

Endgame

2250 words

Neighborhood hardware stores were tougher to come by these days, but there was one on Lombard, run by a Chinese family, sort of a mixture of household goods and basic hardware stuff, along with a couple aisles of Asian food items.

It was Friday morning, a glistening bright day in the city for February 9th, though apparently they'd gotten a foot of snow overnight at Tahoe.

Pete found some decent wire, it reminded him of baling wire like they might use on hay, or to tie fencing together. The main thing, it was flexible enough that you could work it, and he had the guy cut him a nice three-foot length.

You didn't want to skimp on the gloves, and they had a brand that had *extra* heavy-duty padding, both on the palm and fingers, and even on the back--and they were a little bulky when you slipped them on, but well worth it.

And oh yeah . . . the roll of duct tape, don't forget that.

So there you were . . . he was all set, and nothing to do now except drive over to Castro Valley.

The rental car he'd picked up Wednesday was a basic Honda Civic, but it seemed sufficient, and he threw some warm clothes in back and stuck the hardware supplies in the center console . . . and 40 minutes later he was dealing with Errol's community gate, the bottom of the hill, the houses up above.

Pete wasn't positive the guy'd be around. He was going by what Errol told him the other night, that he normally worked at home Monday Wednesday Friday, and you hoped nothing threw that out of whack today.

Errol had been one of Pete's bosses years ago, when Pete was a teenager working a summer job as a bicycle messenger. Now he'd done something very bad.

Pete leaned out the driver's window to where the console was, where visitors called up to the residents, and he took a deep breath and punched in Errol's code.

No answer. He gave it another 30 seconds and tried it again.

Errol's voice came on the intercom: "What do you need."

And Pete picked up the handset that was part of the intercom apparatus.

He said, "Dude I'm trying to *help* you here. Let me in." He hated the word dude but it just popped out.

There was no more conversation, and Pete was hanging onto the headset, hoping, and a good minute went by and then the buzzer sounded and the heavy security gate swung open, and Pete drove up the hill and pulled into Errol's driveway.

Errol opened the door, no smiles today, not like he was going to challenge or attack Pete, but making it pretty clear he didn't belong here now.

Pete pointed inside and said, "You mind?"

"I *do*," Errol said, leaving it there.

"Here's the thing," Pete said. "I'm not your enemy. You have some options, I know you do."

And he brushed past Errol into the house, Errol only making a half-hearted effort to restrain him, and he followed Pete in and closed the door . . . and as he was

doing that Pete smashed him over the head with the flashlight he pulled out of his rear pants pocket.

It was one of those heavy-duty jobs, the kind the police used at one time, that took 6 full-sized batteries and could double as a night stick, or at least some kind of improvised weapon.

He'd actually picked *that* up from an ex-tenant who stiffed him on the rent and left his belongings in the apartment. The flashlight had been in a kitchen drawer.

Either way, Errol was in some trouble, but wobbling, trying to get up, and Pete smashed him with the thing again.

“Let’s go,” he said. “In the car.”

Errol got back to a sitting position and Pete found a towel and brought it along. Let the guy at least dab his wounds, though frankly it was more an *impact* thing, the guy taking some blunt force for sure. One cut was *part* of it, Pete could see now, but no serious blood.

Errol was stunned the way you see a fighter on TV staggering around when they don’t know quite where they are or what just connected with them, and Pete was

able to guide him by the arm, resistance free, into the passenger seat.

“Make sure you put your seatbelt on,” Pete said, and the guy made a small motion with one hand toward where you pulled the belt, and didn’t go any further with it.

Before he started the engine, Pete took the duct tape out of console, taped Errol’s wrists together, and it was a bit of a pain in the neck, but he reached way down and got his ankles taped together as well.

“You can relax now for a while,” Pete said, easing it out of the driveway, onto Fox Ridge Drive, a right turn on Strobridge to the 580 ramp, then picking up the 680 interchange business through Walnut Creek-Concord, and connecting with I-80 at Fairfield.

“So far so good,” Pete said. “I’m turning into a grumpy old man, but I can’t *tolerate* traffic any more. How about you?”

Errol was staring straight ahead. He’d come around a bit, his eyes were showing some recognition.

Pete had to take a leak by the time they hit the Sacramento bypass toward Reno, and he considered

stopping somewhere real quick, you could probably work it . . . but he better not fool around.

It wasn't until around Colfax that Errol initiated his first bit of conversation.

He said, "If I might ask, where are we going?"

"And the *second* part of that?" Pete said, "*and what are you doing with me?*"

Errol didn't say anything.

"You ever a Boy Scout?" Pete said.

Errol shook his head very slightly.

"You're gonna require some winter survival skills. Snow-type ones. What I'll be doing, is letting you off in the mountains. You're going to need to keep your wits about you, and it's up to you, how bad you want it."

Errol was looking at Pete more wide-eyed now.

Pete continued. "You've always been good to me. And that's why I'm giving you a chance . . . Jeez, good thing it's not snowing, currently, otherwise we'd need chains right now."

Which was true, he hadn't thought of that.

Meanwhile, dang, there *was* a fair amount of snow this winter, it was up pretty high already on the sides of the

road from the snowplow, and you still had 45 minutes and a couple thousand feet of elevation before you got to Donner Summit.

Pete said, “But you let me down. An old colleague from the newspaper business laid a tip on me, and I put it together . . . Inconceivable as it was . . . I wished I never asked him about the case, honestly.”

Errol said, “Please Pete. I can’t expect you to understand. Everything just . . . got away from me that night.”

“I understand. Like a perfect storm.”

Errol didn’t say anything.

It *was* good to hear the guy confess, in actual words. Pete was pretty sure he could go through with it even if he didn’t get that out of him just now, but still.

What he meant by *it*--no, he *wasn’t* going to be dropping the guy off in the woods, letting him test his winter survival skills.

The bogus nonsense he was feeding the guy--that he better be ready to dust off his Boy Scout stuff--that was to relax him a bit--hopefully--so he wouldn’t be fighting Pete for his life on the way *into* the woods.

At least until you get the baling wire around his throat, then yeah, all bets would be off.

Pete exited Highway 80 onto Soda Springs Road. He was familiar with the area, he'd been coming up here since he was a kid, not often, but a little skiing, a little summer stuff. There'd been a rental cabin he'd gone in on once at Northstar, 10 people, though there was a party at the end and it got crashed, and that was a mess.

From the exit, the human activity was on the south side. That's where you had your Sugar Bowl ski resort, and if you stayed that direction you'd wind your way down to Donner Lake.

If you crossed *over* though, the *north* side of I-80, there wasn't much, it got remote in a hurry. Pete had some memories of mountain biking over here, though once in perfect conditions, the middle of summer, he took an inadvertent wrong turn off the trail and realized it a couple hundred yards in--and he had a *heckuva* time finding that trail again, and plenty of crazy thoughts swirled around before he got there.

He drove a couple miles and turned onto a side road. This was going to be tricky, since they'd plowed

the main road, but not this one. This is when you wish you'd thought ahead, rented a Subaru, Jesus--or at least something with front wheel drive.

Though the Honda was handling it okay actually, and maybe Pete was mixed up, and he said to Errol, "This thing got front wheel *drive*? Do you know?"

"I believe it does," Errol said, very faintly.

So that was good then, and you couldn't have laid out better timing, the afternoon was getting on, and it was starting to get a little dark, which it tended to do real early in the mountains.

No one around, no houses, no cabins, no vehicles in the distance . . . nothing.

So Pete turned off the engine.

Errol sat there rigid, facing forward.

It occurred to Pete who am I kidding, this guy sees right through my bullshit, and is *expecting* the worst.

We'll find out.

Off to the right was a cut-through in a stand of pines, and then it closed in again on you and opened up in back, and you could see just a bit of light filtering into the spot back there, which looked clean and simple and

logical. The snow was thick along the way, but you could handle it.

Pete got out and opened Errol's door, and he had to help the guy out, on account of the wrists and ankles being locked together with the duct tape . . . and Errol started hopping ahead, as though he knew where Pete wanted to go.

Pete thought back to an incident one day on the job at Speed-King delivery service, where Pete had been the teenage bike messenger. He was a pretty conscientious worker, and he didn't screw up a delivery very often.

On this one day, he did. He was supposed to pick something up at Number Two Embarcadero Center, and take it to the 38th floor of the Bank of America building, on California and Kearny.

But his brain wasn't working right, and instead he dropped the package on the 38th floor of the *Transamerica* Building. They didn't seem to be expecting it there, but Pete didn't think much of it, and they signed for it and that was that.

The shift ended and Pete was back in the Speed-King offices on Pier 7, checking out for the day, and Errol is on the phone and puts his hand up toward Pete.

The woman from the Bank of America building company is on the line, and it wasn't *any* company, it was Roche, Winston and Meyer, one of the most respected law firms in the city, and needless to say, a huge account for Speed-King. And apparently the package Pete screwed up was a legal document that had to be filed that day in court.

Errol asked Pete about it, Pete realized his mistake and explained what happened, and for a minute or so Errol stood there with the receiver held out to the side, and you could hear the woman yelling.

Finally the conversation concluded, and Errol winked at Pete and told him don't worry about it. Pete found out later, through the grapevine, that the woman insisted the messenger be fired, if Speed-King ever wanted any more business from them, and Errol had calmly informed her that that wasn't going to happen.

Pete looked at the guy ahead in the woods now, and told him to come back.

They drove out to Highway 80 again, Pete got back on it headed east, toward Reno, and five minutes later he took the downtown Truckee exit.

He went south on old Brockway Road, and it felt like they were heading out into *different* wilderness now, except Pete veered onto North Shore, and then a little left turn, and the Honda came to a stop in front of the Truckee Police Department.

Pete cut off the tape on Errol's hands, then his feet.

"Take care of it," he said, and he watched Errol slowly go inside.

After a couple minutes, it seemed okay to leave. You could head back down toward Sacramento, probably get most of the way out of the mountains before it was completely dark.

Then again you had the town of Truckee, with an old main street, some character to it, a few establishments. A little bit of a bar scene.

Pete was thinking, maybe there's a game on, you get into a conversation with someone. He could use that now.

