

Day Shift

6500 words

Pete was a week into his loose attempt to reinvent himself in southern California.

At the Starbucks on Manhattan Beach Boulevard you could sit outside on this ledge and there was the ocean right there, down the hill, and you had assorted people coming out of the water, some carrying surfboards which nowadays were about the size of bath mats.

There were also the open-water distance swimmers, who'd been *way* out there circling around some buoy you could barely see, wearing these orange caps so they could find each *other* apparently, and Pete decided that was a questionable one, with the sharks and God knows what else lurking below.

Inside Starbucks was a mixed bag. There were the usual folks fooling around on their phones, but also a core element of locals apparently doing actual work,

most of them wearing flip-flops and seeming casual, except for the occasional furrowed brow.

Pete assumed there was some legitimate money changing hands in there--otherwise how could they hunch over the computer for a couple hours and then blow off the rest of the day, while supporting themselves in Manhattan Beach? . . . but what did he know.

There was one guy along the side wall reading an old-fashioned physical book and Pete liked that, so when he went inside for a refill he sat down in the empty chair at the guy's table.

“Morning to you too,” the guy said, Pete figuring he was getting any obligatory conversation out of the way as fast as possible.

“You wouldn't have stood out ten years ago,” Pete said, “maybe even five, but you do now.”

The guy smiled and turned the book over and looked at it. It was a hardback with a clear library cover but seeming brand new, titled *How The Hell Did This Happen?*, and Pete saw the word *election* in smaller print along with some recognizable cartoon faces.

“Well I hope you’re not a fan of Trump,” the guy said. “Not that I’d hold it against you, but I’m learning a lot.”

“That you don’t really want to know,” Pete said.

“Unh-huh. Kind of like a disturbingly gory movie . . . you shouldn’t look, but you still do.”

“What kills *me*,” Pete said, “is we got what, 300 million people in this country now? The best we can come up with is two clowns going head-to-head?”

“The book dives into that, actually.”

“Yeah? What’s the conclusion?”

“Haven’t gotten there, but you become acutely aware of not just individuals pulling strings behind the scenes, but mega-conglomerates, many of them nameless and faceless . . . though we suspected that already, I suppose.”

That was enough politics for now. This guy looked mid-50’s, maybe 10 years older than Pete.

Pete said, “You retired then, working part-time, or what? You don’t strike me as particularly concerned you’re going to be late for an appointment.”

The guy laughed. “My old firm, I hear from them sometimes, they want me to do some consulting. Litigation work. That’s not going to happen.”

“I get where you’re coming from there,” Pete said. “They’ve still got me on the list, to sub, up where I taught school once. Every so often I get a call, even though they’re out of their mind if they think I’m coming back.”

“Where’s that?”

“Terra Linda . . . But addressing what you were saying . . . so you’re a lawyer?”

“That in Sonoma County?”

“Below it. Marin.”

“Well was, would be not the *technical* answer to your question, but the *right* one . . . Too many circumstances you frankly don’t care about, and it beats you down.”

Pete figured what the hay, and lowered his voice a notch and said, “You ever run across a guy named Ned Mancuso?”

The guy looked at Pete more squarely than he had been. “I have, as a matter of fact. I take it you know him then.”

Pete said, “I met him a few days ago in the bar down the street, the one with the anchors and nautical nets and shit. Colorful character . . . So not so much *know* him, as trying to figure him out.” Waiting on the guy now.

The guy stuck a bookmark in and closed the book. “I wouldn’t be able to go there,” he said.

“Hmm. Attorney-client, and all that, undoubtedly.”

“You got it . . . Speaking of appointments, I do have to meet the wife. The excitement of the weekday half-price bargain matinee.” The guy shrugged like he was apologizing and got up.

Pete said, “Criminal, or civil, your firm . . . Or what?”

“All of it,” the guy said.

He walked home. The lawyer guy’d handed him a card and it said *Chandler Sweeney* and the words *Tennis Partner* on it, not a bad idea actually. Pete had

said something about the guy's *Indian Wells Open* t-shirt, which must have triggered him digging into his wallet.

So Pete called him the next day, and they played and Chandler was good, and sneaky with his tactics too, and he kicked Pete's ass.

"Is that what I'm going to run into?" Pete said, after getting hammered again in set number three. "All you guys better down here . . . or you're an exception?"

They were in the city park on the other side of Sepulveda, down toward Hawthorne where it got more modest, Pete figuring the space you needed for a couple of courts didn't exist closer in.

Chandler said, "You're not bad. A few things you do well, a few not as well . . . I got a pro I can give you, it'll help . . . Me, I played at UCLA, a *long* time ago. Back when you could play more than one sport."

"Oh yeah?" Pete said. "What was your other one?"

"Basketball. I had an okay outside shot, but I was too slow, couldn't defend my man effectively . . . They let me stay on the team because I hustled, but I didn't see much playing time."

Pete was looking at this Chandler thinking, Let's see, John Wooden, he coached there for about a hundred years, didn't he? This guy actually played for *Wooden*?

"Who was the coach?" he said.

"Gary Cunningham."

Pete had heard the name, one of the revolving door of guys *after* Wooden, so Chandler wasn't quite that old . . .

But no way this guy played basketball at UCLA.

Which it would be easy enough and maybe even fun to confirm, but why waste the time.

He suspected the college tennis part was a stretch too. Club ball or intramurals, but not varsity D-1, even back then.

He was pretty sure his friend Jenna Lee, the pro at Golden Gate Park, would make mince-meat out of this guy, but that didn't matter at the moment. Chandler was giddy from his dominating performance and talking like a chatterbox, standing up to demonstrate a technique, and applying it to Pete's game.

Pete figured, the guy feeling so good, he might as well pick his brain, since he didn't think he was lying about being a *lawyer* too.

He said, "Let me jump around on you for a second. If you were going to kill someone and live to tell about it, what would be the best way?"

The guy laughed, not unlike his friend Rich had, when Pete posed the same ballpark question one lazy afternoon in the *Booker Lounge* up in San Francisco.

"That's part of the human condition," Chandler said.

"Hunh," Pete said, not sure he should have asked.

Chandler said, "Answer is, it's harder. We go for technicalities, mostly."

"Meaning . . . you're saying, they *have* these guys? Generally? The police?"

"Indeed. DNA is an absolute killer. Altered the whole playing field . . . Once upon a time, we could put a witness on the stand and trench it, try to *re-establish* the so-called facts . . . Now with someone in a white coat up there, yep, they've *got* you."

"What about O.J. Simpson?" Pete said. "His blood was all *over* the place, no?"

“It was. We did some consulting work for Johnnie Cochran before the trial . . . You might say that was the beginning of the era we’re in now . . . where you’re largely reduced to two things. Procedural abnormalities and character defects.”

“Who might have had reason to plant evidence, you mean.”

“Yeah, put together enough *okay fine, the blood’s all over the place but what if’s* to screw up their case.”

“Ah,” Pete said. This was interesting, and the guy obviously knew his stuff, but no way you *yourself* could let it come to that.

“Of course the home run,” Chandler said, starting to get worked up again, like he was a minute ago with the tennis, “we were facing Clark and Darden. Both of them idiots . . . You don’t always *get* that.”

“Allowing the gloves to not fit . . .”

“Unh-huh, it goes on and on. What was your *original* question though?”

“I guess just . . . what would be the key *these* days, someone being successful?”

“You mean, making it look like someone *else* did it?”

Pete hadn't thought of that, not really, and it seemed basic. Jeez . . . Things *had* sort of evolved that way, luckily, the one he'd found himself getting caught up in . . . But setting out up-*front* to *structure* it like that, it could make sense.

“*Or* are you asking,” Chandler said, “how would someone commit the perfect crime? Where they wash their hands of it, and then put on a tuxedo and have dinner at a fine restaurant.” He laughed.

“More or less,” Pete said. “Yeah . . . how could they handle their business--still be walking around--and stay *the fuck* out of your office.”

“Oh . . . Well I have one theory which sounds simple, but I don't think I'm that far off . . . You want to play another though? You have to *be* somewhere?”

Pete said no he didn't want to play another, and he didn't have to be anywhere either.

Chandler said, “I've thought more than once, these guys, if they simply run and hide long enough, keep a low profile, law enforcement tends to forget about them.”

“Interesting,” Pete said. “And don’t get drunk and brag to the guy on the stool next to you, I guess.”

“Of course, all that. But if you go out-of-state, especially, you’ve just upped your odds substantially.”

“Despite everything you hear about the master databases and whatnot?”

“Right. Don’t forget, AG’s and DA’s and mayors are human like anyone else. They want to get re-elected . . . Extradition can be a mess, not to mention the public perception--why are they bringing more garbage back *here* and putting manpower on it, when some guy’s breaking into houses right in the neighborhood and you can’t even catch *him*.”

That reminded Pete of a pot farm shooting up north a couple years ago that still bothered him, and he told Chandler the story, that the local cops focused so hard on the search warrant business that they ended up losing the guys.

Chandler shook his head. “There are plenty of bright folks on the good side, but every move has to be documented now. It handcuffs them . . . Why, do you have something in mind?”

It shouldn't have, but it caught Pete off guard, strictly hypotheticals flowing up to this point.

“Because I wouldn't hold it against you,” Chandler said. “You'd have your reasons. We all do.”

“What do you mean, *we all do*?”

“I'm saying we all have skeletons in our closet. If we're honest with ourselves.”

“Oh yeah? . . . That mean *you* have a hidden list somewhere?”

Might as well have a little fun with it, push the guy's buttons.

“I do. Not for official consumption, but I've got it filed away.” Pointing at his temple.

Pete couldn't believe he hadn't cut it off with this guy yet . . . maybe the fresh start down here had loosened him up . . . someone said that might happen, the blue skies, the warm nights, the ocean air.

He said, “And? If you had a terminal disease, for example--not much to lose--you might act on it?”

The guy took off his tennis hat and played around with his hair and looked at Pete. “I'm surmising *you*

could conceivably have a terminal disease, and it could be something you're considering."

Not asking him, and not judging. Which Pete appreciated.

He said, "I *had* one, yeah . . . I think I'm good now. Meanwhile, there *is* a list, and in my case I've got it written down."

"So Ned Mancuso is on it?" Chandler said. "That's why you brought his name up in Starbucks?"

Wow, where did *that* come from?

"Because you might have to get in *line*, there," the guy said.

"Oh . . . Attorney-client privilege out the window for a moment."

"Most definitely . . . So . . . if I'm understanding you correctly, you *had* an issue, developed a unique mindset as a result, and now that the issue's possibly resolved itself, you're having trouble letting go."

Pete said, "How much do you charge? Or *did* you, by the hour?"

"When I retired it was at \$1500," Chandler said.

“Well that’s good and bad. The refreshing part, you gave a figure right away.”

The guy didn’t say anything.

“You’re good, is why I’m asking,” Pete said. “You actually got me figured out better than I have *myself* figured out.”

“So . . .” Chandler said. “You want to play tomorrow?”

“That *it?*” Pete said. “I give you enough where *I* almost have to run out-of-state now, and you’re booking tennis courts.”

Chandler said, “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll see you here tomorrow at 1 . . . We can do some drills first, if you want.”

Heading back to the apartment, Pete was thinking . . . that wasn’t exactly how he pictured it playing out today, hitting a few balls in the town park with a retired guy.

The next day Chandler wasn’t kidding when he said he had some drills. He started Pete off running a lap around the perimeter of the park, and then stuck him halfway between the baseline and the net and fired balls

at him, explaining that mid-court play was one of Pete's weak points.

It didn't make any sense to Pete, thinking you don't even want to *be* in mid-court when you're actually playing, that you already did something wrong just to end *up* there, but he went along with it.

Chandler had a basket of balls today, the kind of set-up a teaching pro would use, and it was clear he wasn't getting anything out of it himself, that the drills were strictly for Pete's benefit, so how could you get mad at the guy.

Finally he moved him to the baseline, the right corner, and set up some plastic cones in the opposite court and had Pete try to hit them.

"You're turning it over," Chandler called out. "That's *old-school*. It's all in the pronation of the forearm now."

Pete had no idea what he was talking about but he was afraid to ask any questions and risk triggering a major clarification so he kept his mouth shut and tried his best, and after twenty minutes Chandler let him switch to the backhand side and finally they took a water break.

“You might not think so, in the short run,” Chandler said, “but I saw some progress out there . . . Shall we play a couple sets, put it to use?”

Pete said, “Listen, I appreciate what you’re doing.”

Chandler said, “Meaning as opposed to yesterday, where I was kind of a wise-ass?”

“Yeah, okay,” Pete said. “You have a good side, I’m seeing it now. Pretty sure I came across like a jerk too, in fact I probably still do.”

“Well . . . not the worst way to be. Our old man used to tell us that--the old adage, speak your mind--they may not like you but they might at least respect you.”

“I guess you can apply that to everyday situations,” Pete said. “I had one this morning, sort of a variation on the theme. It’s a good thing I’m learning to relax . . . pick my spots.”

“What *kind* of variation?” Chandler said.

Pete told him about an email from a Craigslist viewer, regarding a painting he was trying to sell. By a graffiti artist named Scott Bird. The guy essentially accused him of art fraud.

Chandler digested it a moment, his face scrunched up. “You have it on you? The exact thing?”

Pete dug out his phone and pulled up the message. He said, “I didn’t answer the guy. Do you think I should have?”

It read:

Hey There Bro

Yo I don’t even like Bird’s work but I can tell a fake ass picture when I see 1 a hundred miles away

Got a lot a nerve, don’t you?

2500 fuck your mother.

Chandler read it a couple times and handed the phone back and said, “I can’t speak for you, but if this were *me* it would be hitting a nerve. Big-time.”

“It sort of did, at breakfast, but I think I moved past it. Only reason I mentioned maybe responding to the guy, I’m thinking--you ignore the assholic negotiating style, he actually *could* be a potential *buyer*.”

“What category did you list it in?”

“Collectibles . . . That’s what I mean, he’s probably some doofus who collects art, and wants to be convinced it’s not a fake. Which admittedly, on CraigsList, there is a lot of.”

“Could be,” Chandler said. “But at this point I’d kill that guy before I sold it to him.”

The words hung there and Pete took a good look at this guy standing there in his baggy tennis shorts, and wow, it sure seemed like he was dead serious.

“Take it from me,” Pete said, “that type of level, no way is it worth it.”

“That’s your opinion,” Chandler said. “I had a CraigsList experience that *I* tried not to think about *too*. But finally it got the better of me.”

“Uh-oh. What happened?”

“This is four, five years ago now . . . I put a motorcycle on there.”

“Not to interrupt you, but you don’t seem like a bike guy. Not at all.”

Chandler cleared his throat. “As I was saying, I listed it, an ‘89 Honda GB500. Book said \$3400 to 45, so I split the difference and made it 43.”

Pete said, “That’s not quite splitting the difference, but I get the idea. You’re not going to tell me some guy accused you of faking a *bike*?”

“If we could cut the comedy,” Chandler said. “That night someone calls about it. He asks a few questions and then states that the maximum budget he has is \$3000. I say fine, thank you for inquiring, and then he proceeds to fire off several more questions about the condition of the motorcycle. I say, and perfectly politely I thought, that I’m not sure of the point in going into more detail, since it’s outside your price range . . . The guy slams down the phone, but that wasn’t the end of it.”

“So he went and filed a complaint with CraigsList, and they suspended you?”

“Much worse. This guy downloads the photo of my bike and then posts it as his own listing, for \$500. With my phone number.”

“Ah.”

“So the phone starts ringing off the hook, and then people are accusing me of baiting and switching them, and I finally figure it out but I can’t get the ad down because it’s *his* listing, and it’s a Friday afternoon and we’re into the weekend . . . and finally on Monday I reach someone at CraigsList and they take it down, but I’m the *bad* guy now. Meanwhile the phone’s still ringing every twenty minutes.”

“So that was it? . . . Or you did something beyond that?” Pete remembering Chandler in the beginning, that the experience *got the better of him*.

“I did. And I know you’re a stand-up individual . . . and *again*--this is not for public consumption.”

Pete was thinking, Jeez, could this guy actually be *dangerous*? This mild-mannered retiree from Starbucks whose schedule that first day revolved around timing the bargain matinee?

“Down below Torrance,” Chandler was saying, “there’s a relatively deserted open area, used to be a military installation. I told the guy to meet me there, that it would be a good place to test-drive the bike, since it wasn’t currently street-legal.”

“Wait a second, you jumped way ahead here. You called him back?”

“Darn right I did. I didn’t let on that I’d been receiving the dozens of calls on his *own* ad. I merely told him I might reconsider the three thousand dollars, but that it would have to be cash.”

“You’re not going to tell me . . .” Pete said, lowering his voice. “You did the guy *in*? . . . I mean I’m joking, but still.”

“I *should* have. Which is something that pulls at me whenever I replay it in detail . . . No, what I did was I brought a couple of fellows with me. One of whom we’d done some work for, got him out of a tight spot. There were no blows exchanged, or anything like that. But the three thousand did change hands.”

“So in the end . . . you sold the bike. The revenge was, you forced the guy into buying it? Whether he exactly *wanted* to or not?”

“Yes. And I kept the bike.”

“You’re shitting me . . . You *robbed* a guy?”

“That would be a question of semantics,” Chandler said. “Naturally my interpretation is different . . . Okay, that’s off my chest. C’mon, let’s play, serve ‘em up!”

Pete got off the bench even though he didn’t feel like it and they played two sets, and Chandler beat him worse than yesterday.

“I think I’m regressing,” Pete said after the last ball--a down-the-line winner from Chandler that beat Pete by ten feet--had been struck. “Let’s forget any more drills, from now on.”

“You were fine,” Chandler said. “The difference was *I* was on fire. You notice? I couldn’t miss . . . I suppose it had to do with rehashing that little episode.”

“Raising your adrenaline,” Pete said. “You weren’t worried though . . . the guy reporting you, or something?”

“I was prepared for the consequences, which would have been a ‘he said, she said’ situation. We did ask him to surrender his phone, on the outside chance he intended to document the encounter.”

Pete said, “I don’t know why I had this crazy thought. That you were going to tell me you brought Ned Mancuso with you.”

“Oh *Gosh* no, that would have been entirely impractical. *These* two fellows, they got their point across, both for that day and going forward. Plus I gave them the three grand to split, on top of their fee.”

Pete almost asked what kind of a fee would be *standard* for something like that, but that may be going too far.

He said, “Well that’s a good story. And, fine, you did get your point across . . . But you ever wonder, did he *really* learn his lesson? I mean do you think he changed?” Jacking the guy’s chain a little, why not.

Chandler thought about that one. “Doubtful,” he said. “But you can’t just sit around and let people blatantly disrespect you. You have to do *something*.”

And he was giving Pete a hard look now.

“I really wish,” Pete said, “we didn’t have this conversation.”

“You know I’m right. You knew that before you showed me the email.”

“Either way,” Pete said, “going forward, I’d appreciate you not volunteering information unless I ask for it.”

“You asked me.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did.”

Pete had been letting a young guy spend a couple nights on his couch. The guy lived in one of the apartments downstairs with a roommate but something happened with the rent and they moved out pretty quick, and then Pete noticed him sleeping in his car around the corner, which was no good.

There was a tap on the door now and it was the guy, Ken.

“Sorry to bother you,” he said. “I just wanted to make sure . . . is it okay to stay *one* more night?”

Pete said, “It is. In fact didn’t I already *say*, until you get a *handle* on your stuff?”

“Oh. Okay then. That’s very kind of you . . . Cause I do have a handle on it, technically.”

“What, you’re out of your car?”

“Not that, no, but everything else is fine.”

“Shut up and come inside,” Pete said. “I see the problem, I’m going to make you a key.”

Ken sat down in the recliner. “Man, this thing is sweet,” he said. “That might be problematic though, seeing as how the landlord tossed me out of here once already.”

“Don’t worry about *him*,” Pete said. “He’ll understand.”

“Not sure about that one, though if you *say* so . . . You getting ready to play tennis, it looks like?”

“You might say that. I got some guy, s’pissing me off. You want to come? You ever play?”

“Not in a while. I played in high school . . . But where’s it at?”

“What are those, skater shoes or something?” Pete said.

“I guess,” Ken said.

“So they’ll work. Let’s go.”

Chandler was already warming up, not with a racquet and ball, but laying there in one of the service

boxes doing these weird, contorted stretches, and already sweating pretty good.

“It’s all about the core now,” he said, getting up to say hi. “I see you brought some new blood, a fresh victim.” Winking at Ken.

Chandler’s attitude was grating on Pete already, the *all about the core* BS reminding him of a tennis partner up north who also stuck in the needle about his supreme fitness.

The last he heard, *that* idiot had re-settled in Europe. Pete was never sure if the guy had something going that backfired on him . . . but Pete did make the rounds briefly with the left-behind ex-wife, and then his brother Floyd took over. That was a circus there for a while . . . god dang.

Chandler was asking Ken if he played much, and where, and Ken was low-keying his answers, the way a guy might, Pete was thinking, when he was pretty *good* at something.

“You know what?” Pete said. “You guys start off, but don’t worry, I’m here if you need me.”

From the first couple balls it was obvious Ken was a player, and *he* was starting to tick Pete off now as well, with the implication that he hadn't played since high school.

Chandler hadn't expected this, and after the first set he ran out of water, which was never the case against Pete, and it was amusing to watch him have to walk a fair distance to the rest rooms to fill his fancy container back up, since the water fountain outside the courts didn't work and looked like it hadn't since about 1950.

They played another one, Ken toying with the guy, who suddenly looked pretty dang old, and Ken now and then cutting loose and really *crushing* a ball, and Chandler having to stand there and watch, though Pete did give him *some* credit, he at least clapped on his racquet a couple times like you see them do when they're saluting the opponent.

“Where'd you come up with *this* guy?” Chandler said, back at the bench after the second set, looking pretty white and changing his shirt, which wasn't the greatest sight.

Ken was wrapped up in his phone, which of course they always were when they had a spare second, barely a drop of sweat on him.

“He’s a good kid,” Pete said. “Kind of like with *you*, I wasn’t sure of it at first. Yeah, he played high school ball, apparently.”

“No, no--*Kid*,” Chandler said, interrupting Ken. “Pardon my French, but high school ain’t gonna produce the kind of display you just laid on me out there.”

“What does *that* mean?” Pete said.

“That high school tennis is a glorified PE class. Most of the elite kids don’t bother with it.”

“I played some USTA juniors as well,” Ken was saying now. “Thank you so much for this though. It was very inspiring.”

“See what I mean?” Pete said. And to Ken, “Chandler played high-calibre tennis himself. At UCLA.”

“Really!” Ken said.

“Nah,” Chandler said, “he’s making a big deal about that. It wasn’t much, not at all.”

“Still . . . UCLA,” Ken said. “That’s huge.”

“At any rate,” Chandler said, happy to change the subject, “this guy happen to tell you about his encounter with the guy interested in the picture?”

“He hasn’t,” Ken said. “That sounds interesting though.” Polite, and undoubtedly hoping not to have to hear about it.

“Oh yeah,” Chandler said, smiling a little, looking at Pete. “He has some unfinished business *there*, that’s for sure.”

“Okay, let’s knock it off,” Pete said.

“You may not always realize it,” Chandler said to Ken, “but just like they’re two sides to a story? The same goes for people.” Winking again at Ken, which was starting to really piss Pete off. Was this guy referring to *himself*, for instance?

“What I’m putting together here,” Pete said, “is you’re a bad loser. Which must be triggering you running your mouth unnecessarily.”

“*Just* having a little fun,” Chandler said, smiling bigger and more irritatingly. “Okay, coming back to it, have you decided to follow through?”

Pete said to Ken: “What he’s referring to, is just a small-potatoes nuisance. One of those things you can’t do anything about, so you move on.”

“Even though it *kills* you though, right?” Chandler said. “Kenny, mark my words, something’s going to blow. Your friend has more of a temper than he lets on, is my guess.” *Kenny* now.

Ken said, “Having a temper--I mean when you think it’s justified--isn’t that human nature?”

This kid was something else, everything’s a positive, and Pete wished *he* were more that way, but it wasn’t going to happen.

“Either of you watch *Friday Night Lights*?” he said.

“Sorry, no,” Ken said.

“I don’t think so. It was a movie, right?” Chandler said.

Jeez, where have these guys been?

“Not the movie,” Pete said. “The TV series. Went downhill over time, but pretty compelling those first couple seasons . . . The reason I mention it, one of the characters reminds me of Ken here, his personality.”

Chandler said, “You’ve set the stage, and you have us pinned, so get to the point.”

“There’s these couple of scenes,” Pete said, “I even looked for them again on *YouTube* but couldn’t find ‘em. One of the players, his name’s Riggins, he ends up at a party where the coach’s daughter also happens to be. She’s getting ready to make a bad decision with some guy and Riggins--they mostly called him Tim--gets her out of there and takes her home, only the coach walks in at the wrong moment and thinks Riggins was putting the moves on his daughter.”

“Jeeminy,” Chandler said. “All that . . . and you’re trying to relate it to Kenny?”

“Yeah, right,” Ken said.

Pete said, “So here’s the rub. Coach is out-of-his mind angry, reads Riggins the riot act, throws him out of the house--he’s been staying at their house temporarily, I remember now there’s another storyline there--but Riggins takes it and never says a word.”

“Meaning,” Chandler said, “he doesn’t speak ill of the daughter, even though it’s *she* that caused it . . . I see what you mean, I admire that.”

Ken said, “Does it end like that, or is there a follow up?”

“There is,” Pete said. “Great scene. A couple weeks later, the daughter finally tells her dad what happened, and that Tim saved her. Coach goes to Tim’s house, Tim opens the door fearing more of the worst, and Coach looks him in the eye and tells him he has character, and he respects him . . . and then you see Coach walking back across the lawn to his car, and there’s Tim reacting to it, Coach on some level a father-figure to him . . . TV doesn’t get a *whole* lot better than that.”

“You keep going, you’re going to have me tearing up,” Chandler said.

“I didn’t think you had it in you,” Pete said.

“Not normally, but I’m a sucker for certain things.” Chandler waited to see if there was more, which there wasn’t. He said, “See you tomorrow then? Same time, same channel? . . . If I can get out of bed,” looking at Ken and rolling his neck around.

Pete said, “Actually, let me take a rain check on that. I have an event up the Bay Area next weekend, I should start preparing for it.”

“How ‘bout you Kenny?” Chandler said. “You work, or are you independently wealthy like the rest of us around here?”

“I wish,” Ken said. “But sure, that’d be fine.”

Chandler said, “What *kind* of event?”

Pete said a 25th reunion he got railroaded into, and Chandler asked did he need the whole week to get ready for *that*?

“I wasn’t intending to go into it,” Pete said, “but since you’re badgering me, I’ve also got one more nuisance on my plate . . . Not the art guy.”

“Oh?” Chandler said.

“There’s a guy, won’t get out of a motel room. And won’t pay up.”

“That could almost be me,” Ken said. “We got *out*, but we still owe the landlords for last month.”

“Different deal,” Pete said. “This guy lifts weights in the middle of the night, lets ‘em drop. Second-story room. The owner made the mistake of entering without permission.”

“Wait a minute,” Chandler said. “This is *you*, the owner? Some kind of rental property you have, you’re calling a motel?”

“No, a friend of mine. A real motel. Against my better judgment I’m trying to help him.”

“Well . . . I know what *I* would do,” Chandler said.

“What?” Ken said.

“In a perfect world, at least,” Chandler said.

“Problem these days, your hands are tied. Tenants have all the rights, landlords are the scum on the bottom of the pond.”

Pete said, “So far, all I could come up with was call the guy, tell him I’d be stopping by. Or technically a *Mr. Wiggins* would.”

“That shake him up at all?” Chandler said.

“No, he was fine with the *Mr. Wiggins*, seemed to be looking forward to it.”

“So . . . what are you doing wasting time with *that* approach?”

“I’m afraid I agree,” Ken said.

“Anyhow . . .” Pete said. “I’ve got *that*, and then maybe this gal coming with me up north, and I may

have to get there a little early . . . Bottom line, my week looks shot, on the tennis front.”

“Why would you have to get there early?” Ken said.

“Jeez, you’re sounding like *this* guy now,” Pete said. “Just a tweak in the itinerary. Not sure if I need to address it before, or after the main event.”

“Plus,” Chandler said, “you just *moved* here, right? The air-conditioning hasn’t even recovered from driving over The Grapevine, and you’re piling on activities back up north?”

Pete couldn’t disagree with him. “My air-conditioning hasn’t worked since about Missouri, on the way to Boston,” he said. “But break a leg while I’m gone.”

Ken said, “That was fun today. Thanks for including me.”

They were back at the apartment, by the pool, this time a take-out spread from a place called *California Kitchen*, which set Pete back a few bucks but wasn’t bad. Ken said he had money and he’d grab himself some

Taco Bell, but Pete wasn't going to let him, and the truth was he enjoyed the company.

“You think Chandler really played at UCLA?” Pete said. “Even back *then*, in the dark ages, when almost no one else played tennis?”

“What do you mean?” Ken said.

No point getting all cynical and corrupting the kid. “We finish here, remind me we need to find a hardware store that's still open, make that other key.”

“Maybe let's don't go that far,” Ken said. “Again, Mr. Zaman, it didn't end well there.”

“Okay listen to me. You keep bringing that up. That's who I'm helping *out*. With the motel business.”

“Oh . . . Wow . . . The surprises keep piling up, I guess.”

“Not as much of a stretch as you think. I got on his bad side as *well* there for a bit, but it kind of morphed into me making a few suggestions. He's a decent guy, doesn't know what to do . . . Nothing worse than a tenant from hell, they can ruin you.”

Ken said, “*Break a leg*. Is that an actors' expression?”

“I don’t know about that. Personally I was telling Chandler to go ahead and break one because he’s a bit too full of himself. Don’t you think?”

“Hmm.”

“Nah, you’re right of course. It’s *bad* luck to wish a performer *good* luck. So they use the ironic version. You’d actually think Hollywood could get more creative than that.”

“And where’s this motel person live?”

Pete picked up a napkin and wiped his hands.

“Excuse me?”

“I was just curious.”

“*What?*”

“Nothing.”

“A, it’s none of your business . . . B, even if it *were*, it’s not child’s play.”

“Okay sorry,” Ken said.

Pete said, “I didn’t mean it like *that*. Okay? . . . All I’m saying, you got a nice clean slate ahead of you . . . you’ve never been in any trouble, right? I mean beyond stiffing-a-landlord type stuff?”

“Luckily I don’t think so.”

“So there you go. Don’t butcher it up, sticking your nose where it’s not required.”

“All's I was thinking, *I* could talk to the person. Maybe help out.”

“I tried that. No dice.”

“Fine then . . . You tell good stories, by the way. I enjoy listening to them.”

Dang. “You don’t think I’m a blabbermouth? I catch myself, a lot of times, pretty sure I’m over-doing it.”

“Not as far as I’m concerned.”

“No?”

“No.”