but didn’t take his eyes off the screen until the British favourite cleared the line first, a wheel ahead of the runner-up from Germany.

“I’m surprised you aren’t there at the finish,” came Claude’s husky voice.

Burke looked up at the owner, a beefy man in his 50s who had grown up in this village and, as far as Burke knew, had always worked at the café which had once been owned by his uncle.

Burke flipped the comment aside with a classic Gallic wave. “Not worth my time,” he said in his fluent, Québec-accented French. He shrugged. “I have better things to do.”

Claude, who was always cheerful, grinned. “Yes, I can see your Sunday is bursting with activity.”

Despite himself, Burke laughed. He liked Claude. In fact, he liked almost everyone in the hillside community for their good spirits and jovial pessimism which had taken a few months to get used to. These people were to be respected and enjoyed. But he felt differently about the residents of the neighbouring developments; they were a well-heeled, self-absorbed bunch who cared little for the social niceties of a small community. As for the tourists who were coming in droves to the expansive resorts being developed at an extraordinary pace, Burke did his best to avoid them. Too demanding, too elitist and too loud. The area was changing.

“Just killing time,” Burke said.

“But surely you must feel some association or kinship with those cyclists,” Claude persisted.

Burke and Madame Marois, the quiet, 80ish, pinch-faced woman from just around the corner, were the only customers. So, as Burke had learned, it was at such times that conversation was appropriate. It was even expected.

“My career is long over,” Burke said, his mind suddenly filled with memories from a score of races, most of them not involving the Tour de France.

“Just, what, three years?” Claude asked. “That’s not so long ago. And then you did television commentary, too. And you were good. You know strategy as well as anyone.”

Burke smiled as they went through a routine they had done a dozen times before since he had moved to the village. “I was crap and everyone knows it. That’s why I got fired so quickly.”

“A bad decision by the television people,” Claude said with a sympathetic smile.

“Ah, you’re just being kind again, Claude. You know I was terrible. Everyone knows it. And it didn’t help when I did that last race pissed. Not a good decision by me.”

Claude, who was really a football man, had watched Burke’s final telecast and had been stunned how the ex-rider sitting before him had blurted out a string of curses on the air as the riders had finished the race. Not only had Burke been fired immediately after, but his outburst had become a YouTube sensation and had led to a legislated change so there would be a minor delay in French coverage of sporting events to ensure no commentator ever unleashed profanities on the air with such enthusiasm.

“Well, as you Americans say, shit happens,” Claude said.

Burke smiled at their inside joke. Claude was fully aware that Burke was a Canadian ex-pat who had grown up in Montréal, but he liked to tease Burke on occasion by lumping him in with American tourists.

“That’s exactly what we Canadians say,” Burke said. “Since you’ve got so much advice and so few customers, why don’t you sit down and join me? Madame Marois over there doesn’t look like she’ll need your services for some time.”

Claude glanced at the old lady, swathed in a black shawl despite the 35C temperature that sucked the energy out of most people. As usual, the woman was statue-like, her eyes staring holes into the wall of an old stone house on the other side of the tiny courtyard. Beside her was stretched her curly-haired Jack Russell, Plato, a ball of white fluff with caramel-coloured ears and one sandy spot on his back. The dog moved as much as his mistress. Claude shook his head slightly then returned to the former pro cyclist before him.

“You look fit, Paul, so maybe you could return to racing,” he said, not mentioning that the former cyclist was starting to show a little more stomach and maybe drank a few too many pastis over the average week.

“Get a pastis, Claude, and I’ll tell you once again why I don’t race anymore,” Burke said.

Claude nodded and then moved toward the café, catching a crooked finger from Madame Marois which meant she wanted another glass of rosé.

Burke thought about the rest of his day. Maybe he’d stay and have a *salade Niçoise* which he had longed for during his decade of pro racing, but had avoided due to the salty anchovies which had skewered his taste buds and driven him from proper nutrition. And a bottle of a Bordeaux red would work. Pastis afterward, too. The French might frown about such a sequence of beverages but screw them. They were a little too rigid about food and drink for his liking.

He turned his attention back to the television where the stage winner was holding up the day’s trophy, a piece of abstract sculpture that resembled a dog humping a leg. The crowd was cheering wildly.

He wished he had enjoyed such a moment just once. His only win had been in an unnoticed three-day event when he had taken the last day's stage after all the favourites in front of him had crashed. The stage trophy had been a small teddy bear that looked like it had already been used.

And then Claude was back, nodding at the stage winner's actions on TV as he sat down with his own pastis and another for Burke. "He's a prick, I think," Claude said. "I think all sprinters are like strikers in football, totally caught up in their own deeds without a care about others. They pretend they're good teammates, but they're just shits. I would very much enjoy telling them the facts of life, but no one takes me up on my offer."

Burke smiled. Yes, the salade Niçoise would work if it came with more of Claude's good company. Life wasn't always so depressing, he thought. And then after his meal when he'd likely be feeling a little drunk, he'd go to the highest part of the village near the old castle and see how much of the Mediterranean he could see. Yes, that would end the night well because it would be quiet up there, except for the diminished roar of the distant vehicles on the highway, and the air would be perfumed.

And maybe he'd sleep well. He was tired of nightmares. Too many goddamn nightmares.

Chapter 3

The nightmare woke him just after 5 a.m. He had dreamt he had needed to catch an airplane, but he had been inexplicably held up at customs by some jerk of an official and, when finally cleared, he had seen the plane beginning to taxi. He had burst through the airport doors and sprinted as hard as possible toward the departing plane and just when it seemed he would reach out and climb aboard, it had pulled away, leaving him to a terrible, unknown fate.

So he had woken up, not to the songbirds outside his second-storey apartment bedroom, but to anxiety.

Again.

Sitting up in his bed with the sheet wet from sweat, he wondered if someone could please tell him what the hell was wrong. He had experienced such feverish dreams for the last two or three years and hadn't a clue about the reason for them. He just knew that sleep rarely brought pleasure or relief.

He also realized he had a thumping headache and a queasy stomach. He had felt fine or close to it after the bottle of Bordeaux. Maybe it had been the four pastis afterward. Even Claude had suggested that maybe he was going a little too deep into the booze. But he had blown off the friendly suggestions to stop. He grimaced. Taking advice wasn't one of his strong points.

He stood slowly and looked out the open window to see the start of a sunrise against a cloudless sky. It would be another beautiful, hot July day.

Burke had little to do.

His next blog for three Côte d'Azur newspapers and their websites wasn't due for another three days. He also had a column for the same publications, but had another week to finish it. Maybe he'd do the blog about what Claude had discussed – the self-absorbed sprinters and strikers in sport who thought they were God's gift. Or maybe he'd do a piece about racing in abnormally hot weather. Or maybe he'd write about how crappy it felt to wake up with a hangover after you had solved the problems of the world.

He stuck his head through the open window and let the slight breeze caress him. He loved early mornings in this part of France – they were so sunny and languid and the birds were always chattering away at sunrise. He loved the smells and sounds of the world awakening. He closed

his eyes, which actually seemed to accentuate his hangover, and took a couple of deep breaths. His problem, he knew, was that he had too many late nights.

Then he stepped back, a little wobbly, went to the bathroom and washed his face for a few moments in cold water. That helped.

Burke then went into his tiny kitchen and started up the coffee. During his racing days, he had been a three-coffees-a-day man for the caffeine boost. Now he was putting down five cups of espresso a day because he found himself bored too often and without a lot to do. When in doubt, drink an espresso. Then later drink pastis.

He promised himself that within six months, he'd have everything straightened out. Maybe he'd go back to Montréal for a visit although there really wasn't anyone left he wanted to spend much time with. He chuckled at the thought of a few days with his older brother and his brother's family. If he showed up, they'd start finding excuses to disappear. Too much brotherly competition – and borderline hatred – over the years. To make matters worse, his brother's two kids, both boys, were shiteheads and they weren't even teenagers yet. As for his sister-in-law, she was a chronic complainer. The family dog, Alvin, was the only one he liked.

Or maybe he'd go to Vancouver to see that young woman he'd hooked up with the previous autumn in Antibes just down the road 10 k's. She was a doctoral student doing research on something involving plankton and they had bumped into each other at the Picasso museum with her coming out and him just hanging around outside slurping down a gelato. She had thought he was an art fan and he'd gone along with it because she had great legs and enormous blue eyes that had sucked him in. After a few days of mindless passion, she had discovered he knew as much about art as he did about nuclear physics, and so she had harrumphed and blown him off as some "stupid cyclist who doesn't understand the real world." He smiled. Picasso and plankton are the real world? But she'd been a lot of fun once they managed to get to a bed. Maybe he could make her forget his intellectual weaknesses and rekindle her passion.

Once the coffee was ready, Burke turned on the kitchen TV – it helped to cook if there was something to watch – and sat down to catch the news. He really wasn't any kind of journalist and was only doing Tour de France blogs and columns as a way to help pay the bills, but he did like to know what was going on in the world.

Of course, the lead item was the TDF and the screen showed the wild finish to the previous day's finish. The announcer discussed how the stage had played out and then, finishing the story, added a bit about the tragedy of long-time directeur sportif Pierre McManus dying just as the race was ending.

"Jesus Christ!" Burke said.

The announcer mentioned how officials were saying a heart attack was the cause of McManus's death.

"Damn!" Burke said.

McManus was dead? How does a nasty bastard who's got the constitution of a bear just pop off, Burke wondered. A heart attack? It didn't seem possible. McManus didn't have a heart. Burke had always figured his former directeur sportif would be right there at the end of the world with the cockroaches and crows.

"Shit," Burke said with less passion.

And then he surprised himself by feeling a little sad. He had only worked for McManus for two years which was about two years too many, thanks to McManus's driving ambition, psychological gamesmanship and endless criticism. But somehow he had developed a minor appreciation for McManus's sense of cycling strategy. The bugger had produced some great

champions over the years and even Burke admitted he'd learned a few tricks that had served him well. Of course, he could never forget the time he'd overheard McManus telling a team masseur to spend as little time on him as possible because "Burke can barely make the pedals go round. He's a useless turd who doesn't even deserve to be stepped on."

And as soon as his contract, which had been signed under another boss, had ended, Burke found himself unemployed. The turd had been canned.

Burke watched the entire news hour and then took his third cup of espresso into the tiny spare bedroom that served as his office – complete with his Cannondale racing bike which was starting to gather dust. There, he turned on his computer and started reading everything he could about McManus. Most of the stories were about McManus's talents and pre-dated yesterday's events, but a couple mentioned how he had died at the wheel of a team car which had stopped only when it crashed into another team's bus. It almost seemed a comical ending.

Burke shook his head. Yes, McManus had been highly strung, a total alpha dog who was always snapping at riders, team staff, the media and even sponsors. But he had been only 49 at the time of his death and a beast of a man who had somehow found time to exercise each day and whose eating habits were scrupulously proper. McManus dead? It barely seemed possible.

When it was just before 8 a.m., Burke went to the local newsagent's and picked up a stack of newspapers from the affable owner Jean. He grabbed another coffee with water and sat at one of the two tables outside the newsagent's place. Then he started searching for anything about McManus.

There wasn't much new. Just the same info about the heart attack and the team's statement that said riders and other staff were shocked by his demise and distraught over his death, but would continue in his name so as to bring him some glory. Burke smiled at that. Unless McManus had changed beyond belief, he'd bet most of the riders and others on the team were probably shaking hands and toasting the unexpected passing of their directeur sportif.

There was also a short bio of McManus relating how he'd grown up in the Flanders area of Belgium, become a pro racer with limited results but shown brilliance in developing race strategies. He'd gone from team to team, rising in the ranks, and building a reputation among the media as a savvy if ruthless leader. And his teams had won a lot of races.

There was also a brief mention of McManus's short tryst with a Hollywood actress whom he'd met on the set of a cycling-related movie in Saint-Tropez. The actress had called him her "Belgian treat" which had stuck and led to plenty of behind-the-back snickering at McManus's expense. Burke had been sure that when she had dumped McManus after three months for a rodeo cowboy whose first name was Buck that McManus would be surlier than ever, but that hadn't happened. In fact, after his bout with Hollywood fame, McManus had been abnormally pleasant with hardly any barking or growling or biting. Then another racing season had got fully underway and McManus had gone back to type. So much for the influence of a slightly good woman, Burke thought.

Then he made up his mind. He'd write about McManus this week, exploring a little more than what the initial reports had included. He'd provide some colour, a few anecdotes and maybe even hint how miserable McManus could be in pursuit of victory. The price of glory and all that blather.

He figured he'd start by whistling down to Nice where the teams would still be because the day's afternoon stage was starting at Cagnes-sur-Mer which is essentially a suburb of the big city. And why not go by bike? He could definitely use the exercise – he'd seen how Claude had

noticed his expanding tummy – and it might also be easier than driving since the area would be jammed with cycling fans.

Back in his small apartment, he pumped up the tires on his red-and-white Cannondale carbon fibre bike, added a few drops of oil to the chain, put on cycling shorts and a cycling jersey, and then jammed a tape recorder and notebook into one of the jersey's three back pockets with his wallet in another. He took a look at the helmet by the bike. Screw it, he thought. It would squeeze his head and he wasn't sure he wanted any more grief. He left it there.

Outside, he waved at a couple of the local shop owners strolling to their businesses. They always seemed to be in a decent mood. He hoped that one day their bonhomie would rub off on him.

Then he was riding and, instantly, he felt at home, his long, lean legs punching the pedals with little effort, slightly to his surprise. Of course, the first stretch was marginally downhill, but he felt strong. He was a believer that if you've done a lot of physical exercise, you keep a base of muscle and lung power that can be easily re-asserted with a little work.

He passed a couple of middle-aged touring cyclists and then snuck past some doddling cars. He cruised through the first roundabout at 45 km/h and, on the following straightaway, he cranked it up to 50. But not for long. After about 30 seconds, he was wheezing so he slowed it to the low 30s. A good start to a new program, he figured.

He made it to the road by the Nice airport in under 10 minutes and then he punched the pedals hard again, moving smoothly with the traffic toward the main part of the city and by the promenade. He figured a couple of the teams would be staying at hotels just off the main area and so those would be his first stops.

Just as Burke was slowing and ready to take his first hotel turnoff, a man in a one-speed rental bike came off the promenade and collided with him. Burke, a veteran of a hundred crashes in his career, made himself go limp as he twisted and then landed against the side of a parked Citroën. The traffic all around instantly stopped.

Stunned but sensing no major injury except an expansion of his headache, Burke slowly got to his feet. He did a brief body check. Nothing was broken. He looked at his bike and saw the front wheel was caved in with spokes sticking out in wrong ways. He looked at the other cyclist who seemed fine and was standing by his bike which looked undamaged.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Burke said in French.

The man, in his mid 40s, stumbled over what Burke had said. Behind him were a pretty woman and a boy, maybe 12, on similar bikes. They were standing and staring, and looking a little worried.

Burke tried again, this time in English. "What the hell were you thinking?"

The man shrugged and offered a sheepish grin. "I thought there was a turn here and I'm just real sorry," he said in some kind of midwest American accent. "Are you OK? I'll pay for any damages."

Burke looked down at himself. He had a few rapidly developing bruises on his left arm and leg, but that was it.

"Let's move over here," Burke said, hauling his bike with him and letting the motorists get on with their travels. On the promenade and away from the bike path, he shook his head and said, "I'm fine but I'll need a new wheel."

"Really? Are you sure?" asked the tourist, studying the wheel.

Burke wanted to lay into the stranger, but remembered the bonhomie he was seeking. "I'm sure. I'm a pro cyclist and I understand these kinds of things," he said, figuring no one but a

cycling geek would recognize that he was a retired pro. “There’s a decent shop about four blocks from here.”

“Uh, how much are we talking about?” the man asked.

“I can’t say for a sure, but probably 600 or 700 euros,” Burke said.

The woman behind the cyclist gasped at the amount. The man himself looked like he had been slapped. The youngster suddenly seemed more interested and bent over to inspect the wheel.

“It’s a pro machine,” Burke added, hoping the exchange wasn’t going to turn into a complete ordeal, but expecting it would.

“That’s a lot of money,” said the man.

“I can call the police,” Burke said, spotting a cop about a half block away. He had no interest in involving the local constabulary because, in his experience, French police were often as challenging to victims as to the perpetrators, but he wasn’t going to share that viewpoint with this tourist.

“No, no,” the man said, relenting.

They agreed to all walk to the bike shop and figure out there what needed to be done.

Burke would have preferred the walk to go in silence so he could concentrate on reducing the thump in his head, but the tourist seemed to feel an obligation to fill the time with observations about Nice, France, anything. Burke wondered if the man was nervous and was trying to be cordial to get the price of the repairs dropped. Not a chance, Burke thought.

Finally, Burke felt compelled to ask a question. “What do you do back home?” he asked.

The man, who had introduced himself as Ron Henderson, almost puffed up. “I’m a pharmacist. I run my own pharmacy in Missoula, Montana. Been doing it for 15 years,” he said.

Burke noticed the man’s wife was paying no attention whatsoever. The boy didn’t seem to be enjoying the trip much better although his head swiveled whenever a pretty girl – and Nice had lots of them – strolled within vision range.

Then the pharmacist launched into a monologue about the different meals they had enjoyed since landing. Burke worked hard at tuning him out, but perked up an ear when he heard the American had developed a liking for steak tartare and pastis.

Finally, they were at the bike shop, a small but tidy operation run by André Rousseau, a long-time mechanic for a decent French pro team. Rousseau had finally given up the pro circuit at his wife’s wishes and, with the backing of some pro racers, had opened his shop which catered to many top-calibre racers in the region. Burke respected Rousseau’s mechanical expertise and liked him for his dry wit. He figured Rousseau would support him in this dispute.

The mechanic took one look at the crumpled front wheel and told the tourist in flawless English that it was a write-off and it would cost about 700 euros to replace. The tourist winced. His wife shook her head and looked a little worried. The son kept staring out the window.

Rousseau removed the broken wheel and leaned it against the counter then looked at Burke. “Mavic, same model?” he asked. “Or an upgrade?”

Burke would have liked an upgrade but said he’d manage with a same model as a replacement. Rousseau nodded and went into the back of the shop.

“An expensive day,” the pharmacist said, managing a sheepish smile.

Rousseau was back in two minutes with a new wheel and tire which he quickly put on. He slipped the wheel back onto the bike and then filled the tire with a pressurized pump.

“You’re back in business,” he told Burke.

After Henderson had settled with a credit card, they went outside.

“Sorry about your bad luck,” Burke said, starting to climb aboard.

“Yeah, well, stuff happens, hey?” Henderson said.

Burke felt a strange obligation to extend the conversation a few more seconds. “Staying in Nice?” he asked.

“Three nights at the L’Empereur,” Henderson said.

“Good hotel,” Burke said. “Have a good time and watch out for cyclists.”

His duty now done, Burke started off, hearing a “bonne journée” from Henderson.

A few minutes later, Burke stood at the entrance to the hotel housing the Global Products team, his bike safely attached to a nearby post by a thin cable lock. He flashed his media pass at the two security staff at the hotel entrance. They seemed unimpressed which didn’t entirely surprise Burke, given he was wearing spandex cycling bib shorts and an old KAS shirt with his notepad and recorder tucked in his back jersey pockets.

“I’m a journalist but I rode here from my apartment,” he explained. “I’m a former pro.”

The security pair continued to look unimpressed. In fact, they seemed to be studying everyone else but Burke.

Then Burke spotted the hawk-like features of Mark Den Weent, a one-time teammate and one of the coaching staff. Den Weent was just strolling down the hallway and turned when he heard Burke call his name.

Den Weent came over and told the security duo that Burke could come in. Wordlessly, the pair stepped back, letting Burke walk into the large, brassy entrance of the glamorous hotel.

Burke looked at Den Weent. “Tough day?” he offered.

“Oh, you mean McManus,” Den Weent said. Then he shrugged. “Well, it’s difficult and definitely a surprise, but what can you do? We must go on.”

Burke thought Den Weent, who looked a lot more ready to smile than cry, was managing just fine.

“You haven’t been doing your miles on the road,” Den Weent said with a grin, nodding at Burke’s waist.

“Yes, well, it’s the life of the journalist,” Burke replied. “Not good for exercising.”

Den Weent, still smiling, shook his head.

“How’s the team doing?” Burke asked, leading Den Weent to a couple of vacant black leather chairs in the foyer.

“Is this for you as a journalist or for my old teammate Paul Burke?” Den Weent asked, dropping into one chair.

“Both I guess. I’m doing a piece on McManus, but I’m also curious how everyone’s managing without the old”

. . . bastard!” Den Weent said, jumping in. “Officially, as we said at the news conference last night, we are devastated by the tragic loss of such a giant of the sport and such a key component of this team’s success.”

“You’ve been working on your PR skills, I see,” Burke said, letting the leather chair swallow him.

“I’ve had plenty of instruction in the art of PR,” Den Weent said.

“And the non-PR take?”

“Everyone is breathing again,” Den Weent said. “This last year, he was worse than ever and I didn’t think that was possible. We’ve got riders who’ve been close to breaking for months. They come here for more money and discover very quickly that a better contract isn’t worth shit when you’ve got a boss who believes he now owns your life.”

“And you? Did you get fooled by McManus?”

Den Weent smiled. "Same story. He had me by the balls."

"But not now."

"Now my balls don't hurt," Den Weent said. "After the press conference last night, the three of us trainers on the team got pissed in the bar right over there. Everyone not on the team probably thought we were overcome by sadness and that we were drowning our sorrows. Fuck that! We were celebrating."

They chatted for a few more minutes and then Den Weent excused himself, citing a need to concoct the team's plans for the next stage. Burke was ready to head back outside when he spotted Eric Tilson, one of the pro peloton's most familiar faces, a consummate domestique with endless stamina, boundless understanding of race tactics and a gift of gab in five languages that made him a media darling and a strong candidate for a TV commentator's job once he hung up his cleats.

"Big loss, eh?" Burke said, holding out his tiny recorder and hoping it still had enough juice to work.

"Irreplaceable," Tilson said in his Aussie drawl, his dark eyebrows knitting into one solid line as he frowned. "We're all devastated."

"Tough to ride today?" Burke asked, sensing that Tilson would stick to the company line.

"Yeah, I'm heartbroken. I'll be thinking of Mac every kilometre," Tilson said, a slight twinkle showing in his gaze.

"Surprised by the heart attack?"

Tilson paused. "Yeah, I am. He was made of iron and could still ride like hell. He ate well and stayed away from booze. He looked like he was ready to live to be bloody 100."

Burke asked who was controlling the team now.

"Den Weent will still work the car. Shit, he's one of the best at dealing with stage tactics on the fly. But I don't know about who'll really pull the strings. No one does. And with looking for a new sponsor, we're all wondering what's next."

"You want to stay around, Eric?" Burke asked.

Tilson, who was 35 but looked almost 50 due to years of racing in all kinds of weather, shrugged. "I'd like to. Lots of talent here. With the right co-sponsor, we could do very well for the next couple of years."

"Would you want to stay around if McManus was still around?" wondered Burke.

Tilson laughed. "I learned a great deal under his guidance. It's a real loss, a real tragedy."

Burke put away the recorder. He wasn't going to get much new, but he didn't really mind since he had always enjoyed Tilson's company.

"Thanks, Eric," he said, shaking hands.

He had gone a few steps when he heard Tilson's voice behind him. "Be careful what you write, Burkie. People are a little sensitive these days."

Then he was gone, leaving Burke wondering what was behind the warning.

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