

Territory

1750 words

Hal said to Mel, “You were good today, but listen, I got something else going on.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” Mel said.

“It means, when you win you brag. You relive it. We’re just a couple hackers, we can barely hit the ball compared to the real guys.”

They were in the steam room of the racquetball joint. The place had seen better days. The steam room never got quite hot enough, though you could stay in there longer this way.

“Okay I’m going to level with you,” Hal said. “And please--I don’t expect this to go anywhere.”

“Uh-oh,” Mel said.

“No no, it’s not like I killed someone, or committed bank fraud. Nothing at that *level*. So take it easy.”

“Funny way to put it, telling me what to do. But I’m listening.”

“I’ve been screwing around on Katherine.”

“No shit? To be honest you’ve seemed a little spacey, the last couple weeks. With who?”

“It’s been longer, on and off since New Year’s. A gal over in Mission Beach.”

“So you met her at a New Year’s bash? Or you’re just rounding it off.”

“No I did. Katherine’s boss had a thing, and she dragged me to it, is the irony here. Sylvia was working the catering.”

“Sylvia. Jeez, I always liked that name but it sounds like an old person, different era.”

“Yeah, well, this one’s 24. I fucked up. Most significant reason being, her boyfriend is interested in killing me.”

“That happens,” Mel said.

“Thanks,” Hal said. “I knew you’d be there for me in my time of need. Nice going.”

“Who else you tell?”

“My lawyer. From when I had the real estate thing.”

“Is that . . . Marc Oke, the guy we golfed with? Or different guy.”

“Different. I also told Katherine.”

Mel said, “Okay Bud, you’re playing with my temperature in here. Not sure if you’re jerking me around for a reason, but what’s the *problem* then?”

“You don’t listen. Her boyfriend wants to do me in. He’s one of those guys . . . based on my limited contact with him so far . . . has a screw loose.”

Mel considered it. “Probably doesn’t hurt, if a guy ends up on the stand. Brings in character witnesses, who testify to the fact that he’s been off his rocker for a long time. Might still find him guilty, but he has a shot.”

Hal was pretty sure he understood this, that Mel just laid out how the boyfriend might get away with it after he killed him.

He wondered--hypothetically--could you bring some kind of electricity in here and hose this guy down first and then electrocute him--but he checked himself.

Mel said, “How’d she take it? Katy.”

“How do you think? First night I’m on the couch. Then she gains more clarity, I’m in a motel.”

“Which one?”

“You’re an idiot. Then I’m back on the couch, main reason being she’s worried about the boyfriend too now, doesn’t want to be alone if he shows up looking for me.”

“Second question,” Mel said, “why the lawyer?”

“I don’t know . . . that’s part of why I brought this up, see if you had any thoughts on that.”

“Well what did he say himself?”

“He acknowledged the situation, and told me keep him posted if anything escalates. Kind of like an air traffic controller and a holding pattern.”

“Yeah not much bite there. Where’d this guy go to law school?”

“Harvard. That’s why I used him for the real estate, figured he’d outsmart the opposition in the fine print.”

“Okay now that’s the worst guy for this. You need someone street smart, came up the hard way, squeezed out a shingle from, like--what’s that place on Cedar Street . . . California Western School of Law. That type place, that no one ever heard of.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Hal said.

Mel said, “When’s the last time you had contact with this boyfriend?”

“That’d be a week ago Wednesday. He kinda walked in on us. First and last introduction to the gentleman all rolled into one.”

“Hmm . . . so without getting into the details of the timeline . . . you’re not *still* hammering this babe?”

“That would be an affirmative, for better or worse. I know.”

“Welp, processing the whole shooting match now, I can’t help you there my friend.”

“I didn’t expect much, but thanks for hearing me out,” Hal said. “You know actually, the way you said that, *I can’t help you*, it reminded me of the Butch Cassidy movie.”

“Which scene?”

“The opening one, where they’ve got it all grainy and yellow. Sundance is playing cards and the guy accuses him of cheating, and there’s about to be a gunfight.”

“See now that was different,” Mel said. “What Butch says, the complete line, is: I can’t help you *Sundance*. By naming him he *is* helping him, because the other guy loses his nerve when he realizes he’s dealing with the Sundance Kid.”

“That’s a fair point,” Hal said, “as opposed to some *ordinary* guy cheating him at cards . . . If this guy comes at me and I end up hurting him or something, how’s it work these days, the self-defense business?”

“Not well is my guess. Even worse if the guy’s a minority. He’s not, is he?”

“I haven’t checked his DNA for sure, but nah. Very cream-colored white guy. And bodybuilder type. Looks roided up, if I had to take a guess.”

Mel said, “All right, let me understand this . . . *trip* . . . you’re laying on me, which is cascading further out of control every time you add something . . . You’re going to take down a weightlifter on steroids?”

“Could happen that way, yeah.”

“You’ve been, what, enrolled in secret MMA lessons on me then?”

“Nah, I got like a metal bar I keep in the house, handle taped up to get a grip, never had to use it, but . . .”

“Ah, so this is going to happen in the house. Yours.”

“I thought so, yeah. That way, the self-defense angle I was asking you about, that’s in play. Fucker shows up, is hunting me down.”

“Hmm. So you’ll be inviting him over?”

“No. But Sylvia knows where I live. He’ll get it out of her, if he hasn’t already.”

“I see . . . and Sylvia knows where you live, because?”

“We did it there once. When Katherine was on an art walk.”

“That’s one of those downtown deals, where the artists are on the street and everyone’s loading up on the free wine?”

“Nah this one was over in Barrio Logan. Artists can’t afford downtown. But whatever, Jesus Christ.”

“So you timed it, the activity. Which makes her dangerous now, you’re saying, Sylvia . . . though you got a gated neighborhood, how’s the dude get in?”

“There’s a punch code and she knows it. It’s 1-2-3-4, and there’s a funny story behind it, which I told her.”

“Yeah, well, you’re increasingly a barrel of laughs . . . Not to mention, you’re out of your goddamn mind, every piece of this.”

“Oh,” Hal said. “So you don’t believe me, the guy’s dangerous . . . Which I get . . . Would it help if the guy rang the bell Saturday, looking for me?”

“*Last Saturday?*”

“Unh-huh.”

Mel took a little time now.

“I gotta get out of here,” he said.

“It’s my fault,” Hal said. “I’m a Finn. It’s a weakness. We leave stuff out.”

“You’re Finnish? I thought they all had names that ended in n-e-n. Most of ‘em at least.”

“My mom’s side. So bottom line--if I happen to be there next time when he stops by--hitting him in the skull with the bar, it works or not, yes or no?”

“Middle of the night *maybe*. You could claim an intruder. Regular hours, unlikely.”

“So, *you’d* handle . . . this mess . . . how?”

“I’ll see ya,” Mel said, and he got up and was gone, and Hal was thinking, man, that guy’s sweating like a dog.

Hal decided, instead of doing any more analyzing--which admittedly wears the shit out of you--why not head over to Mission Beach, see what’s cooking.

He had another one of those metal bars in his car, under the passenger seat. He’d lived in New York once and it was standard back there to have something with you when you were driving, and the habit stuck.

A Puerto Rican kid--the son of the super in his building--showed him how to tape it, how to build up the handle first with foam insulation strips and finish it off with a tennis racquet grip of all things, the kid explaining this way it had the tacky property you wanted, it wouldn’t slip around on you.

He got there, parked on the street across from her apartment--one of those ones where you could look up and see the door, like a motel--and chickened out, he was pretty sure, on the tough guy business, if an opportunity presented itself.

Mel was right, he didn't say it in so many words, but how was this a plan? What kind of idiot operated like this?

But since he was here . . . might as well text Sylvia . . . and she said now wasn't a good time, and Hal got back in the car and sat there for an hour, why not, the Padres were playing the Dodgers tonight and baseball on the radio was a good thing . . . and finally her door opened and she kissed someone goodbye, plenty of passion on display, and it was a different guy.

Hal waited until the end of the half-inning, Kershaw pitching out of a jam, and he figured he caught a break on the boyfriend scenario, that either they'd broken up or else now the guy had new material to focus on . . . and this would be a perfect time to go get a pastrami sandwich--there was a sit-down deli he liked off the 5-8 interchange that was open to eleven--and close the case.

He went up there anyway and knocked, and Sylvia asked how his day was, and Hal asked if the first boyfriend was still into killing him, and she said oh yeah, but don't mind Tony, he likes to yell and scream but he's a teddy bear.

