

Who Needs Justice?

by TED GROSS

writing as 'Rex Bolt'



Chris Seely Book 1

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1 – Receipt

February 2017

San Francisco, California

When he started thinking straight again, the first person Chris decided to kill was Reynaldo Holmes.

Better known back in the day as Ray.

Ray and two other kids jumped him coming off the 3 Jackson and kicked his ass, laughing as they left him lying there in front of Alta Plaza Park. That was in the spring of 1989.

Junior high school.

What stuck in Chris's head from that day was Ray carrying the rake.

There'd been a War Ball game in PE, and Chris had put one of Ray's crew out of the game.

Kid named Charles Fuqua, not a bad guy actually, but nailing him with the ball in the face from a blind angle didn't help, and word spread the rest of the day.

So what they did after school, Ray and Fuqua and CJ Williams, they got on the bus with Chris and chased him off it at his stop and beat the shit out of him.

He never did figure out where Ray got the rake, but for good measure Ray finished him off with it, the butt end, two-handed across the mouth.

Chris was bleeding pretty good when it was all over, and some adult helped him and they called his parents and he spent a couple hours in the emergency room.

Then he was afraid to go back to school. So he faked being sick for a week.

His first day back, in the yard, there was Ray Holmes tapping him on the shoulder. He had a wide-tooth comb sticking up out of his Afro. He told Chris to remember, he didn't touch him.

Chris nodded, and that was the end of it.

For a while he walked home, down Chestnut to Pierce and up the hills to his house, and eventually he started to relax and took the bus again.

He barely crossed paths with Ray or Fuqua or Williams the rest of the semester, and Ray enjoyed himself like nothing had happened, running track that spring and finishing 3rd in the city in the 60-yard low-hurdles.

Holmes was now on Chris's list.

Chris put together the first draft at Starbucks in Mill Valley following a morning hike on Mount Tam, the day after he'd gotten his news. He wrote it out on the back of

his venti caffe latte receipt:

- 1 Ray**
- 2 DS**
- 3 'Chip'**
- 4 Simmons**
- 5 Ike's guy**
- 6 video store Australian**
- 7 football driver**
- 8 Maierhafter situation**
- 9 soccer guy**
- 10 Eric Mossman's person**

Before he left Starbucks he entered 'Holmes, Reynaldo' in a White Pages San Francisco search, and all these years later there it was, the only result, no phone number but an address of 1144 Webster.

Right in the old Fillmore neighborhood was where Chris was picturing it, if that was actually the guy.

2 - Invitation

When Steiner told him, he hadn't reacted like he would have thought.

It was a Monday, a month after the 49ers lost to the Seahawks to end the season 2-14, Chris making a mistake accepting a free ticket to the game.

"Your results are a concern," Steiner said. "There are experimental therapies out there, and clinical trials and so on."

He cleared his throat. "But eradicating a stage four is not something we are entirely optimistic about, I'm afraid. In my opinion you have at least six months, maybe as much as eighteen. We are recommending treatment though, Chris."

Chris felt like he was watching a compelling TV show, a doctor delivering grave news to a patient. He didn't feel particularly sorry for himself, or terrified or angry. He was mainly surprised. His stomach had been feeling a little funny, different, for a few weeks, so he went in. *You've got to be kidding me.*

"I'm forty- two years old," he said. "How is this possible?"

"I'm very sorry."

"Well . . . Fuck you then I guess."

Steiner looked down and rubbed his lip, and Chris walked out of the examining room. The receptionist, Bethany, was at the copy machine.

“That was quick today, Mr. Seely. You have a great afternoon, and we hope to see you soon!”

Bethany had wavy brown hair pulled back, nice skin, no ring. A twinkle in her eye. Chris had occasionally wondered what might be underneath the surface.

“Not my best day so far,” he said, “But would you want to have dinner?”

She took a moment. “I don’t think so, but thank you for asking.”

“You’re welcome,” Chris said. “And can you please tell Billy I didn’t mean it when I said ‘fuck you’?”

3 - Chaser

The Marina district had changed a lot, and Chris had mixed feelings. The Italian families had been replaced by kids fresh out of college, working their first jobs in the financial district or down in the Silicon Valley. Chestnut Street on the weekends was like a big fraternity party. Chris liked to sit on the bench in front of Hunt's Donuts and observe the bountiful female backsides that paraded up and down the block.

Today he stopped for a beer at Weatherby's. Two in the afternoon, no one in the place except for a couple guys at a side table huddled around a computer screen.

What now?

His parents had passed, so thank God they wouldn't have to go through this. He had his sister Bonnie in Boston with his little nephew Bert, and his kid brother Floyd in Arizona. Hard to know how Bonnie would react, since they didn't see much of each other. Floyd wouldn't say a lot, but he would take it hard.

Halfway through his third Anchor Steam, Chris decided to tell Shep, the bartender.

"Shep, I've got a terminal situation."

"That's what I keep saying too, brother. Which is why soon I'm getting out of this business . . . There's a guy in Marin makes those little houses? All's you have to do, find a piece of land. They call it living off the grid."

"I got like a year to live, maybe a little more. I just came from the doctor."

Shep didn't move.

"I mean what would you do, how would you handle it? . . . I've traveled, lived different places . . . couple careers . . . good memories . . . made it to forty, right? That's all you can ask . . . What do you think you'd do?"

Shep poured him a chaser.

"Something tells me you're not shitting me."

"No, I've had this stomach thing and . . . whatever."

"And just like *that*? This is where you're *at*? . . . No way, man."

"I know . . . but yeah."

Shep gave it some time.

"Well if it was me," he said, "I guess first thing . . . would be let myself get mad. Take a couple days to get that out of the way. Then I suppose I'd be grabbing all the gusto I could, for as long as it lasted . . . Probably try to tie up some loose ends, along the way."

The guys on the computer were laughing about something. A kid in a Duke sweatshirt took a seat at the end of the bar, and Shep went to wait on him.

“What you were saying, about the loose ends,” Chris said when he came back. “I was thinking of maybe killing a few people.”

Shep looked him straight on and nodded slightly.

“I hear you brother,” he said. “But you’re joking, right?”

Chris didn’t say anything.

“You’re not,” Shep said.

4 - Talk Show

On Wednesday Chris took his normal morning run from the Marina Safeway to Fort Point and back, three miles each way, past the distance swimmers and dogs fetching sticks out of the bay and hard-core surfers under the bridge near the rocks.

He picked up some French pastries at La Petite Auberge and went back to his apartment and fired up a pot of coffee.

1144 Webster, he figured out, was between Turk and Eddy, on the east side of the street. About fifteen blocks from where they left him lying there back in 8th grade. It was a ten minute drive from the apartment, or an hour walk, but what was the rush?

On the way there he wondered how you would do it. He'd only shot a gun a few times, a rifle, at his Uncle Barney's ranch up near Grass Valley when he was a teenager. It would feel good to use your fists, at least for some of it, though maybe that wasn't practical.

Of course the big thing, the trouble with the whole idea, would be getting away with it clean. Ending up dying in a prison hospital didn't bother him all that

much, but then you could be leaving an unfinished list of seven or eight people. No set rule how you had to do it, so you might as well work smart.

You'll probably get caught either way, but still.

One option would be to line up a few of them and take care of it back-to-back-to-back, on the same day. That way, worst scenario, you've at least accomplished a portion of it.

Ray's building was a modern low-rise that took up half the block. It looked a lot like a regular apartment complex, but Chris guessed redevelopment money, a nice step up from the projects where Ray probably lived back then, but still the projects.

A security guard was sitting behind a high desk in the lobby.

"Could you direct me to Reynaldo Holmes please," Chris said.

"And who should I say?" said the security guard, picking up the house phone.

"Charles Fuqua."

"He says he'll come down," the guy said. "You're welcome to wait in the lounge, right there."

Chris unfolded a hardback chair and took a seat. There was an elderly woman up front watching a talk show with the volume loud.

When Holmes walked in, he looked old. He'd had a high forehead and light complexion and had moved with an easy grace back then. Now he had a slight limp and had gained some weight, but it was definitely him.

"Charles, he had a rough time of it," Ray said. "He ran with a bad bunch, got into it."

"Oh yeah?" Chris said.

"That boy been down for some time now. Which bring me to my next question: who the fuck are you?"

Chris stood up. Ray's eyes were yellow and he was missing an upper incisor.

"Chris Seely. From Marina?" He extended his hand.

Ray took it, and Chris knew he knew.

"Man, now you taking me back," Ray said. "You're talking junior high school. Only school I remember, Galileo. Played some ball there."

"Is that right."

"Caught me a touchdown on Turkey Day at Kezar, corner of the end zone . . . We called it Strong 86 Flag, two DBs on me, I went up and got it. We lost to Lincoln . . . They was full of white boys like you."

Chris said, "Remember playing War Ball on rainy days?"

"Fuck you talking about?"

“You remember, give me a call.” Chris picked up an old newspaper and wrote his number on it.

“I got four days a week, four hours a day, they working on my kidneys in a chair. So I can stay alive. Mother fucker asking do I remember War Ball.”

“If you do, Ray, call me.”

Chris thought of asking him what the final score was of that Turkey Day game, but that was getting off the subject.

5 – Boost

Friday evening, Chris drove across the bridge twenty-three miles north to Terra Linda. Marin County. Traffic was awful. By the time he got to the high school gym, it was the third quarter.

He spotted Joyce in the little faculty section behind the scorer's table.

"I must say, your school spirit is a bit deficient," she said. "Though it is a surprise to see you here."

"Well, I thought it might be fun to stop by. For old times' sake."

"Then I'm glad you did. How have you been Chris?"

"You know, kind of all over the place. What can you say?"

"Don't I know it . . . That kid number 28 is the star. He was all-TCL last year as a sophomore. I have him in 5th period, really nice boy."

"Smooth ball-handler, I can see that."

"His dad pushes him hard, unfortunately. But I think he still enjoys it, at least I hope."

Chris said, “Donny Shelhorne doing okay these days?”

Joyce frowned. “You come with that out of the blue? What are you doing here Chris?”

“I actually was hoping we could get a bite, after we put away St. Stephen’s. We’re up by eighteen at the moment.”

“There’s someone I’m seeing,” Joyce said.

“Serious?”

“Well, yeah, a couple months. I’m happy.”

“Anyone I would know?”

“Hopefully not, he’s in the wine business.”

“And you’re dating him tonight?”

“Yes.”

“So you break it.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Tell him the game went into double overtime, and you’re exhausted.”

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Three in the morning, Chris got up and opened the door a crack for a little air. *The Jetty* was an old-time, dependable motel along the northern shore of Sausalito, sandwiched between a boat builder and a business park. Chris’s first time there had been the week of his senior prom.

“You,” Joyce said, sitting up, shaking her head.
“What did I just do?”

“Are you kidding? You did a lot, you boosted my confidence.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Anyway, as far as you know, what’s Donny up to these days? You must at least hear something. I haven’t seen him since that time in the deli . . . I told you about that, right?”

“Yes. That’s when you said if he weren’t around anymore, it wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

“I did?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, any particular part of that statement you disagree with?”

“I block it out, so stop,” Joyce said.

“Well, I actually find I’m not blocking it out as well these days . . . Far as you know, what’s that cocksucker doing with himself?”

Joyce said, “You want to keep being an asshole and bringing it up, or you want to come here?”

6 – Arrangement

In 2012, at the start of Donny Shelhorne's senior season, when he was 18 years old, Preps App rated him one of the top twenty-five left-handed high school pitchers in the nation. He had gone 12-1 as a junior, striking out more than half of the batters he faced. He had a relaxed, natural motion, and the radar gun put him consistently in the low 90's.

On a Saturday night in March, Donny and his pal Benji Romano decided to have an impromptu party at Benji's house on the southwest side of Terra Linda. Word got around quickly, and within an hour the party was overflowing out onto the driveway and front lawn.

Donny was in the kitchen, all smiles, putting the moves on Meghan Britta and her best friend Lindie Moreda. Especially Meghan. The girls were sophomores. They were in the middle of trying out for varsity cheerleading for next year, and they were awestruck that Donny Shelhorne was paying attention to them.

Donny reached around Meghan and poured three shots on the counter. Lindie wasn't sure, and Meghan

wasn't either, but after a minute Meghan picked hers up, gave Lindie an "Oh well, here goes!", and drank it down.

Donny matched her. He refilled the glasses, and they did a second round. He asked Meghan how old she was.

She told him sixteen last month. She was giggling.

Donny said in that case why not go a shot for every two years, making it eight. He had his arm around her now. Frankie Rohn had started talking to Lindie. Someone turned up the volume on the reggae.

Donny stopped his shots at four, but Meghan didn't notice. He smiled and refilled her glass until she got to eight. It went by quick, like it was a game.

Meghan excused herself and walked unsteadily toward the bathroom. More people poured into the kitchen, and Donny soon had his arm around another girl.

Lindie hung out in the back yard for a while with Frankie and some kids she knew from Novato. When she went looking for Meghan, she found her stretched out on the couch in the family room. A couple of people were watching TV.

At first Lindie thought Meghan was just asleep, but then when she got scared and tried to wake her up, Meghan barely moved.

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Of all the students that had passed through Joyce's English classes, Meghan was one of her favorites. Some of her essays were so personal and heartfelt that Joyce was convinced she was reaching out.

A few times she asked Meghan if everything was okay in her life, if there was anything she wanted to talk about, and Meghan had said it was all good, until one night she showed up at Joyce's house in tears. Her mom had a revolving door of boyfriends and wasn't around half the time. There was no dad.

Joyce fixed her some hot chocolate and listened. She prayed that Meghan would make it into a four-year college, as far away as possible. This was one of the special ones, a bright light, and after Meghan hugged her tight when she left that night, Joyce couldn't sleep.

This was three weeks before the party at Benji Romano's.

Chris taught social studies that year, and he had Meghan and Lindie in his U.S. History class. He liked to go to the baseball games and watch Donny pitch, and he'd see the two of them in the stands with their group, a couple of all-American kids having fun, ostensibly not a care in the world.

They took Meghan off life-support after five days. There was a police investigation, and Donny Shelhorne got arrested. He was locked up for six hours, then he

was out on bail and the lawyers took over. A plea arrangement was reached. Donny got probation and community service.

He accepted a full ride to Ripperton University to play baseball, and he made the starting rotation as a freshman. It would be a successful four years for him there, plenty of good times and a couple of awards. The *Terra Linda Herald* would occasionally chronicle his accomplishments.

Chris saw Donny once when he was back from college for summer vacation. It was at lunchtime, in Macci's Deli, not more than a mile from Benji Romano's house, and Chris was in line. Donny came in with his girlfriend, both of them laughing, Donny talking loud like he owned the place, acting like nothing had ever happened.

7 – Southbound

On Saturday, Chris and Joyce had a late breakfast at Sam's Grill in Tiburon, and he dropped her off. He figured he'd try the San Rafael library. He was thinking everything you did on your own computer could somehow be tracked, but hopefully using one at the library avoided that.

He tried a White Pages search and there was one match, but in Illinois. He googled Donny Shelhorne plus "baseball", and there were dozens of haphazard results. The kid made a name for himself, you had to give him that.

On the third screen there was a newspaper article from September, out of the *Marin County Independent Eagle*, titled, **Former Pratt Valley Pitcher Tries Hand At Culinary Endeavor**, which began:

Following a successful Division I collegiate baseball career at Ripperton University in San Diego, ex Terra Linda Pratt High School star Donny Shelhorne is back in the north bay, partnering in a restaurant/gourmet foods start-up in Santa Rosa.

And it went on . . . farm-to-table, everything sustainable, a physical restaurant but also with an event center and market, all backed by Judson Vineyards of Healdsburg.

Quotes from Donny and his two partners. A photo of all three of them in aprons, giving the photographer a thumbs-up.

How about that.

Chris preferred old-fashioned hard copies of stuff, so he went to the website they gave you in the article, and spent the thirty-five cents required to print out the home page, which included directions, on the library printer.

+++

Watching the operation for a few minutes, it was clear that Donny was a good business manager. He had the workers' respect, the type of boss who likely kept it loose and didn't talk down to people, and Chris noticed a couple times where an employee would smile and laugh about something, and Donny would laugh right along with them.

It was Monday afternoon, and Chris had driven up to get a feel for the situation. He figured Donny probably wouldn't recognize him, since it had been a

good five years since they would have crossed paths at Pratt, and that's all it would have been, since he never had him in a class.

That time in Macci's Deli, if the kid had placed him at all, you wouldn't have known it. And it wouldn't really matter, would it, if today in the snazzy new million-dollar restaurant operation he did recognize him and said *Hey, how you doing, Mr. Seely?*

Still, why screw around tempting that stuff, so Chris went with a cap and big sweatshirt and sat at the corner of the little bar they had and kept a low profile and worked on a white wine, Donny on the other side of the room, supervising the various food counters.

The food emporium closed at 6 on weekdays and the restaurant part stayed open late, and it was close to 6 now and Chris figured Donny'd be here for a while.

He finished his drink and took one more look at the operation, thinking was there any particular angle but couldn't come up with one, and he got in the car.

There were a few messages to deal with which kept him there for twenty minutes or so, and lo and behold here comes Donny out into the parking lot, in shorts and a t-shirt, looking like he's done for the day.

Chris tried to figure out which vehicle would be Donny's. His guess was the newer looking black F-150, but Donny passed that one and opened the door of a

beat up, pale green Chevy Tahoe. He didn't get in, he grabbed a windbreaker from the truck and took off on what looked like a jog.

Interesting.

Chris got out of his car and began jogging as well—it was fortunate he had some old running shoes on—staying way back, but keeping Donny in sight.

The edge of the restaurant/event center property butted up against a creek, and there was a trail you could get on that paralleled it.

It was dark by now, but there were enough nearby streetlights, and some staggered lighting on the trail as well, that you could see what you were doing.

The trail looked to continue quite a ways south, no end in sight . . . or, as he was discovering following Donny, after about fifteen minutes you could hang a left and leave it, and there was a feed store with some old stables behind it, a remnant of the way the whole area probably used to be, and if you cut across behind all that there was an opening in a fence.

This took you onto a community college campus, Redwood County JC, and past a small cluster of classroom buildings and onto the main loop. What Donny did then was branch off to the right onto another dirt trail that began at a big decorative fountain. It was peaceful back there, fairly wooded, plenty of blackberry

overgrowth, and you could hear the birds settling in for the night.

The college trail approached what looked like a performing arts center, tucked back at the far end of campus, and then it reconnected with the main loop, which zig-zagged south through the central quad before bringing you back to that opening in the fence, and you got back on the creek trail going north and retraced your steps.

Chris put the whole drill at about four miles . . . a mile and a half each way from Donny's culinary deal to the community college, and a mile loop around the campus.

Tuesday Chris came up to Santa Rosa again. Same basic routine for the guy, it seemed like, nothing fancy, no surprises . . . the guy knocking off work about 6:15 and unwinding with—and you couldn't be positive without following him again obviously—but very likely the identical run.

Donny organized and methodical, which hopefully he'd be for one more day.

Wednesday Donny didn't show right away, and Chris was worried something was different on Wednesdays, or maybe it was his day off, and what could you do.

But a few minutes later, not that bad actually, maybe 10 minutes off his normal routine, Donny came out of the side of the building, all set to go this time, no need to stop in his truck and switch up any clothing.

Chris waited a couple minutes and started the engine and drove over to the RCJC campus, parked, and got out.

Forty-five minutes later there was Donny leaving the main loop behind the classroom buildings, coming toward him down the dirt trail. Chris had a bat, an old wooden one that'd he'd picked up years ago when he lived in Teaneck, New Jersey. Someone advised him that it was always good to have a degree of protection in your car when you traveled in the New York metropolitan area, that you never knew. He didn't have any trouble in New York, and considered the bat good luck and kept it in the car ever since.

He let Donny pass, stepped out of the brush, and caught up to him from behind. The first blow was off line, clipping Donny inside the right shoulder. Donny stumbled and turned, his eyes saying "What the Hell?", and this time Chris caught him in the face. Donny fell, and Chris hit him again in the head until he knew he had crushed his skull.

He was parked in the overflow lot for the performing arts center. There was only one other car

there, no one around that he could see, likely no performance scheduled for tonight and no lights on in the complex. He held the bat at his side and walked fast. He felt like running, but it always seemed in the movies you should walk.

He threw the bat in the trunk, made a few lefts and rights and had to deal with some stop signs but soon enough crossed under the freeway and headed east, no particular reason except his instinct told him to. He found Brookwood Avenue and from there made a right onto Yolanda and a few minutes later was in rush hour traffic on 101 heading south. He kept checking his rear view mirror all the way to the city.

When he got over the bridge he took the Park Presidio exit.

There was a park with a lake off 11th Avenue that they'd go to sometimes as teenagers. On rare, hot San Francisco days, it was a swimming hole. Now it was dark and the fog had come in. Chris made sure he was alone, got out and walked to the lake and fired the bat overhand out toward the center. He thought it sunk but he wasn't sure. Hopefully that wouldn't matter. He took Geary to Divisadero, hung a left, gunned it over the hill, and home.

8 – Espresso

He slept fine, though he definitely felt off on his morning run. He was stiff and slow, and everything was sore, especially his forearms and hands from swinging the bat, but his legs too, probably from all the tension lactic acid build-up.

Overall it hadn't been that bad. He got a little lucky, of course, with Donny being organized and consistent. Very unlikely any of the others would play out as simple.

He went back and showered and the phone rang. He checked the number and picked it up. It was Steiner, his doctor.

"Damn it Chris," Steiner said. "This is at least the fifth time I've tried to call you."

"The reason I don't answer is because what are you going to tell me?" Chris said.

"I just think you should come in, go over some things."

"I told your secretary, I'm sorry about the screw you comment. I wasn't thinking clearly then."

“Forget that,” Steiner said. “Just come in. Will you?”

Chris knew what was coming. *Let's not simply sit around here and do nothing and let this thing sweep you away without a fight. There are options.* Chris knew it was bull, but he said okay, mostly because Steiner seemed hurt.

The office was on California Street across from the old Children's Hospital grounds. It was a sunny day and there were a considerable number of attractive females sprawled out eating lunch on the large front lawn, so at least that was something.

Chris and Steiner were alone in the office. Steiner began his professional, due-diligence speech, and Chris held up a hand to cut him off.

“Billy, where would a guy be going to get dialysis these days?”

Steiner didn't answer.

“No I'm serious. I got an old friend, I heard he's on it. I'm wondering if there's a main place, or what?”

“UC does the bulk of it,” Steiner said. “They have the newest system, and treatments don't take quite as long.”

“And if he's a low income guy, on public assistance, that where he'd probably be going?”

“Actually no, then. In that case it would be SF General . . . But why don’t you find him and ask him?”

“Okay I will,” Chris said. “There’s no way someone could screw something up, is there, with the treatment? Filter his kidneys with the wrong stuff, or whatever, and kill him?”

“God damn it!” Steiner said. “You always were such a stubborn bastard. Chris, this is your life we’re talking about, and you’re dancing around the subject like an idiot. I know you don’t want to hear what I have to say, but can you please give me a chance!”

Chris shut up. Steiner went through the motions--where we stand right now, the recommended treatments, clinical trials showing promise, a referral to an excellent oncologist. It sounded rehearsed.

“Billy, you got some patients I can talk to in my shoes, who went through those treatments and are still around a couple years later?”

“I’ll see.”

“How about one. One guy.”

“I’ll try to put you in touch with someone. Let me work on it.”

“You know what? My energy level is good. So far it’s been pretty much business as normal . . . You stick me on chemo, that’ll be the end.”

“Granted, no treatment is perfect,” Steiner said.
“But Chris? You try nothing, that will most certainly be the end.”

“Fuck you again,” Chris said.

He swung left out of the building, glad to get some fresh air, and there was Bethany the receptionist coming back to work from her lunch break. She was wearing running shoes and had on a small backpack which seemed to tighten her blouse. There was a projection and mass to her breasts that he hadn’t been aware of before.

“You wear running shoes in the office?” Chris said, trying not to stare at the situation.

“Oh no,” Bethany said. “I try to walk at lunch is all. It’s so beautiful out today, I went up California to 10th Avenue, and came back on Lake.”

She didn’t seem in a big hurry to return to work. She looked around to make sure they had privacy.

“Mr. Seely, I read your chart. All the way through. I was troubled by last time, and curious . . . I’m really, really sorry.”

“Number one, it’s Chris . . . Two, sorry enough for that dinner tonight?”

Bethany smiled. “Okay, Chris, I feel sorry enough for you to have dinner with you.”

+++

They tried New Joe's in North Beach, which had recently opened. At one time there were five or six Joe's around the city, but they slowly disappeared. You could come in at midnight, sit at the counter, watch the chef work right in front of you, big white hat, every pan flaming up. The guy next to you was usually a native San Franciscan.

This place was trying to bring it all back, and Chris and Bethany agreed it wasn't bad. A little too much glitz in the decor, the lighting a bit strong, but the booths were nice and they left you alone.

"I live in the Marina," Chris said, sipping his espresso.

Bethany gave him a long look, serious. "Not tonight."

"Fine with me. Although I might not recommend waiting too long. If you know what I mean . . . That is, if you ever were considering stopping by."

"Uh-huh."

"You know what I appreciate about you?"

"What?"

"You give things thought. Like tonight I can tell you decided not to ask me how I'm feeling."

"How are you feeling?"

"Pretty darn scared, if you want to know the truth."

9 - Like Liquor

On Chestnut Street on the way home there was a rare spot right across the street from Weatherby's, so Chris stopped in for a nightcap. This time the place was packed, a Friday night, twenty-four-year-old kids, all of them so fit and upbeat, with everything ahead of them.

"Hiya pardner," Shep said, when he finally got to him. "What's shaking?"

"The energy in here," Chris said. "It's something else. It ever bother you?"

"If you let it, it can, yeah. How you feeling?"

"So far so good, I appreciate it."

"You start moving . . . on any of those loose ends at all?"

"As a matter of fact yes, I asked an interesting woman out tonight. Warm, sincere, composed, with rosy cheeks. It was nice."

"But you didn't bring her back?"

"I tried, but it didn't work."

"Anyhow, I mean the other loose ends. That you mentioned last time."

"Oh. I took care of one of them, yeah."

“No . . . fucking . . . shit.” Shep’s eyes were wide. Chris sipped his drink. The kids at a back table started singing a college song.

“It hasn’t sunk in yet, I don’t think. I’m hoping it won’t.”

Shep was trying to wrap his mind around it.

“I give you credit then, brother, you got some man cojones,” he said. “Just don’t tell me about it, okay?”

+++

Chris's apartment was on Broderick between Bay and Northpoint. He had to share the garage with two other people, and the maneuvering could be a pain, but tonight it was empty and he pulled right in.

Joyce was sitting on the bench in the entry alcove, wearing a big overcoat.

“Well now, what a surprise,” Chris said. “Except you could have called first.”

“You’re right, calling would have been a lot easier. But I was somewhat concerned about that.” She gave him a hug. “You smell like liquor. And perfume.”

“I stopped at Weatherby’s. It’s a friendly place. Before that, I had dinner with my doctor’s secretary.”

They were in the apartment now. “She pretty?”

“Not in the traditional sense, but yes.”

“Chris there’s been stuff on the news.”

Chris realized he hadn't turned on the computer or watched any TV all day.

"Early this morning, a dog walker in Santa Rosa, in back of the JC," Joyce said, "they ran into a dead body. A kind of nature area back there, with a trail."

Watching him closely as she spoke.

"They always have to notify next-of-kin and so forth," she said, "But it moved pretty quickly, and by two o'clock they announced it was Donny Shelhorne."

"Holy Toledo."

"He essentially had his head beaten in, it sounds like. He was wearing jogging gear."

"Why'd they kill him?" Chris said.

"They didn't say."

"They killed him there, or they did it somewhere else and dumped him there?"

"They didn't say that either."

"Who was it, the Sheriff, or Santa Rosa PD? . . . Or do the state colleges have their own police working something like that?"

"I'm pretty sure it was the Sheriff making the announcements."

"What, why are you looking at me like that?" he said.

“Because I’m not sure how, but I think . . . just maybe . . . you had something to do with it,” she said. “Did you?”

“Babe, c'mon! . . . Don't get me wrong, I've got no problem with this happening to that prick . . . But you have to be out of your fucking mind to say to something like that!”

Joyce slid off his jacket, and she was going after his shirt, popping a couple of buttons. Chris let it happen. When they were engaged, she asked if he had ever done it with the doctor's secretary. He didn't answer, and that seemed to ratchet up the intensity level, so when she asked him a second time, he didn't answer then either.

10 - Summit Drive

Joyce had to leave early in the morning even though it was Saturday, because they had a Walk-a-Thon at school. She had pressed up against him all night, and it felt like he barely slept, though when they got up and had coffee she said he had called out a few times.

“What was I saying?”

“Hard to tell,” she said. “You were being pretty defiant though, whatever it was.”

“How’s your new boyfriend? The wine guy.”

“He’s good. I haven’t seen him in a few days.”

“Better take care of that then. I see you starting to get sidetracked.”

“Chris . . .”

“Yeah?”

“Let me know what I can do to help you, okay? If there's anything at all to what might have happened? Please?”

“You are thinking irrationally, believe me.” He kissed her forehead. “But if I need anything otherwise, you got it.”

+++

Chris bought all the morning papers and drove to Mill Valley. He didn't feel like dealing with Mount Tam today, so he took a long walk in town, up onto Summit Drive where you circled around and caught views of the city and the East Bay. There were sets of connecting steps alongside people's houses that brought you back down to the plaza.

He sat in Starbucks for a while before he opened the papers.

The *Chronicle* ran a basic story, and the *Marin County Independent Eagle* focused on the local angle.

The *Press Examiner* had the most extensive coverage of the scene:

**Former San Rafael Area Prep Baseball Star
Donny Shelhorne Found Dead On RCJC Campus
by Gerald Leoni**

March 3rd, 2017—The body of former Terra Linda Pratt Valley High School student Donald E. Shelhorne was discovered early yesterday morning on a dirt trail in a remote part of the RC Junior College campus. Foul play is suspected, according to authorities.

Shelhorne, 23, was a partner in a start-up culinary business in Santa Rosa. He had been an all-league Marin County pitcher at Pratt and went on to play at

Ripperton University in San Diego, graduating last spring.

According to Sonoma County Sheriff's Department spokesman Matt Flynn, there were signs of blunt trauma to the head.

Shelhorne was wearing running attire, authorities said. A company official confirmed that Shelhorne frequently ran following work.

The body was discovered at approximately 7:20 am by a dog-walker in a wooded area known as The Bramble, which extends along the northeastern edge of the campus.

Shelhorne was a Marin County native and attended Pratt Valley High School from 2008-2012. He was arrested in early 2012 and charged with manslaughter following the alcohol-related death of 16-year-old Meghan Britta at a southside Terra Linda party.

Shelhorne eventually pled no-contest to a lesser charge and was given a year's probation and community service, according to Marin County court documents.

No suspects have been named in the case.

Chris closed the papers and put them in the Starbucks newspaper bin. Pretty straightforward. He

knew they always held back information, but his gut feeling was they didn't have a whole lot.

In any case, what good was it to waste time worrying about it?

He opened a notebook and began a revised list. The original read:

- 1 Ray**
- 2 DS**
- 3 'Chip'**
- 4 Simmons**
- 5 Ike's guy**
- 6 guy at video store**
- 7 football driver**
- 8 Maierhaffer situation**
- 9 soccer guy**
- 10 Eric Mossman's person**

The revised list was:

- 1 Ray**
- 2 ✓**
- 3 'Chip'**
- 4 Birgitte problem**
- 5 Ike's guy**
- 6 Simmons**

7 Eric Mossman's

He decided he better tighten things up a bit, prioritize. You could always expand the list if things worked out and there was time.

“Chip” Reggio had bilked his brother Floyd out of seventy-three thousand dollars, when Floyd lived in Las Vegas.

Birgitte was a vivacious woman in her fifties whose husband screwed around on her right and left. The guy, Maierhaffer, was Chris's tennis partner.

Ike was his best friend growing up. He lived in San Mateo and had a neighbor from hell.

Thad Simmons raped Chris's sister Bonnie in 1992. They were working after hours in the same office. Bonnie pressed charges but nothing ever happened.

Eric Mossman was a kid from the neighborhood who got killed by a drunk driver. The guy did a little time, not much.

Plus Ray.

It felt good to have a better handle on it, though the whole thing was overwhelming when you laid it out.

Chris was thinking something else too . . . that you wouldn't exactly write it down as an addendum to the list . . . but **Stepped-Up Womanizing** was an inevitable byproduct of all of this, wasn't it?

Who was he kidding to pretend otherwise?

People could call him a male chauvinist pig and politically incorrect, and an ass, and they'd be right.

But then again, let *them* have X months to live, and see how they handle it.

And forget the *living* part—the *performance* window was going to be even shorter.

So you *went* for it at this point, you just did.

“Not our best day?” A girl smiling at him from the next table, an iPad in front of her. He noticed purple streaks in the hair, bib overalls, Converse tennis shoes.

“Why, I’m giving it away?” he said.

“I used to get bent out of shape too. Then I decided: what’s the worst that can happen? It’s not worth it.”

“And you’d take that same approach if you had a terminal disease or something?” he said.

“Oh, absolutely. Even more so . . . See, equanimity is an essential Buddhist virtue. It means calm and balanced, even in the midst of difficulty.”

“That’s the opposite of me then.”

“Me too.” She laughed. “I started meditating. That helps.”

“Would you want to see a movie tonight?” he said.

A moment.

“I can’t, I’m busy tonight,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Tomorrow night I could though.”

“Oh. You want me to pick you up, or what?”

“I’ll meet you,” she said.

+++

He went to the car to check his messages. He hated the phone, and frequently left it in the glove compartment. There were three.

First was Joyce, give me a call.

Second was Ray. He sounded like he may have been drinking, and Chris couldn’t understand much.

Third was Bethany. Just the missed call, no message.

“It’s me, Chris,” he said. He was parked under the redwoods on Throckmorton near the Mill Valley library.

“I’m glad you called,” Bethany said. “And thank you again for dinner last night. This is slightly awkward, but would you have any have interest in going to a Warriors game tomorrow night? Someone gave us two tickets in the office, and Dr. Steiner can’t use them. They’re playing Miami.”

Fuck.

“Tomorrow night’s not going to work out, unfortunately. I’d love to, but I can’t.”

“Oh, that’s fine then. I knew you liked sports, so I just thought I’d ask.”

“What are you doing *tonight*?”

“Actually I’m getting ready to go out.”

“Where you going?”

“Just out. Anyway . . .”

“Have fun,” he said.

+++

The library helped a little. One thing he picked up was Thad Simmons might be living in Pocatello, Idaho. Nothing on Eric Mossman’s guy. He did a quick skim on Chip Reggio, and apparently old Chip had picked up and moved from Vegas to Manhattan Beach. If he could afford it there, that meant he was probably still bilking guys.

11 – Bazooka

Chris stopped in at the Booker Lounge on Pierce when he got back to the city. Not nearly the action of Weatherby's around the corner, but the food was better. He had the house burger and fries, the whole works apparently organic and grass-fed, and a pint of dark stout.

The guy two stools away looked familiar, but he couldn't place him. Then he realized it was Rich Tomlinson, who was a beat reporter for the *Examiner* when Chris was working at the *Chronicle*. Both papers pretty much fell apart ten years ago. He assumed Tomlinson had taken a buy-out just like he had.

"Rich, that you?"

"Hey! Chrissy! Good to see you man, how you been?"

"Pretty good Rich. You latch on anywhere?"

"Buddy of mine has a PR firm in Burlingame. He handles a few of the Silicon Valley big wig accounts. He throws me some hours."

"Good . . . not the same though, is it?"

“Nah, not at all. There’s nothing matches the excitement in that newsroom when a good story was breaking . . . What can you do? You doing anything?”

“I went back and got a Master’s, and taught high school for a while. Last few years I’ve been teaching a journalism class at College of Marin, in the fall.”

“And you’re okay?”

“Yeah, between the buy-out, a little real estate I got, whatever, I’m staying alive.”

Rich ordered another round, and Chris moved to the stool in between them.

“Rich, let me ask you a question though. How would you kill someone? What would be the best way?”

Rich laughed. “Why, you researching the topic out of curiosity, or you have something in mind?”

“Every now and then,” Chris said, “I conjure up a couple guys who would be satisfying to take care of. Over a beer, obviously, not literally.”

“That’s for sure. With myself, there’s more than a couple of those dudes around. The other day, some decked-out jerk on a bicycle comes riding up, slaps my fender and gives me the finger. All I’m doing is stopped at a stop sign on Irving Street . . . If I had a bazooka at that moment, I swear I would have chased that guy down and shot it off up his ass.”

“What about hitting them with a baseball bat, is that a clean way?”

“Yeah, that might be one of them. You wouldn’t want to leave the bat, or part of it, behind of course. I’d probably alcohol the bat first, wear gloves, long sleeves all that stuff. If there was a struggle and the guy scratched you or something, you wouldn’t want your DNA under his fingernails.”

Chris was running the JC up in Santa Rosa back through his head.

“Of course a nice way to handle it,” Rich was saying, “would be to cause some type of accident. No direct contact.”

“How would you go about that?”

“I don’t know, force the guy off a cliff on Highway One on the way to Stinson Beach, something like that? You’d have to pick your spots. There’s also medical accidents, medications and such . . . All I know is, I worked my share of crime stories and it took a little bit for Homicide to look hard at an accident situation. Sometimes it did come to that, of course, but your odds are better.”

“Gentleman, pardon me for interrupting y’alls entertaining conversation.”

It was Booker himself, who’d been tending the bar tonight. A big black guy with a shaved head, everything

neat, a pressed white sport coat, huge hands full of rings. He kept order in the establishment: you want to use your cell phone, you go outside; you come in with a hat, you take it off.

“What you both doing,” he said, “is dancing around the concept. You want to hit someone, you go get a gun they can’t trace and then you shoot him in the side of the head with it.”

“Hard to argue with that,” Rich said.

“Any way they could trace the bullets on you though?” Chris said.

“Chrissy, my man,” Booker said, smiling. “You really thinking this through, aren’t you? Now you got me curious about that. Something to find out.”

+++

There was a complex south of Market called *The Rialto* that played off-beat, artsy films which didn’t make it into the mainstream theaters. Chris picked the one titled “A Graceful Exit”, not knowing anything about it.

The girl from Starbucks, Allison was her name, showed up on time at six on Sunday, but she had a friend with her, Monica.

“Good choice,” said Allison. “This got really good reviews.”

It was a documentary about a dance troupe in Egypt that was able to perform freely now, after the overthrow of Mubarak. Chris didn't think the liberated dancing was much better or that different than the restricted dancing, but the dancers were so joyous that you couldn't help root for them. Naturally, it ended with a performance in New York.

"What did you think?" Chris said.

"I cried," Monica said.

"I did too," Allison said. "I can relate."

"Wait a second," Chris said. "You relate to them, *how?*"

"I'm an artist too. A musician actually. Depending on the circumstances, it can be very inhibiting."

He was thinking about the Warriors game he was missing with Bethany.

"You're full of shit, you know that?" he said.

"Anyway, I'm starving. Let's eat somewhere."

There was an Indian place he remembered in the Tenderloin, a run-down hole in the wall, but cheap and authentic. He knew they'd be vegans, so he made sure to order himself the meatiest dish he could.

"This is really tasty," Monica said. "We have some of these in Berkeley, but this place is even better."

"You guys roommates, old friends, in a relationship, what?" Chris said.

“Yes, roommates,” Allison said. “Two white girls in the flatlands. We live like a half block up from San Pablo Avenue.”

“We have a male roommate though too,” Monica said. “He’s black, and most people know him in the neighborhood, so that helps a lot. Henry.”

“Oh,” Chris said, trying to figure it out, but deciding it wasn’t worth it.

“And you?” Allison said.

“No particular excitement. That’s why you ran into me in Mill Valley, I like to hike by myself on Mount Tam.”

“Is that what you had just done?”

“Not yesterday actually.”

“That’s what I mean, I could tell right away you were struggling with something. You still are.”

“I am, but I feel better now that I ate. Let’s get out of here.”

Chris walked them down to the bottom of Powell to get the BART train back to Berkeley.

“Well, it was fun,” he said. “Thanks for meeting me.”

Monica announced that actually she was going to Jill and Tabitha’s party in the Mission. “You want to come, Al? You too Chris, it might be weird, but they don’t care.”

“No, what I’ll do then,” Allison said, “is hang out with Chris a little longer.” Looking at Chris. “If that’s all right. I feel like you’re a tour guide.”

He said fine with him, he didn't mind.

“Monica gay?” he asked, when she’d left.

“Not really. She’s into women, but she appreciates men too.”

“Well, there’s a couple options,” he said. “We can go up to Nob Hill, get a coffee somewhere, take the Cable Car back down. The other would be the longer effort, here to Chestnut Street. I could buy you a drink and then my car’s near there so I’d drive you back to Berkeley. You don't want to be taking BART too late.”

“I like Plan B,” she said. She had put on a woolen hat that covered the tops of her ears, with straps that hung loose. She looked cute.

“Okay then. I enjoy pointing stuff out. If it gets over the top, tell me to shut up.”

A couple miles into it, when they got to Polk Street, she said, “This makes me realize I don’t walk nearly enough. We need those positive ions.”

They took Broadway to Fillmore, and then down the steep hill with the classic view of the bridge, everything sparkly across the bay tonight.

Sunday night at Weatherby's, it was a little quieter but not much. They sat at a corner table and had lemon

drops. When Shep came over, Chris introduced him to Allison and gave him the not-what-you-think look, though he could feel it maybe happening, you never knew.

As they were walking to his place he said, “I’m trying to picture the set-up. Pardon me being out-of-line, but the liquor’s got me curious . . . You guys fuck your roommate Henry, or it’s nothing like that?”

“Monica does, on a semi-regular basis,” Allison said. “I tried it once, when I first moved in, but it didn’t work for me.”

“Oh.”

“You have a guitar?”

“I do, as a matter of fact.”

“Can I play a couple of songs for you, originals? Then you can take me home. I’d love to know what you think.”

He told her be my guest, and they turned down Broderick, crossed Bay, and when they got to his building there was Joyce again, waiting on the bench in the alcove.

12 - Coffee Table

“You have to be kidding me,” Chris said.

“Chris, I just need to speak to you briefly,” Joyce said, giving Allison a weak smile.

Chris introduced them. “Tell you what,” he said, pointing upstairs. “I’m going to set her up and I’ll be down in a couple minutes.”

“So who’s Joyce?” Allison said in the apartment.

“Joyce is someone I used to work with,” he said. “She’s really pissing me off.”

“And you’re hooked up with her?”

“We were at one time. Not any more.

“She’s attractive. She takes care of herself.”

Chris did have to admit Joyce looked pretty good tonight, her hair a little different, and wearing a skirt, suede.

“Okay, let me handle this real quick,” he said. “The guitar’s hanging on the wall in the bedroom, and there’s not a lot in the kitchen, but whatever you can find . . . I’ll be right back.”

“No problem,” she said. “It’s nice here.”

Back downstairs, Joyce said, “I’m really sorry to keep showing up unannounced. But you didn’t call me back all weekend. Can we talk somewhere private, just for a second?”

They went in the garage. There was only one car there, his, no one around.

“Chris, the police talked to me yesterday morning at the Walk-a-Thon.”

“They did?”

“I mean, they talked to all of us, whatever faculty and administrators were there, so I know it was just routine. But I lied to them, which scares the shit out of me.”

“What do you mean, lied?”

“They asked me could I think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Donny, and I said I couldn’t.”

“That’s perfect then. And that’s the truth.”

“It’s not,” she said. “And something else.”

“What?”

“I’ve been horny for you. I can’t get beyond it . . . Ever since what I think you might have had something to do with.”

“You’re out of your goddamn mind, you know that?”

“I’m not wearing any underwear at the moment,” she said.

Fuck.

A few minutes later, her back up against the side of the car, she said, “Didn’t know doctors’ secretaries . . . had nose rings these days.”

He thought about correcting her, but figured what was the harm.

+++

“Everything good?” Allison said, when he was back.

“I’m very sorry about that,” Chris said. “There was an accident involving a former student, up where she teaches. She’s having trouble rationalizing it.”

Allison was sitting cross-legged on the couch strumming the guitar, a cup of tea steaming on the coffee table.

“Well,” she said, “do you want to make love *first*, or should we go through the songs?”

Jesus Christ Almighty.

He said why not try the songs.

She had a good voice. Not a trained voice, but expressive, with plenty of range. She ran through three songs. They were pretty much folk, with a little pop-hip-hop element thrown in. The lyrics were off, corny, with too many words, but the melodies weren't bad.

When she finished, she laid down the guitar and waited for his reaction.

“For me, the second was the weakest,” he said. “It sounded too much like something else, that I can’t place. But the other two were good. Not great yet, they need a little help, but both pretty catchy actually.”

“Wow, that means a lot,” she said. “Thank you.”

They talked music for a while. She told him she’d been going to open mics, and that a friend who had Pro Tools was helping her put together a demo. Chris said he was in a couple of bands back in college but rarely picked up an instrument these days, and that it was nice to feel her energy.

“Welp,” she said. “This turned out to be one of the best evenings I had since I moved here. You sure you don’t mind driving me?”

“Of course not,” he lied. “That’s the idea.”

When he dropped her, she said, “You’re a pretty nice guy. Maybe you can come to one of my little gigs.”

“Well, yeah, you never know,” he said.

13 – Bucket

It was 3:30 in the morning when he got back to the city, and he realized he was ravenous, so he went to Mel's on Geary and ordered a Reuben sandwich and a strawberry shake.

Should he be concerned about Joyce? Not the second thing so much, but the first, the police. She seemed shaken up. Why? She had to be as glad as anyone about what happened. He'd have to keep an eye on her, unfortunately.

One idea that struck him was could you kill someone and implicate one of the others in the same deal? For instance, could you give the police an anonymous tip that Ike's neighbor killed Donny? Or would they check it out, and if the guy had an alibi, then figure out who gave them that tip, and come after you?

He went home, decided why bother going to sleep, and took his run early. The sun coming up, the foghorns, the smell of the ocean—things could be worse, he supposed.

After breakfast he returned Ray's call from Saturday.

“Ray, Chris Seely. I think you called me? I couldn’t understand you though.”

“I phoned you to tell you you’re an ugly motherfucker, just like you was back then,” Ray said. “I’m not losing sleep over it or nothing, but I remember what happened that time by the park . . . It shouldn’t have happened.”

Wow.

“Oh, so now you going silent.”

Chris took a minute.

“Actually, no Ray, you got me thinking a little different here. Would you want to . . . get a drink . . . or have lunch or something?”

“Man, you is one strange white boy. Why not? If I can squeeze you into my schedule.”

They left it he would pick Ray up tomorrow at noon.

Chris found Steiner’s office number, thought about it, said screw it and dialed.

“Dr. William Steiner’s office, Bethany speaking, how may I help you?”

“Not sure how you can help me on the phone, but would you want to go to LA this weekend?”

A pause.

“Chris? It’s you, right?”

“Yep.”

“It’s busy in the office. I’ll have to call you back.”
She hung up.

Then he called that son-of-a-bitch Maierhaffer and asked him if he wanted to hit some balls this afternoon.

+++

Julius Khan playground was tucked inside the Presidio at the bottom of Pacific Avenue. They had four courts, nicely set in a cypress grove, even some bay views thrown in, and Chris was always surprised they weren’t more crowded.

He had taken up tennis several years ago and found it relaxing, but the one thing he hated was losing to this guy. Maierhaffer was one of those New Yorkers with a chip on his shoulder. He came from Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, where they played one-wall handball and paddle ball and paddle tennis and everyone put money on stuff, and the whole scene was in-your-face competitive. Maierhaffer usually played Chris with no shirt on, and he switched hands with the racquet, hitting a left-handed forehand from the backhand side.

Maierhaffer’s line calls were terrible, and Chris saw him as a pathological cheater. The worst part was he was in his mid-fifties, a good fifteen years older than Chris, and he usually won their matches.

Today Chris couldn’t find the court and Maierhaffer hammered him 6-2, 6-0. They played an

extra set that was just as bad. Chris had no feel for the ball off the racquet. His forearms still hadn't recovered properly from when he swung that bat, plus he was distracted.

Now he had to sit there and watch this prick do his post-match stretching and pushups and situps, sipping every two seconds from a dumb water bottle.

"Chris, when you get to be my age," Maierhaffer said, "you can't let it go even one day."

"Who you trying to impress though?" Chris said.

"Well, my lovely Birgitte, for starters. You met her once, right? And there's always other fish in the pond, if you get me." He winked at Chris.

"That's something I wanted to talk to you about, Steve . . . I did meet your wife here that once, and I also ran into her another time at Cala Foods. The nicest lady in the world. She seems to have a touch of an accent, was she born here?"

"Denmark. They came over when she was fifteen."

Chris looked around. There was one other court in use, an Asian kid and his dad on it, the kid hitting repetitive groundstrokes with the dad feeding balls out of a bucket. The playground behind the courts was full of scrambling little kids being trailed by nannies.

“Thing is,” Chris said, “I’ve been playing you for a couple years now, and you talk more about your conquests than Birgitte.”

“Chris, you know how it is. We have a great relationship, the best. But we're all alive, here. Sometimes a man’s got to do what he has to do.”

“Well you do it again, I’ll kill you.”

“Come again?”

“Don’t screw around on your wife anymore. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Did I hear you right? . . . You’re telling me how to conduct my life?”

“Yeah.”

“You know what, you cocksucker, stand up right now and I’ll kick your fucking ass! Where I come from, pal, nobody talks to me like that! I know *people*, son . . . You don’t know anything *about* me, do you? . . . I was you I’d be keeping a tight eye on my backside from here on out, you cunt-bastard.”

Chris watched him finish his tantrum, jamming his racquet into his bag and spitting in Chris’s direction. When he was at the gate, Chris said, “Steve?”

Maierhaffer kept going.

“I wasn’t joking.”

14 - Discipline Style

Ray struggled a little getting in and out of the car, but it worked out. They were in Weatherby's, not the exact table but right next to the one he and Allison had the other night.

"This is the kind of joint," Ray said, looking around, "I'd never walk into in a million years."

"I hear what you're saying," Chris said, "but you get comfortable with a place. They know you, start you off with a smile, no surprises. That's worth something."

"It is," Ray said. "I had one like that on Turk Street, Monte's, but they let it go. You didn't trust the cuisine no more."

They ordered drinks. Chris got a beer, Ray had scotch on the rocks. Shep wasn't bartending today at lunch, it was Eloise, a plump redheaded woman with a hearty laugh.

"You okay drinking that hard stuff?" Chris said. "You're on kidney treatment, right?"

"Hemodialysis," Ray said. "I was going three days a week. They got a whole unit at SF General just for us, so we can take a piss. Then they do a big study, how four

days filters you better than three. That's where I'm at now. I got Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday off . . . Answer your question, we supposed to avoid alcohol."

"Where'd you live, when you and Charles and Williams jumped me back then?"

"On Sacramento."

"Jeez, I always figured you lived down past Geary. The projects."

"I can tell you getting ready to reminisce about Marina Junior High School now. Mr. Gullickson, the PE teacher. Man, that dude kicked my ass for three years."

"No kidding. Remember how he'd come up to guys and slap you if he thought you weren't paying attention? I heard one time a kid was looking into the girls' gym, so Gullickson made him put on one of their uniforms."

"That blue shit?"

"Yeah, the one-piece jobs. Then he sent him in there for the period."

Ray was laughing now, his shoulders moving, the first time he'd smiled.

"I wonder how his discipline style would go over today," Chris said.

"It wouldn't," Ray said, "but it wasn't the worst thing. Kids's too soft now . . . That's not why we here though, is it?"

“No,” Chris said, leaning in, lowering his voice.
“Any idea how I’d get a gun that couldn’t be traced?”

Ray scrunched up his face. “Seely,” he said, “you a more fucked up motherfucker than I even thought. What you want to go messing with something like that for?”

“If I ended up . . . hurting somebody, . . . which I’m not sure about, but if it *happened*, wouldn’t that be one way to handle it? A gun they couldn’t track?”

“Sound like you playing Cops and Robbers with me now.”

“No, there’s a situation, a legitimate one, not around here but there’s a possibility.”

Ray gave him a long look.

“What would it be, something like twenty-five years ago we messed you up?”

“Twenty-eight. It was ’89.”

“You been carrying it around with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me work on it. And I wouldn’t mind a refill.”

15 – Donation

Bethany returned his call at 10 o'clock that night.

"Dang," Chris said. "A day and half to call me back. What if it was an emergency?"

"Very funny," she said. "Anyway, if I heard you accurately, I don't think so."

"I'm driving down there Friday evening . . . Manhattan Beach, a taste of spring in southern California. What would it hurt?"

"You're trying innovative ways to get me to sleep with you, aren't you?"

"Well I wouldn't mind, yeah."

"Chris, it's not going to happen that way."

"It's not?"

"There's some stuff. It's complicated."

"Do you mean the Dead Man Walking aspect of things?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Ah."

"Look, I'm having some people over tomorrow night for dinner. You want to come?"

"I'm not sure. What are you making?"

“Just stop being difficult and come. Around six.”

+++

There was an Albert Reggio listed as the one and only name under the “Our Advisors” link on the website for Good Fund Financials, LLC. The office was in Hermosa Beach, it said. A “Chip” Reggio was mentioned in the local Manhattan Beach weekly on August 18th of last year, for having donated five cases of wine to a charity auction that was part of the AVP Pro Beach Volleyball Classic.

Chris was in the Funston Library. He couldn’t find a home address for the guy, and he wondered if the office in Hermosa might be a mail drop, but it did confirm his preliminary research, that this good-citizen crook was down there somewhere.

For the heck of it, he googled Birgitte Maierhaffer. Not much there, except she was on the faculty of the UC Berkeley adult extension and taught a course in art appreciation. In her short faculty bio it said she had once modeled in New York before turning her attention to art, her life passion. He pictured her in Cala Foods that time, mostly gray, no obvious plastic surgery, but, yeah, the high cheekbones and pretty face, and he could see it.

Before he got out of there, he thought of googling Bethany, but decided to leave it alone for now.

+++

He arrived at six, like he was told, and he was too early. Bethany had her hair in a towel and said to make himself comfortable. It was a flat on Cole Street in a hilly neighborhood, a few blocks off the Panhandle. The flat was minimally furnished and not particularly cozy, but it was good sized.

“What does this place set you back?” he said, when she re-appeared. “I didn’t realize Billy was such a generous employer.”

“Oh, it’s a sublet,” Bethany said. “A husband and wife, both nature writers, they received a grant to go to New Zealand for eighteen months. I got a really good deal.”

The doorbell rang and Phyllis arrived, followed shortly by John. Then Steve, then Gloria, finally Jeff.

“Everyone, this is Chris,” Bethany said. They all said nice to meet you.

“This isn’t, like a pyramid scheme meeting or something, is it?” Chris said.

They laughed. “We play squash together,” Bethany said. “At the Bay Club.”

Chris had tried squash once in Santa Barbara. “There’s plenty of fitness involved, right? And a good bit of technique too, as I remember.”

“We’re not very good,” Phyllis said. “We’re 3.0 players. It is a lot of fun though.”

“We’re all on the same team,” Bethany said. “It’s a co-ed league, which just ended last night, so we’re having a little thing.”

When they sat down and started eating Chris got asked about himself and what he did, and he could see Bethany shift around slightly.

“What I enjoyed the most so far,” Chris was saying, “was being a sportswriter. You were around all that action.”

John asked, “Did you ever become friendly with any of the big-name players, I mean separate from your job?”

“A few. I knew Barry Bonds a little bit and I spent some time with Randy Cross, from the 49ers. You’d see a lot of other guys in the bars on Union Street back then . . . But you tried not to have too much to do with them, because it could affect what you wrote.”

“And the women sportswriters,” Steve said, “how did that work in the locker room?”

“Every venue set up a closed-off interview area for that reason. But it never worked, because the female writers waiting there were getting trumped by the male writers who were inside the locker room getting the

fresh quotes. So everybody went wherever they wanted, basically.”

“And the players are just walking around, nothing on?” Phyllis said.

“They are, but it’s not like that. There’s a lot of pressure writing game stories, and the deadlines can be tight. The women writers have a lot on their mind.”

“Did any relationships ever develop, though, between the women and the players?” Gloria said.

“There were a couple that I remember, yeah. They didn’t last long.”

“Well anyway,” Bethany said, “so after that you were a high school teacher?”

Chris nodded. “In Terra Linda. The south side.”

“Jeez, speaking of Terra Linda,” Jeff said, “something I just read about. I take it you knew that baseball pitcher up there that got murdered?”

“That was a tough thing,” John said. “I saw it too.”

“I did read about that,” Bethany said. “But there’s a backstory to it, right Chris? Hadn’t he been arrested at one point?”

“There was an alcohol incident at a party,” Chris said. “And a girl died. Sixteen. I had her in a class.”

“You did,” Phyllis said. “How tragic.”

“Do you think the girl’s family might have hired someone to do it?” John said.

“Or maybe what goes around does come back around,” Steve said.

“Wait a minute, how can you say that?” Jeff said. “We don’t even know what happened.”

“The kid, Donny Shelhorne, fed her eight consecutive shots of Svedka vodka,” Chris said. “She laid down on the couch and never came to.”

“Oh my God,” Gloria said.

“And there was a plea bargain, correct?” Bethany said. “It sure sounds as though he should have spent some time in prison. Maybe justice *was* served.”

“Beth, I can’t believe you,” Jeff said. “You have a guy bashed to death in some woods, and you’re saying that’s okay! . . . What do *you* think, Chris?”

“I can see both sides of it,” he said.

+++

Chris helped in the kitchen with the dishes. Phyllis and Gloria and Steve had left, but John and Jeff were hanging around, and he didn’t feel like trying to outlast them.

At the door, Bethany gave him a peck on the cheek and thanked him for coming.

“It was refreshing to get a different perspective tonight,” she said. “Instead of just shop-talk.”

“What about the other thing?”

“Let me sleep on it.”

“Until when?”

“Tomorrow night,” she said.

16 - Second Invitation

Thursday morning there was a text from Joyce. It said: "Need to see you today. Call me on the school #."

Chris went for his run, but was preoccupied now with what the heck could this be? He called her at 10:30, left a message with the office, and twenty minutes later she called back.

"Better to be using the school phone," she said. "Not because of the other issue, so much, but something else I didn't expect. Can I come down?"

"No," he said.

"I have a prep 7th period today," she said, "so I could be there about 3. We can just grab a sandwich and something to drink, I'll say my peace and be out of your hair before it's hardly dark."

"Ooh boy," Chris said. "Okay, fine."

It was more like 3:45 when she got there, and he met her outside. No suede skirt this time, but the tight jeans and high boots weren't exactly teacher's attire, either.

He suggested the Booker Lounge, and asked what this apparent new, big development was. She said let's get settled first.

Joyce ordered a gin and tonic and Chris had a Manhattan, which he'd been meaning to try after seeing *Barefoot Contessa* make one on the cooking show he liked.

They went through the usual small talk, ordered another round, and Booker came over to say hello. When he left, Joyce said, "That's a handsome man. He has quite a presence."

"You'd be interested in him then?"

"I could be, yes, under the right circumstances."

"You mean if you thought he might have smashed a guy over the head or something?"

"C'mon Chris."

"Well, here's what you do then . . . You take your over-the-top interest in the male population, which is not un-appreciated, don't get me wrong, and channel it toward the guy you've been supposedly screwing for the past couple months."

"That's what I'm getting to," she said. "He knows about you."

A moment of panic, and Chris said, "Knows about me, *what?*"

“About me running down to see you, texting you, calling you. He got into my phone.”

“That it? Nothing about me being connected to your . . . theory . . . on what might have happened to Donny?”

“Chris, I would never! What do you think I am?”

“Okay, good . . . so all we’re dealing with is he’s little jealous. And he’s right to be. So get your ass home and take care of business.”

“It’s not that simple, unfortunately. I think he’s going to do something.”

“To you?”

“No, to you.”

“He’s that type of guy?”

“I didn’t think so, but when I admitted what was going on, I saw a very angry side of him I didn’t know was there.”

“Wait a minute, admitted what was going on?”

“Just that I still have some feelings for you and am attracted to you, even though we parted ways a few years ago.”

“Ah Christ. Of all things, why in the heck would you say *that*?”

“Because it’s true.”

“First of all, it’s not true, you’re in a mixed up state right now. Either way, all you tell him is the Donny

thing has you feeling bad about Meghan again, and you've been talking to an old friend who can relate."

"That's part of it, yes."

"That's all of it. It's basically the same thing I told Allison the other night."

"Oh yeah, Allison. She seemed very nice. I want to hear about it."

"It only went fair. You screwed things up pretty royally there."

"She didn't believe you then?"

"Pretty sure she did. But it just didn't work out great after that."

When they got back to his building, she said, "I want to, but I won't force you."

He put his arm around her and pulled her in.

"Don't be ridiculous, it's not forcing. There's just too many complications right now. I think we both know it."

He helped her into her car. When she'd made the turn onto Lombard, he right away second-guessed himself, but that's the way it went.

Ten minutes later the doorbell rang. One thing you had to give her was credit for persistence, and Chris wasn't positive he could turn down a second invitation.

He went downstairs and opened the door, and it was a heavy-set man wearing a sport coat and tie. This can't be right. A *cop*?

“Are you Chris Seely?”

“Yes I am.”

The fist entered his field of vision from the left and a millisecond later connected with his right eye, and Chris fell back into the alcove and down.

The man said, “Don’t touch Joyce again. Stay away from her.”

Chris was trying to figure out if he could still see.

“We good on that?” the guy said.

Chris nodded they were, and staggered up the stairs.

17 - Working Cowboys

He was looking for the ice, couldn't find any, so he grabbed a frozen steak, laid back on the couch, and pressed it on his eye.

The phone rang and he answered it automatically, fearing it was Joyce's boyfriend with further instructions.

"Hey," Bethany said.

"Oh, hi."

"Chris, what's wrong? You don't sound good, I'm not kidding. What is it?"

"No, no, it's not what you think," he said. "Some guy just hit me in the face."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, just a random thing, right in the neighborhood. It's over now, it's fine."

"Should you go in?"

"Nah, I got ice, and I'll find some Tylenol."

"What kind of random thing?"

"Well not quite 100% random actually."

"Meaning there's a story behind it, correct?"

"There always is I guess, if you dig deep enough."

“Well, then you can tell me about it on the way to LA.”

“Oh . . . Yeah.”

“But judging from your reaction, why don’t we take a rain check.”

“No, are you kidding? In 24 hours I’ll be good as new. And don’t worry, I’ll book two rooms.”

“Chris, I can handle one room. But just make sure it has two beds, okay?”

+++

Friday morning the eye looked real bad. It was essentially closed, red and swollen on top with a half-moon outline underneath which would no doubt turn an assortment of colors.

Chris found his one pair of sunglasses and drove to San Bruno. There was a Goodwill there he was familiar with, a busy place where it was unlikely they'd remember a guy purchasing a baseball bat. He found two that would work, one wood, one aluminum, bought a bottle of alcohol and some latex gloves at Walgreen's, picked up one of those bat cases with the shoulder strap at Big 5, and threw the whole shebang into the spare tire compartment under the main trunk.

He doubted there'd be a favorable opportunity this weekend, but knowing he wasn't going empty-handed

made him feel slightly better, though his head was pounding like a mother.

When he checked his phone there were three missed calls from the high school office number, Joyce obviously. There were two messages. The first was Steve Maierhaffer cursing him out again, so he advanced to the second, which just said hi, it's Allison.

Chris wondered if somehow he could hook up Maierhaffer with Joyce, and then the wine guy would kill Maierhaffer.

He printed out some street maps of the Manhattan-Hermosa-Redondo area, packed a bag, and since he had a couple hours, moseyed on over to Weatherby's.

Before he went in he returned Allison's message.

"I'm glad you called," she said.

"Well, what's up?" he said.

"The two songs that you liked? Better than the other one? I've been working on them. I think there's an improvement."

"That's good."

"I'm playing an open mic tomorrow night at the Fig Tree in Berkeley. Can you come?"

"No, I can't."

"Oh, okay."

“I didn’t mean it that way. You didn’t catch me on my best day, is what it is. Plus I have to go to LA.”

“Well, there’s another one Tuesday night I could try in Marin. Would that be a possible? I can email you the link.”

“Fine.”

“You’ll really come? Awesome.”

“Practice hard all weekend,” he said, and hung up. Before he’d fully taken his customary stool, Shep said, “Whoa, brother.”

“That bad, even with the sunglasses then,” Chris said. “I’ve got something this weekend, and I was hoping to be at my best.”

“The shades give it a little disguise, but it’s pretty clear you got clocked, man.”

“I deserved it.”

“Hey,” Shep said, coming close, “this have anything to do with . . . ?”

“No, not at all.”

“Hmm . . . Any further developments, along those lines?”

“I want there to be, but it hasn’t happened. One guy I resolved it with diplomatically, so I’m taking him off the list.”

“Fuck, you got a *list*?”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s this weekend?”

“A little scouting trip.”

“Ooh. In that case, keep safe, pardner.”

+++

“You like meat?” Chris said. They were on Highway 5, south of Tracy.

“I’m hoping that’s a normal question, in which case, yes I do,” Bethany said.

They stopped at Harris Ranch, near Coalinga, half way to Los Angeles. It had a more touristy element than Chris remembered, but the food was still pretty good.

“When I was a kid, my parents would bring us here on trips,” he said. “You’d see working cowboys eating meals, wearing their chaps.”

“Are they still alive? Your parents?”

“No, they both died seven years ago. My dad had a stroke, and then my mom was so heartsick she didn’t last the year, even though there was nothing wrong with the woman.”

“You see that frequently, I’m afraid,” Bethany said. “So who do you have, Chris?”

“Uh-oh.”

“No, I’m just curious. Honestly.”

He told her about Floyd and Bonnie.

“So do you have any . . . plans? And so forth?”

“You mean when things get worse?”

“Fine . . . Yes.”

“None whatsoever,” he said. “And since we’re asking the hard questions, could you please clarify your views on sexual relations?”

Bethany half-smiled. “You’re not going to let up, so if you can get me a hot tea to go, maybe when we’re back on the road.”

Chris re-introduced the subject an hour later when they were approaching the Tehachapi Mountains, on the northern fringes of LA County.

“The short version,” she said, “is I have an ex-husband I can’t move forward from. Is that blunt enough for you?”

“Wow, I didn’t think . . . ”

“I know, that’s what everyone says. We got married out of high school.”

“Around here? I mean, the Bay Area somewhere?”

“No, I’m from Fort Wayne, Indiana. Don’t laugh.”

“That where he still is then, or he’s out here?”

“He’s in Anthem, Arizona.”

“Oh.”

“But Chris? Can we not discuss this any more this weekend? I’m actually having fun with you, believe it or not, so please don’t wreck it.

18 - Seaweed Wrap

Chris went for a run on the beach, and when he got back Bethany was up, and sitting on the little terrace with coffee and a newspaper.

“The croissants are to die for,” she said. “You need to go get something before it ends. They call it a continental breakfast, but it’s quite the spread.”

They were staying at The Minka Hotel, two blocks from the Manhattan Beach Pier. There were nice places on Sepulveda, at a third the price, but Chris couldn’t think of any reason to economize these days.

“Well I will then,” he said. “And after that, you want to take a walk, do a little shopping? Or maybe you’d rather lounge around the pool in your swimsuit. I saw the sign, the water’s 82 degrees year-round.”

“A walk sounds nice,” she said.

They went up the boulevard past Highland and looped through the shopping district. On Manhattan Avenue in front of the A-Team Shoe Shop, she took his arm.

“Now that definitely throws me off,” he said.

“I love it here. You’re a very good host.”

“Okay, well here’s the thing,” he said, when they got back to the hotel. “I have a small bit of business to take care of this afternoon. They have a spa right downstairs. Can you go get a treatment? Massage, facial, seaweed wrap, foot thing, whatever there is? Get the works, and just sign for it.”

“That sounds amazing,” she said. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. That’s the whole reason we’re here, to relax and re-charge the batteries.”

+++

Chip Reggio’s Good Fund Financials, LLC, was listed at 113 Norden Lane in Hermosa Beach. It turned out to be a real office, in a small strip mall, with a red and yellow hanging sign out front, maybe a mile from the beach. Driving slowly past it, Chris could actually see the asshole, if that was him, at his desk through the window.

The other tenants in the strip mall were a dentist, a CPA, a taqueria, a cleaners and a framing shop. Across the street was a bed store that took up half the block, a ballet studio, and on the corner a Baskin-Robbins.

Chris drove around until he found one of those big complexes with a Best Buy and a Target, and parked. He called a cab and waited for it in front of Panda Express.

When they had pulled up to Good Fund Financials, he told the driver he’d be ten minutes.

“Can I do for you?” said the man he was pretty sure was Reggio.

“Hi there,” Chris said. “I’m shopping.” He kept his hands in his pockets.

“Chip, a pleasure. Big-boy shopping, or what?”

“Well I’m not sure yet. Just closed my parents’ estate up north. I’m spending a couple days with my buddy in MB, then back to Scottsdale . . . My head’s still spinning from the whole thing.”

“That’s understandable. What’re we talking about?”

“Well, the estate’s around 3 million after the dust settles.”

“And you picked me why, exactly?”

“Mainly because the website says you do hard money firsts, which might be one way to go. What does that pay?”

“I normally charge them twelve and you get nine, I keep three.”

“And are they clean?”

“Oh yeah. For every fifty that come across my desk, I pick one. Good condition, prime neighborhoods, and we only do 40% loan-to-value, max. Just no way to get hurt.”

“If they don’t pay . . . ?”

“If they don’t pay we take the asset, and then it’s Christmas. That hardly ever happens though. They get stuck, they normally go to another hard money guy who loans them 50 or 60%. At that point they usually are fucked, yeah, but that doesn’t affect us because we got our money out plus interest and penalties and other fees we tack on . . . Of course if you want to take a little risk, I have a variation that’ll knock your socks off.”

“Interesting,” Chris said. “Can you meet me tomorrow morning at eight? I’ll bring what I have, and you can shoot the whole thing by me in more detail.”

“How about ten, that’s a little early on a Sunday.”

“I’m trying to line up two or three of these tomorrow if I can. You’re the first, so the earlier the better.”

“Okay fine. What’s your name again?”

“Bob,” he said. “I’ll see you at eight, thanks very much.”

+++

When Chris got back to the room, there was no sign of Bethany so he went down to the pier. The beach volleyball courts were full, there was a junior lifeguard training day going on, a lot of surfers in the water, plenty of action. Not many bikinis yet, but it was still March.

He was pretty positive he hadn't touched a thing in the office. No handshake, and the guy had opened the door for him both ways. There were no security cameras. There was a second desk in there, but it was unlikely it'd be anyone besides Chip meeting him tomorrow. His one concern was did the taqueria guys come in early to start a big soup or something?

His brother Floyd had worked for Chip when he was fresh out of UNLV. Chip had a catering business that was connected to some of the casinos and handled their overflow at large corporate events. He recruited kids like Floyd from the college culinary program as interns.

Floyd was a quick learner, and Chip introduced him to his other business, which was distressed properties. He taught Floyd the basics, told him find me a deal, and if I buy it I'll give you 20% of the profit after I flip it.

Floyd began hitting the courthouse three times a week, looking up new foreclosure filings. He drove around neighborhoods and knocked on owners' doors, asking if they wanted to sell their house before the bank got too involved. Some of the owners were polite, and some weren't, but no one was interested.

Finally in north Vegas, a guy agreed to deed him his tract house for the amount of the arrears plus

\$10,000, which came out to \$62,000. Floyd ran a few comps and figured after \$5000 of fix-up, the place was worth \$125,000, with a quick-sale value of \$105,000, and he took it to Chip. Chip closed on it a couple days later, and re-sold the place within a month.

When Floyd asked about getting paid, Chip told him his payouts were quarterly, and to keep up the good work. Floyd got better at sifting the properties with potential from the dead wood, and in two months he had laid seven more deals on Chip's desk.

Floyd decided that was enough for now until he got paid, and stopped going to the courthouse. When the eighth and final property had sold, well after whatever quarter Chip had been referring to, Floyd asked for his cut, which added up to \$73,000.

"Bud," Chip said. "You're a dependable worker, and you learned a good lesson here. You want something, get it in writing. Right now, we got nothing to talk about."

Floyd got drunk that night and considered killing Chip. A few thoughts stopped him, the main one being how would you get away with it, and the second being Chip was probably connected. Floyd let it go and moved on. This was twelve years ago.

Chris walked up the hill from the pier and Bethany was stretched out on a chaise-lounge at the pool, wearing big, baggy sweat clothes and uggs.

She said, “I’ve been trying to remember when I’ve had an experience as heavenly. And I can’t come up with one.”

Chris said, “They put their hands all over you and everything?”

“Oh yes, it was dreamlike. Chris, thank you so much.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m ravenous.”

“I could certainly eat something too.”

“You follow the NCAA Tournament at all? I see they have a sports bar a block over, which I could carry you to if you’re too exhausted.”

“Sounds perfect, and I can make it.”

“Who’d you end up taking to that Warriors game, by the way?” he said, when they were settled in at the Goofy Foot Bar & Grill.

“Jeff.”

“Oh. I notice he called you ‘Beth’. You go by that?”

“No. Lately he’s been shortening it.”

“Is that right.”

“You know what? I’m going to have to start interrogating *you*. I can only guess the skeletons you must have in your closet.”

The menu wasn't exciting so they went with drinks and appetizers. Kentucky dominated Indiana, and Syracuse hit a shot at the buzzer to beat Wisconsin.

"I enjoy college ball more than the pros, to be honest," Chris said. "Maybe because it's the end of the line for most of them."

"I know, you can feel the emotion, that they're not professionals," Bethany said.

Sometime after midnight, both of them still awake, she got out of her bed and into his.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "I got a glimpse just then of a tiny pair of briefs and a tee shirt that had to be three sizes too small for what it was trying to contain . . . Now it's all right here, but I can't do anything about it?"

"I wish we could, but you wouldn't be happy. It would put a damper on everything." She had her head against him and her hand on his chest. The windows were open, and they could hear the ocean.

"You gave me the short version. What's the long one?" Chris said.

"He told me he didn't want me intimate with anyone else."

"Wait a minute . . . I've said the same thing to people, but I never expect it to work."

“This is different though. I feel like he’s . . . not exactly hovering . . . but aware of things. Irrational as that sounds.”

“And he gave you this ultimatum when?”

“Three years ago, when we separated.”

“Holy shit . . . So you haven’t been able to enjoy yourself since then?”

“Only twice. The two times I went back to visit him.”

Chris tried to absorb this.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. “That I need a psychiatrist. Right?”

“Not necessarily,” he said. “Maybe you just need to get back together.”

“That could never happen. He scares me.”

“Scares you into deciding he’s the only one you can successfully fuck.”

“Please don’t put it so crudely, but yes, that . . . And scares me that he might hurt me if I became seriously involved with someone.”

“Wow. This is becoming a common theme.”

“What is?”

“Forget that, go ahead.”

“It’s just a gut feeling. I have nothing to validate it.”

“And you say he’s in Arizona,” Chris said. “Whereabouts again?”

“Oh no. You’re not going to call him. Is that what you’re thinking? That would never work.”

“Why not? One man to another, get him to see he’s stifling your life experience.”

“If you tried that,” she said, “he’d know right away I told you to. And things would intensify.”

“Oh well, it was an idea.”

“That is really sweet of you, I mean it. It’s for me alone to resolve. I’m hoping sooner or later I can.”

A few minutes passed. Bethany said, “Would now be a good time to tell me about your eye? The part about it not being 100% random?”

“Hey, no one has seemed to notice down here,” he said. “Maybe the sunglasses are working.”

“What happened though?”

“A guy I’d never met, but knew of, who had the look of a bodybuilder, connected with an overhand right.”

“And any idea why?”

“Some, yeah. But it could have been handled differently. Getting violent like that, it rarely solves anything.”

19 - After Clipping

The big decision Sunday morning was not whether to go ahead with it but which bat to use. Chris was more comfortable with the old-fashioned wood, more confident in being able to adjust his grip as necessary, especially wearing the latex gloves, but he opted for the aluminum because it seemed less likely there'd be a piece of it left behind.

It wasn't the perfect time—he could have waited on Ray, made another trip down, followed the guy around for a while, double checked everything—but screw it, you do all that and then something unexpected could pop up.

His main concern, as he pulled into the parking lot at 7:45, was the one-room taqueria three doors away, the only place in the strip mall that would likely be open today besides Chip's office. No one was around yet, and their sign said they opened at eleven. It would almost be better if someone were in the place now, cooking, than to risk having them arrive in the next twenty minutes, but what could you do?

Chip pulled in at eight o'clock on the dot and waved. Chris got out of the car and cracked Chip over

the head with the aluminum bat just as Chip opened the office door. It was a cleaner first blow than with Donny. Chris realized after clipping Donny on the shoulder and neck that in that position you're better off forgetting a baseball swing and coming straight down, more like you're chopping wood.

Still, Chip crawled into his office. He was a strong motherfucker obviously, not sports-strong like Donny, but street-strong. He was heading for his desk, had one hand up on the side of it now, and Chris realized with alarm that there was a gun somewhere. He delivered a dozen more blows to Chip's head and torso, and Chip didn't move any more. He waited a minute to be certain, and for good measure smashed him in the head two more times, using more of a golf swing, since the head was on the floor. Just like with Donny, he made sure he caved it in somewhat before he was through.

He was tempted to say, "Floyd Seely says hello", or whatever, but realized that would be dumb, especially if the guy miraculously recovered, so he kept his mouth shut, left the office door open, went into the trunk which he had left ajar, put the bat and gloves into the bat case, and stuck it all back in the empty spare tire compartment.

As he pulled out of the parking lot, two teenage kids on bicycles passed by, barefoot and wearing partial

wetsuits. They had racks on the sides of their bikes that were carrying surfboards that didn't look much bigger than skateboards. They were heading toward the beach, talking to each other, and Chris didn't think they were aware of him.

He took a shower in the locker room near the pool and changed his clothes. When he got back to the room, Bethany was sitting on the balcony in a terrycloth Minka Hotel robe, her head back, eyes closed, taking in the morning sun.

"It's glorious here beyond belief," she said. "Would you ever consider moving?"

"Not right now, no."

"I'm sorry, that was so insensitive. I wasn't even thinking."

"Don't be silly. I wouldn't want to live here permanently is all, nothing to do with my situation."

"I could . . . Anyway, give me a moment to change, and we'll get some of that incredible breakfast. I didn't want to start without you this morning . . . No run today, I see, but how was your walk?"

"Not as enjoyable as running, but I got some exercise."

Chris sat down, facing the ocean, but looked sideways into the room. Bethany had taken the robe off, and now there were pale green briefs and another too-

small white t-shirt. In the better light, the t-shirt was essentially transparent.

“You know what, why bother getting dressed yet?” he said. “I’ll go down and bring some stuff back.”

“Too late,” she said. She had pulled on a big sweatshirt and a pair of jeans. “They have a quaint sitting area down there with a fountain. It feels like you’re in Europe.”

At breakfast they discussed the pros and cons of living in Southern California, and Chris ran the chain of events back through his head. It felt like they should be on the road, not hanging around a couple miles from where it happened, but did it matter, really? If they were going to get him, they’d find him wherever. Might as well enjoy the Minka Hotel amenities right up until check-out time, and hope to God he hadn’t overlooked something basic.

They took the scenic route home, up Highway One to Santa Barbara and then 101 the rest of the way. Bethany fell asleep around King City and didn’t wake up until they were back in her neighborhood.

Chris said, “You sure tossed it around, whether you should go with me or not, keep me company.”

“Well I made the right decision,” she said. “And I was so out of it down there, I never even asked you: what business thing were you doing?”

“Ahh, I was checking out an investment. There was a window of opportunity, but I decided against it.”

20 – Landline

Shep said, “You’re back. How was it?”

“It was uneven,” Chris said. “Have you ever been with a voluptuous woman who seems to like you, where you couldn’t do anything about it?”

“No.”

“I know. She says she has a nasty ex who’s gotten in her head.”

“In that case, anything you can do . . . personally?”

“I’ve gone through it, but if something happened they’d be all over her, wouldn’t they?”

“Probably depends if there’s been a history, a restraining order, that type of thing.”

“Part of my reservation is, what if I went through all that and nothing changed on her end?”

“I see what you mean, brother,” Shep said. “You could easily be right. That the scouting trip you were referring to?”

“Yeah, I just dropped her off twenty minutes ago. The scouting part went okay, I think.”

+++

He slept late on Monday, walked over to Peet's Coffee on Chestnut and checked his phone for the first time in three days. There were nine messages: four from Joyce, one from Maierhaffer, one from Ray, one from Bethany, one from his brother Floyd, and one from a Detective Cousins of Santa Rosa Police.

Alarmingly bad, that final one. But Chris had woken up with a serious headache and was determined not to let his mind run away from him, at least until he'd had his double latte and scone. He took his time, read the paper, and went back home to use his landline, so he could be sure he understood what the police might be asking.

First he called Joyce, and she answered on the second ring. "Two things," he said. "Aren't you supposed to be teaching, and I'm surprised you called me on your cell."

"We're in lunch," she said, "and I made it crystal-clear to Bruce to never go in my phone again. I as much as told him if he ever did, I'd kill him."

"Hmm."

"I called to make sure you were okay. And then you were silent all weekend, so I worried more."

"I wanted to ask you, any word . . . on anything else?"

"No, none . . . Chris, I'd like to see you."

“I have to return a stack of messages,” he said, and hung up.

Detective Cousins’ number went to voice mail, and Chris took a deep breath and left a message. Then he called Maierhaffer, pretty certain the guy wasn’t trying to round up any more tennis games with him.

“Steve?”

“Speaking.”

“It’s Chris. Seely.”

Maierhaffer said, “What kind of cunt . . .” and Chris hung up.

He called Bethany.

“I’m on my walk,” she said, “I wanted to tell you what a wonderful time I had. I dreamt about it all night.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“And, going forward?”

“Something may have to give,” he said.

“That’s what I was afraid you’d say.”

“What’s his first name?”

“Jesus . . . Kyle.”

“So you say ‘Kyle, it’s been nice knowing you.’ He says something back, you get a restraining order.”

“I don’t know, Chris.”

He told her it was something to think about, and got off.

He started to google Kyle Lamb in Arizona, but realized he was on his personal computer, and just then the Santa Rosa detective called back.

“Chris Seely? Ed Cousins here, SRPD”

“Hi.”

“I’m sure you’re familiar with a case we got working, Donald Shelhorne?”

“Yeah, I’ve been following it.”

“You got some time tomorrow? Maybe you can help with a few things.”

“Sure, whatever you need.”

“I’ll come your way then. I’ll be there at ten.”

“You don’t want me to come up there?”

“Nah, I got other business I have to take care of in the city, so you’ll be my first stop. See you then.”

Chris hung up, rattled, trying to think straight. This didn’t sound like a routine canvassing of ex-faculty members from Pratt Valley High School. The cop wanted to get a look at him in his environment, probably check out the apartment. Realistically though, could he actually be a suspect? He was positive Joyce hadn’t said anything and couldn’t imagine what else might be linking him to it now, that hadn’t earlier.

Maybe the guy did actually have business in the city, and his was just another name they’d be checking off a list. He prayed it was. Either way, the two bats

currently in the trunk of his Toyota Camry, one of them containing blood and whatever else, would not help matters if the detective asked him would he mind opening it.

He returned Ray's message. No answer, no voice mail or machine, nothing.

Then he called back his brother Floyd in Phoenix. "It's been a while," Chris said. "What's going on in the Valley of the Sun?"

"Always refreshing to hear your voice, Chrissy," Floyd said. "You'll probably be interested in this one: Somebody killed Chip Reggio."

"Jesus. In Las Vegas?"

"No, in California. A friend of mine from UNLV heard about it, he called me this morning."

"Mob thing, or what?"

"They think so, but he's screwed so many people, who knows?"

"Well . . . I'll be raising a glass to you tonight then," Chris said.

"Likewise. When you coming down for a visit? I miss you."

"It could actually work out in the near future. You still with Suzanne?"

"No. You?"

“Nobody at the moment. Listen, is there an Antheneum by you?”

“There’s an Anthem. One of those awful planned communities. About forty-five minutes north, off Interstate 17. Why?”

“Just curious. I think there was a House Hunters episode there. You get a lot for your money.”

“That you do,” Floyd said. “Hope Chipper got his money’s worth too.”

“He didn’t,” Chris said, “but maybe someone else did.”

+++

Chris decided he better take care of the bats on the late side, so he put on some music and stretched out on the couch for a nap. When he woke up his headache was nearly gone, but he had had his first bad dream. He and Donny were on stand-up surfboards that you maneuvered with a paddle, and the current pushed him into the pilings under the Manhattan Beach Pier. Every time he tried to get away from the pier, a wave would knock him back under it, and he realized he was bleeding and that he was being cut by the waves.

He liked it that people were rarely in the park off 11th Avenue after dark, but more bats in the same little lake might attract attention. Lake Merced seemed like a good alternative, more exposed to traffic, but with

plenty of inconspicuous access points, especially at two in the morning.

Chris backed out of the garage, and when he got to the corner he thought what if someone was following him? He drove around the block, double-parked, shut the engine off. Then he started again in the opposite direction, saw nothing in the rear view mirror and was pretty convinced he was being paranoid.

He remembered a parking area near the Harding Park golf course, and without fooling around, fired the aluminum bat into the water. He swung back through Golden Gate Park, threw the wooden one into the lake where you rented rowboats, and then found a dumpster near the Hall of Flowers and stuffed the bag into it.

He checked his watch, it was twenty to three. He had just left the park and was on Oak Street in the Panhandle, right down the hill from Bethany's. No rush to be anywhere now, so what would it hurt to drive by?

He recognized Bethany's car, a blue Mini Cooper. It was parked on the right side of the driveway that she shared with her upstairs neighbor, who parked on the left. Directly behind the Mini Cooper was another car. There were lights on in Bethany's flat.

Hmm.

Chris rang the bell. He waited a minute, rang it again, waited a bit longer and got back in the car and went home.

+++

He slept for a few hours and took his run, trying to rehearse how it might go with Detective Cousins. There was clearly a tricky balance between volunteering too much information and coming across like you're holding onto something.

Cousins arrived at 10:15 and Chris came down to let him in.

"Ed. A pleasure," the detective said. He was wearing a suit. He sat at the kitchen table and thanked Chris for the cup of coffee.

"Traffic into the city?" Chris said.

"Not that bad. Nice apartment, I lived in the Marina once upon a time. A different animal now."

"You said it. The families are pretty much all gone."

"Now on the homicide, did you know this fellow?" Cousins opened a notebook.

"I saw him around school, but I never taught him, so I didn't really know him. I did watch him pitch several times."

"What about Meghan Britta, you knew her?"

“Yeah, I had her in a class. Both Meghan and Lindie, who ended up together at that party.”

“What was your reaction after the accident?”

“You mean Donny, or Meghan?”

“Meghan.”

“My view of it was that guy shouldn’t be walking around enjoying himself like nothing happened.”

“So you think he didn’t pay a price?”

“Not at all. I mean, he obviously did in the end.”

“So it’s your opinion he was killed because of what happened to Meghan?”

“I’m not sure, but it would be hard to one hundred percent rule out.”

“How well do you know Joyce McCann?”

Whoa.

“Pretty well. We dated for a year and a half when I was teaching up there. We’re still close.”

“Did she take Meghan hard?”

“She did. She had a real tough time. Meghan reached out to her not too long before it happened. She’s had a tough time since Donny too, because it re-kindled it.”

“How do you know?”

“I can tell.”

“How about Meghan’s family, you know anything about them?”

“I really don’t, other than there apparently wasn’t much of one.”

“Where’d you get the shiner?”

“Ah, it’s embarrassing . . . but Joyce’s boyfriend hit me. Guy named Bruce, apparently.”

“Oh yeah?”

“She’s been coming down sometimes. Last Thursday I guess he followed her. When she left, I got what I deserved.”

“Bruce who?”

“I don’t know. She just said he was in the wine business. Big, sturdy guy, like a bodybuilder. Well dressed.”

“Bruce Gilbright?”

“I don’t know.”

“Black hair, slicked back?”

“Yeah.”

“Could be a match. We know that guy well, if it is. Used to own a strip club at the end of Santa Rosa Avenue. Difficult gentleman to deal with.”

“I actually remember that place.”

“You surprised Ms. McCann would get mixed up with a guy like that?”

“Well, my guess is she doesn’t know that much about him. She said it’s been a couple months.”

“Now I’m going to ask you a hard question,” Cousins said, “and I expect a stand-up answer. You got that?”

Chris said yes.

“Could Joyce have gotten Bruce to kill Shelhorne? On a scale of one to ten, how likely is that?”

“That’s a zero. Not even a possibility.”

Cousins gave him a long look. “Well, I thank you very much for your time.”

“I hope I could help,” Chris said. “What else do you have in the city today?”

“Ah, my old man is out in the Sunset, not doing that well. Eighty-seven years old, the bastard refuses to allow any help.”

“Probably what keeps him going though, the feistiness.”

“Maybe. Makes it harder to give a homicide the attention it deserves. We’ll figure it out, though. Sooner or later.”

Chris walked Detective Cousins down and saw him off, and continued right to the nearest bar, which wasn’t Weatherby’s or the Booker Lounge but Joe’s Place. He ordered a straight double scotch and tried to piece together what exactly had just happened.

+++

He put in a couple hours that afternoon on the computer at the Funston Library. One reason he was pretty sure the Pocatello Thad Simmons was the same one who raped Bonnie was that according to Google he was running a gym out there in Idaho now. In 1992, when it happened, Simmons and Bonnie had desk jobs at Eastern Sports Clubs, one of those success stories with gyms sprouting up all over. The company had moved into a new headquarters in northern Westchester County, which was where the piece of scum assaulted her.

Chris found a little bit on Bethany. Her maiden name seemed to be Hoag, so the name she went by now, Lamb, was most likely her husband's. There *was* a Kyle Lamb listed in Anthem, Arizona. Address, phone number, the whole works. On *Street View* you could see the actual house, with a pickup parked in the driveway.

Before he left the library, he checked the LA Times online and found two articles. The first was from yesterday, with no writer's byline:

Financial Advisor Found Slain In Hermosa Beach Office

March 12. 2017 – Anthony Reggio, 46, of Manhattan Beach, was found dead yesterday

afternoon in his south bay office, the victim of an apparent attack.

Reggio was found in the ground floor office of Good Fund Financials, LLC, at 213 Norden Lane in Hermosa. Police said there was no sign of forced entry. The body was discovered at approximately 12:30pm by a patron of the nearby Taqueria San Jose.

And then one from today:

Slain Hermosa Financial Planner Had Reputed Organized Crime Ties

By Arlene Gonsalves

March 13, 2017 - A financial advisor found dead Sunday in his Hermosa Beach office had ties to organized crime, according to a source close to the investigation.

Anthony “Chip” Reggio, who lived at 1178 Primrose Street in Manhattan Beach, was known to both Las Vegas police and LAPD as a suspected member of the Romano crime family, the source said.

Reggio, 46, was originally from Hoboken, New Jersey, and had been a Las Vegas resident for sixteen years before moving to the south bay in 2008, records show. He operated Good Fund Financials, LLC, and

was on the board of Citizens For Manhattan Beach Preservation.

A Primrose Street neighbor, Jonathan Sweet, said, “Chip was the nicest guy you could ever meet. He played ball with the kids. He was Santa Claus at our Christmas block party. We’re all in shock.”

Police said Reggio was beaten to death Sunday morning in his Norden Lane office, and that robbery has been ruled out as a motive.

Police are asking anyone with information to call their hotline at: 888-826-4800.

Worth keeping an eye on, Chris thought, but definitely good about the mob angle.

There was an afternoon run that he did sometimes when he wanted an extra workout, across Lombard and up the Divisadero hills to Broadway and back down. He’d repeat it a few times. Today the energy wasn’t there, but he forced his way through it. Hopefully it was the double scotch and the stress of talking to Cousins, and nothing physical screwing him up yet.

The shocker was that Cousins might be suspecting Joyce. Of course one positive was the police up there apparently didn’t like Bruce, if it was the same guy, and that could keep them busy for a while. It was impossible to tell if Cousins was slick and knew what he was doing,

or was just an ordinary cop fishing around without a plan.

Either way, it seemed wise not to procrastinate too long on the rest of his own business, in case things suddenly caved in on him.

By the time he showered and ate something and paid a few bills it was after seven, and Chris figured why not go see what was up at Maierhaffer's. The guy had a small mansion on Washington Street, in Presidio Heights not far from where they played tennis at Julius Khan.

Chris pulled up and parked across the street. If Maierhaffer was home, there might be some fireworks, and if not, he could say hello to Birgitte. What was the harm?

Birgitte answered the door. She was dressed modestly, with little or no makeup, a gorgeous woman in her day, it was clear now, looking entirely appropriate in her fifties.

"Chris Seely?" he said. "Steve's tennis partner? Remember, at Cala Foods?"

"Oh yes, absolutely--Chris," she said. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you, but actually is Steve around by chance?"

“No, I’m sorry, you’ve missed him. He has a business meeting tonight.”

“Really,” Chris said. “Okay then, I’ll come in for a moment if it’s no trouble.”

“Please, by all means,” she said. “Can I get you something?” They were in the formal living room.

“A club soda type thing would hit the spot,” he said. Birgitte came back with drinks on a tray and a bowl of nuts, everything tasteful.

“It’s none of my business,” Chris said, “but does Steve frequently have business meetings at night?”

“He can, yes,” Birgitte said. “There’s no rhyme or reason to Steve’s schedule. That’s the way it’s always been.”

“He’s an interesting man,” Chris said. “Do you ever think he might be cheating on you?”

Birgitte sat up straight, her face contorted. “I’m sorry?”

Chris nodded. “He is. At least he says he is.”

The words took time to register.

“You’ve . . . caught me totally . . . I don’t know what to say . . . I’m stunned.”

“I’m glad I said something then. It got to the point where I couldn’t hear about it any more.”

“Yes, then . . . I’m glad you did too . . . thank you . . . I needed to know, obviously.”

“Here’s my number. If I can do anything for you, any time, please call me. Okay?”

“Yes, thank you. Thank you so much.”

He left her seated on the couch in a daze and headed to Weatherby’s to take the edge off the day for the second time.

21 – Driveway

“Haaay, what’s shakin’ my brother,” Shep said.

“One thing I’m learning,” Chris said, “don’t get a terminal disease. You act different.”

“I’ll try to remember that . . . Any updates . . . on a topic I might be interested in?”

“The cops talked to me today.”

“Are you *shitting* me?”

“I don’t think I’m their man. At the moment, anyway.”

“And they have that part right?”

“I feel they have it right, yeah.”

“Okay, I’m not going there,” Shep said.

“That other situation though,” Chris said, “with the intimidating ex-husband? I was in her neighborhood at three in the morning, so I swung by.”

“Any particular reason you were out at three in the morning?”

“I had to put something in Lake Merced.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, there was an extra car in the driveway.”

“See, this type of thing, too much nonsense. It’s generally not worth it.”

“We’ll see, maybe you’re right,” Chris said. His phone rang and he answered it.

“You’re an ass, you know that?” a female voice said.

“Just a moment please,” he said, “I can barely hear you.” He went outside.

“I said you’re an *ass*, shame on you.” It took a moment, and he realized it was Monica.

“Um, hi Monica. What do you mean?”

“You don’t even know? You’re more pathetic than we thought.”

“I’m real sorry,” Chris said. “I’m at a loss here. What are you talking about?”

“Allison’s open mc? Tonight? In San Rafael? Ring a bell? You told her you’d be there.”

“Shit . . . I can’t believe I forgot all about it. Where is she, let me speak to her.”

“She’s right here, driving back to Berkeley, but she doesn’t want to talk to you. You obviously could care less, but it meant a lot to her to have you at her performance. Which of course you had better things to do than show up at.”

“How did she do?”

“Chris, just don’t pretend you’re interested, all right? Just go back to your party.” She hung up.

“That wasn’t the authorities or anything, was it?” Shep said quietly. “You look a little shook up.”

“Nah, I left someone hanging. My brain is screwy. This is what I’m talking about, how you’re not the same.”

“Let’s face it though, pardner, you’ve got a lot on your plate. You get a pass.”

“I hate standing people up though,” Chris said. “I don’t sleep well afterwards.”

+++

On Wednesday afternoon he dropped in on Ray in the dialysis department at SF General.

“Well now, looky here what the cat brung in,” Ray said. He had two strands of red rubber tubing taped to his forearm that Chris assumed entered his arm someplace, and then continued into a couple of canisters attached to a standing, computerized machine. Ray was wearing a sweater and Oakland A’s cap and sitting on a hospital-type recliner, partially covered by a blanket. There were nine or ten identical patient set ups, and several TVs were blaring.

“I called you back,” Chris said. “But there was no option to leave a message.”

“And there never will be,” Ray said. “I hate the telephone. I’m a fan of direct contact.”

“Good thing I remembered your schedule, then,” Chris said. “What’d you want? When you called me.”

“I got your thing is all.”

“You *did*?”

“Told you I’d look into handling your business, didn’t I? So why you surprised?”

“No, it’s just, I thought you might put me in touch with someone or whatever. Not finish it off.”

“You want it or not?”

“Oh, yeah. Listen, I appreciate it.”

“Don’t be jumping for joy like it’s Christmas morning. You setting up for some serious shit now.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“You owe me nothing. If you want, you can buy me another drink.”

“Ray, you’re a good man, you know that?”

“So all these years later . . . that’d be your conclusion then.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re still a little white boy piece of crap,” Ray said. “But looking at the whole picture, I guess I’ll take it.”

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow night. I got a place we can unwind, hear some music.”

“Fine with me. Long as it ain’t the joint on Chestnut Street again.”

“It’s near there, but a brother’s in charge of this one.”

“That don’t mean nothing.”

“I’ll see you at eight,” Chris said.

+++

When he left Ray, he called Allison.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey back. I guess.”

“About last night, your performance . . .”

“It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not okay. But getting beyond that for a second, I’m taking a drive out to Idaho. Be gone probably a week.”

“Have a nice trip then.”

“Would you want to come? I mean I know that’s a ridiculous question, completely out of left field.”

“Sure.”

“Hold on, just like that? *Sure?*”

“Yes, it sounds like fun.”

“Fun in what way? What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, have an adventure.”

“Oh. Well I checked the weather and it’s snowing in the Sierras. I hate dealing with chains, but it’s supposed to be clear Saturday. That work?”

“Yes it does,” she said. “I have to run, but thanks.”

“Any time,” he said, pretty sure he just piled on something he shouldn’t have.

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After dinner he drove over to Bethany’s.

“I was in the neighborhood,” he said.

“I’m glad you were,” she said. “Are you hungry?”
They went in the kitchen.

“No, but I’ll watch you eat. If I’m not disturbing anything.”

“You’re not right now, but Monday why did you ring the bell in the middle of the night?”

A pause. “The lights were on, and there was another car. I was curious.”

“My girlfriend is having a relationship problem. She stayed over. But truth be told, it’s none of your business.”

“I can’t disagree with you there. I thought maybe it was Kyle though.”

“That would be stretching it a bit, don’t you think?”

“Yes and no . . . He couldn’t reach you all weekend, he grew concerned and decided he better find out what’s up.”

“I’ll admit, when you frame it like that, that’s the kind of behavior I do worry about.”

“Or is it my condition?”

“What?”

“You’re turned off by my situation.”

“No, Chris, please. You couldn’t be more off base.”

“Which would be understandable, believe me.”

She stood up and came around behind him and started rubbing his shoulders. “It’s me. It’s not you.”

“But if Kyle died in an accident, or someone killed him or something, would you feel better?”

She stopped with the shoulders.

“Excuse me?”

“Just your first impulse, before you analyze it . . . We used to have to take these STAR tests at school? And they’d tell you the best answer was usually the first one that came into your head. After that, you overcomplicate it.”

“Okay, hypothetically,” she said, “my first reaction is I’d be relieved.”

“You would.”

“But I’d also be sad.”

“Forget the sad part, you’d get over that. But would you be scared? Of the police?”

“Why would I be?”

“Well, I mean, let’s say for example *I* killed him. They could suspect you talked me into it.”

“Okay Chris, this is going off the deep end now. Let’s stick with reality.”

“Fine . . . Would you want to take a shower?”

Bethany gave him the half-smile and the 'you’re not going to let up, are you?' look that he’d seen a few times in Manhattan Beach.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay?”

She didn’t answer, but she headed back there, so he followed. She did him the favor of leaving on a few items of clothing that he could take off, and soon the hot water and soap and tight quarters were a comfortable mix.

“One thing is clear,” Chris said. “If those were any further developed, there wouldn’t be room for both of us in here.”

“You are a piece of work, you know that?” she said.

The main event followed in the bedroom, and Bethany had been right: it was disappointing.

“Does that mean you won’t want to stay the night?” she said.

“I’d like to. Unless you have something else planned that’s none of my business. I’m going out to Idaho, so I might not see you for a little while.”

“Gee, you’re certainly doing your share of traveling.” She was curled up against him.

“You mean for a guy on the way out?”

“Okay, yes. For someone on the way out.”

“You’re right. You discover an impulsiveness you didn’t know you had. It’s not entirely the worst thing.”

“I actually envy you in a way.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“I know . . . Will you be traveling alone this time?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“In that case, I won’t call you when you’re gone. I’ll wait until you’re back safe and sound.”

“Just to get it straight, though,” he said, “that wasn’t Kyle the other night, but it wasn’t a girlfriend in need either, was it?”

“No,” she said. “It wasn’t.”

22 - Wiped Away

When he got home Thursday morning he checked his messages and there were two from Joyce, which he deleted without listening to them, and one missed call from a number he didn't recognize. He called back, and it was Birgitte Maierhaffer.

"I wanted to apologize for my behavior the other night," she said. "I have truly been such a fool."

"What behavior?"

"I couldn't have been more rude and self-absorbed. You were a real gentleman to take the very difficult step and inform me. Especially since Steve is your friend."

"Does Steve know that you know?"

"Oh yes. He denied everything and was quite furious at me, and he immediately booked a business trip to San Diego."

"That where he is now?"

"Yes. It's all so incredibly transparent . . . What a moron I have been."

"Well, maybe you'd like to have a drink tonight and listen to a little music."

"Oh . . . I see . . . with you?"

"I have a friend, we're going to hang out, nothing serious. I can pick you up."

“Well it certainly does sound appealing,” she said.

“Changing up the routine, it never hurts. I’ll see you a little past eight.”

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Joyce called again around noon and this time he answered. She said she absolutely had to speak to him in person, so he said fine, whatever, he’d see her after school.

Then he went to the library and started doing some more digging on the drunk driver who hit his childhood friend Eric. Chris and Eric played catch together in Eric’s oversized backyard, and sometimes Chris would stay for dinner. The Mossmans had a ski cabin near Sugar Bowl and a few times he would be invited along. Eric went to a private school, and Chris had closer friends, but the kid was nice enough and he certainly didn’t deserve to get wiped away by this guy.

When he and Eric were fourteen, the Mossmans moved to Tiburon, and they didn’t cross paths much after that. Chris did see Eric’s older sister Lorraine in the neighborhood, visiting her friend Amanda. Lorraine eventually went to Humboldt State, near Eureka, and Eric was a new 16-year-old driver on the way up there to visit her for a weekend when the asshole crossed over the line on Highway 20 north of Ukiah.

Lorraine dropped out of school and got into the drug and pornography scene in the San Fernando Valley. Mr. Mossman died a year-and-a-half after the accident, and Mrs. Mossman moved back into the city. Chris would now and then see her walking her dog on Fillmore Street, but he tried to avoid her because when he said hello it was too hard on her.

Chris heard the guy got a year in prison and was out after eight months. He couldn't come up with a name. The search archives for the *Marin IJ* and the *Chronicle* didn't go back far enough, since the accident took place in 1986, so he asked the librarian what to do. She told him his best bet was the main library on Larkin Street, where they had microfiche copies of old newspapers.

He drove down there, got set up at a machine, and found the guy's name was Jerry Smith. The article said he was twenty-four years old and from Santa Rosa. Chris googled him in Sonoma County and there were a few results, but none of them any good because the ages were wrong. If he was twenty-four in April of '86, this guy would be fifty-four or five now. That also meant he should have graduated from high school in 1979.

Chris set up an anonymous gmail account on the library computer and emailed all five Santa Rosa high schools, telling them he was a long-lost alumnus and

was there any source of updates they could provide on fellow classmates.

That was about as far as he could go, especially since it was after three and he unfortunately had to meet Joyce. She was parked waiting for him when he got home.

“The goon follow along this time?” he said.

“He’s in Lodi this week.”

“That makes sense. I read that believe it or not, they grow more grapes in San Joaquin County than in Napa and Sonoma combined.”

“I wouldn’t mind something to drink,” she said.

“Upstairs or on Chestnut Street?”

“Your place. Don’t worry, I’ll behave myself.”

Chris made margaritas in the blender and brought out some chips and salsa. “I spoke to my brother Floyd the other day,” he said. “Did you ever meet him?”

“Yes, you don’t remember that? We had dinner with him at the airport that time when he was on his way to Hawaii. He had a really pretty girlfriend.”

“It sounds like they broke up. But what’s going on with you?”

“Lindie Moreda came to see me,” she said.

“Oh yeah?”

“She said the police talked to her about Donny. And they asked if she thought I might have wanted Donny dead.”

“Is that right.”

“What? *Doesn't that shake you up?* They think I might have killed Donny!”

“Listen to me now. They don't think anything. I had a cop talk to me too, this is what they do when they don't have *shit*. They throw stuff against the wall and hope something miraculously sticks.”

“So why didn't they ask me directly then?”

“I'm telling you, it doesn't mean anything. But let me ask you this: could Bruce have done it?”

“What?”

“What's his last name?”

“Gilbright.”

“Okay, so what they're reaching for is Bruce might have killed Donny because he saw that you hadn't gotten over Meghan, and he thought it would make you happy.”

“I'm sorry Chris, but that is fucking crazy.”

“They've had trouble with Bruce in the past, various things. Obviously he has violent tendencies. It kind of makes sense.”

“I know he socked you in the eye, which was way wrong, but he's not a killer.”

“For all I know, you’re right. I’m just telling you straight, what the police at this point are looking at . . . Bruce. They have nothing else.”

Chris poured them seconds on the margaritas and no one spoke for a few minutes.

“So Lindie coming over and all, you’re saying I can relax?” she said.

“Absolutely. Unless you had a hand in it, that you’re not telling me about.”

“Very funny.”

“And you know how it goes, their Bruce theory may or may not pan out, and they could be back to square one.”

“I see, professor . . . ,” she said. “Meanwhile, have you interacted with your doctor’s secretary recently?”

“I have.”

“That’s interesting. Could you please tell me about it as you make love to me?”

“Oh no, Jesus,” he said, but he found himself cooperating, and they didn’t make it to the bedroom.

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Ray was dressed the best Chris had seen him. “It’s how you do it,” Ray said. “You go out at night, show some respect. You still wearing duds.”

Ray handed him a shoebox tied up with twine. Chris opened the trunk of the car and put the box in the familiar empty spare tire compartment.

“Okay, now I’m throwing in a curveball,” Chris said. “We’re picking someone up.”

“Good by me.”

“A lady, in her fifties. She found out her husband is unfaithful, and she’s having a hard time dealing with it. Loosening herself up could help.”

“And she found this out how?”

“I told her.”

“Man, you a mischievous motherfucker. You more complex every day.”

Birgitte was wearing a modest dress with a shawl. Her hair was up, and she looked elegant.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Ray said.

“For me as well,” Birgitte said. “I’m honored to be invited.”

“Don’t be getting ahead of yourself,” Ray said.

“The last place Seely took me was full of twenty-year-old kids. Let’s see what he come up with this time.”

Parking was impossible, so Chris let Ray and Birgitte off in front of the Booker Lounge and drove across Lombard to find a spot. When he got back, he could see them through the window, set up with drinks and talking steady and bobbing their heads.

“I was asking Birgitte how she got hooked up with the likes of you,” Ray said. “Didn’t know you was a tennis player.”

“I’m no good,” Chris said. “Birgitte’s husband Steve owns me.”

“The way I hear it is you are quite well matched,” Birgitte said. “Do you do any sports, Ray?”

“Those days is long past,” Ray said. “All except for dancing. I’ll show you some moves when the music get started.”

A band was setting up, four black guys and a frizzy-blond woman who Chris guessed would be singing.

“Well this is just splendid,” Birgitte said. “Ray, I’m not sure if Chris told you, I’m in a transition.”

“How’s that?”

“My marriage after twenty-three years is not where I had assumed it was. It certainly creates occasion for pause, especially at my age.”

“Well one important thing you got going,” Ray said, “is you a beautiful woman.”

“You are,” Chris said.

“My gosh, thank you so much,” Birgitte said.

“Okay, here now,” Ray said, “come on.” The band had started up and the frizzy blond woman was singing

“Fly Me to the Moon”, two horns, a keyboard and drums behind her.

“I . . . I couldn’t,” said Birgitte, smiling. Ray took her hand, and next thing they were dancing together like they’d been doing it a long time. More couples crowded the little dance floor, and Booker came over to Chris’s table.

“That’s a fine woman, Chrissy,” he said. “How’d y’all manage that?”

“Not sure, but she likes it here, is the main thing. The band is good too.”

“That Ray Holmes with her?”

“Yeah. You know him then?”

“Little bit of dealings at one time. Look like he got it cleaned up pretty good now . . . That other question you had, when you was giving your hypotheticals about weapons and so forth?”

“Yeah?”

“Couldn’t get a straight answer on that.”

“Meaning they might be able to trace where bullets come from.”

“Might or might not, but that’d be telling me be smart about it.”

“I appreciate it. Not that I’m expecting to need that advice.”

"Good then," Booker said, and he moved on to say hello to another table.

Ray and Birgitte kept it up for the first set. "This one, she downplay it," Ray said when they were back, sweat dripping off both of them, "but she's a live wire."

"I was just following you," Birgitte said. "You're a magnificent dancer."

"And the thing of it is," Chris said, "walking around, you move like an old man. Then you get out there and you're flying."

"Except now it feels mighty nice to be stretching out," Ray said. "I got nothing left."

Chris said, "Anyone hungry? The food's good here."

They ate and drank, and after a while Birgitte pulled Chris onto the dance floor. "Kind of embarrassing being out here after Ray," he said.

Birgitte said, "I haven't felt this exhilarated in quite some time. I can only imagine what Steve would think."

"You know what? He's a good man. When you strip it all away, he wants you happy."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course. He loves you."

"I meant do you think he's a good man?"

"Oh," Chris said. "Maybe not."

23 - Seafood

Ray had included some bullets, so Chris thought he better practice. He was tired from the late night at Booker's, but he set his alarm for 5:30 and forced himself out of bed and onto the road. By 6:15 he was parked at one of the trailheads near the top of Mount Tam, figuring there shouldn't be too much action in the area on a Friday morning at daybreak.

He walked uphill a half-mile until he came to a clearing with a stand of Monterey Pines on the far side. He took the gun out of his backpack. Ray told him it was a .38. It was black steel and the finish seemed crude, and near the handle it said *Czechpoint*. He pushed the cylinder to the side, loaded it carefully, picked out a tree and fired off six shots, emptying the gun. He missed everything on the first two but at least hit various parts of the tree with the last four. The thing definitely kicked back, but it wasn't as intense as you heard about.

He decided since he was there anyway he might as well do a hike, so he followed the loop toward the summit and back down. There were spectacular views of

Stinson Beach from the west side of the trail, the thin white strand curving toward the Bolinas Lagoon.

He thought of his ex-wife Connie. The two of them had rented a beach cottage at Stinson one summer, and way too many of their friends came to visit and the partying got out of hand. He and Connie had gotten married too young, and they flew to Mexico for a divorce after seventeen months. The last he'd heard, she had four kids and was living in Gainesville, Florida, with her second husband, a NASCAR mechanic.

It was a little after eight when he got back to the trail head, so he drove down to Starbucks in Mill Valley and killed time waiting for the Salvation Army in San Rafael to open, and then he bought another metal bat. You never knew, and the truth was he wasn't all that comfortable with the damn gun.

Driving back across the bridge, there was a call from Maierhaffer. When he got to the city, Chris parked along the bay and called him back.

Maierhaffer said, "Just answer me one thing, cunt lips. Was it you, said something to my wife?"

"I told her you loved her, but that you didn't have the greatest character," Chris said.

"You fuck, where are you right now?"

"On the Marina Green. Clear day, you can see for miles."

“You wait right there, you dick. I’ll kick your fucking ass half way to Richmond, you prick face.”

“What time?”

“Fuck you.”

“I’ll wait for you if you give me a time, but I thought Birgitte said you were down in San Diego on business.”

“Know what pal? . . . First I’m gonna rip your eyeballs out. And then I’ll urinate into the sockets.”

“That mean then, Steve, you don’t want to hit some tennis balls at Julius Khan? My game’s getting rusty.”

“You’re dead,” Maierhaffer said, and hung up.

Chris sat in the car and watched a huge container ship sail into the bay, two tugboats escorting it. The ship had a foreign-looking green and red emblem on the bridge, and he could only imagine how ready the crew was to get off the thing.

He called Birgitte. “Hope I didn’t wake you up,” he said.

“You did not,” she said. “I slept like a baby, though. The evening was so enjoyable, I honestly don’t know where the time went.”

“Well at the risk of being forward, would you want to follow it up with a bite of dinner tonight?”

“Do you mean with you and Ray again?”

“No. Just with me.”

“I see . . . Chris? Would you mind if I called you this afternoon? I’m going to need to do a bit of soul searching.”

“Absolutely, please do,” he said.

It was close enough to lunchtime that it made sense to pop in at Weatherby’s. On the way there, Bethany called. “This is business, not personal,” she said. “Dr. Steiner asked me to get you on the line.”

“Tell him my schedule won’t permit it,” Chris said.

“Chris?” It was Steiner. “Listen, it’s been four weeks since your diagnosis. We need to follow up.”

“Billy, it’s simple. When I collapse I’ll let you know, okay?”

“Are you noticing any changes at all?”

“I feel pretty good. Other than the energy’s not a hundred percent there sometimes. Not sure if I’m screwed that way, or if I’m running around trying to do too much.”

“Why are you running around trying to do too much? What’s the need?”

“Well, you don’t want to waste time, obviously . . . And be good to leave the world just a tad better off than I found it.”

“Okay fine, whatever. When can you come in?”

“You’re not fooling around with Bethany, are you?
I mean I wouldn’t blame you.”

A pause.

“God damn it Chris, I’m here for you on this.”

“I know you are,” Chris said.

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It was a lively mid-day crowd and it took Shep a few minutes to get to him. “Hey my friend, always nice, breaks up my day around here.”

“My doctor wants me to see him. It’s been a month.”

“You don’t look that bad,” Shep said. “Your color’s fine. You seem to have sufficient energy for womanizing too, is my impression.”

“Some of that, yeah, but nothing’s clicked. I’m thinking at the end I’m just going to have a bunch of people mad at me.”

“And what about the other . . . proceedings?”

“I’m going out-of-state tomorrow. See what happens. I’m not even positive I have the correct match.”

“So how do you make sure?”

“I guess I have to ask him.”

“And if you get a satisfactory answer, take care of it right then?”

“Then or later, it depends. Or if he comports himself really well, maybe not at all. The whole deal is more work than most people realize.”

“You riding solo?”

“Nah, I got someone coming along, I think.”

“Well, I gotta go. It’s been nuts in here. Send me a postcard.”

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Chris was dozing off in his recliner with *House Hunters* on when Birgitte called. She said, “Needless to say, I’ve been introspective the last few days.”

“Unh-huh,” said Chris.

“My short-term conclusion is: yes, dinner tonight sounds perfect.”

“Wow.”

“Did I startle you?”

“Actually, you did. But you’re making the right decision. When you have to go through something like this, the worst thing is sit around.”

He told her he’d pick her up at seven, and realized he better get the heck organized if he expected to drive to Idaho tomorrow.

When he finished packing the car he called Allison. “No, I didn’t forget,” she said. “And can you bring your guitar?”

“Just bring yours.”

"I am, but then we can jam and stuff."

"Ah Jeez. Jamming's not at the top of my list, to be honest."

"So what is?"

"All right, I'll try . . . Be watching for me at five. Sharp. I don't want to have to turn off the engine."

"That early? Do we have to make it there in one day?"

"Definitely."

"Chris, you're no fun."

"Get a good night's rest," he said.

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Birgitte said she wouldn't mind seafood so they went to The Spinnaker in Sausalito. The restaurant was built on posts sticking up out of the water and you had all-glass walls with views in every direction.

"My, the city is breathtaking tonight," Birgitte said. "I've never been here. I had always assumed they catered to tourists."

"Took me a long time to try it myself," Chris said. "Funny thing is, you hear the original old-time San Francisco accent in here. Apparently it's popular with the North Beach families that moved to Marin."

"Well the petrale sole is my favorite, and this is as delicious as I've ever had. It's very nice of you to bring me here, Chris."

"Steve called me this morning," he said.

"He did? Oh."

"You don't think Steve could ever . . . hurt you or anything, do you?"

"Gosh, why would you ask that?"

"He was in a threatening mood. Toward me, not toward you. Pretty sure it was an act, but he's never put his hands on you, has he?"

"No. Never."

"Okay, I'm glad to hear it . . . Are you looking to the future at all?"

"Yes, of course I know I have to make a change. It's so hard to conceptualize turning my world upside down though."

"So why do anything for a while? Let it settle, who knows, you might work it out."

"I fear that is impossible. Whenever I've read about any sort of addiction, it seems the person never ultimately overcomes it."

"You think Steve has an addiction?"

"Maybe not a clinical addiction, but yes."

"He's not just a guy with a need to prove himself? The way we all are to an extent?"

"That's entirely plausible. But I went through his desk drawers from top to bottom. Notebooks, scraps of

paper, it goes on and on, and has, apparently, for quite some time.”

Chris waited a minute. “Getting back to that one thing though: if Steve ever *did* put his hands on you, you’d call me right away?”

“It’s certainly not something I’m anticipating, but fine.”

“Middle of the night, whenever?”

“If it makes you feel better, please know that I would.”

“On a lighter note, the bread pudding may not sound like much as desserts go, but it’s pretty darn good.”

Heading home he asked if she wanted to get an after-dinner drink somewhere.

“I was contemplating that as well,” she said.

“Where do you normally go?”

“I’m fairly limited. I mostly stay in my neighborhood. You have Booker’s, where we went, and then Weatherby’s, which tends to be my establishment of choice even though I don’t really fit in there.”

“Any place is fine actually,” she said. “Or maybe you’d like to come to my house. It would be my pleasure.”

“Ooh. When is Steve due to return from San Diego?”

“On Sunday.”

“And you don’t think he could be stepping up his business schedule, now that the proverbial shit has hit the fan?”

“No, but if that were the case, too bad. You and I are having a drink together. I’d call that pretty mild compared to his goings-ons, wouldn’t you?”

“I have to say, I’m admiring your spark,” he said.

Chris didn’t want to get too sidetracked with Idaho looming, but Steve’s well-stocked liquor cabinet was appealing. Birgitte sat him down on the couch and sure enough, brought out the cognac.

“I don’t know much,” he said, “but something tells me old France.”

“You’re not far off,” she said. “This is about fifty years old. Chateau de Montifaud. Steve has a connection.”

An hour went by and Chris said he better get going. “Is that non-negotiable?” Birgitte said. “Because you’re splendid company at the moment.”

“I have an early day tomorrow, but sure, I don’t mind sticking around a little longer,” he said.

“Do you work on Saturdays?”

“Sometimes, yeah . . . So . . . I’m not trying to back you in a corner or anything, but as a general question, if you slept with someone would you tell Steve?”

She kept her eyes on him, steady, serious.

“Absolutely. I might not volunteer the information, but when asked I would be completely truthful.”

“And he wouldn’t get violent or anything?”

“Chris, you keep addressing that. After twenty-three years of marriage, you know someone.”

“You’d think, but look what happened.”

“I’m talking about someone’s inner nature. Granted Steve gets upset on occasion, but I can tell you he’s not a violent person.”

Chris moved over, touched her cheek and gave her a little peck on the lips, a test kiss. Birgitte responded in full, and soon the trip to Idaho didn't seem all that urgent . . .

The sunlight woke him up. “What time do you have?” he said.

“It’s 9:20,” she said. “I’ve been watching you sleep for quite a while.”

He bolted up. “Wait a second. Oh my God.”

“Chris, is everything all right?”

“I just . . . really blew it with the time . . . I can't believe this.”

“I feel I'm partly to blame, then.”

“No, no, not in a million years. Everything'll be fine, it's not like someone's going to die . . . Come here.”

Birgitte nestled in against him. "You treated me so wonderfully last night," she said. "What can I do for you?"

"Just stay here for a minute would be good. Then I wouldn't mind a cup of coffee to go."

"Oh that's perfect. I'll brew you a Scandinavian blend. I'll think you'll love it."

When she went downstairs, Chris took a shower and got dressed. There was a bureau on Steve's side of the bed with several framed photos of Birgitte on top. Next to the pictures was a wooden box. Chris looked inside and it was full of loose change.

Hmm.

He dug around in his wallet and pulled out a business card from his short-lived post-*Chronicle* writing career. It said:

Chris Seely, Freelancer.

He stuck the card on top of the change and closed the box.

Birgitte was right, the coffee was special.

"In Denmark we do a lighter roast," she said, "which highlights the flavors intrinsic in the beans."

"Now you're going a little too far," he said. "But you know what? You're a special woman. I'm predicting a solid future."

She gave him a kiss. "I'll see you again?"

“Not right away, but promise me you’ll call me any time.”

“And you please be safe as well,” she said.

24 - Lucky Buck

"See this is the thing," Allison said when he arrived in Berkeley at close to eleven.

"There's nothing to talk about," Chris said. "I'm not even going to say I'm sorry, because it won't matter."

"Did you bring your guitar at least?"

"I did, and that's part of what slowed me down. I was somewhere else and had to go back and get it."

"I can see how that would slow a person down by six hours," Monica said. She had joined Allison on the front porch and had a suitcase next to her.

"You've got to be kidding me," Chris said.

"I wasn't planning on it originally," Monica said. "But with all this extra time this morning to think it over, a road trip could be fun."

"It won't be. Whatever. Whoever's in the car in the next thirty seconds, I'm going."

A half hour up Highway 80 he realized he was starving and pulled off at a truck stop in Fairfield. Allison said, "That wasn't the longest first leg of a trip. But I like stopping places."

A half hour later Chris said, "I feel better now, finally getting something in my stomach. The towns along here--Vallejo, Fairfield, Vacaville--they used to be like old middle-America. You'd hear pieces of Oklahoma accents as remnants of the dust bowl migration. Now it's gangs and oxycontin."

When they were past Sacramento into the foothills of the Sierras, he said, "Something I neglected to ask you last time. What do you both do, that you can take off without worrying about it?"

"Temp work," Monica said.

"Not a bad idea actually. That pay the bills?"

"Usually," Allison said. "And Henry understands our situation, so if we're short he works with us."

"Good old Henry," Chris said.

It was starting to get dark past Reno and he asked if anyone could drive a stick. Monica said they couldn't and what was the problem, he was doing just fine. The two of them were sprawled out in the back seat, half asleep.

"That's it," he said when they got to Winnemucca. "Unfortunately."

They checked into the Frontier 8 Motel a couple blocks off the main drag. "You guys get the better room," he said. "Two beds, no doubt all kinds of amenities."

"Thank you for getting two rooms," Allison said.
"You don't have to."

"Oh yes I do," Chris said. "Here's a few bucks for some dinner, have fun, and don't bother me until the morning."

"Meaning 5 am," Monica said. "Sharp."

Chris got cleaned up and walked over to the strip of casinos they had seen coming off the Interstate. He picked Stan's Lucky Buck and sat down at the lounge bar. A guy was up front on a little riser, playing guitar and singing Toby Keith with synthesized backup. It was a nice place, it had a homegrown feel to it, very different than the unpleasant corporate atmosphere that had taken over Vegas and most of Reno too.

The cocktail waitresses were jammed into shiny blue and gold outfits. After a few minutes of watching them Chris asked the bartender, a friendly young guy wearing a long-sleeved western shirt, "There any of those legal ranches around that you hear about in Nevada?"

"You mean like the old Mustang?"

"Yeah."

"Well, we got a few of those places in town. Pretty basic stuff, not really ranches anymore for the most part."

"Is there one you . . . recommend?"

"That'd be the semi-legal one, the Tumbleweed J. There you do have a ranch. It's about six miles east on Jungo Road, which is State 49. You just go out the main door, go up the corner and hang a left at Burger King."

"When you say 'semi-legal', I mean I wouldn't want to be breaking the law or anything."

"Not a concern. They got technicalities with code and shit. Maybe once every couple years they'll haul in a few of the gals and patrons, hold 'em for an hour. It's all for show."

"Anyone in particular there?"

"Well what are you, late 30s, early 40s?"

"Yeah."

"I'd go with Sandra. She's lived a little bit. Very compassionate lady."

Chris thanked him for the tips, finished his beer, and headed out to try to find the place.

It was definitely a ranch, there were barns and corrals and you could smell the animals and feed. The parking area was crowded, and Chris remembered it was a Saturday night.

There were four or five guys standing around in the entry parlor and two of the working women were sitting on couches, one smoking and staring into space, the other wrapped up in her cell phone.

An older woman in jeans and a starched white blouse appeared and said she was Daisy and could she help him, and Chris asked if Sandra was available.

"Sandy's here tonight," Daisy said, "but she's booked up through her shift. You've visited her before?"

"No, I got a referral."

"Okay let's see. I'm thinking Jeanette might be a good fit then. She's newer here but she's one of our more mature girls, like Sandy."

Chris said that'd be fine, signed something, took care of the credit card and Daisy walked him to Jeanette's room, which had an outside entrance.

A movie with Robert De Niro was on with the sound off. Jeanette said, "How are you?"

"Hard to say," Chris said. "I always anticipated this moment, but now that I'm here, it's an odd vibe."

"Do you mean me?"

"No, that part's fine. Just not sure I want to do anything about it."

"Okay, fair enough. There's no need to announce anything, should you change your mind."

"Do you . . . get there . . . ever?"

"You mean when I'm working?"

"Yeah."

“Not during the act. Occasionally from foreplay. Doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy it all though.” She took off her top, everything bounding forward.

“I see,” Chris said. “Well, maybe I can give it a go at that.”

When they were laying back, Jeanette said, “I’m really glad you relaxed your guard. It’s just a sense, but I feel you’re hiding from something. Or running.”

“I *am* wrestling with my mid-life direction,” he said. “Which makes you perceptive.”

“You learn to size people up,” she said. “If I can distract you for an hour, I’ve spread a tiny bit of goodness out into the world.”

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They had lunch in Twin Falls and got into Pocatello before three. A guy at the gas station mini-mart recommended a motel on 5th Street, so they went with it. Chris showered and took a little walk out the front door, and just up the block was the beginning of the Idaho State University campus, which he didn’t expect, another college.

A few blocks further he passed a steakhouse that looked good and he went back and rounded everybody up and took them there for dinner. “I’d highly recommend suspending the vegan act for tonight,” he

said. "If you insist though there's always the chef's salad, if they hold the hardboiled egg and ham."

To his surprise, Allison and Monica ordered house specials with fourteen ounce rib eyes. "Something about being in this environment," Allison said. "The meat fits."

"This is really good Chris," Monica said. "I'm glad I tagged along."

"Well I do give you credit in one department," he said. "You're good travelers. Not much whining or complaining so far. Even last night, little town in the middle of the desert, you were upbeat."

"I forgot to ask, what'd you do last night?" Allison said.

"I went to a brothel."

"*What?*" Monica said.

"Wow. What was that like?" Allison said.

"It was pretty much the stereotype you would expect."

Monica said, "Meaning what? Come on, you have to tell us about it."

"Everything was handled pretty professionally. You check in and they match you and farm you out."

"And were the women attractive?" Allison said.

"I didn't see many of them, but mine was. She was a few pounds overweight, but I tend to like that."

"And . . . ?" Monica said.

“Well there’s a mind-body connection obviously. It took me a while to ‘relax my guard’, was the way she put it.”

“And did she orgasm?” Allison said.

“*Jesus*, not so loud . . . No.”

Monica said, “Can we go with you next time? Just to take a look?”

“On the way back, you want, I’ll drop you off. But I’ll wait in the parking lot.”

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Monday morning Chris drove around getting the lay of Pocatello. There were eight or nine health clubs, but the gym that Thad was hopefully still involved with was Boardwalk Fit on Yellowstone Avenue.

He found the place and went in. A tan guy in a polo shirt was sitting behind an oval counter, and Chris asked was there a brochure or something and the guy said by all means, right here.

He didn’t see Thad Simmons’ name but he noticed there were three locations of Boardwalk Fit, with clubs in the works for Twin Falls and Boise.

“Is this the original facility?” Chris asked the polo shirt guy.

“Yes sir,” he said. “Since 2004.”

“So you’re doing well then, expanding.”

The guy nodded. “We like to think we’ve carved a significant niche in the industry. We still have them of course, but we’ve de-emphasized the machines and weights. We’re known for heavy duty classes and personal training. Boot camp style. It’s all about the core now.”

“You owned by a corporation then, or what?”

“That’s one of the things we’re most proud of. Our boss founded Boardwalk with one room, a treadmill, a bike and a nautilus machine. He manages hands-on, and he’s not the type to sell out.”

“You have to admire that.”

“You do. Great place to work. I’m just part time, but even with me they make you feel like you’re part owner of the business.”

“Really,” Chris said. “You have a one-day thing you can sell me so I can try it out?”

“On the house, I just need your X right here please,” and Chris signed ‘Jerry Smith’, thanked the guy and gave himself a tour. There wasn’t much to the place--no basketball or racquetball or pool, mainly just workout areas with minimal equipment where trainers could yell at you as you developed your core. There was one class in progress and it looked grim.

At the end of the hall past the men’s locker room was an office with *Manager* on the door. Chris opened

it. A man looked up from his desk, frowning, taking off his half-frame reading glasses. There were several award-type plaques on the walls, and a nameplate on the desk read 'Thad Simmons'.

“Oops,” Chris said, “I guess this isn’t where I inquire about membership.”

“That’s all up front,” Thad said, and he put his glasses back on.

+++

Allison and Monica had discovered a microbrewery pub near the railroad tracks and they insisted Chris go with them for a little happy hour.

“Did you know that Pocatello once had the largest rail yard west of the Mississippi River?” Monica said. “We found that out today.”

Chris said, “I didn’t, but I have to admit this black stout is pretty dang good. A touch of sweetness to it. You can’t get anything like this at Weatherby’s.”

“Is Weatherby’s where you took me?” Allison said.

“Yeah.”

“How’s your friend?” she said.

“Shep, the bartender?”

“No, the one who needed to see you that night in your lobby. In the short skirt.”

“Joyce . . . She’s okay, I haven’t caught up with her in a while.”

“She was into you though, that was obvious.”

“She was?” Monica said.

“Yes, seriously. Chris, have you ever been married?”

“Once, when I was about your age. What are you twenty-one, twenty-two?”

“Gosh, you really think we’re that young?” Monica said. “We’re both twenty-four.”

“Okay then, sorry. Bottom line, it went south fast.”

“But do you still keep in touch?” Allison said.

“No. I wouldn’t even recognize her.”

“So who are you closest to in the world?”

“Man, you’re grilling me. You mean if I was in a big jam, who would I turn to?”

“Yes, who?”

“No one particularly jumps out, to be honest.”

“This is what I’m driving at. I’m sorry if I’m overstepping.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I mean, I’m having trouble getting why you would need to visit a brothel,” Allison said. “Even though it is interesting to hear about.”

“Let me shift gears on you for a minute,” he said.

“If I’m trying to find someone, and I’ve got a name, Jeff Jones, and I want to make sure it’s not the wrong Jeff Jones, what do I do?”

“Are they a professional?” Monica said.

“Probably be considered one, yeah.”

“Did you try Linkedin yet?”

“No.”

“It’s a giant business networking site. People list their past work experience, that sort of thing. You might be able to narrow it down.”

“We’re on there,” Allison said.

“It helps in the temp world,” Monica said.

“Okay thanks,” Chris said, and he ordered another stout and excused himself. When he came back he said, “I see they have open mics in this place. There’s a flyer posted outside the men’s room.”

“Gee. What night?” Allison said.

“Thursdays and Saturdays, if I got it right.”

“Al, that’s perfect,” Monica said. “This time Chris can even be there.”

“Will we still be here Thursday?” Allison said.

“We should, yeah,” Chris said, trying to picture things. “Probably not much beyond that though.”

“What exactly do you have to do here, anyway?” Monica said.

“A business thing I’ve been putting off.”

“That’s certainly specific.”

“See, now that’s it again, Chris,” Allison said. “You’re holding too much back, and it’s affecting your quality of life.”

+++

On Tuesday Chris sat down at a computer in the university student union and tried Thad Simmons on LinkedIn. There were a few results, but one photo looked distinctly like the Thad he had walked in on so he clicked that guy. It listed him as “President of Broadway Fit, LLC”, and sure enough, boom, under “Experience” it said “Senior Account Manager, Eastern Sports Clubs, Bedford, NY, 1993-95”. It wasn’t clear how he’d ended up in this unlikely place, but he had.

Chris was twenty-one when Thad raped Bonnie. She was twenty-four. According to Bonnie, Thad was obsessed with her and had professed his love. She rejected him repeatedly until he took matters into his own hands that night when everyone else had cleared out of the office. A few employees told the police that the two had been friendly, and it quickly turned into a “she said, he said” case of rough sex, even though Bonnie had multiple bruises and went to the emergency room, and even though it came out two previous women had filed complaints against Thad. The young female DA handling it told Bonnie she didn’t think she could convince a jury.

Chris couldn't find a home address for Thad, so he picked up a take-out lunch, drove to Broadway Fit and sat in the parking lot. Club members came and left over the next couple hours, and there was a black late-model Toyota Highlander in the rear of the parking lot that hadn't moved, and time would tell if it was Thad's. Meanwhile, he called Birgitte.

"How have you been?" she said.

"Fine, but I'm more concerned about you."

"How nice of you to inquire. Things are good, actually."

"Really?"

"Yes. Don't ask me why, but Steve has been treating me famously. It's almost as though he's discovered a rejuvenated passion for our marriage."

"Jeez . . . That's amazing. I'm trying to process that one."

"I am as well. All I know is he's been a pleasure to be around."

"So evidently a light bulb went on. Or something."

"Perhaps."

"Okay, well good luck with it then."

"I appreciate your calling, Chris. You must know you've been quite beneficial to both Steve and myself."

It was nearly 3:30 and he didn't want to, but he figured he should call Joyce. "You answered," he said. "That mean you're out on bail?"

Joyce said, "Let's can the humor, if you don't mind. Where are you? I was in the city on Sunday and stopped over a few times, not to mention texted you."

"I'm in the vicinity of Las Vegas . . . Listen, what else is going on? I have to get off in a second."

"Bruce and I are history, for one thing."

"Whoa."

"He's been very unpleasant recently and I finally put my foot down. I don't know, maybe him doing the Donny thing is not that far-fetched."

"Hard to argue with the possibility."

"Oh, and did you see that on the news, about the guy and the dog?"

"No. What?"

"My God, the worst story. A man on Clement Street gets into it with another driver over a parking space. It escalates and he grabs the other driver's little dog off the front seat and flings it into traffic."

"Oh no."

"The poor thing was still barely alive but died on the way to the vet."

"Christ sakes."

“Anyhow, sorry to put a damper on your Las Vegas fun. You be good.”

“Yeah, you too,” he said.

It had almost reached the torture stage when Thad came strutting out the door of the gym at 4:45 and got into the black Highlander. He turned right, continued a couple miles up Yellowstone past the Pine Ridge Mall and the 86 Interchange, and made a couple of moves that took him to the Bannock Swim and Racquet Club, where it sure looked like he wasn't going to be in any rush. Chris called Allison.

“Don't wait around for me to eat or anything,” he said. “I have to speak to someone who keeps postponing it. It's going to be a while.”

“Not a problem,” she said. “It's been a good day. I spent some time working on my songs. I can't wait to play them for you.”

“So you're going to do the open mic then?”

“I think. It's a little intimidating, not being from around here. Oh, and Monica met someone.”

“Male or female?”

“A guy. He's a graduate student at the college.”

“Good for her then.”

“The thing is, he may spend the night. In which case, would you mind if I came into your room?”

“I do mind,” he lied. “But I guess, if there’s no alternative.”

“Okay, let’s see how it plays out. Monica will appreciate you being understanding.”

Thad emerged from the Bannock Swim and Racquet Club after nearly two hours, which was infuriating. The guy didn’t even look fit, how could he justify all that time? Chris followed Thad as he jumped onto I-15, exited at the southern edge of town, passed the zoo and golf course, crossed the tracks on Cheyenne Avenue and continued into the foothills until finally a garage door opened at a house on Johnny Creek Drive and Thad disappeared into it.

Now what?

There was an area at the end of the road where it looked like people parked cars and maybe let dogs run around the hillside, so Chris waited there for a while but didn’t see one dog walker, much less Thad. Could you just ring the bell and shoot the guy when he answered?

He drove back past the house. The neighbors on Thad’s side of the road shouldn’t be a problem, since everybody’s property seemed to be a couple acres and they couldn’t see each other’s front doors. The house across from Thad did have a view of things though. He’d have to make sure nobody was home there first. If this was the right way to handle it.

He went back to the brewpub and had another one of those black stouts. Could you shoot him in the manager's office when the polo shirt guy was busy taking a shit or something? Or could you get to him in a parking lot some place, maybe when he was loading his groceries after dark? Could you get a day pass to the Bannock club and drown him in the pool there?

No, obviously. Chris could see this wasn't going to be easy, he'd have to follow the guy's routine carefully and hope for an opening, and then not dilly-dally.

It was quiet at the motel with no sign of the girls. The room had basic cable, not the full shebang that everyone was used to now, and it was amazing that with sixty channels there was nothing to watch. One station was twenty-four hour LDS Church stuff, and the Mormon Tabernacle was singing out of the huge temple in Salt Lake City. It was different at least, so he left it on.

Allison knocked on the door close to midnight. "Chris, I'm not sure if I'm going to need to leave the room. Are you still good with it though if I do?"

"I can deal with it, but you're not sure because?"

"Monica may not be that into her friend. Tim."

"That's surprising, she should know all about him by now."

"Either way, can we have breakfast?"

"I can probably fit it in," he said.

+++

Voices and laughter and banging around woke him up, coming from their room. His first thought was, this place is half empty, why was I stupid enough to get two rooms next to each other? The activity continued unabated for a couple hours until he couldn't take it anymore, and he bundled up and went for a walk. It was five-thirty in the morning.

A block into it he decided why not walk up to Thad's, maybe something would present itself. It was further than he thought, especially how you had to wind around in the hills after you crossed the railroad tracks, and it was after seven when he got there, though it did feel good to be getting some exercise in the crisp mountain air.

Lights were on in Thad's kitchen and Chris could see him at the counter. He walked to the end of the road to the parking area, and when he got back Thad's lights were off and the house seemed quiet. It appeared to be garbage day; most of the neighbors had cans and recycling containers out near the road but a few didn't, including Thad.

Chris heard a garbage truck nearby and followed the sound. What he deduced pretty quickly was some of the residents went with the deluxe service, where the sanitation guys had to go up the driveway and get the

cans out of the backyard or garage. He went back to Thad's, walked around the side of the garage and sure enough, there was a keypad mounted inconspicuously in the back corner above the hose spigot.

During that year he'd spent in Teaneck, New Jersey, his apartment complex installed a gate, and tenants were always forgetting the code. The cops came by a couple times and one of them told him because of safety regulations you could often get in those things by punching in 911 or 1234.

This was different of course, a private setup, but Chris figured what the heck and picked up a twig out of Thad's yard, tried 911 with it and nothing happened, so he tried 1234, and there was the hum of the garage door in action, and he walked down the driveway, took one look back to make sure, and began the long trek back to the motel.

25 - Road Maps

They were at Inez's Country Kitchen, the noon-time crowd filtering in, and Allison and Monica were having bacon and eggs with sides of pancakes.

"All that activity apparently," Chris said, sipping his coffee. "It took it out of you."

Monica said, "Not right now, Chris, okay? We're not feeling that great."

"At times," he said, "it sounded like a couple battleships pitching around on the high seas. Do you think anyone else noticed, or just me?"

No one said anything.

"The good thing though," he said, "was it got me out early. You can't beat going for a walk when it's ten degrees and dark. You get perspective."

Allison put her fork down. "I'm sorry that it played out differently than we thought," she said.

Monica said, "Tim had a friend. Matt."

"Good then, you resolved the uneven relationship with Tim," Chris said.

"No, I got together with Matt. Tim and Allison hooked up."

“Ah.”

“But Chris?” Allison said. “We’re going have to go take a nap. After that can you help me with the songs?”

“I guess if I have to . . . But one thing is you have to thin out the lyrics. You’re trying to do too much.”

+++

By Thursday he had Thad’s basic routine down and he loaded the Czechpoint and transferred it from the spare tire compartment to the glove box and covered it with a bunch of road maps. He had gone over to Hayward to buy bullets at a place Ray told him about, and he parked a few blocks away and paid cash, probably overly paranoid about the whole thing but glad now he didn’t have to screw around with finding ammunition out here.

He stopped off at City Hall and checked the land records for Thad’s property. A Marion Simmons was on title with Thad, but there hadn’t been any sign of her at the house. Hopefully they were separated and she was out of the picture, not just away for a couple days.

The best move, which wasn’t saying much, did seem to be to get in that garage and shoot the prick when he came home at night, maybe have him turn on the engine first to muffle the sound. Still, it was prudent to be ready if a better opportunity was out there.

He followed Thad again from Broadway Fit to the country club and realized even if he could pull it off there wouldn't be enough time tonight because of the damn open mike. If he missed this one, they'd kill him for sure.

There was a Texas-style rib place he'd heard about on the east side of town, so he went there for dinner. It was around 7:30 when he finished and since he had some time now, he took a drive. As he headed east there were less houses and more farms and the last bit of sunset reflected off the fences. He came to a railroad crossing and sat there waiting for a freight train to clear, and a pickup truck pulled in behind him and switched on its high beam lights.

When the train passed, Chris started slowly, watching his rear view mirror. The guy in the pickup honked at him and then swung onto the right shoulder and as he passed Chris he stuck his head out the window, spit in the direction of the car and gave him the finger. Then he started laughing and sped by. The guy was wearing a camouflage John Deere cap and had long, stringy hair. He looked to be in his 20's.

Chris accelerated until he caught up to the truck and flicked on his own high beams. He followed the pickup for a couple miles until the guy made an abrupt left turn into what looked like an equipment yard. Chris

kept going straight and tried to calm down. There had been no reason to get into that, the jerk didn't like his California plates or whatever, so what?

Bright lights poured into his car again, and the pickup was back behind him, riding him tight. They continued driving for what seemed like several miles. It was dark and there were no signs of people or even lights in the distance. It felt like they were climbing slightly.

Chris slowed down and came to a stop, hoping the truck would move on, but the guy stopped and waited, his front grill just about on Chris's bumper. Chris started up again, desperately looking now for anywhere to turn off and hopefully end this nightmare. Finally there was a sign with an arrow to the right and he followed it. It was a small dirt pullout area with power poles and big electrical boxes and a utility company sign.

The truck parked parallel to him and the guy got out.

"Ain't you a bastard then," the John Deere guy said, coming toward him, smiling. "Gonna teach you something now."

Chris opened his door, stood up and shot the guy in the chest. The guy's hat flew off and he wobbled and went down, clutching at himself, moaning. Chris

watched him for a minute, figured he better shoot him in the head too to be safe, so he moved closer and squinted and aimed for the middle of the forehead. He came in a little off to the side, but the guy wasn't moving any more and you couldn't make out the left side of his face, so he figured that was good enough.

There wasn't much room, and the way the guy was situated Chris had to make several maneuvers to avoid running over him, which would have been fine except it might put the guy on his car somewhere. So he took his time and finally got the fuck out of there without contacting anything. One good thing, the guy had turned off his engine and lights.

He followed the road back as best he could. At one point it felt like he made a wrong turn but he went with it, pretty sure he was northeast of Pocatello and at least traveling south.

Eventually he started to see lights way off to the right, and he stayed with them to the outskirts of town. He went to the motel and took a shower, only then noticing that his hands were shaking, and lay down.

He bolted up with a start, remembering Allison and Monica were at the brewpub. It was 9:35 and he tore over there.

They ignored him when he walked in. There was a list of that night's performers on a chalkboard near the

little stage, and Allison was number three and had already gone.

There were seven musicians signed up, and number five was up there now, a man playing piano singing Billy Joel. Chris found the person in charge and was able to get on the list as number eight. He approached Allison.

“I have my guitar in the trunk,” he said, “so I thought I’d join in the fun.”

“Whatever,” she said.

“What I’m going to do, I’ll play a song, and then you come up there with me, okay? What do you have, that works as a duet?”

“Yeah right,” she said.

Monica said, “Every time we start saying what a nice guy you are, you pull this. There’s something deep-rooted, pathologically wrong with you Chris.”

“I’m getting the guitar,” he said. “I haven’t done this in a long time.”

A woman played the accordion next and sang along. It sort of worked. A couple of her songs were in French. Number seven was a folksinger, a young kid trying to be Phil Ochs out of Greenwich Village in the sixties. He had passion but he was slightly off key.

Chris tuned up, cleared his throat and announced here was one about Florida, the one time he visited

there, called “Look Around Town”. He forgot some of the words and had to hum a few lines, but the audience seemed to like it, and it was a pretty full house. That was one thing he noticed about places like Pocatello-- when there was an event, people didn’t over-think what else they could be doing instead, they showed up and paid attention and stayed until it was over.

“I have a couple more I’m going to need help with,” Chris said. “So I’m going to bring up Allison Burdette.” Staring right at her. There was a smattering of applause and Allison made her way to the stage, clearly not in the mood.

He told her, “We’ll just wing this. We’ll do two more of mine, you fill in the harmonies wherever you think, and then we’ll do one of yours, your best song.”

“I already played it.”

“So we’ll do a different one. Jesus.”

The first had a lazy Merle Haggard feel, titled “Straight Ahead Two Times”, and the second was an upbeat number his band played twenty years ago called “Working Jupiter”. He could feel Allison getting into it, inserting herself just right, and he tried to enjoy the moment even though he kept flashing on the John Deere guy.

He asked her which song she’d picked out for the grand finale and she said the third one from that time in

his apartment, which she was calling “I’m In Love With Your Shadow”. She sang it well. She’d cleaned up the lyrics and strengthened the bridge and it flowed.

"The part about the garden though," he said back at the table, "You'll see it through its time of toil?"

"Yes, I added that line."

"No. But overall, you weren't bad."

"Al, they loved you," Monica said. "That last song got the biggest ovation of the night."

"The other thing, I'm thinking we'll leave tomorrow," Chris said. "Might as well be on the road bright and early."

"Already?" Allison said. "We're just getting used to it here. And the bartender asked me if I'll be at the open mike on Saturday."

"I'm comfortable here as well," said Monica. "We spent the day in Old Town. There's a lot we haven't seen yet."

"Either of you want to screw around with the bartender," he said, "better start on that now. We're out of here at 5 am sharp."

"You're a real party-pooper, you know that?" Allison said.

26 – Readjustment

Chris slept badly, twitching awake every few minutes. Around one he phoned Bethany.

"Hey Chris," she said. "I haven't heard your voice in a while. Interesting of you to pick now."

"That was fun. Down in LA."

"It was . . . I still think about it. But you sound strange."

"Your ex-husband, any updates with that?"

"No. But tell me honestly Chris, are you still feeling fine?"

"A-okay."

"And you're back safe and sound from your trip?"

"Nah, still trying to accomplish a few things . . . What I'm thinking you do, tell Kyle to shove it up his ass."

No response.

"Anyway, how's your squash?"

"Chris, I'm going back to bed. Nice of you to call."
She hung up.

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They were two-and-a-half hours below Pocatello on Interstate 15, approaching Salt Lake City. Chris said, "Okay now, we need a meeting of the minds. We go right, we end up back in Berkeley tonight. We go straight, we visit Phoenix."

Monica was scrunched up in the passenger seat against the window, with Allison laid out in back, dead to the world. Monica opened a slit of an eye, gave him a 'whatever' hand signal and readjusted herself and went back to sleep.

How could he have screwed up Thad like that? It was almost there, only a matter of time before he got it right, but now they had to hightail it out of town because he wasted the whole trip on some idiot.

He came up on the US 80 Interchange, got in the right lane, thought about it, thought about it, and kept going. It was ten hours from Salt Lake to Phoenix. Might as well call Floyd and let him know.

Allison and Monica finally woke up when he stopped for gas near Blank, Nevada. "Where are we?" Allison said.

"On the way to see my brother. We got six hours left. You've been missing the scenery."

"What's he like?" Monica said.

"Floyd is seven years younger than me, so it's hard to say. He's generous, has a good heart, that much I know."

"But you're close, right?" Allison said.

"Not really. I ignored him growing up, which I regret."

"What does he look like?" she said.

"Ah Jesus, you're not planning to mess with my kid brother now, are you?"

"I wasn't thinking that."

Monica said, "She might be. I know Al, that's where she's going with her questions. Anyway, this should be fun, I've never been to the southwest."

"Don't hold your breath," Chris said.

Floyd lived in a tract house in Mesa. Not only did the houses look the same but the neighborhoods got you mixed up too. The people next door to Floyd had a giant Winnebago in the driveway with a flag flying off it, so Chris figured Floyd could use that as a landmark to find his house.

The inside smelled like fresh paint. "I'm drawing a blank on when you were down here last," Floyd said. "Pretty sure though I was still in that first condo."

"Big spread with a couple pools, bikinis walking around, the whole nine yards," Chris said.

"That's right, downtown. Then I had another one in Tempe. I got a sweet deal on this place though. You know, the housing downturn. No pool, but I joined a club to cool off and shit. It works."

They were having cocktails at the little kitchen table. Allison said, "You don't look that much like Chris, but you kind of talk the same."

Floyd said, "Not sure I want to hear, but how did you all get together for this adventure?"

"I met Chris at a coffee place," Allison said. "He was having a difficult day, and I asked him if he wanted to go do something."

"A little shaky on the details, but it doesn't matter," Chris said.

Floyd freshened everyone's drink. "And we took a lovely, long walk through San Francisco at night," Allison said.

"I was there too," Monica said. "We had that really good Indian dinner, remember?"

"Oh that's right," Allison said. "Then you went to the lesbian party."

"You're a lesbian?" Floyd said.

"No."

"She sort of is," Allison said. "She brings girls home sometimes."

"Interesting," Floyd said. "Could you see yourself in a long term relationship with a woman, or is it just for pleasure?"

Monica said, "The second thing. You're worse with the direct questions than Chris."

"So Floyd, what do you do, for your job?" Allison said.

"I scramble a little bit, no set thing. I teach some golf at a resort, you get the snowbirds coming down from Chicago and New York, and the money can be good. I've been a little lucky in real estate also."

"Doing what?" Chris said.

"Actually the same type stuff I was doing for Chip. Distressed houses, flipping them. He screwed me, but then again he taught me the ropes."

Monica said, "Who's Chip?"

"Guy in Las Vegas, sort of a player," Floyd said. "Smart, but sleazy. I told Chris he got murdered a few weeks ago."

"My God," Allison said. "What happened?"

Floyd said, "He'd moved out to L.A. and someone got into his office and killed him. At first I was kind of celebrating because Chip owed me money and he didn't care. Then I started thinking he wasn't that bad of a guy."

"But they think it's mob-related, right?" Chris said.

"They thought so, but now they don't know. I hear bits and pieces from my buddy in Vegas. They're pretty sure someone used a baseball bat on him though."

"Well," Chris said. "Anyone hungry? Whatever's your restaurant of choice, it's on me."

"Nah, I got steaks and burgers ready to go on the grill. That's how we do it here in Arizona in late March."

The girls went for a walk and Floyd and Chris hovered around the backyard barbeque. Floyd said, "Still not clear on how you pulled it off my big brother, but those are two righteously foxy women."

"They have their moments. They can be impulsive though, which you have to roll with."

"Are you currently hitting on either one of them, or what?"

"No."

"You're sure."

"I'm sure. Almost happened once, Joyce got in the way. Never re-ignited itself after that."

"Jesus, Joyce. What happened to her?"

"She's around, we're on good terms."

"Little more subtle with her, but she was one hot number too."

"Yeah, well, what can you do."

"I know it . . . How'd she get in the way though?"

"Allison came over to my apartment. Joyce shows up unannounced to ask a question, broke up the whole flow. I was already irritated because I had a chance to see someone else that night."

"Did you follow through with the someone else?"

"I did. A very warm lady. She says she's got an ex-husband messing with her mind, holding her back. Physically."

"You buy that?"

"I go back and forth. I'm tempted to talk to the guy though."

"Now why would you want to fool with something like that, man?"

"I know, there are other opportunities, without the baggage. Just something that's been bothering me, that's all."

"Okay whatever. At least coming down here, you can put all your concerns behind you for a few days."

27 - Line of Baloney

Chris was drinking coffee in the kitchen, the patio sliding door open, birds chirping, sunshine flooding in, when Monica appeared wearing an Idaho State University tee shirt that only covered half of her turquoise thong.

"You've got to be kidding," he said.

"Good morning to you too. What?"

"To be laying that on someone this early, that's unfair." Not taking his eyes off her as she opened a cabinet and reached for a cup.

"Chris, we're in Arizona," she said. "It has to be seventy-five degrees out already."

"Fine, not to change the subject, but you sleep okay?"

"Like a baby. I had the window open. The air here . . ."

"Dry, right? I'm going take a run, you want to come?"

"Hmm. Okay, I'll try. I feel like I've been gaining weight on this road trip."

"I wouldn't worry about it, honestly," he said.

Everything outside was cement. Even the high school, a few blocks away, had a fake grass football field with a fake dirt track surrounding it. Chris ran laps on the track so Monica could go at her own pace, but she didn't last long and ended up sitting in the bleachers.

"You have a fluid stride," she said when they were walking back. "It must make jogging easier."

"Pain in the ass is what it is," he said. "The best thing, find a sport. Then you don't have to know you're exercising."

Chris's phone rang and it showed Maierhaffer. He stopped walking and took the call. "So, how's the butter-butt pretty boy?" Maierhaffer said.

"Fair to middling."

"Someone's looking for you. Says you're never home. It's nice to know you're still alive."

"Steve?"

"What."

"Have you stopped doing your thing?"

"I'll be in touch," Maierhaffer said.

Chris called Birgitte. "Everything still good?" he said.

"Yes, of course it is . . ." she said. "Chris, it's not necessary for you to continue interrogating me."

"I don't think it's still good," he said.

"All right . . . Steve has admittedly been grouchy of late. He's experiencing a withdrawal of sorts . . . I can't hold that against him."

"He touch you at all, scare you in any way?"

"No . . . Nothing like that." Taking a little too long to answer a simple question.

"Okay then," he said.

He waved Monica away as he plugged one ear and dialed Ray. There was no answer. "Damn it," he said. "What time is it in California?"

"I think 12:20, the same as here, now that it's Daylight Savings," Monica said. "You seem upset."

"I got a friend I can't reach. It's Saturday, he's probably getting dialysis as we speak."

"Some of that sounded bizarre. Did someone scare someone and so forth. What's up with that?"

"Hard to say. Hopefully it's just me putting my nose where it doesn't belong."

"Chris you're on a holiday, okay? You have to eliminate these projections. Stay in the here and now, let yourself have fun."

She was standing close to him, concerned. He bent down, grabbed her behind the knees, and when he straightened up she was upside down over his shoulder. "Wait . . . what are you doing . . . don't," she said, but

she was laughing and he kept her up there dangling and jostling around until they got to Floyd's house.

"I see what you mean about that weight gain," he said. "I could only carry you two blocks."

"You're not funny," she said.

Floyd and Allison were next to each other on the couch, Floyd flipping pages of a photo album. "Hey, morning Chrissy, Monica. Remember the summer mom and dad dragged us to that lake in Wisconsin?"

Chris said, "You guys bang each other already?"

"No," Floyd said. "We're hitting it off, but it's not like that."

"They did," Monica said.

"Long as everyone's having fun," Chris said. "I'm going to look around Anthem this afternoon. You guys feel safe being left with my brother?"

"I thought I'd take them over to Scottsdale, find a little action," Floyd said.

"Actually, why don't I go with Chris," Monica said.

+++

He'd been carrying the address for Kyle Lamb around in his wallet since he pulled it off the computer at the Funston library, the same day he was questioned by Detective Cousins, which was two days after the incident with Chip Reggio.

Traffic was light. They passed various planned communities on both sides of the freeway, extensions of north Phoenix. "Think you could ever live in one of these?" Chris asked Monica.

"I'm not sure, what about you?"

"Has an artificial feel, but there'd be redeeming aspects . . . All your needs within five minutes, everything bright-spanking clean, no crime to worry about. A giant year-round pool in your complex."

"Probably I could," she said. "Not now, it'd be a tad slow, but when I settle down to have kids."

"Hold on, you're leaning that direction?"

"Oh, absolutely. I've wanted to be a mother since I can't remember . . . You're laughing."

"I'm not laughing at you, you could have fooled me is all. I'm happy that's your goal."

"Your brother is red hot, incidentally," she said.

"You think so?"

"Totally. Look at Allison getting her hands on him right away. I love her, but what a single-minded little bitch."

"The way things have been playing out, pretty good odds you'll get your chance."

"You'd be fun too though," she said.

"Oh," he said.

+++

There were two similar developments that made up Anthem it turned out, one a little fancier with a golf course and requiring you to deal with a guard booth. Luckily Kyle lived in the more modest section you could drive right into, and when they got to the address, there he apparently was, a thin guy with a backwards baseball cap and a goatee shooting baskets with his kids in the driveway.

Chris said, "Something could be off, but there's a chance that's the person."

"What person again now?" Monica said.

The guy glanced toward the car and they kept going and turned the corner. Chris said, "Okay. Don't tell Floyd or anyone else about this . . . A woman I know in San Francisco, I'm trying to help her get on with her life. She says her ex-husband is essentially mind-fucking her."

"The man playing basketball back there, he doesn't look the type, frankly."

"I agree, but this stuff can surprise you . . . Hey, would you want to talk to him?"

"Me?"

"Yeah . . . How 'bout . . . tell him you're looking around, considering moving into the area. Pick his brain, see how he is."

"Well I guess I could. If you really need me to play detective."

"Just walk back there right now before he goes anywhere. Make sure you introduce yourself so he gives you his name too. My guy is Kyle."

It took her twenty minutes. "That was kind of a trip," she said.

"What'd you get?"

"I got that those are his step kids, he's lived here eight years, the quality of life is great except for July and August, but it's a bear if you have to commute . . . And his name is Kyle."

"Dang. You are good."

"And also, last thing . . ."

"Yep?"

"I'm having a drink with him. At six."

"Oh my God."

"He's actually really nice."

"I'm not believing this . . . What about his step-family obligations?"

"He didn't mention that. What else should I ask him?"

"Wow . . . Well the main thing we're trying to determine, is he purposely sticking it to my friend, or is she feeding me a line of baloney."

"Okay don't worry, I should be able to get you that. It might take a couple of drinks."

"Try to make it 7-Up or something, on your end."

"Chris, I can take care of myself."

The place was called Jackson's Hole And Bistro. It was in a shopping center near Safeway, a short drive from Kyle's house. Chris said, "What I'm wondering, what kind of guy cheats on his wife right in his own backyard? At least put some distance on the situation."

"He's not cheating on his wife."

"You know what I mean. He's either a dumb shit, or just as likely, he wants to show off his new prize."

They were on the far side of the parking lot, and Monica got out. "I'll be right here," Chris said.

He watched her walk over there and disappear inside. Then he called Ray again. "Seely, you son of a bitch," Ray said. "I actually kind of miss your ass."

"Ray, I have to run something by you. You drinking anything yet?"

"No, but about to be. I just walked in. Had to sit in the chair dealing with the bullshit all afternoon."

"Okay hold off on that for a minute then. Birgitte might be having a problem with her husband."

"Man, you already told me that. In fact I seem to recall it was *you* initiated it."

"No, not that. Now I'm worried he might not be treating her right. I talked to her at noontime, nothing she said, I just had a bad feeling."

Ray didn't say anything.

"Ray?"

"Where you at right now?"

"I'm in Arizona, that's the whole problem."

Ray said, "I got this then."

Chris said, "What do you mean, you got this?", but Ray was off the phone.

+++

It occurred to Chris he'd been spending too much time sitting in parking lots. Finally, nearly 8:30, he spotted Monica in front of Jackson's Hole mingling with the doofus. Chris waited for the obligatory hug and peck on the cheek so he could thankfully get the hell out of there, but no, she follows Kyle to his car, *gets in*, and they drive away.

He followed them as they jumped on the freeway toward Phoenix and got off fifteen minutes later, turned into a Holiday Inn Express and went inside. Chris sat there with the engine running, trying to digest this. He sent Monica a text, and went home to Floyd's.

"You're back," his brother said.

"Sort of," Allison said. She was sitting on Floyd's lap, in the kitchen, beverages in front of them.

"She's having dinner with someone," Chris said. "I have to go pick her up later."

"Yeah, right," Allison said, playing with Floyd's hair. "Now you're getting to know Monica, Chris. She's not particularly complicated."

"Well, hey, how's everything going otherwise?" Floyd said.

"You know, could be worse. Took a look around Anthem. Nice to see all that red rock. People there seemed reasonably cheerful."

"That, or they're a bunch of zombies," Floyd said. "A little bit too controlled up there for my taste."

"Could be. Plus I got one or two issues that are dogging me."

Floyd said, "I already told you, you go away, check that shit at the door."

"That used to be easier," Chris said. "You went somewhere, you wanted to address something at home, you needed to find a pay phone and come up with about ten dollars in change, so you said forget it and had a good time . . . Now you're held hostage by modern technology."

"So turn it off and lock it in the trunk," Floyd said.

"Don't quite have enough discipline to. Speaking of which, I have to go outside and make a few calls. After that I want to ask you something."

He called Ray, got no answer, was hesitant to try Birgitte but he did and she didn't pick up either, so he went back inside. There was no one in the kitchen and there was music on now in Floyd's bedroom, some new guy trying to sound like Marvin Gaye.

Chris went over to the counter and helped himself to what was left in the shaker, a sweet, citrusy vodka mix that wasn't bad, and when he turned around he had an angle through the living room into the bedroom, where the door was slightly open and Allison was riding Floyd.

He watched for a few minutes, sipping his drink. Allison mostly had her hands clasped behind her head, her back slightly arched. She would occasionally bring them down and say something to Floyd.

Chris went back outside and checked his messages, nothing from Monica, and he phoned Joyce but she wasn't there either, so he went over to the high school and walked around the track for an hour. When he came back, Floyd and Allison were showered and sitting on the couch watching a comedy special on HBO.

"Took you a long time," Floyd said. "What was that you wanted to ask me?"

"Whether you know of any strip clubs in the greater Phoenix area," Chris said. "I thought I'd go to one."

"Hey, can I go too?" Allison said.

Floyd said, "There's a couple that come to mind. Your best bet consistency-wise is Judy's Rendezvous. It's in Tempe, not too far from ASU."

"Babe, I'm serious, can you take me?" Allison said. "I've never been to one of those."

"Jesus, 'babe' already," Chris said.

"You wouldn't feel awkward?" Floyd said.

"I'm with you and Chris, why would I?"

28 – Paperback

Chris took his own car in case he had to go get Monica. It was a relatively small place, three women dancing at a time on a runway in the middle of a circular bar. Whatever song was playing, even something light out of the '70s, it had a heavy rhythm section engineered into it. There were strobe lights that kept changing the setting to different colors, but mostly the women looked slightly purple up there.

Floyd was right, the majority of the dancers were attractive and the bodies were tight and supple. "One thing I'll give this place," Chris said, "no poles. This you can get into easier."

"I must say, they're good dancers," Allison said. "More professional than I expected."

Floyd said, "With this place, a lot of the girls are supposedly from Brazil. Doesn't seem logical, but I heard that."

"Actually, I can see it," Allison said.

"Wait a second," Chris said, "*what* can you see? Who's Brazilian up there now?"

"The middle girl for one," she said, "I mean look how exquisitely she moves."

Chris said, "Take away the lighting, she's white as a sheet. My guess is she hails from Rapid City, South Dakota."

His phone rang, Monica. He excused himself. "Yeah," he said.

"Chris, please . . . Can you at least say something?"

"What time is it?"

"It's ten to one."

"Okay, just be in the lobby."

He told Floyd and Allison to continue having fun and took his time, stopping for a donut and coffee on the way. Monica was reading a paperback when he got there.

"Well?" he said.

"I think I have some stuff for you, but can it wait until tomorrow Chris?"

"It can, absolutely. In fact never is fine too."

"You know what? It wasn't quite what you thought."

They got home to a dark house, Floyd and Allison were still out, and Chris went straight to bed and barely moved until noon.

+++

He went in the kitchen, where someone had been frying bacon. "One of you looks relatively fresh," he said, "while the two late arrivals look like shit."

Monica said, "You didn't tell me they were watching strippers. We could have met them."

"You didn't ask," Chris said.

Allison said, "It was pretty amazing. When I feel better I'm going to try to write a song about the experience."

Floyd said, "The pace that you're all setting, it's a little heavy for me."

"Is there a Starbucks nearby?" Monica said. "I have to go over a few things with Chris."

Floyd gave them directions and headed back to bed. Chris said, "Might as well walk it then. Give you time to gather your thoughts."

The Starbucks was a mile or so down Seneca Avenue, everything pretty quiet on a Sunday afternoon. Half way there, Monica took his arm.

"Now that," Chris said, "is an error."

"It makes me feel good. You can't lighten up and leave it at that?"

"Fuck, I forgot all about Ray," he said.

Ray answered on the second ring. He said, "I get over there, nothing jumping out ringing no alarm, so Birgitte and I went out to dinner."

"Okay fine, but what about the husband?"

"No sign of him. According to her, he on a business trip. "

"But she seemed . . . the same? As when we went to Booker's?"

"Far as I could go with it, she did . . . Fact that's where we went back to. They was featuring the music again. I couldn't get out there this time though."

"She curious at all why you happened to stop by her house?"

"Somewhat. I told her your mind probably running away with you, being out in the sticks somewhere . . . I also mentioned should the motherfucker put his hands on her, I'll kill him."

"Ray, now something like that, that would be me, you have to take my word for it . . . Anyhow, I owe you."

"Pleasure's mine. When you be back?"

"Hopefully soon. This trip has gone 180 degrees different than I expected."

When he put the phone away Monica said, "Are you a secret agent or something? I'm not kidding, you have a secondary life."

He looked at her and said, "Okay, hundred percent confidential? What it really is? . . . I'm one of those people you read about, who the medical experts give a

year to live. I'm trying to cram in what I can in the time I have left."

Monica stopped walking and let go of his arm, her mouth half open, looking up at him.

"Jiminy Christmas," he said. "I'm joking."

She hit him hard on the shoulder. "Don't play around like that, I'm serious. You almost gave me a heart attack."

"That's my fault then. But you better start smiling again, get rid of that crinkled up face."

"Why should I, you piss me off."

Chris got behind her and started tickling her under the armpits. She tried to wriggle out of it but he stayed on her and pretty soon she was laughing, yelling at him to stop.

"There you go, back to your cheerful self," he said.

"For a few minutes. 'Til you start cross-examining me about Kyle."

He waited until they had their tall skinny white chocolate mochas or whatever it was she'd ordered.

"Just start me off with the bottom line," he said.

"Well, he does have a wife in California. They're still technically married."

"Did he strike you as someone who could get violent?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't have thought so, but then he got really angry when he couldn't get it up."

"He couldn't?"

"No. He tried for an hour and left. He didn't even say goodbye."

"Wait a second, you got there at nine. What took you so long then?"

"They had one of those fancy bathtubs, with the jacuzzi jets? I wanted to try it. Then I turned on the TV and fell asleep."

"What else did he say about the California wife?"

"Only that they see each other every so often. They spend most of the time making love. Supposedly."

"Anything else?"

"He said he wants a divorce so he can marry his girlfriend but your friend isn't being cooperative. That he tells her she needs to get on with her life."

"You tell him your name was Monica?"

"Of course, I'm not a sneaky person."

Chris took a moment. "I guess that covers it then," he said. "What else is going on with you?"

"Chris, please do me a favor? Can we drop the whole thing now?"

"We can," he said. "It's nice to finally have some closure."

+++

The simplest thing would be to kill Kyle, because he was a piece of scum that no one would miss. What the real dope was between Bethany and the guy was irrelevant. The problem was Monica would get caught up in it sooner or later, which of course meant him.

Allison was sleeping when they got home and Floyd was in the kitchen reading a Sports Illustrated. Chris said, "Thought I'd take a little personal time this afternoon." Floyd didn't look up and Monica said that sounds good and plopped down in the living room.

As Chris started to drive away he noticed some red rocks in Floyd's front yard, framing a scraggly piece of cactus. *Hmm*. He found one that felt good and headed back up the interstate to Anthem.

He passed the house and parked around the corner again and walked back and rang the prick's bell.

Kyle answered, chewing, a beer in his hand. "Whoops," Chris said, "I might have the wrong address. I'm looking for Monica?"

Kyle flinched. Chris could see a pretty, strawberry-blond woman, pregnant, down the hall at the kitchen sink. "I guess not, then," he said. "Sorry to bother you."

There was nothing to do but walk around the neighborhood and pass by the house every twenty minutes, hoping Kyle's girlfriend went somewhere. On the fourth pass, one car was gone and Kyle's was still

there. Chris looked around, was satisfied there were no neighbors in the way, and rang the bell.

This time when the door opened Chris hit Kyle in the mouth with the rock. Kyle went to his knees and held his face, and there was blood all over and Chris was pretty sure he'd eliminated several of the guy's teeth. There was kids' laughter coming from an upstairs room, not a huge concern.

Kyle was lying on the floor now, sobbing like a child. Chris said, "What you take from this, Kyle? You bothering Monica again, that would be an error."

Kyle nodded just barely.

"Oh, and on a related topic," Chris said. "Bethany. The thing there is, she needs her privacy. I find out you're ever in her presence--*rest of your life*--I'll have to kill you. Then I'll fuck your girlfriend. The right way."

Kyle covered his head with his arms looking like he expected to get hit again. Chris said, "We good then Kyle?"

Kyle moved slightly indicating they were.

Chris walked back to the car, moving fast but not rushing it to where he was conspicuous. The asshole could call the police of course, which would be a mess, but looking at the big picture it didn't seem likely.

29 - Quick Salute

Allison and Monica tried to talk Floyd into coming to California with them. Floyd said the idea had potential, but he couldn't right now. They were out front, the car packed, a perfect blue-sky morning.

Chris said to Floyd, "Next time I come visit, I'll give you more notice. I feel like we kind of turned you upside down there."

Floyd said, "Yeah you did, but it was good for me."

Chris gave him a quick salute and got in the car. No hug or handshake or big thank you, he didn't feel like going there, even though he might not see his brother again.

They stopped for coffee at a rest area on I-10 an hour into the trip, and then pretty much drove straight through. As they approached the Ashby Avenue exit for Berkeley, Chris said to Allison, "You haven't said squat since about Needles."

"She thinks she's lovesick," Monica said. "Give her until Wednesday."

Chris said, "You notice how my brother was less animated as the weekend wore on?"

"Al does that to people," Monica said.

Allison said, "It happened so fast. I'm not sure I'll meet anyone as interesting, or fun."

"You mean cute," Monica said.

"You think what you want," she said. "But Chris? Thank you for taking us. I mean it."

"Well, I guess it wasn't the worst way to spend ten days," he said. "There won't be a part two though."

"Hey, it's not even nine yet," Monica said. "Why don't we go into the city and do something?"

"Yeah, right," Chris said.

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When he got to his apartment there was a piece of binder paper under the door which said:

I look for fucker Chris Seely.

He turned it over, and there was no other information. He put it on the table and walked over to Weatherby's.

"Yo, my long-lost brethren," Shep said. "You've been on my mind."

"I have?"

"Oh yeah." Lowering his voice. "They must be liberating, your adventures . . . While the rest of us are in our rut."

"Haven't been putting them in that light, honestly. You see certain things that need to happen, is the extent of it."

Shep looked around. "But nothing, when you strip it down to its core, you say damn, that felt good?"

Chris said, "I guess you could apply that to the first one. The second one, the beneficiary has mixed feelings, it turns out. The third was a waste of time."

"Wow . . . So *three*."

"Yeah but really just two. The third had the wrong guy."

"You're shitting me . . . Wrong guy as in a mistake, or in the way?"

"Both. A mistake on my part and then becoming in the way. A guy driving."

"Jesus."

"Thing was, the correct guy, his routine didn't give me much. I have to go back, which I'm not looking forward to."

"Does he ever go anywhere better?"

"I don't know . . . But you mean find out if he's taking a trip or something, and *meet* him there? I hadn't thought of that."

Shep cleared his throat. "Anyhow. Besides that business, what's next?"

"Well one unfortunate development is I think I got someone looking for me."

"Oh boy. Regarding your . . . list?"

"Sort of. It's probably harmless but even so, I need this type of thing right now like a hole in the head."

+++

Tuesday morning Chris took his normal run from the Marina Safeway to Fort Point. He did the same thing on Wednesday, and this time he was pretty sure there was a guy following him.

He'd been feeling the guy's presence, a steady ten yards behind him, starting at the Marina Green. So at Chrissy Field he stopped to tie his shoe, and the guy stopped to tie his. When he started running again, the guy didn't follow, but when he got back to the yacht harbor on the return trip the guy was there waiting for him on a bench. The guy followed ten yards behind him back to Safeway and continued on when Chris stopped near his car. Little dude, looked real fit, shaved head, wearing a shiny tracksuit.

Chris went home, took a shower and called Birgitte. "I had dinner with Ray when you were out of town," she said. "Word had it that you were concerned about me."

"I was," Chris said. "And I still am. Steve around?"

"He's in Philadelphia."

"I see. So tonight okay then? For dinner?"

"My, you certainly dispense with the formalities."

"I'll see you at seven, unless you tell me otherwise."

"No, that should be fine . . . I do feel a modicum of guilt, I must tell you though."

"Don't," he said.

After lunch he got on the library computer. First he looked for a Pocatello newspaper. The thing happened last Thursday, so it wasn't even a week, but it felt like a long time now. It had been the headline story for Saturday:

Blackfoot Man Found Dead Off Highway 33, Apparent Victim of Foul Play

March 27th, 2017 - The body of a Blackfoot man apparently shot to death was discovered Friday afternoon at an Idaho Power substation on Highway 33 east of Pocatello.

The victim was identified as Lincoln Sweetig, 28, of 318 Dramouth Street in Blackfoot.

The discovery was made by a J.B. Hunt trucker who had pulled off the road to rest.

Sheriff's Department spokesperson Molly Sirlock said the victim appeared to have been shot by a

handgun at close range. No further details were available.

Sweetig was a 2007 graduate of Blackfoot High School and was employed as a welder by Holquin Brothers Metals in Pocatello.

It is the second apparent homicide in Bannock County in 2017. In February, Clint Elong of Pocatello was charged with shooting and killing his brother Mike at a Super Bowl party in Chubbuck.

Chris searched the Arizona papers and couldn't find anything on a guy in Anthem getting assaulted in his foyer, so hopefully that was that.

The *LA Times* had one follow up story on Chip, from nine days after the incident:

**Slain Hermosa Financial Planner Reportedly
Bilked Investors
by Jack Sperlle**

March 20th, 2017 - Hermosa Beach financial planner Chip Reggio, who was found murdered in his office on March 11th, had disgruntled clients in both southern California and Las Vegas, according to a source close to the investigation.

The source told the LA Times that Reggio was thought to have used illegal and unethical tactics against investors for more than a decade, netting close to half a million dollars as a result.

The tactics included setting up Ponzi schemes involving shell corporations and creating fictitious foreclosure property packages.

Reggio, 46, had reportedly been under investigation by federal authorities since 2010.

An LAPD spokesman declined comment, saying only that a homicide investigation is ongoing.

Reggio was discovered beaten to death on March 11th in his office at 213 Norden Lane. He was a resident of Manhattan Beach, having moved there from Las Vegas in 2006, records show.

A good story for sure, and a terrific job of investigative reporting by Jack Sperlle.

Finally he googled back through the Donny case. There were no follow-ups in the *Chronicle*, but there was one in the *Marin County Independent Eagle*, from last weekend when he was in Arizona:

**Proposal To Name Terra Linda PVHS
Dugout After Donny Shelhorne Draws Mixed
Reaction by Evelyn Buffum**

March 27th, 2017 - A proposal made Wednesday by Pratt Valley High School officials to name the home dugout at Harrigan Field after the late Donny Shelhorne has drawn mixed reaction in the Marin County community.

Shelhorne, 23, was killed the evening of March 1st while jogging on the RCJC campus in Santa Rosa, according to authorities. The case remains unsolved.

Shelhorne attended PVHS from 2008 to 2012 and was a standout pitcher on the baseball team, earning all-Marin honors twice and winning the Marin County Field and Turf MVP award his senior year.

He received a full-ride baseball scholarship to Ripperton University and graduated last spring. At the time of his death, he was part of a culinary start-up in Santa Rosa.

In 2012 Shelhorne was arrested but never charged in connection with the alcohol-related death at a party of 16-year-old PVHS student Meghan Britta.

PVHS Boosters' President Randy Turk called the proposal "entirely appropriate".

"Donny was one of the faces of athletics in Marin County during his tenure," Turk said. "Hopefully having his name live on in this manner will provide a small measure of comfort to his friends and family."

Faculty member Joyce McCann, an English teacher who has been at the school for fourteen years, took a different view. "Donald Shelhorne should receive no honor whatsoever at Pratt High School," McCann said.

"His actions five years ago took the life of an innocent child," she said. "I can tell you in all honesty that not everyone is upset about how it played out."

Jesus Fucking Christ.

A decision on the proposal is expected to be announced at the year-end school board meeting in June.

Chris left the library and called Joyce. "I'm afraid to ask what I owe this honor to," she said. "I haven't even texted you for a couple days."

"We should catch up," he said.

"Fine, I'll be down. Give me a half hour to finish grading these papers."

"I'll make it easier on you," he said, thinking the vicinity of his apartment wasn't the best idea. "I'll meet you in Mill Valley, the plaza."

"Fair enough," she said.

+++

She got there around 3:30, a few minutes after he did. There was an old time market that made good

sandwiches, one of the last real places still standing, most of Mill Valley being upscale shops now. They took the sandwiches back to the plaza.

Chris said, "The simple question: I didn't really read that in the newspaper, did I? Please tell me I was dreaming it."

Joyce said, "The direct answer? It needed to be said."

"What comes to mind, without me being a genius, is why the fuck would you want attract more attention to yourself--and others in your circle of acquaintances--when you're already on the radar?"

"Chris. I didn't kill anyone, nor do I know for sure who did. I spoke my peace, which is the least I can do for Mehgan. Frankly I'm surprised you'd have a problem with that."

"You were so scared though, when you thought they suspected you had something to do with it."

"Well I got past that, what can I say. Their trying to honor Donny makes me nuts."

Chris finished eating. They were sitting on a bench near the cement chess tables, where a few disheveled guys were playing speed chess using clocks.

"You know what?" he said. "I apologize."

"That's a crock, you never apologize."

"I respect what you did, I do. It's just . . . a million things kind of crowding in on me at once. I was wrong to butt into your business."

"What million things? Tell me, Chris. Let me help you." She put her hand on his.

"Little stuff is all, combining together. No one big thing. I'll be fine."

"But what can I do? You know there's something."

"I guess a walk would be therapeutic. I'm still trying to clear the cobwebs from being on the road. You can fill me in on who you hooked up with since you dumped Bruce."

"Fine, but your little excursion--did your doctor's cute secretary with the nose ring accompany you?"

"She did, and she even brought a friend."

"And?"

"Nothing happened, if that's what you're asking. Actually, I take it back--there were occurrences, just nothing involving me."

"Chris, you know that's not good enough. Involving who?"

"My brother, for one."

"Really . . . Floyd, I'll be darned. How's he doing?"

"Fine, I think, though he didn't look too good when we left. He made it pretty extensively with the . . .

secretary, and I'm guessing worked his way into the friend as well."

"My God, and you witnessed this?"

"Caught an inadvertent glimpse of it. I had to distance myself, I was started to feel inadequate."

"And did one of them watch when Floyd would satisfy the other?"

"Okay, that's enough . . . The thing that kind of got me, they're both raving about how irresistible my brother is, saying it like he's part of their generation. I'm thinking, he's only seven years younger than me."

"Well they are correct about Floyd being awfully handsome."

"He said something similar about you, if I remember right."

"He did? What did he say?"

"He put you in the same 'hot number' category as the secretary and the friend. Except with you it's more subtle, was his view."

"How sweet of him . . . If he were here I'd give him a big kiss for that."

"That all?"

"Chris, I'm probably crazy, but I've always found you more attractive than your brother."

"Okay, whatever. The new guy, what was his name?"

"Doug."

"Yeah, how's that all going?"

"I'm not sure. He's a really nice guy, but he lives with his mother."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Everything . . . Hey, I want to look at the falls." They were at the top of Throckmorton, and there was the little green sign for Cascade Park.

"I guess we could," Chris said.

They took the trail that looped around the main waterfall, which ran fast this time of year. It was peaceful in there, surrounded by giant redwoods, soft-packed needles under your feet, no sign of other humans.

"Remember when we used to do it outside?" Joyce said. She was hanging onto him.

"No."

"Don't give me that, yes you do."

"Okay I remember that one time in the backyard. There was no 'used to' though, as in regular event."

"There were four times, not counting the in-the-car ones," she said.

"Oh Christ."

"The first time was in your backyard, correct, when you had that bungalow off Todd Road."

"Fine."

"The second was on the Russian River. Remember we rented the canoe and we found that little cove below Johnson's Beach? It was a weekday, there wasn't anyone around."

"Unh."

"The third was something else. The fourth of July fireworks show in Corte Madera Park, everyone captivated and crowded together, and you made love to me behind the tennis courts. We could see the flashes of color."

Chris didn't say anything.

"Then there was the time on Union Street, in that narrow alley alongside the restaurant. I couldn't believe it when you suggested it, that you would throw caution to the wind like that."

"Oh. How'd that work, the one in the city?" he said.

"For me, amazingly."

"No, I mean did you have to take stuff off, or what?"

"I was wearing a dress. Don't you remember? It was Stacy Fieling's graduation from law school. We ended up on Union afterwards with a group of people."

Chris stopped walking. "The problem I'm having at the moment," he said, "is I don't want it to happen again. We better get out of here."

"But you do," Joyce said, reaching for him.

"What, you can't take my word for it?" he said.

She said, "Remember when you used to pick me up? . . . Suspend me?"

"Not at all."

"I'll re-teach you then," she said.

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It was after six when Chris got back to the city. It had been an error, for the most part, to add on something in front of seeing Birgitte. He had a dull headache and needed a nap. He wasn't sure if that was normal wear and tear, or if his condition was slowly but surely starting to kick in.

He decided to take the scenic route to Birgitte's, cutting through the Presidio from old Letterman Hospital to the Arguello gate, and he noticed a car following him close. His guess was the track suit guy from the morning, who hopefully was the same person that stuck the note under his door, looking for fucker Chris Seely. When he got to Birgitte's he watched the car drive by and then park on the next block.

He rang the bell, suddenly aware of how hungry he was, thinking about the Burmese place on Clement Street that he liked. Birgitte opened the door and Chris glanced down the street before he went inside, and it was definitely the track suit guy, still dressed the same,

standing against the car now with his arms folded, looking right at him.

Something smelled good in the oven, and Birgitte sat him down and said, "I must express my gratitude, Chris, how you've looked after me. Even from far away places, apparently."

Chris said, "Or maybe I just faked being concerned, because Ray wanted a date with you."

Birgitte laughed. "Then it was for the best, because we had a nice evening . . . You don't think Ray was in any way serious though, when he spoke of doing violence against Steve?"

"No, of course not . . . Unless maybe you wanted something like that to happen." Locked on her eyes.

She took a moment. "I wouldn't be truthful if I said I haven't embraced those thoughts recently, as fantasy. But I could never condone an act of violence."

"Does Steve have a gun, far as you know?"

"My Land, I hope not. He did serve a stint in the Israeli Army, before I knew him. He's certainly never hunted, or any such thing."

"He have any . . . friends, acquaintances--of questionable character--you've ever met?"

"Well Steve does own quite a number of houses in Richmond, in a downtrodden neighborhood. His property manager, Willie, although he's always been

exceedingly polite, strikes me as someone who may have been incarcerated."

"Black guy?"

"Yes."

Birgitte excused herself and came back with a tray of appetizers, homemade bite-sized pastries with a meat filling.

"Dang, these hit the spot," Chris said. "Anybody foreign you can think of? In Steve's circle?"

"You're starting to sound like a detective."

"I'm sorry. I'm just fishing, I don't know where I'm going with this."

"To the contrary, I sense your concern has to do with my welfare. It's unfounded, but flattering . . . Steve takes tennis lessons occasionally from a man I don't think I would trust. I believe his first name is Damirko. You might know him?"

"Is he Russian?"

"Eastern European, I think Croatian."

"What's Damirko look like?"

"He's short and prematurely bald. He appears athletic, like someone who might have been a gymnast. I met him only once, with Steve at the Golden Gate Park courts. We said hello, but my sense was this was a cold individual."

"Any chance Steve and Damirko do business together?"

"I've not heard of Damirko in that regard . . . but what I know doesn't mean a great deal, does it?"

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They had to wait a few minutes at the Burmese restaurant, even on a Wednesday night, but it was worth it, with the food pretty tasty and the portions large.

Finishing their tea, Chris said, "Is Steve still fooling around on you?"

"He says he's not," Birgitte said.

"It reminds me of the baseball players," Chris said. "They catch a bunch of them using steroids, and Congress investigates, and then everyone calls it 'the steroid era', as though it's all over. You know most of the players are still using something, even the ones that got caught."

"You're saying Steve coming clean, and treating me more lovingly, doesn't mean he's altered his behavior?"

"Highly doubtful."

"Well, my intellect agrees with you, but my heart doesn't want to."

"That's understandable . . . Do you want to take a browse in the Green Apple and then come back to my apartment for a while?"

"My, you shift gears unexpectedly. But yes, that sounds lovely."

The Green Apple was across the street, a large, well-organized used bookstore that had been there since the sixties.

Chris said, "There're always a lot of people in this place, you know it? With everything you hear about the e-readers and other dumb devices taking over?"

"Thankfully," said Brigitte.

Chris bought a book on past-life regressions written by a psychiatrist he heard interviewed on the radio once. There were chapters devoted to different patients who under hypnosis started speaking foreign languages or described Roman sandals on their feet or castles they lived in, that sort of thing.

When they were driving home, at the stoplight on Arguello, he saw that Damirko, turning out to be quite a pesky little fucker, was behind them.

"What'd you get?" Chris said.

"Oh, just 'R is For Ricochet', from the Sue Grafton series. I've read most of them."

"That's the woman private-eye with the letters of the alphabet, right? Set in fake Santa Barbara." Keeping his eye on the rear-view mirror.

"It is. I do give her credit, she's been at it for thirty years. She's through 'V' now."

"I started the first one. Couldn't buy into it. But I'm not much of a mystery fan."

Birgitte smiled. "But you are apparently a fan of past-lives."

"Something I'm looking into," he said.

Damirko veered off when they crossed Lombard Street, and they went up to his apartment. Chris made coffee.

"This is quite the bachelor pad," Birgitte said. "Forgive me if I am prying, but you must have entertained many ladies here."

"I've tried. Not sure how consistently entertaining I've been . . . If you had to come up with a past life for yourself, what would it be?"

"Ooh, that's difficult, though I am open to the possibility. Something with horses and a schoolhouse in England, perhaps? That vision has flashed through my mind on occasion since I was a child, like a *deja vu* sensation. What about you?"

"I got nothing. I never believed in those type things, they fly in the face of logic. But this doctor on the radio was compelling. Plus my dad said some weird stuff near the end."

"What did he say?"

"That he was a soldier at Fort Sumter in Georgia. Something bad happened to him, I couldn't understand

quite what. But his description of detail was uncanny, and he seemed so sure of himself, and pained by some of the recollections."

"Well that is surely intriguing."

"That was with the morphine kicking in of course . . . I was at a Club Med about ten years ago, and this comedy magician put on an adult show one night."

"He did."

"He asked for female volunteers from the audience to come up on stage, and he sat them in a line of chairs. Maybe six women volunteered. The guy then supposedly hypnotized the whole group, and their heads all slumped forward."

"Yes? And then what?"

"Then he gives them instructions. That when he touches their shoulder or hand they will become highly stimulated. He tells them to sit up and look straight ahead, and then goes around one-by-one poking them with a finger tip on the shoulder."

"And . . . they became . . . sexually aroused at that point?"

"Yeah, right away, except for one woman who didn't react. But forget her. The others' responses became more heightened each time the magician would tap them again on the shoulder. It didn't matter if it was their bare skin, through the clothes worked the same."

"Please continue."

"So he keeps this up for a while, essentially teasing them, and then for the grand finale he shakes hands with each of them. Sustained contact now where he's bringing the person's hand up in the air and circling it back down, sort of like he's turning a crank. The women all climaxed, at least it sure seemed like it. A couple of them ended up out of the chair and on the floor."

"I . . . I've never heard such a story before."

"One of the women I knew a little bit, from a windsurfing lesson we took. I asked her the next day at lunch if she remembered being on stage and she said no, that she remembered volunteering but nothing after that."

"I see."

"Anyhow, I didn't mean to get so far off track. The point I'm trying to make, we know so little about how the brain works. We probably understand less than one percent of it."

Birgitte nodded.

"What?" Chris said. "You're still picturing the Club Med thing?"

"Very much so," she said quietly, coming close.

"Uh-oh," Chris said. "To be honest, this direction wasn't foremost on my mind tonight. Nothing with you, just my energy level is not quite up to par."

"Shall you take a bit more coffee, then?" Birgitte was rubbing the back of his neck, slurring her words slightly.

"I can probably tough it out," Chris said.

30 - Bad Strokes

He dropped Brigitte off late morning and drove over to the Golden Gate Park tennis courts.

The courts were full of hackers like himself, mostly playing doubles, many with terrible looking wraps on their knees or forearms. They tended to talk after every point, all four of them chiming in on what a great rally it had just been, sometimes yelling out. It made Chris realize you didn't get much exercise in tennis unless you were pretty good, that you just looked stupid out there, and he vowed to forget the whole thing from here on out.

There was an elevated clubhouse with a couple of couches and a ping-pong table, and next to the locker rooms was a small pro shop, with an attractive Asian woman in tennis attire behind the counter.

"How do the lessons work please?" Chris said.

"Certainly," the woman said. "I'm Jenna."

Extending her hand. "We also have Mark. It's best to book a day or two in advance. We charge sixty-five dollars an hour, or forty a half-hour."

"Anyone else teach here, besides you and Mark?"

"Officially, no."

"There are unofficial pros, then?"

"Oh yes, unfortunately. They do it on the sly, and they undercut us. I keep telling Park and Rec, you have signs all over the place prohibiting that, you have to enforce the rules. But they don't."

"You mean the pirate instructor signs up for a court with a partner, and the partner is the one taking the lesson?"

"You got it."

"That would make me go ballistic. It's your livelihood."

"Thank you."

"They good players, any of them?"

"It's a mixed bag. The advantage with Mark or myself is we've paid our dues. I played D-1 and Futures, and then got USPTA certified. You know what you're getting."

"But a guy in his fifties with bad strokes and a bad attitude, will he get more out of his lesson with you than with some doofus?"

"Probably not," she said.

There was a bulletin board on a side wall with players seeking partners, musical happenings on Haight Street, upcoming tournament notices and so on. There were business cards here and there. Chris went through

them one-by-one until he saw the word 'Damirko' and took that one off the wall.

The card read:

***Fitness Training from National Trainer
Mixed Martial Arts also Tennis call
Damirko***

There was a rare pay phone outside the clubhouse, and Chris found some change and dialed the number.

After half a dozen rings he got, "Yes Damirko trainer."

Chris said, "Hey, I'm on the court. Golden Gate. What happened?"

He could hear Damirko fumbling around. "My sorry," he said. "I teach San Jose today."

"Fine, I'll come down there then. Where are you?"

"Okay, you know the Stevenson Park? We can do six tonight."

"That late?"

"I'm sorry. I have juniors, from two."

"All right, six then."

"Your name is, again?" *Nem.*

"Barry Bonds," Chris said, and hung up and started driving to San Jose.

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The gun was still in the spare tire compartment in the trunk as far as he knew, though he hadn't actually verified that fact since the issue in Pocatello.

He stopped at a 7-11 in Cupertino to get directions to Damirko's park and backed into a space that faced a brick wall. He casually opened the trunk and confirmed he was good. While he was at it, he put on the latex gloves and carefully re-loaded the thing back to six shots. Highly unlikely but not out of the question.

He got to Stevenson Park around three and all eight courts were full, with two of them occupied by Damirko and his juniors. He had to hand it to the guy, it was an impressive operation. Maybe fifteen kids out there, everyone busy, first hitting a series of balls fed by Damirko or his assistant, a young guy also wearing a shiny track suit, then running to a side area, putting down the racquet and doing an exercise, then hustling to pick up bunch of balls, and then back to the hitting drill again.

Damirko barked orders like a drill sergeant, but no one seemed to mind. The kids all looked like elite, tournament players who were focused and took direction well. After a while they shifted to a different drill involving baseline crosscourt rallying, and it was clear Damirko was the weakest player out there. His strokes were short and choppy, while the kids all

crushed the ball with the loose-armed, wrap-around open-stance technique you saw the pros using on TV.

The guy had probably never been on a tennis court until he came to America and saw you could make money teaching it, and he figured out enough to make it work. You add in some personal training and the occasional side job, like getting hired to follow a guy and break his arm or neck, you probably did okay for yourself.

Chris hung around for an hour, watching from a distance, and got out of there. He'd seen enough tennis drills for a lifetime, and it seemed unwise to confront Damirko. He thought about following the guy back to where he lived, getting a sense of that, but it didn't seem worth it because then what? Bottom line, he'd be running into the prick again soon.

When he got back into the city he took a chance and stopped by Ray's. Ray came down to the lobby, happy to see him.

"Seely, you know there's something wrong with you though," Ray said.

"What do you mean?"

"You ain't normal. You always got something urgent you dealing with. Can't wait to hear what it is now, the reason you came."

"You want to get something to eat then?"

"Man, I was getting ready to fix me something when you rang. But if you insist."

"Where to?"

"Ah, you know you want to go that first joint, the one I wouldn't walk into voluntarily in my lifetime. That'd be fine."

Weatherby's was half-full when they arrived and they got a table in back and the drinks came quickly. Chris said, "First of all, what you did, making sure Birgitte was okay..."

"We been over this already. She still okay?"

"As far as I know. I saw her last night."

"When you saying 'saw her last night', that mean you did her up?"

"It went that way, yeah."

"Man, I wish I was in your shoes."

"Ray, don't worry about me, you can date Birgitte all you want."

"Believe me Seely, I ain't worried about you. The problem is I got no libido."

"What?"

"The treatment, it's fucked me up in the head. Don't got shit anymore in that department."

"You mean no interest, or can't do anything about it?"

"Fuck you motherfucker. Both."

"Wow . . . what do the doctors say?"

"That the condition mess with some people, others it don't. They not sure why."

"Ray, I'm real sorry to hear that. That's no way to live."

"I don't especially need a piece-of-shit white boy to tell me that, all the action you getting. Playing the ladies, maybe even shooting people."

"Have you tried, like a hypnotist or something?"

"No, and not planning to. Bunch of bull roar there."

"Well on my end-- not as big a deal after I hear your thing--but I got a guy seems to know my business, insists on following me around."

"Okay here we go. Now we establishing why we here."

"Pretty sure it's connected to the Birgitte husband, Steve."

"That dude? Honestly don't strike me as someone you'd have to worry about, other than he be yelling and screaming."

"I thought that too. But this guy he's got working for him, or whatever, he might be a tough customer. Foreign guy, with an MMA background."

"So you afraid he gonna slap a submission hold on you, make you tap out?" Ray was laughing.

"Actually 'kill me' would be at the top of the list of what I'm afraid of."

"Nah . . . nobody gonna take a chance on you. You ain't worth it."

"Hopefully. But what if the husband was insane enough to think so?"

"Then you on defense," Ray said.

"Meaning what?" Chris said.

"Well . . . you know your friend, running the other joint around the corner, right?" Ray was talking softer.

"Yeah, Booker."

"Me and him, we had a little history, years back. Lot of shit was going down in Bayview, and Booker near the middle of it. Whenever he found he on defense, he handled it right away."

"Je . . . sus . . . Christ."

"He got pinched once but it never stuck. Now he striding around table-to-table with manicured fingernails, jazz music flowing, asking how is everything. The ones put him on defense, things worked out different."

"This was what I was afraid you would say. Not about Booker. But my deal."

"Course you could do what a sensible citizen of the United States of America usually do. Call the po-lice."

"I thought of that, but if I had to . . . go back on defense, they're familiar with me now."

"Didn't know you was a natural genius. How 'bout that."

"But back to handling this. There anything you recommend?"

"Well, Birgitte's old man getting smacked upside the head, that might put an end to the show."

"Might be rolling the dice there, though. Could backfire the other way."

"All right, let me clarify something. You got the piece, you acting the part . . . but you full of shit."

"Mostly, yeah."

"At least you honest about it. I can't blame you. You got the good life going on."

"So you'd say keep an eye on things for now, and hope they resolve themselves."

"I don't believe you heard me say that."

31 - Bitten Off

Friday morning he tried a little curve ball, starting his run right from his apartment, not driving anywhere. But when he got half way across the Marina Green, yep, there was Damirko on him again, pacing himself ten yards back. The guy was actually talking on his phone a few minutes later when Chris looked over his shoulder, quite the multi-tasker.

Ray was right, of course. Chris was hoping for an alternative he hadn't thought of, but ultimately there was just the one way. The problem being, you'd probably get caught. You shoot a guy in San Francisco, especially a foreign guy with some mystery behind him, the case would be all over the news and the police would work it hard.

Getting caught at the end when you can barely get out of bed was one thing, but getting caught when you still felt pretty darn good and had plenty left to accomplish was dumb.

You could baseball-bat the guy and maybe improve your odds. You wouldn't be leaving any firearms evidence and it could look like a random case

of road rage or something, but close combat with this guy seemed foolish because he might fend you off and then put an extended rear-naked-choke on you, and it's all over.

This time the dick followed him all the way to the bridge and back, until Chris crossed Marina Boulevard to get back into his neighborhood. In the shower he thought, could something fall on the guy, or could he hit him with the car saying it was an accident? Could he start an argument with the guy and then shoot him in self-defense? No, that was all idiotic, and he was procrastinating.

He went to the library and looked up 'drowning'. What he wanted to know was: did someone who got drowned by another person exhibit anything different to a coroner than someone who drowns accidentally on his own?

After a half hour, the answer wasn't clear. The literature was too complicated and disorganized, like much that you tried to look up on the internet. Why couldn't they just tell you what people want to know?

While reading about drowning though, Chris had an idea: what about somehow drowning the guy under the bridge, and have it appear the guy jumped off? After all, the Golden Gate Bridge was one of the most-used suicide structures in the world.

He realized that idea was ridiculous. Surveillance cameras on the bridge, too many people around, and that if the asshole really jumped off the bridge his bones and organs would be shattered on impact, was his understanding.

Chris remembered he hadn't checked his fake gmail account since he set it up before Pocatello. He had emailed some Santa Rosa high schools as a longshot looking for Jerry Smith, the drunk driver. Surprisingly, there were three return emails in his inbox. He started to open the first one but decided he better resolve the current nuisance before he took on an additional activity. And that was assuming he got the current thing right.

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That night, Chris had his second bad dream, at least that he was aware of. Joyce had mentioned something after the Donny thing, and Birgitte brought it up as well, that he was agitated and yelling out. He had no memory of those, but this one was vivid. He was at a coastal resort in Mexico with Floyd, but Floyd was the Pocatello driver. There was a Mexican kid lifeguard who only had part of a leg, because it had been bitten off by a shark. The lifeguard took them on a glass bottom boat for a sightseeing tour. At the back of the boat, Bethany was up against the railing and Kyle was making love to

her. Chris tried to break it up, but Kyle threw him overboard. Every time he tried to climb back onto the boat, Floyd beat his hands with a baseball bat.

He couldn't sleep any more after the dream, so he got up and luckily his favorite show *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* was on, and after a while the dream didn't bother him as much. He supposed he was fortunate to not be having continuous nightmares, like you'd hear about people in similar situations having to face, and he left it at that.

It shaped into a sparkling-clear April Saturday morning, the fog gone and the city already flooded with sunshine, and Chris decided to go to Stinson Beach. First he stopped at a Big 5 in Corte Madera and bought an ocean swimsuit, a one-piece vest-and-shorts job made of thin wetsuit material, that supposedly left you enough flexibility to actually swim. He added some short fins and a pair of goggles, parked in Mill Valley, slung on his backpack and picked up the start of the Dipsea Trail.

It was his favorite hike, about seven miles up and over Mount Tam to the coast, and it began with several hundred forested steps climbing out of Old Mill Park before opening up into bright daylight and the smell of the ocean, mixed with licorice from the wild anisette that was all over the place.

There were steep switchbacks down the back side of the trail, with sweeping views of the coastline toward Point Reyes, and he was feeling it in his shins by the time he reached Highway One and the little town of Stinson Beach. He wolfed down a burger, fries and milkshake at the same outdoor place he'd gone to as a kid, and he watched the people roll in. The scene hadn't changed much; you had yuppies and families and giggling high school kids driving the twisty road from 101, stripping down and going home sunburned from a beach where you couldn't comfortably put a toe in the water until about July. But they all seemed to have fun, and the setting was world-class.

Chris gave it a half hour and then changed into the ocean suit, adjusted the fins and goggles and went in. The initial temperature shock was just as brutal as without the fancy suit, but he warmed up pretty quickly, so the thing worked. There were scattered surfers out there, no one else swimming. He worked his way past the break-line, floated around for a while, picked out a flag on the beach, swam parallel until he was in line with it, practiced going underwater a few times, and got the hell out.

He hadn't been in any body of water for a while, but he felt reasonably good to go. The suit was bulky but probably a good idea. The fins helped for sure. The

goggles were debatable, because someone might put them around his own neck and strangle him, but having the good vision seemed worth it.

The main thing, he was a good swimmer. He'd been on a year-round team when he was young, practicing five-days a week at the USF pool and going to meets on weekends. By the time he was fourteen he was burned out and quit the sport, but by then he'd put up a JO qualifying time in the 100 fly.

He relaxed on the sand, leaning back on his elbows and taking in the spring collection of new bikini offerings. You really did see more female on a sunny day at the beach than anywhere else. Under better circumstances, it would be a great afternoon to alternate between dozing off and observing the action, but not today.

He figured why not thumb a ride like the old days, and if that didn't work he'd have to take the bus back, but the second car that came by stopped. The guy was a bleach-blonde-haired surfer, mid-30's, heading back to the city, driving in flip-flops.

Chris asked how it went today. "You know Stinson," the surfer said. "Short break. I live in the Sunset, so Ocean Beach is a lot better, but I come here for the change of pace."

"I love it here," Chris said. "I could live here, at least during the week."

"I hear you. Looks like you got wet yourself."

"Yeah, trying a little open water swimming. I got a suit, feels strange but you can move your arms and legs okay I guess."

"That's the only way to go. Otherwise you stiffen up pretty quick . . . You planning on going in the water this week?"

"Actually I was thinking about it, yeah."

"Well be careful. We got big surf on the way."

"We do?"

"Late Tuesday, supposed to hit. They're getting fired up at Mavericks, some Hawaii guys are flying in."

"Interesting," Chris said. "So when is high tide these days."

"Right now, around 5:30 in the morning. But with this thing it'll be big all day."

"After high tide though, typically, it goes out for the next twelve hours?"

"It's not quite that cut and dry, but yeah."

"So if a guy was floating around on a board and just went with it, or had drowned or something, where would he end up?"

"Starting from where?"

"I don't know, say from where they surf under the bridge."

"They'd go somewhere outside the Gate I guess. Probably a mile or two."

"Would they ever just . . . keep going . . .or they'd get reversed back in eventually?"

"Reversed back in. Maybe not right away though, lot of factors out there."

"I see . . . well where's the best place to watch?"

"Guys surfing big waves?"

"Yeah."

"Great Highway down past Sloat should be pretty strong. Earlier is always best of course. Cleaner sets, no wind."

"You going to be out there, then?"

"No man, I don't think so. I grew up down south and surfed some big storms in the '90s, but I got a wife and kid now."

They had reached downtown Mill Valley. Chris thanked the guy. "No worries," the surfer said. "And you'll have fun with the open water stuff. There are groups, you can go online."

Chris said he appreciated it. A hot Starbucks sounded good right now, but before he went in he called Bethany. "You caught me at home," she said. "I'm just

unpacking some things from the Farmer's Market. I'm off to a hair appointment in a minute."

"What for, your hair's fine."

"Okay, I'm not getting into this. I try to stay presentable, if you don't mind."

"So any earth-shattering news? Work, Billy, your apartment, Kyle, squash, anything?" Chris was counting backwards with his fingers, putting it at six days ago that he'd used the rock on Kyle.

"Nope. Other than Dr. Steiner wants you to come in of course. I've given up on that one."

"Tell him 'current patient condition inconclusive'."

"Seriously, you are okay Chris?"

"Fair. The anticipation has me a little stressed. Physically, I still do what I have to do. One good thing, you eat whatever you want, no conscience. You can unequivocally tell the American Heart Association to shove it."

"Fine, but I wouldn't be simply throwing caution to the wind."

"How about dinner tonight, a drink, something?"

"I can't."

"Okay tomorrow for a little Sunday Brunch then. Don't have my schedule in front of me, but I can probably make time."

"I'm actually busy tomorrow morning as well."

"Tomorrow night?"

"No . . . Monday, though, we have a league match at the Bay Club. You could stop by and watch some, if you can tolerate us. Then we could grab something afterward."

"You wear normal workout gear when you play, or a uniform, or what?"

"Chris, it starts at eight if you'd like to come. Please enjoy the rest of your weekend."

Chris ordered a small decaf and a finger sandwich at Starbucks, and half way home the hike and the swim and the sun hit him all at once and he went straight to bed, no dreams to contend with this time.

32 - Medium Rare

Sunday morning he drove to the Marina Green, not to work out but to make an appearance. Damirko was easy to find, leaning against the hood of his car, facing Alcatraz, working the phone. The guy was resourceful; he could book lessons, put ads on Craigslist and scare the shit out of someone, all at the same time.

Chris parked, waited for Damirko to notice him, jogged the first hundred yards of his usual route and then pulled up fake-lame, holding his hamstring. He fake- tested it for a minute and turned around and walked back, shaking out the leg. He got in the car and drove home, passing Damirko who was on the trail and off the phone now, glaring at him.

After lunch, he drove to China Beach, first making sure he wasn't being followed. It was an odd setting for a public beach and a closely held secret to many native San Franciscans. You were in Seacliff, one of the fanciest neighborhoods in the city, all mansions and manicured sidewalks and then boom, this beach out of nowhere. China Beach was about a mile on the ocean side of the Golden Gate Bridge, so it was technically the ocean even

though it felt like you were still on San Francisco Bay because the Marin Headlands was directly across.

Chris spent time at China Beach growing up, and had one bad experience. When he was about ten, he was with a friend and the kid's father, and they went too far down the beach looking for tide pools. They weren't paying attention, and the tide came in and pinned them, and they had to scramble part way up the cliff and sit tight. It was getting dark and luckily a fisherman in a little dinghy spotted them and they got rescued by the fire department.

Today he went back to the same spot where they got stuck. Right now you had about twenty yards of beach between the cliff and the water, and things were relatively tame. He continued a little further down the beach, heading west away from the city toward Land's End, and there was a horseshoe cove that felt pretty private. You couldn't see people or houses or any other part of the beach, and someone would have to be doing something stupid on the cliff to see you.

This had possibilities. There were a couple of large rocks sticking up out of the water, maybe three hundred yards away. On a dare once when he was in high school, he swam out there and back from the main beach. The distance wasn't terrible but the current made you nervous.

It was as good a time as any to check in with Maierhaffer. Maierhaffer picked up but didn't speak.

"Oops, my bad," Chris said. "I was trying to reach Birgitte Maierhaffer? Wrong number though?" Maierhaffer hung up.

Five minutes later, Maierhaffer called Chris back. "Not a question of *if*, pal, just *when*," he said.

"Hey, Steve," Chris said. "Good to hear your voice. What was that again, you're breaking up on me."

"I said your number's up. Sorry."

"Jeez . . . Well if that's the case, I better take a nap so I'm fresh for Birgitte. Might as well double up, make it count."

He could hear Steve breathing through his mouth for about ten seconds like he was getting ready to respond, but then he was gone.

Chris made mental notes of the last few details at the beach and went back to take an actual nap, nothing to do with Birgitte but needing all his energy reserves if it happened tomorrow. For dinner he went back to New Joe's in North Beach, where he'd taken Bethany that time. He sat at the counter, shot the breeze with the guy next to him who said he grew up in the neighborhood, and put away two steak sandwiches, medium rare. Hopefully not the last dinner he'd ever eat, but if it

turned out to be, at least go out in relatively classy fashion.

33 - Tourist Parking

He set the alarm for six on Monday morning, and when he looked out the window it was raining. Not a battering rain but a light, steady one.

He put on the ocean suit under his sweats and stuffed a backpack with the fins, the goggles, a towel and the gun. That made him nervous, that the gun might somehow go off and shoot him in the back. He'd thought of trying to jam everything into a briefcase and carrying that instead, since if the thing discharged he at least could control the direction, but a doofus jogging with a briefcase might get remembered.

There were two concerns, actually three. First, that the prick would even show up today, and second, that he would cooperate by tailing him the whole way and not sit on a bench doing business on his phone and waiting for the return trip.

Hopefully yesterday's call to Steve would mean Damirko would be on it, but the flip side was the third concern, that Damirko might step it up, going from following him around making him uncomfortable to breaking his neck and throwing him in the water.

Chris backed out of the garage at 7:30, and when he'd crossed Northpoint he saw Damirko driving behind him, the guy most definitely present. Chris parked at the Marina Green, Damirko parked one spot away, and Chris strapped on the backpack and started his run.

When they reached Chrissy Field, where he was afraid Damirko might stop and wait, Chris checked over his shoulder and Damirko was right there, chewing gum, furrowed brow, a baseball cap pulled low against the rain, which Chris wished he'd thought of. Damirko was wearing a tight, stretchy running suit, no obvious sign of a weapon, but you couldn't be sure.

A quarter mile from the Golden Gate Bridge was a road off to the left that took you up into the Presidio and through the tourist parking area and into a tunnel that crossed under the bridge. Then you were winding through the Presidio, under normal circumstances enjoying a section of the 49-Mile Drive, the Pacific Ocean on your right, China Beach three miles away.

Chris left the jogging trail and got on the road and Damirko followed, the rain picking up a bit when they exited the Presidio at 25th Avenue and entered Seacliff.

There was a parking area above China Beach and then a cement walkway that went down to it. There was only one car in the parking lot, which likely belonged to the dog-walker on the beach with an umbrella who was

conveniently headed east, the opposite of where he and Damirko were going.

It being a Monday morning and grey and rainy, the weather no doubt connected to the big surf that was coming, Chris had to admit it wouldn't be set up better than this.

Right before he'd left his apartment, he flashed on a scene from one of his favorite movies, Wall Street, where the kid stockbroker says, "Life comes down to a few moments. This is one them." Now, jogging down the path to the beach, the motherfucker in back of him, that was ridiculous. There was no perspective, just a guy to float face down.

Chris hit the sand and took off in a sprint to the left. The tide was past peak but it was still in, and there were places where you had to run through the water. Knowing where he was going helped, and when he got to cove he'd put some distance on Damirko.

When Damirko came around the final corner Chris had the gun on him.

"Hey man, how you doing," Chris said.

Damirko put his hands out to the sides, palms-up, and said, "Please . . . Seely . . . I no hurting nobody."

Chris said, "Oh."

"This guy, Steven," Damirko said, "I tell him I watch you . . . You fucking with his wife, what do you like him to do?"

Chris said, "I see."

"I gonna do nothing . . . Just like you no gonna use a gun." Saying it like he was getting ready to make a move.

Chris said, "You'll need to lay down, on your stomach, because if you don't I'll have to shoot you." Chris locked eyes with Damirko and nodded. Damirko smiled and stood there. Chris closed one eye, curled his upper lip and was about to squeeze the trigger when Damirko got the message and laid down.

"Why you making this?" Damirko said.

"All I'm doing, I'm asking you to go for a swim."

It took the Croat a few seconds. "What swim?"

"See those rocks out there? You swim to 'em, raise your hand to show me you made it, turn around come back, I'll buy you lunch. I can tell you're a nice guy. We'll call it even, and talk about getting me some tennis lessons."

"So we do that now, forget about swim."

"I have to give you credit, Dim, you sound like me . . . You don't mind me calling you Dim, do you? A nice ring to it, short for Dimwit . . . However, you have ten

seconds to take everything off and get in the water. Shirt first. Nine, eight . . ."

Damirko stripped down to his briefs before the count expired and stepped into the water. Thank God all he'd had on was a long sleeve shirt and running pants, nothing concealed underneath, though Chris felt through his clothes to make sure as Damirko was adjusting to the water.

"How is it?"

"Please. Is like ice. Please."

"There's an initial jolt, I hear you. But then you get stabilized pretty quick. You've seen those old guys at the Dolphin Club right? Down by Aquatic Park? They never miss a day, no wetsuit, nothing. Of course as I think about it, a lot of them are fat, which probably does help."

Damirko was in to his knees, trying to scoop water onto his upper body. Chris said, "Good idea, Dim, but unfortunately we've got to get the show on the road. Five, four, three . . ."

Damirko waded through the whitewater and got past a couple of waves and sprawled forward and started swimming. It was a combination of dog paddle and freestyle, his face never going in the water, everything out of synch. It occurred to Chris that maybe he

wouldn't have to do anything, that the prick might just drown on his own out there.

But after watching for a few minutes it was clear that bad as the guy looked, he was moving slowly but steadily toward the rocks like a determined little pit bull, and from there he'd choose an option that didn't include a guy waiting for him on the beach with a gun.

Chris pulled on the fins and cinched the goggles tight. He hated having to leave the gun, in the unlikely event some hapless beachcomber wandered by. The best he could think of was wedging it into his shoe and then piling everything else, including Damirko's clothes, on top.

Seventy-five yards out he hit Damirko the first time. He approached him from underwater and grabbed his right ankle and pulled down. When he let go and came up Damirko was facing him, treading water, looking confused, then shocked, then terrified. Chris dove and grabbed an ankle with both hands and kicked hard downward, and he had Damirko underwater. Damirko thrashed furiously and Chris had to release him.

Chris hadn't factored in the survival instinct, but he felt he had things under control if he didn't get grabbed or kicked in the head. There wasn't a huge rush. He'd read that cats look like they're playing with rats

when they kill them step-by-step, but what they're really doing is being careful not to get injured.

The fins made a difference, especially with the downward thrust underwater. He grabbed a Damirko foot and swam toward the bottom of the ocean with it and let go. Then he popped up and did it again. Then he did it again. The guy was coughing. Chris pulled him under again, came up for a breath, then boom, again.

He gave the guy a little distance and waited. He knew there were various stages of drowning, and that a drowning person didn't often look like they were drowning. When they were scared of drowning they yelled out and waved, but when they were actually drowning, everything shut down except for the futile attempts at respiration.

It was hard to tell if Damirko was drowning, but he wasn't going anywhere and he wasn't doing the best job treading water at the moment. Chris floated on his back and looked around. There were splinters of sunlight on the hills of the Marin Headlands but the sky looked ominous to the west, dark and swirly, the big surf apparently twenty-four hours away.

When he looked back at Damirko he couldn't find him. He kept his eye on where he thought he was and waited five minutes. Then he swam to the spot and had

to search a bit before he found the guy, hunched forward, floating just below the surface.

He watched a little longer, trying to size up the relative positioning of Damirko to the shore. You'd think that with the tide peaking four hours ago Damirko would be going out, and it seemed he was. But did that mean high tide tomorrow morning would beach him right back at the cove, or what?

Either way, it was time to get the fuck out of the ocean. He swam in, put his running gear back on, and filled the backpack with everything else, including Damirko's phone and his sweaty clothes and shoes, unfortunately. He was exhausted when he got back up to the parking lot but glad there were no cars at all, nor apparently any idiots milling around the beach in the rain.

What he wanted to do was walk over to California Street and get on the bus and then go home and go to bed, but it seemed best to run back through the Presidio, the same way he came. They most likely wouldn't be zeroing in on a guy committing a homicide in the middle of a run, and the truth was if you were out there anyway, you might as well finish it off.

34 - In The Wheelhouse

Bethany reached for a low forehand in the back corner of the squash court and didn't get the ball back, but she was putting on a good show. The other woman had more skill and Bethany was forced to do most of the running, but she tried her hardest on every point, and by the third game she was sweating profusely. Her teammates were on adjacent courts and they were all wearing light blue T-shirts that had their individual names on them, and Bethany's front side was revealing itself impressively, both in mass and clarity, as she raced around the court and stretched into awkward positions to try to return shots.

It was 8:30 Monday night, ten hours since Damirko.

"You look like you're into this match," someone said.

Chris looked up. A woman with a San Francisco Bay Club name tag was smiling at him.

"It does get the hooks into you," he said. "Especially this angle through the glass back wall."

"So I take it you don't play then, yourself," she said. "How come?" She was petite, early 30's, no mistaking her enthusiasm.

"Why should I? I'm fine just watching my friend."

"Which one?"

"The one waiting for the serve."

"Bethany. She's great. Not at squash so much, but a lot of fun to talk to when I'm working the front desk."

"You working it right now?"

"I'm on a break. Today's my long day--noon to close."

Chris stood up. "I'm Chris, by the way . . . Would you want to, get a coffee or something, afterward?" Bethany was real red in the face now, and looked increasingly frustrated. She appeared to be losing most of the points.

"Golly. Could we be a little more forward, how about?" Hard to read, but at least seeming amused.

Chris said, "So what time?"

"Well, we shut the doors at midnight, and I'm off at 12:30. It's up to you if you'd like to check back, but I'm thinking probably not. It's Kim though."

Soon Bethany and her opponent were shaking hands and they opened the door and came out of the court. Bethany walked past Chris without saying a word

and returned fifteen minutes later, showered and changed.

"You're more of a battler than I realized," he said. "You have a temper."

"I'm not a great sport," she said. "It's something I need to work on. But thank you so much for coming and watching my whole match."

He said, "I'm a doe-doe bird sitting here, but I saw something you can do to improve."

"No, Chris. With all due respect, I take lessons sometimes. I don't need you telling me how to play."

Chris said, "What you do, you hit the ball higher up on the front wall. So it travels further back into the corners. That's what she was doing to you."

"Dammit, Chris, I mean it. I'm not in the mood."

"Your ball was landing short, where that line is across the floor? Right in her wheelhouse."

"Will you shut up!"

Bethany's teammates Phyllis and Jeff, from the dinner at her house, were nearby. Phyllis said, "Nice to see you again Chris. How do you like our little sport?"

"I think it's terrific," he said. "Tennis's better half, for sure." Bethany had moved to another court to watch the end of Gloria's match.

Jeff said, "B was upset about her result?"

"That, and me trying to give her advice, that's what put her over the edge," Chris said.

"Don't worry about it," Jeff said. "She's a terrible loser. Always takes her about an hour, and then she's back to normal the rest of the night."

"Competition works in funny ways," Phyllis said. "You see a side of someone you never imagined."

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They went to the Big Horn on Sansome, Bethany's team plus him, which he figured was how it would work. Chris thought the place was only so-so, the menu a cross between New Jersey-diner and California-fusion, and pricey.

He sipped his beer, glad to be in a social situation, but fighting hard not to replay Damirko in his head. The backpack was sitting in the trunk, too much to deal with after the morning but needing to be addressed, the guy libel to wash up somewhere at any time.

The team was discussing the matches, and Bethany was coming around, laughing at certain things. Jeff and Gloria and Steve were doing most of the talking, with Phyllis and John chiming in.

"I had my guy 9-6 in the fifth," Steve said. "Then I don't know what happened."

"What happened was you hit the tin four times in the last five points," Jeff said. "If you'd just kept your poise there, we would have won the overall match."

"Hold on Jeff," John said. "You lost three-zip to your guy. Let's not be too critical."

"Okay, but I was playing number one," Jeff said. "I wouldn't have let that guy off the hook two points away, is all I'm saying."

Gloria said, "Chris, we're sounding foolish here. How have you been?"

"Fine, but the shop talk doesn't bother me a bit. Makes me wish I had something as exciting going on."

"Well, you certainly look fit," Gloria said. "What do you do?"

"Mostly just run, which is boring. When I lived back east I enjoyed playing tennis, until my partner got mad at me."

"What happened?" Phyllis said.

"Oh, I got in his business where I probably shouldn't have. He beat me five sets in a row one day and I thought he was making bad line calls on top of it. I said you were beating me straight up, why'd you need to make shaky calls?"

Steve said, "So you got in his business by questioning his on-court character?"

"No, I got in his business by offering my opinion of his personal life. He had a really nice, devoted girlfriend who would come to the courts sometimes. He was cheating on her with his ex-wife." Chris noticed Bethany and Jeff shifting around.

"How did you know that?" Phyllis said.

"He'd bring it up, brag about it. Though he put it on the ex-wife, that she couldn't get past him."

"What a son of a bitch," Gloria said.

"Yeah, that's a crock of horseshit," John said. "It's not like someone was putting a gun to his head, making him participate."

Phyllis said, "So what did you tell him?"

"That if he wasn't going to stop doing it, then stop talking about it. Evidently that hit a nerve, because the guy never spoke to me again."

"Well good for you," Gloria said. "That is scum of the earth behavior. He should be shot, and the ex-wife too for that matter."

"I agree," Phyllis said. "But just find another partner then."

"Oh, I still play once in a while. But the other day I was watching some hackers, and it was embarrassing. I realized that's how I look too. On the other hand, you guys all look good out there."

"That's very kind of you," Gloria said. "But really?"

"Absolutely. You're giving it your all, running around like chickens with your heads cut off. What can I say, you look like athletes."

"Gosh, just hearing it put like that is amazing," Phyllis said.

"Totally," Steve said. "That's over the top, Chris, but we'll take it."

"We will," Bethany said, glaring at Chris.

"So where do you like to run?" John said.

"The Marina usually, down to Fort Point and back." Chris said. "The scenery helps."

"And that's what you did today?" Gloria said.

"Yeah . . . Although today I actually repeated it twice. I was looking for a little extra."

"How far?" John said.

"I'd say maybe eleven, twelve total. I'm feeling it now, that's for sure."

Bethany said, "Jesus Christ, Chris. Do you really think you should be out there trying to run eleven miles?"

Jeff said, "B, take it easy, what's the big deal?"

"Exactly," Phyllis said. "Why not?"

Bethany said, "It's just . . . I don't know, increasing your intensity like that, without building up to it . . . it seems unwise."

"I'll keep it in mind next time," Chris said.

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They were at their cars, and Bethany had said goodnight to everyone, including Jeff. She said, "Chris, what got into you? You certainly know how to humiliate someone."

"What do you mean? The only one who might have raised an eyebrow was Jeff. My educated guess is he's the only teammate you're schtupping."

"My God, do you have to be so crude."

"While we're on the subject, it work out any better with him?"

"Jeff? . . . No."

"So, one more time--it's not me, my prognosis, whatever else."

"It isn't . . . In fact, since we're being so honest here, Jeff wants to go to Arizona and have a talk with Kyle."

Chris was digesting this.

Bethany said, "What?"

"No, I was trying to visualize how that'd go. I wouldn't mind being on hand to find out."

"Believe me, it couldn't go well. Jeff might get hurt, and I'd probably lose him as a friend."

"Kyle a tough guy then?"

"I already told you. Scary."

"He have a new wife, kids, anything?"

"A girlfriend, and I think she's expecting."

"Kyle ever ask you for an official divorce?"

"No. . . Can we please change the subject? You're welcome to come over, if you'd like."

"Tell you the truth I'm pretty worn out. That eleven miles you scolded me for, it's starting to kick in."

"All right, then."

"I were you, I'd tell Jeff to sit tight. Little baby coming into the picture, Kyle could get his priorities straight. Wouldn't surprise me if you didn't hear much from him going forward."

"Chris," Bethany said, "you have no idea what you're talking about."

35 - Thinking Vesuvio's

Chris checked his watch and it was 12:10, and the Bay Club would be locked up, but he thought he may as well see what happens. Kim and another employee were straightening up the lobby, and Kim saw Chris and let him in.

"What happened to Bethany?" she said.

"We had a group meal, plenty of laughs. I'm on the outside looking in though."

Kim worked it around. "So I assume you're full then."

"Yeah, but I love to eat, I can always force it."

Kim smiled. "In that case, I was thinking Vesuvio's. If that appeals to you."

"On Columbus?"

"Yes. They're open until two."

"Nah, doesn't sound good. I'm gonna call it a night."

"Oh. Okay."

"Jeez, I'm kidding."

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Kim was eating like a horse, which motivated Chris, and he almost finished his veal scallopini.

"Dang," he said, "small individual like you."

Kim said, "I'm always famished when I get off work. It drives my family crazy, everyone's constantly on diets."

"Can't beat a healthy metabolism."

"I know, I've never had a weight problem. I feel guilty sometimes."

"So what's your story?" Chris said.

"Nothing dramatic, if that's where you're going. I grew up in the city, and except for college in Northridge, I've been here my whole life."

"I grew up here too. My guess is, you take most of your restaurants in the city, it's not that common to find two native San Franciscans at the same table."

"Tell me about it. I love working at the gym, but no one's from here. Where'd you go to school?"

"Chestnut Street's the same way. It has its moments, but if you polled a hundred people maybe two would know the 49ers used to play at Kezar . . . Lowell."

"So did I! What year?"

"'92."

"Get out of here, my sister was '92."

"Oh no."

"Did you know Leslie Stemphill?"

"Jesus . . . That's your sister?"

"Yes, what's wrong?"

"What were you?"

"I was class of 2001."

"Wow . . . you had another sister, right? In between."

"Margie. She was three years behind Les."

"I remember her. That means you were like, eight years old then . . . Ah man . . . I actually remember you too. I'm not believing this."

"My God, I remember you also! When you'd drop Leslie off, Margie and I were all over her, wanting to hear everything."

"Well that puts a damper on things, to say the least," Chris said. "Serves me right for being truthful. What an idiot."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was going to try to maneuver you back to my place. Except for a small detail emerges, that you're my high school girlfriend's little sister. Unreal."

Kim grimaced, taking it in. She said, "I must say, that wasn't an answer I was expecting."

Chris said, "That's my fault then. And I didn't mean I'm not enjoying your company. You're a good kid, that's obvious."

"You say 'kid', but would it occur to you I worry about my biological clock ticking? . . . You mean that kind of kid?"

"No, not that kind."

No one spoke for a while.

"You know what?" Kim said. "If we hadn't made this connection there'd be no way I'd go home with you tonight."

"Oh."

"Now I can. If you want me to."

"You mean fire up the scrabble board? Since you don't have to worry about any moves being put on you?"

"You're funny," she said.

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Chris made coffee and they sat on the couch and flipped around late-night TV. *Carnal Knowledge* was on, where Jack Nicholson and Art Garfunkel swap girlfriends, Ann Margret being one and the other a familiar actress Chris couldn't place, all of them so young.

He muted the sound and said, "I ask a few questions but you do most of the talking, okay? And if I start falling asleep, elbow me."

Kim tucked her feet under herself and got comfortable. "I'll ask the first one for you," she said, "What's Leslie doing?"

"That was number two. The first one, are your parents still alive? I really liked them."

"Mom passed away, but Dad's hanging in there. Leslie lives in Walnut Creek."

"Yeah?"

"She has two teenage sons. They've both been in a little trouble. Les has had a fair number of men in and out."

"Who's the father?"

"Two different guys. The first, you probably knew, Tim Boglou."

"Holy Toledo, the basketball player? She ended up with that guy?"

"Seems like everyone knew that. You must be out of the loop entirely."

"I am until they ask for those alumni donations. When I give them something they don't acknowledge it, but they do solicit me earlier the next year."

"Well you have your 25th reunion coming up. You should go, Leslie's been talking about it."

"To be honest, on my list of things to do, that's off the bottom."

"I could go with you, it would be so much fun." She moved next to him and without thinking too hard he put his arm around her.

Chris said, "Your dad still in the same house?"

"No, a retirement complex on Van Ness. They had something bad happen and sold the house in '04."

"Something bad, what?"

"Oh, I would always ask them not to, but they were driving up to visit Margie, she lived in Seattle at the time. My dad was stubborn, he insisted on driving straight through and sleeping at rest stops. They got robbed and beaten up pretty badly at one in the middle of the night, near Bend, Oregon."

"Fuck."

"It was touch-and-go for a while, especially with my mom. When they recovered they put the house on the market right away and moved to an apartment. It wasn't rational, but they felt vulnerable."

"God damn it."

"On a brighter subject," Kim said, "how come you're not involved with anyone? Or are you?"

"What happened to the guy that beat them up?"

"There were two. They caught them the next day trying to use my dad's credit card. There was no way my parents were going back up there to testify, so they pled guilty to a watered-down charge and served 90 days in the county jail."

"Mother-fucker . . . What else, besides the house?"

"Mom seemed a little slower, mentally. We never knew if it was early dementia setting in, or the incident."

Chris said, "Well now I probably can't sleep. Which isn't the worst thing."

Kim said, "You know what Chris? You look absolutely exhausted. Please go in, and I'll leave."

"I'm good right here. I'm actually afraid of having a bad dream tonight."

"A serious bad dream, or one because it didn't work out with Bethany?"

"She leave the squash club with various guys, in your experience, besides that guy Jeff?"

"Oh yes, she's very much out there."

"That's what I figured. Lot of mystery to her."

"Made more complicated no doubt by that body, which you were studying carefully during the match."

"Don't you think most of them hit the ball too low on the front wall, though? She got mad when I told her that."

"Probably. So are you involved with anyone Chris? Or you just fool around."

"No. You?"

"I've broken up with some nice guys. I can't put my finger on it."

"Let me tell you something," Chris said. "You're never going to find that perfect package. Something's always a little off. You accept that, you move forward."

"Interesting, Dr. Phil," she said. "So how come you aren't settled down?"

Chris said, "Those two guys, anyone ever follow up what happened to them? After they got out of jail?"

"No, that wouldn't make sense. Why would we want to?"

"You're right," he said, "but if it were me, I couldn't help it, I'd be curious."

36 - Extra Twenty

When Chris woke up it was almost noon. At some point Kim must have set him up with a pillow and blanket, and he'd slept surprisingly well on the couch. She'd left a note, that she had to go to work and thanking him for the 'interesting' evening.

He checked the *Chronicle* online to see if a washed-up body had made the news. Nothing so far. He had the backpack to deal with, and the phone.

Was it logical to send a couple texts from the guy's phone, or make a silent call, from say the beach at Santa Cruz? On the one hand you might throw off the timeline and geography. On the other, they might track you and arrest you then and there if Damirko had been reported missing and they were on to his phone.

So forget that. He opened the back of the phone and removed the battery, and with a small screwdriver pulled out the circuit board, or whatever it was. There were no doubt easier options, but the Sonoma County dump would do the job, and a bird in the hand was better than fooling around. He put the backpack in a garbage bag--fins, goggles and all--threw in the phone

and tied it up and put it in the trunk. He stuffed an old rug he was tired of into the backseat area, so the backpack wasn't the only thing he'd be dumping, and drove up there.

The dump was north of Petaluma, lush green hills all around reminding you of Ireland, and it was easy to miss the turn. The guy at the booth asked for his driver's license and he said he didn't have it with him. The guy said he needed something to verify he was a Sonoma County resident, so Chris handed him an extra twenty bucks and drove in.

The operation gave you confidence, with giant payloaders gobbling up your trash almost as quickly as you dumped it. In fact you had to watch your step not to get run over by one.

He stopped for gas on East Washington, bought a donut at the convenience store, devoured part of it and put the phone battery and circuit board into the bag with the rest of the donut and deposited it in the gas station's yellow dumpster, which took care of everything for now. Hopefully.

He was thinking he'd have a hearty breakfast at Mel's on Lombard in the city, but he found himself angling once again toward the Mill Valley exit on 101 South, and he settled in at Starbucks.

He'd made both the original and the revised lists sitting here, the original the day after Steiner gave him his news. The revised was two days after Donny, the day he'd met Allison. It sure seemed like a long time ago:

- 1 Ray**
- 2 Donny ***
- 3 Riesling**
- 4 Birgitte problem**
- 5 Ike's guy**
- 6 Chip**
- 7 Eric Mossman's guy**
- * Complete**

He had an envelope that had been sitting on the front seat of his car, no particular reason except he was mad about it. It was his health insurance statement, that when he read the fine print, charged him for tests last month that he'd never received. It was no money out of his pocket, since it was covered by his policy, but you wondered how many millions of people got hit with similar errors and never noticed. How could they charge him for something that never happened? Wasn't that criminal?

He wrote his updated list on the back of the envelope:

- 1 Ray - no**
- 2 Donny#**
- 3 Thad**
- 4 Chip#**
- 5 Jerry Smith**
- 6 Ike's guy**
- 7 Birgitte situation***
- 8 Leslie parents**
- 9 dog guy?**
- 10 Pocatello driver ##**
- 11 Kyle ###**

#Complete

Complete but mistake

Good enough

In sizing up the new list, Chris wasn't sure if he was up to it. All that work and stress to get to this point, and look what was still ahead.

If he had to go with two, he'd say Thad and Smith, since Thad involved family and Smith killed someone. That left Ike's neighbor from hell on the sidelines for now, along with whoever assaulted Leslie's parents and the guy who threw the dog into traffic. He'd added that guy to the list because he'd gotten more worked up

about it as the story unfolded. You had a 22-year-old kid on drugs from a good-old-boy San Francisco family, and it looked like he'd getting probation, tops, which was appalling.

One thing he decided, he better not watch the news any more, or for that matter meet any new people who were liable to tell you their life story. You'd almost certainly end up expanding the list.

He walked up the hill to the Mill Valley library and read the Jerry Smith return emails from the high schools, which he couldn't concentrate on last time because he was in the middle of Damirko. There were four now, two from school administrators blowing him off, and two from alumni coordinators, one at Montgomery High School and one at Piner.

Montgomery was the more organized, and the contact person directed him to a tidy website that had all known alumni listed, and Smith wasn't on it. The Piner person said there was nothing they could email but they had a master binder with a database, one in the office and one in the Santa Rosa main library.

Before he got off the computer, he looked around for fitness industry conventions and trade shows that Thad might attend. It was a bit overwhelming; there was a big one in Oklahoma City in May, but there were others all over the place too. He set up another gmail

account and wrote the sales department of the Oklahoma convention, which was called World Fitness Expo 2012. He said he was starting a business in Boise, and he'd be interested in attending if he knew there were going to be other Idaho fitness people there.

Chris hated to reverse direction and drive up to Santa Rosa, but he figured it was worth a shot with Jerry Smith, and if nothing else he'd be narrowing things down. He got hungry on the way and stopped at In-n-Out in Rohnert Park, though he wished he hadn't because it was so crowded he had to park in a furniture store parking lot down the road.

While he was walking to the restaurant the phone rang and it was Allison.

"Chris!" she said. "We've been thinking about you."

Chris said, "Really. In what way?"

"Know what you need to do? Let go of those defenses. That's why you're so cynical."

"I'm cynical 'a', because I haven't put enough distance on our little excursion, and 'b', that you calling out of the blue means you want something."

"Fine, I won't even tell you why I'm calling."

"Not to change the subject but how's my brother these days? All recovered?"

"Floyd is great. He's coming out."

"Oh, Jesus . . . That what you were calling about then?"

"No. I'm playing an open mike tomorrow. The Red Raider on Polk Street, it starts at eight. Can you come?"

"You know what, that one in Pocatello, I'm going to have that be it as far as open mikes."

"Come on Chris, you can walk. We passed right by it on the way to your house that night, when your friend met you in the lobby. It would be so nice to have you there."

"We'll see," he said, and hung up.

+++

The Piner High School directory in the reference section of the Santa Rosa library had a Jerry Smith, Class of 1976, listed at 4820 Mill Station Road in Sebastopol. The directory had been last updated in 2003. Chris googled around for the assessor's parcel number, entered it in the Sonoma County land records search engine, and boom, Jerry and Suzanne Smith were the current owners of the property.

He asked the librarian if they kept old high school yearbooks, and she led him into a side room and opened a glass cabinet with a key. It was a surprisingly organized collection from the various Santa Rosa high schools, going back to the 1950's. He found Smith's Class of '76 yearbook, took it to the xerox machine and

made of copy of his graduation picture, thinking it looked a lot like the one on the microfilm at the SF main library that was part of the original IJ article.

Sebastopol was fifteen minutes away, between Santa Rosa and the coast. Chris took Highway 12 into the center of town, turned on Ragle Road and took a left on Mill Station. Sebastopol was once apple orchard country, known for the sweet Gravenstein, but vineyards had replaced most of the orchards over the last twenty years. Not quite prime Napa Valley conditions because of the marine layer, but excellent for supplemental grapes, and lucrative.

Chris did a double-take when he saw Smith's property. There was a large modern house, easily 4000 square feet, set on a hill surrounded by several acres of vineyards. He could see a pool, a court of some kind and a barn that looked like it had been converted to a guest house. Chris thinking the barn was all he'd need.

How could a dead-beat 28-year-old drunk driver end up here? He either married money or came into it, or somehow was successful himself, which would be even worse. He was clearly enjoying the good life while the Mossman family, what was left of them, quite likely was not.

On the way out of town there were signs for the spring Sebastopol parade and Apple Blossom Festival,

this weekend. Chris thought what the hay, let me show up at that.

+++

He got home and put on the 6 o'clock news while he made a sandwich. A blonde reporter was doing a live-remote from Ocean Beach, her hair being whipped around, and Chris stopped in his tracks, his mind racing. But the reporter was talking about the big off-shore storm that had arrived as predicted and was churning up huge swells. There were fire department trucks on the beach, the firemen watching the ocean with binoculars, because dozens of surfers were in the water taking advantage of the conditions.

Chris watched the report to conclusion, switched channels and caught the end of a similar report and then checked online. So far, nothing about a beached Croatian.

He took a shower and headed over to Weatherby's. Shep said, "My man. I saw you here last week with the black guy, looked kind of intense there, so I didn't want to bother you."

Chris said, "Ray. He lays on the act, but he's got a good heart. I've known him since junior high school."

"And last we spoke, if memory serves, you felt like you had an issue."

"Yeah, a guy on me to an extent. But that got resolved."

"Shit . . . You mean, definitively resolved?"

"I guess. There's a Part B guy, but pretty sure he'll be a non-factor now that Part A got handled."

"Jiminy Christmas."

"The main thing tugging at me now, I met a woman I think I could marry. Sounds insane of course, after one date."

"That's how it can work though," Shep said. "You just know. Or so they say."

"What makes it more complicated is two things, the first of which is I can't sleep with her. She's the little sister of someone I used to know."

"I hear you there, brother. I'm not sure I'd be able to either. What's the second complication?"

"I won't be around."

"Oh yeah. I almost forgot about that. Sorry."

"I try to forget about it too. I'm even successful sometimes."

"How long has it been now? Since they told you."

"It was a Monday, a month after the Niners lost to Seattle, which I unfortunately ended up at . . . so let's see . . ."

"Man, don't remind me, the Seahawks of all teams. What keeps eating at me is why'd they kept letting those

guys kneel during the anthem? No backbone in the ownership."

"I'm thinking February 20th. So we got March 20th, and what are we now, April 6th? Seven weeks, give or take."

"I probably already asked you this . . . but you supposed to be deteriorating yet?"

"Maybe. I threw away all the 'what to expect' paperwork they gave me, on purpose. I did a hard workout yesterday, kind of a cross-training thing, and got yelled at by my doctor's secretary. I felt decent after though."

"You don't think . . . there could be any chance they fucked up?"

"Hard to imagine, though I won't lie it hasn't crossed my mind once or twice lately."

"What'd you say you went in with in the first place? Without getting graphic? An intestinal something-or-other?"

"Yeah."

"How's that coming along?"

"It's gone. The symptoms, anyway."

"So maybe . . . you had the goddamn flu and some moron mixed up a test sample . . . or entered the wrong patient in the computer."

"I give that possibility five percent. Up from zero admittedly. The thing is, I don't want to know."

"What the *hell* are you talking about?"

"Meaning . . . I don't want to go in and get my death sentence re-affirmed, which it almost surely would be. And if it were miraculously overturned . . . that wouldn't be the greatest either, at this point."

Shep stared at Chris with his mouth open.

Chris said, "It would actually, kind of . . . screw things up."

Shep said, "Uh-huh."

"Crazy as that sounds," Chris said.

+++

When he got home he was going to call Kim, but he found a re-run of a reality show he liked, so he waited until it was over. The show was about a blended family, and in this episode one of the teenage daughters builds up to asking the stepfather if she can call him 'Dad', because he has been there for her more than the real dad has. Several of the characters end up crying, and Chris cried too.

"I was hoping you'd call," Kim said. "That last night wasn't it."

Chris said, "There's this performance tomorrow I told someone I'd be at. Nothing in it for you though."

"I love live performances."

"Well, okay then, if you insist."

Kim said, "I saw Bethany tonight at the gym, and I mentioned you."

"You did?"

"She said if it ever got serious I needed to ask you about your skeleton in the closet. That was how she phrased it."

Fuck.

"What gave her the idea it could get serious?"

"I told her I wanted it to."

Chris was silent.

"Uh-oh," Kim said. "Does that change me coming tomorrow night?"

"No, we're good," he said, and he gave her the information and got off.

37 - Free Radical

Chris woke up Wednesday with a lot of energy. There were familiar smells in the air when it was going to be a warm spring day, and this was one of them. People were walking around the neighborhood in shorts, rare for a morning in San Francisco.

He felt so good that he repeated his run to the bridge-and-back twice, the way he'd described it in the restaurant the other night. He was tired but exhilarated at the end. Chris was thinking the Damirko workout may have upped his fitness level.

After lunch he called Bethany in the office. "What skeleton in the closet?" he said.

"Chris, I only know Kim from checking me in at the squash club. But she's a sweetheart. It was something I needed to say."

"Okay, listen, I'll buy you a drink when you get off work. I want to ask you something."

"I guess we could. Just one though, because we have another league match tonight."

"I get it, you're in training," Chris said.

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At 5:35 Bethany came out of the medical office building, Steiner right with her. He saw Chris, shook his head and kept going.

"Billy's turned into a grumpy old man," he said.

"Okay, let's not keep going there," Bethany said.

"Did you have somewhere in mind?"

Chris knew a bistro in Laurel Village, a few blocks away. At this hour you'd see private-school moms from Presidio Heights, dressed in L.L. Bean type gear, in there getting blitzed.

"So Kim," Bethany said when they were set up. "I can't wait to hear where that one came from."

"She picked up on my appreciation of your match, actually. Funniest thing, it turns out I knew her sister years ago."

"Well you have to be frank with her Chris. She's hung up on you, that's pretty obvious."

"People look up to their older sisters' friends, so that part might be artificially induced. Either way, things are haywire, like I'm being punished for something."

"Your diagnosis, you're referring to."

"Not that . . . I'd kill to be able to pleasure you, but you're not into it, and then this new person who maybe would be into it, I'm not sure I could consummate the relationship."

"Wow. All I can tell you is I've given my opinion . . . It's not completely about you Chris, even though I know it feels like it."

He said, "That's actually why I wanted to talk to you. Someone said maybe I was nursing the flu, and they fucked up in the lab."

"Is this someone a medical individual?"

"He tends bar."

"You know something? You need to limit your medical discussions to trained experts."

"You mean like the oncologist Billy wants me to see? Even though they can't show me one patient like me they've cured?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"I ran another eleven today. It wasn't that bad. Unlikely as it is, I think I'm getting stronger."

"You're making me really angry, is that what you want?"

Chris said, "Near the end with my dad, I had to take him to the Emergency Room a couple times. Gave me a chance to observe the activities. Everyone, including the ER docs, was on the computer at least half the time. It does make you wonder."

"Whether someone made an error? Chris, I understand you grasping for any ray of hope . . . but no."

"That's what I figured. Just thought I'd bring it up."

Bethany took a minute. "If you don't mind me asking though, who else knows besides your bartender friend?"

"Besides you and Billy and the lab person? No one. The bartender, Shep, I blurted it out to when I was in shock. He's been a good confidante. I almost told someone else at what seemed like a natural moment, in fact did tell them, but she didn't react well so I told her take it easy, I was joking."

"Well maybe you should start leveling with a few more people? Rather than harboring all the stress yourself?"

"Good point. When I get to where I can only run ten miles and not a foot more, that's what I'll do."

"Chris . . . fuck you."

"Now there you go. That's the passion we've been looking for. All you gotta do, convey that to Kyle."

"You know what? Fuck you."

+++

Polk Street was changing, Chris was thinking. It wasn't as gay it used to be, when it felt like an extension of The Castro. There were upscale bars and restaurants popping up, the vibe different than Chestnut in that you had less of the college-sweatshirt crowd, though

everyone was young and seemed well off, the way they were jumping in and out of cabs when they probably didn't have to be.

The Red Raider had been around for years, and if it was reinvigorated by the surrounding activity you wouldn't know it. Chris got there at quarter to eight, ordered an Irish Coffee, and was just about the only one in the joint.

Right around eight everyone showed up. Allison had on very tight jeans and a lacy top and looked nice, especially compared to the other performers who were shuffling in. Monica introduced Chris to Henry, a surprise.

"A pleasure to meet you sir," Henry said. "The two ladies have spoken quite highly of you."

It took Chris a little getting used to. He assumed Henry was a street kid with pants falling down and a tattoo on his neck, but here was a polished, easy-going fellow with a steady smile and a touch of a West Indian accent.

Chris said, "How are they? As roommates. They clean up?"

"Man, you know then," Henry said. "I never saw two people so oblivious to a mess. So I take care of it myself. It's worth it, I enjoy the company."

Monica was holding Henry's arm. "He exaggerates big-time," she said.

Chris looked up and there was Kim. He gave her a peck on the cheek and introduced the others as his friends from Berkeley. Allison was tuning her guitar and stood up and thanked Kim for coming but at the same time was scrutinizing her, which irritated Chris and made him want to leave right then.

The surprising thing was the whole shebang was much worse than the one in Pocatello. Tired chord progressions you'd heard a hundred times, corny lyrics, and everyone so serious, like they were compelled to make a grand statement. The only one any good was Allison. Her songs were just enough outside the formula, and she had the best voice in the house.

"I heard her play one of these in a small town," Chris said to Kim when it was over. "Here we have San Francisco, big cutting edge music scene supposedly, and most of this was tough to take."

"Your friend really is talented though," Kim said. "I was kind of blown away by her, actually."

Monica came over to their table. "Chris, you won't take credit, but Al really has been focused since the trip. You've been a big influence."

"She's coming along," he said.

"There's a pizza place," Monica said. "You guys are joining us, right?"

Kim said, "Unfortunately I can't. But thank you for including me."

Monica was talking to someone else and Chris said, "Why not?"

"I open tomorrow, Chris, I have to get up at four."

"Ah."

"Bethany was in the club tonight, before I left. She said she saw you earlier . . . Also, what trip?"

"You know something? Bethany's starting to get on my nerves. I confronted her on the skeleton in the closet comment."

"And how did she respond?"

"Just that I don't open up enough, in her opinion. That it would be unfair in a serious relationship."

"What did you say?"

"I told her she has to start cultivating her own garden. She didn't like hearing that."

"And what was the trip Monica was referring to?"

"Not something I'd recommend. I had to go to Idaho, so Allison wanted to come along for the ride. She brought Monica, and it was pretty strange."

"Do you have something with Allison?"

"Not that type of thing."

He walked her to her car. Kim said, "Can I make you dinner tomorrow night?"

He gave it a moment. "I'm thinking no."

"Not tomorrow? Or no?"

"Probably no," he said.

+++

At the pizza place, Allison said, "Are you just saying that, or I really am getting my act together?"

"I would say it anyway," Chris said, "but in this case it's true."

"Well, so what's my next step?"

"You make some videos, gotta be tight, your best stuff, you stick them on YouTube. You never know, that's how they found Justin Bieber apparently, if that counts."

"And then I would promote them how?"

"C'mon, you have to figure that out. My guess is you play the dumb game, commenting on everyone else and 'liking' shit, so you start getting linked back to."

Allison said, "Okay. And off-topic, that girl Kim, she's a little cutie."

"Oh."

They finished eating and were outside the place. Monica said she and Henry were stopping off somewhere and they said goodbye, and Allison asked Chris if she should come over.

"That'd be wrong for about seventy-five reasons," he said. "But what can you do?"

They walked there, Chris not crazy about carrying Allison's guitar but thinking he should, and this time they got down to business right away.

"One reason you sounded better," he said, looking up at Allison, his hands on her hips, her eyes closed, "you worked some of that fake country out of your voice."

"Did I."

"Yeah, it was more pure . . . Also . . . this is . . . how I envisioned you at Floyd's."

"Well I fucked Floyd . . . just like this."

"I saw you doing it."

"I wanted you to . . . I was . . . hoping you would."

"Fuck you? Or see you?"

"See me . . . Do you . . . see me now Chris?"

He asked her what she meant, exactly, but she stopped answering . . .

Later, Chris said, "Well, whadda you know. I wouldn't have put money on that occurring."

"I'm glad it did," Allison said.

"And I guess glad to get it out of the way before my brother shows up."

"For your information, I'm not thinking about anyone else right now. Can you take a shower with me?"

It was a nice experience, she was tender and serious in there, and Chris felt bad he'd made that comment. He lingered for a while and when he got out, Allison was on the couch with a cup of tea and the TV on.

"Gosh, someone drowned in those waves," she said. "It just felt like that might happen." It was two in the morning, the late night local newscast being replayed.

Chris said, "What?"

"It's off now, but they were at the Cliff House. They didn't say much except that they found a body. You know we have a big ocean storm going, right?"

"Yeah."

"A friend of mine, he surfs, he's been on a high. But people get in trouble. They don't anticipate the awesome power of the ocean."

"They show the guy? . . . Or woman, or whoever?"

"No. They only said some people having dinner saw something out the window. You know how the restaurant part extends over the water? At first they thought it was a seal, but it was too white."

"Okay, well, those things happen I guess." Racing through it in his head, looking for some mistake he'd made.

"Do you want me to leave? I can hook up with Monica, she and Henry are staying in the city. I can get a taxi."

"No, don't go. Let me ask you something, though . . . Any aspect of me in worse shape than when you first met me?"

"Chris, it was great tonight. I mean that."

"What I'm getting at is have I changed? My pallor, the way I speak, move, look, anything?"

"Well yes, you look a little thinner."

"I do? God damn it."

"What a strange reaction, Chris . . . I'll tell you what, let me see what's happening with your eyes."

She brought a standing lamp closer and had him lean back. "Nice and white. Your diet is obviously prudent, and I'm not seeing a lot of free radical activity."

"Yeah right. What a bunch of bull."

"I know a little about Oriental medicine. There's a logical body flow, everything is connected, and you can tell a good deal about a person through simple observation. Let's see your tongue . . . hmm . . . You appear quite fit, Chris. What are your concerns?"

"Nothing to back it up, just that I might have something wrong I don't know about."

"See now this is the thing, which I've tried to impress upon you. You're not balanced. Therefore

you're not calm, and you develop anxious thought patterns. Not to mention the cynical stuff."

She had him put his legs up and began massaging the soles of his feet. He said, "Dang, that feels good. If I had something wrong, it might show up in my feet too?"

"It absolutely would," Allison said. "I have a friend, he got poked in the eye, where he couldn't open it for a few days? I was doing his feet and he yelled out when I worked on a certain spot. I looked it up on the chart, and that exact spot was for eye."

"What else is on the chart?"

"All your organs, everything."

"How about penis? Can you do something there?"

"What did you have in mind, in particular?"

"I don't know, tune it up, enlarge it, that kind of thing."

"No, I'm sorry Chris, that I can't do."

"I didn't think so."

"Not permanently anyway. Temporarily I can though."

"Oh yeah?"

"Un-huh."

+++

Chris got up late and ran, not giving it a very good effort. He felt Damirko behind him part of the way and then saw him fluttering toward those rocks. Something

he alarmingly hadn't thought of, could you leave DNA on a guy when you tugged on him and most likely fingernailed him in the ocean?

When he got back, Allison was not only still there but standing in the kitchen waiting for a piece of toast to pop up. *Nude*.

"Jesus God Almighty," Chris said. "What are you doing? People can see in."

"I closed the shades," Allison said. "Is it such a problem?"

"What are you again, twenty-five, twenty-six?"

"Yep."

"Well you have a grace period, is what I'm saying. Just so you don't take things for granted."

"Thank you for that wisdom."

"If you were forty-five you might be a bit more discriminating. Whereas right now, admittedly, I'm not finding any specific issues."

Allison said, "Floyd's driving. He should be here tonight."

"You've gotta be kidding me . . . He'll be residing with Henry and the whole gang?"

"Yeah . . . Listen, why don't you jump in the shower and by then I'll be fully awake."

"Awake?"

"You know . . ."

"You sure? . . . Two Seelys the same day?"

"I want that."

"Fine. You do what you have to do. Then beat it on out of here."

+++

He spent the afternoon checking news updates on the body that washed up at the Cliff House. After a few hours they identified it as Gregoriev Petroivikov of Santa Clara. Chris was relieved for about twenty minutes, until the *Mercury News* added a photo to its news story, which was of a smiling Damirko.

He had hoped the little guy might stay out at sea a while longer and end up down near Half Moon Bay, but it was what it was. He figured he could sit around waiting for further developments, or he could go over to the Booker Lounge and have a couple drinks.

When he walked in, his old newspaper cronie Rich Tomlinson was sitting at the bar talking to Booker.

"Rich," Chris said, "this is where we left off like a month ago. Same stool and everything."

It wasn't quite cocktail hour, and it was just three of them.

"Chrissy! I'm glad you're back." Rich got up, staggered a little and embraced him. "Have you committed any homicides since last time?"

Chris was stunned by the question, felt his heart race, started to say something and then caught himself, remembering now the hypothetical discussion they'd had.

"It's a fair question Chrissy," Booker said. "If I recall, you inquired whether bullets recovered at a crime scene was traceable."

Chris said, "Well are they? You never did get me the definitive answer," and they all laughed.

"Nothing wrong with plotting to whack someone over a few beverages," Rich said. "In fact it's probably therapeutic."

Chris saw Damirko's picture flash on the TV behind the bar. He tried to look away and listen to Booker, who was saying, "You got that right, we all human beings. The difference though between us talking junk--and them up in Pelican Bay? Restraint, brother."

"Good point," Rich said. A news reporter was interviewing players at a tennis court now, probably that park in San Jose. Chris was thinking they piece it together quick. The segment ended with a police hotline number, which implied they didn't buy the guy being in the ocean in his underwear by choice.

Chris said, "Any thoughts on how you'd take care of someone who was on vacation? Staying in a hotel and such?"

"Damn, you crack me up," Rich said. "I'm loving this though . . . Well one thing, don't go in the hotel."

"Or outside it neither," Booker said. "Before, during or after. Cameras up the wazoo, if the establishment is half-way respectable."

"The thing about killing an out-of-towner," Rich said, "you have to expect more heat. The cops work those hard."

"They protecting the business owners, and I don't blame 'em," Booker said. "If The Lounge started losing revenue because some dude from Milwaukee got hit on Chestnut Street, I'd go out and track down the motherfuckers myself."

Rich said, "Remember the one about fifteen years ago where the guy and his girlfriend got shot to death near Japantown?"

"Vaguely," Chris said.

Rich said, "Young couple from Nebraska. Lily-white, corn-fed, supposedly here sightseeing. You have your Japantown featured on the tourist map, but then you have projects three blocks away." Chris thinking, yeah, Ray lives in one of them.

Rich said, "I was on the crime beat then, at the *Examiner*. SFPD used more manpower trying to solve it than any case I remember. It didn't even matter that the fresh-faced Nebraskans were on a drug buy."

Booker said, "How you know that?"

"A little old-fashioned investigative journalism. The cops didn't want to go there, they were working the PR angle. The mayor came on TV every day for a while, assuring tourists the city is safe and justice will be served, and look how we're making sure."

"And it backfired on 'em, because they came up empty," Booker said.

"Exactly," Rich said. "You remember it then."

"Heard about it," Booker said. "How it went down and such."

"Christ, really?" Rich said.

"And we'll be leaving it at that," Booker said.

Chris said, "I'm not seeing though how that'd apply to my . . . situation."

"Well for starters," Rich said, "taking care of it in a dangerous neighborhood wouldn't be the worst idea." Chris was wondering if there were many of those in Oklahoma City, and how you'd get someone to go there.

Booker said, "I might actually agree with you on that. Be putting more angles in circulation. Throw 'em off track."

"Okay, fair enough," Chris said. "And what about a guy living in a small town? How would you approach that one?"

"Chrissie, I'm getting a kick out of you," Rich said. "You're messing with us pretty convincingly. That, or you're a closet homicidal maniac."

Chris said, "All it is, I've got these two guys right now, they shouldn't be walking around."

Booker put his hands on the bar and took his time. "My man, I believe your heart is in the right place. But you follow it too close, you may not be liking what you see."

38 - Radar Like Lightning

Friday morning Chris was on a computer at the Funston Library. First he checked his fake gmail, and there was a reply from the Oklahoma City fitness convention person, saying yes, other fitness operators from Idaho would be attending but they weren't allowed to say who. Chris thought for Christ sakes, it's not like they're giving out classified information, though he had to admit they sort of would be.

There was an updated version of the Damirko story in the online *Chronicle*:

Gregoriev Petroivikov, Body IDd At Ocean Beach, Coached Bay Area Youth Sports by Jan Swainstone

April 9th, 2017 - A body found floating in the surf below the Cliff House Wednesday night has been identified as a popular South Bay tennis instructor.

Gregoriev Petroivikov, of Santa Clara, ran an afternoon junior tennis program at Stevenson Park in

San Jose. He also reportedly gave martial arts instruction.

Petroivikov was known to his tennis students as Damirko Crackoifka, and authorities confirmed the individuals are the same.

"Damirko was a terrific instructor and an all-around nice guy," said Anthony Chilton, who said Petoikvok coached both of his sons in the San Jose program. "My oldest, Bruno, no way he'd be playing D-1 right now if it weren't for Damirko."

Another parent, speaking on condition of anonymity, characterized Petroivikov as "somewhat mysterious, but a dedicated coach who was tough but fair."

Petroivikov reportedly emigrated to the U.S. from eastern Europe in the late 1990's.

His body was spotted in the water by diners at about 7:30 pm Wednesday. He was unclothed except for a pair of underwear briefs.

According to SFPD, there were no obvious signs of trauma, but a coroner's report is pending.

U.S. Park Police officers are also investigating how Petroivikov ended up in the water, according to Jason Livingsbean, a spokesman for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

It seemed benign enough so far. Maierhaffer, of course, was the wild card, but Chris couldn't see the guy stepping forward. Unless he was missing something obvious . . . Which could easily be the case in all these engagements . . . So at the end of the day, what was the point of over-thinking any of it?

He looked up Thad's Idaho club and wrote down the phone number and changed five dollars for quarters at the front desk, though he felt the librarian shooting daggers at him.

The only dependable pay phone he could think of was the outside one at the Golden Gate Park tennis courts again, so he drove there and called Thad. The receptionist said he was away from his desk and would be returning in twenty minutes.

Chris wandered into the clubhouse and the attractive Asian woman tennis pro was in her little shop area stringing a racquet. "Hello again," Chris said. "I see you keep busy on and off the court."

"You have to," she said. "Fortunately, in spite of all the new racquet technology, the frames still need to be strung by hand."

"People break a lot of strings though?"

"They shouldn't if they go heavy synthetic, but a lot of the players insist on using light gauge since it gives

you a bit more feel. Some of them need a re-string job every week."

"Does it make a difference in their game?"

"It doesn't, and I tell them that, but they go thin anyway. They watch the players on TV changing racquets all the time, and they think that's them."

"Well, good for business then," Chris said. "Do you ever go out with your clients?"

She looked up from the machine, with the relaxed manner, Chris was thinking, of someone who got hit on frequently and was comfortable dealing with it. She gave him a little smile. "At times. Normally it helps if they've taken a series of lessons."

Chris said, "Well, I might be coming out of retirement and signing up for a few of those. You never know."

She handed him her card: *Jenna C. Lee, USPTA Level 1 Pro*, and went back to her stringing. She said, "That other time, you were curious about the discount lessons."

"Nah, those don't make sense," he said.

"Speaking of that, I had the police here yesterday. You might have seen, someone drowned out at the beach. He taught here sometimes. One of the unofficial ones."

"What'd the police ask you?"

"It was pretty random. If I knew anything about him beyond tennis, if he had any unusual friends, students, and so forth. Also did he seem mentally stable."

"A detective, or uniform or what?"

"Yes, a detective and a uniformed officer."

"What'd you tell them?"

"I told them he was an asshole."

Chris could have kissed her. "Oh. He was?"

"Sorry if I'm sounding unsympathetic. But when you fool with someone's livelihood, that's unacceptable. Do you remember that song in the schoolyard, how cheaters never prosper?"

"Yeah. I don't want to ask you, but you grow up in the city, go to public school?"

"Seattle mostly. We moved here when I was sixteen. How about you?"

"What I'm thinking is, those lessons, they may not happen for a while, but I'm good for them."

Jenna said, "That's normally a bunch of BS, but something tells me you will be."

Chris went back outside to the pay phone and tried Thad again. This time he picked up himself. Chris said, "Hey, Bill Crawford calling. We've come up with a potential energy saver for gyms. Love to show it to you in person. Will you be in Oklahoma City?"

"What is it exactly?" Thad said.

"A piece of software, little hardware to it as well. It factors in everything 24/7. You'll see a reduction in your bills, guaranteed."

"How much is it?"

"Two Ninety-Nine."

"What's the name of your outfit."

"Light Gauge Strings. Love to talk to you more in Oklahoma."

"I'm not doing that one anymore. Last year was a waste of time."

"I see."

"I'll be in New York though, you want to introduce yourself. You'll have a table?"

"Yeah, you're talking about the upcoming New York, or the later one?"

"Upcoming. The Javitz."

"Good, that's the one. I'll keep an eye out for you."
Thad hung up.

Chris went back inside to Jenna Lee's pro shop. "Sorry to make you look up again," he said, "but can I borrow that computer for just a second?"

Jenna handed him the laptop. "You're certainly demanding for someone who hasn't spent a dime."

Chris said, "I'm testing you out," and he googled 'Fitness Club Trade Shows' again and found the New

York Javitz Center one, suddenly on the radar like lightning, two weeks from this weekend.

"Say, you wouldn't want to go to New York with me, would you?" Chris said.

"In your dreams," Jenna said.

39 - Up By Hurlbut

Chris was in the car bright and early Saturday driving to Sebastopol for the spring parade and festival. Around Sausalito he called Joyce.

"Jesus, nothing like a little notice," she said.

He said, "What you can do is meet me, if you're up for it. I'll be standing near the post office. If you miss the parade the thing overflows into the park down the street, is how I remember it from years ago."

"I'm just curious, what's the big deal?"

"I'm thinking of making a change actually. Maybe buy something up there. Nothing gives you an honest feel for a place like an old-fashioned parade down Main Street."

"Well I'll do my best," Joyce said.

There were detours off of Gravenstein Highway in front of the parade route and he had to park a mile away, but it was a perfect day for a walk. Royal-blue sky, temperature in the high 70's, cute little houses overflowing with flowers in the front yards. Chris thought maybe he should move here at that.

The parade kicked off with the local war veterans, followed by the high school band, all the student musicians wearing fedoras and sunglasses, which Chris thought looked ridiculous.

Next was a chain of open convertibles, the dignitaries sitting up high with their feet on the back seats. The prick Smith was third, he and his wife, and they were waving and throwing candy that kids were scrambling to collect. On the side of the car it said: 'The Rotary Club Thanks Jerry and Annette Smith'.

There was a heavy-set woman standing next to Chris with a 2013 Apple Blossom Festival T-Shirt on. Chris said, "What'd that guy do, that they're thanking him for?"

The woman said, "Jerry Smith. He helped save the pool when the finances were kaput. De-fibrillators for the police, computers in the schools, all that."

"He a nice guy then, as far as you know?"

"Of course he is," the woman said. "You give your heart and soul to the community, how could you not be?"

A man overhearing the conversation butted in. "Smith had a term on the city council. Pro-development, helped push through the business park up by Hurlbut. They razed an apple orchard that had been there

forever, and now we have asphalt and a bunch of buildings that are half-empty."

"How did he make his money?" Chris said.

"Video games," the man said. "It was during the '90's, when everyone was getting bought out there for a while."

"And he was a small piece of the puzzle, for one of the big boys."

"You got it, his timing was fortunate," the man said.

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Chris found himself absorbed in the parade. There were musical combos on floats and Little League teams and a dachshund club and horses performing and a hot rod club and several 4-H groups, including the Future Farmers of America. There were more elements of a rural small town than Chris would have expected, just fifty-five miles from San Francisco.

Half way through it Joyce tapped him on the shoulder. "This is nice," she said. "We have our jubilee coming up in Terra Linda, but this one's more intimate."

"How's school?" he said.

"It's good," Joyce said. "We've made some real headway on blocking the Donny baseball dugout naming."

Chris thinking, *son of a bitch, can you just let it go?*

There was an electric vehicle company in town and their display was passing by. They had decked-out funny-cars running on batteries driving in circles, including two guys sitting on a couch that looked like it was floating. Next was a women's dance troupe called West County Samba, where everyone had on silver beaded bikinis that flashed as they danced to a lively horn and drum section that brought up the rear.

"Get a load of this," Chris said.

"I know," Joyce said.

Some of the women had classically voluptuous bodies, others not so great. One or two might have actually been South American, but the rest were white and fleshy. They were putting considerable energy into it and seemed to be having fun shaking themselves at the crowd.

Chris said, "I'm seeing a combination of salsa and belly dancing here. Not bad, actually."

Joyce grabbed his shoulder and whispered in his ear, "It makes me horny."

Chris looked at her and shook his head, but he had to admit he was feeling it himself. The parade ended and they walked over to Ives Park where the festival was getting started. There were games and bands and wine tasting and food, and around the perimeter there were canopied booths. One of them was for the Rotary Club,

and Smith was sitting in back, gnawing on a barbequed turkey leg that Sebastopol was apparently known for. He was easy to spot, big guy about six-three, thick red hair, freckles. To be 100% sure he had the right Jerry Smith, he would have to match the photo he got from the Piner High School yearbook with the original IJ article on the crash, but meanwhile what could it hurt to say hello?

Joyce was absorbed in a quilting demonstration a few booths away. Chris walked into the Rotary Club booth and said to Smith, "I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate what you all are doing." Smith finished chewing, swallowed and wiped his lips. "Thank you for that, we aim to please."

"What's on tap?" Chris said.

"Well, we'd like to re-sod the soccer field at Brookhaven. And adjust the lighting angles if possible. Neighbors are complaining they shine in their living rooms."

"You can't win, can you? You do the right thing, there's always a wise guy has problem with it."

"Ain't it so."

"I'm sorry," Chris said, "what was your name again?"

"Jerry. Smith."

"Peter Mossman," Chris said, extending his hand. Smith's left eye twitched, very slightly, but it was him.

Smith switched his turkey leg into his left hand, wiped his right palm on a napkin and shook hands with Chris, getting grease all over him.

"Anyhow, I'll let you go," Chris said, "You guys have been appreciated for years in our family, I'm glad I finally said something. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"You too," Smith said.

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Chris found a bathroom and washed his hands thoroughly. He roamed around the rest of the festival and hooked back up with up Joyce. He said, "I appreciate the skill level, don't get me wrong, but if all the arts and crafts booths disappeared tomorrow, would we be any worse off?"

"You mean as a society?" Joyce said.

"Okay, yeah."

"That's a terrible thing to say, and frankly I'm surprised at you Chris. How about if all the tall buildings in downtown San Francisco disappeared?"

"That'd be fine. I've never understood it, what they could be needing to do in all those offices."

"The difference is, the crafters are people, expressing themselves. The buildings are corporations."

"Fine, I'm not saying get rid of any people . . . They still liking Bruce by the way? Far as you know? For the Donny thing?"

"I haven't had any communication with Bruce, but I don't think so. It seems like a dead topic around town these days, except for the field part."

They were back on Main Street, in front of a taqueria that looked busy. "I could eat," Chris said. "I got stuck talking to some slob who was stuffing his face, and it made me hungry."

Joyce said Mexican sounded great but she wanted a real drink with it, which the taqueria didn't offer, so how about taking it out and going back to her place?

Chris said, "A couple Dos X's doesn't do it for you?"

"It's Saturday."

"The new dude, where's he fit in the picture exactly?"

"He has his mom tonight. They have a routine."

"So you're telling me go in and get two super burritos and meet you at your house?"

"Yes."

"Hmm."

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Joyce had a small Victorian on Uppelt Street on the west side of Terra Linda. Not something you could afford today on a teacher's salary, but she'd picked it up at the right time. An old boyfriend, Lew, pretty nice guy actually, had renovated it for her.

One of the touches that Lew came up with was a low built-in bureau in Joyce's bedroom closet. He had used redwood, to match the mouldings throughout the house, and finished it off with several coats of high gloss lacquer.

Right now, Joyce was sitting on the bureau facing Chris, whose pants were at his ankles, and they were going to town.

Joyce said, "The atmosphere today . . . there was an intensity."

Chris said, "Not at first so much. But I'm seeing your point."

Joyce said, "When I make love to someone else . . . you know what I think about Chris?"

"No."

"The time in your garage . . . against the car . . ."

Someone said, "Is that so."

Chris froze and Joyce slid away from him and said, "Goddamn it Doug. What on earth are you doing here?"

"Have you been screwing other people just lately, or the whole time?" Doug said. He asked it pleasantly enough, a guy about thirty with an earring, wearing a pullover sweater and a Cal hat.

"You know what?" Joyce said. She'd put on a robe, and had her hands on her hips, though she apparently didn't realize it was open down below. "Anyone who

puts his mother first has no say in what I do or don't choose to do. Do you understand that?"

"Just a minute," Doug said, "We've had an understanding all along, I thought."

"Well you can take your understanding and shove it," Joyce said. "Give me the key."

When Doug had driven away Joyce said, "Don't even go there Chris."

"About the coast not being clear after all?"

"Yes. I'm really sorry."

"Forget that. The main thing, I'm glad he wasn't some psychopath about to pull a gun."

"No, he's a whole different animal than Bruce, if that's what you're concerned with. Anyhow . . . do you want to eat?"

"I'm thinking not yet."

Joyce said, "What I wanted to add, to the garage part . . . it turns me on that we were keeping someone waiting upstairs."

"You've touched on that before," Chris said.

"Even so," Joyce said, "we were rudely interrupted before I could complete my thought."

40 - Second Martini

He drove home Sunday morning and went for a run. Today he went the opposite way: through Fort Mason, along Bay Street to the Embarcadero, past the piers to the Bay Bridge and down to ATT Park at China Basin, where the Giants play baseball. It felt like four or five miles, and he turned around and started back. When he was growing up you rarely went south of Market Street, but now the area was alive with condos and restaurants and vintage streetcars and specialty shops, and Chris didn't feel connected to any of it.

He picked up some coffee and a Sunday New York Times and was showered and stretched out when the doorbell rang. He went downstairs and there was Birgitte, fidgety, wanting to get inside.

Chris sat her down at the kitchen table. "You look beautiful, as always," he said. "but you're redder in the face and sweating a little."

"I parked at Cala Foods and walked," Birgitte said.

"Jesus, on Geary?"

"Chris, I'm very worried. I haven't heard from Steve. And that man Damirko who I told you about?

Who gave Steve lessons? He drowned. Did you know that?"

"I did hear that, and I'm sorry. I was at the courts and they were talking about it."

"Steve calls at least every other day, without fail, wherever he is. The last time I spoke with him was Wednesday, before he left for Denver. He hasn't been answering his cell, and this morning there's a recording that the service . . . has been disconnected." Birgitte was crying.

Chris poured her a shot of vodka, and helped himself to one too. "Okay, let's hold our horses and back up a minute. Why would you be worried about Steve because his tennis teacher got fished out of the ocean?"

"Because they may have harmed him as well."

"Who is 'they'?"

"I have no idea. But as I believe I told you, I would not trust this man. There was a dark side to him, and God help Steve if he didn't see that."

Chris re-filled them. "So you're saying they may have been in on some shady dealings together. That went south."

"That's my fear, yes."

Chris said, "I have to tell you, that sounds like a stretch. Of course, you know Steve better than I do."

"Or you don't think Steve . . ."

"Could have killed that guy, or paid someone to do it?"

"Is it possible Chris?"

He took her hand. "Well, nothing is certain except death, of course, and taxes. But my guess, you'll be hearing from Steve soon."

"I've never been this scared. That's why I walked here, in case someone were following me."

"Okay, your mind's starting to run away from you now. But here's the deal, my brother's in town and I'm about to meet him for lunch. The neighborhood place. Can you join us?"

Birgitte said, "I'm afraid I'm without an appetite. But it is comforting to have someone share my concern."

"You'll like my brother," Chris said, hoping Floyd wouldn't be bringing anyone else.

Floyd had grabbed a table at Weatherby's and Chris made the introductions. Sunday brunch was going on, and there were strollers here and there, and babies in diapers. Chris said, "It's like clockwork. When the kids are old enough to run around and cause trouble, boom, they move to Greenbrae or Orinda, and kiss the city goodbye."

"So you have your finger on the pulse, do you," Birgitte said. She was in the middle of a martini and had calmed down and was smiling for the first time.

"I'm glad you're getting to meet my kid brother," Chris said. "He's got relationship issues too."

"Yeah, I should have stayed in Arizona," Floyd said.

Chris said to Birgitte, "Floyd has these two women following him around. I was afraid they might show up today actually. I worry they're choking the life out of him."

Floyd didn't say anything.

"Well, you're certainly a handsome young man," Birgitte said. "I can understand it." She'd downed her martini and Chris called for re-fills. He had to admit, Floyd did look good, all tan and fit.

Chris said, "Birgitte's been under some stress. We'll leave it there, unless she wants to talk about it."

"My husband is AWOL since Wednesday," she said to Floyd. "My worst nightmare is he's on the run from the authorities."

"You're joking," Floyd said.

"When Birgitte presented the scenario to me, it sounded off the deep end," Chris said. "As I'm digesting it though, maybe she is onto something, unfortunately."

"Where's he supposed to be?" Floyd said.

"In the Denver area."

"They have periodic satellite issues out there, if that's part of it," Floyd said. "I've had that problem a few times."

"See?" Chris said. "There's usually an explanation." He lowered his voice. "And couldn't the Croatian have simply drowned on his own, nothing to do with Steve?"

"Jesus Criminy," Floyd said.

"Well I suppose he could have," Birgitte said. She polished off her second martini and excused herself.

Floyd said, "Lot more action in San Francisco than Phoenix, if I'm hearing things right."

Chris said, "Can you do me a favor? Are you parked outside?"

"Around the corner, though some guy almost wanted to fight me because I beat him to the spot."

"It's gotten bad . . . Listen, can you drive her home? She was wobbling a little when she got up. I'll be here."

"She on the right track, about her husband?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. Guy's bad news."

"Have you been bedding her down long-term? Or is that recent activity?"

"Recent activity."

Birgitte was back and Chris said, "Floyd's going to take you home."

"Already?"

"I think it's the right thing," Chris said. "We have any more cocktails, you might regret it later. Take a hot bath, get a good night's sleep and you'll have a fresh outlook tomorrow."

"Fine then, you're dismissing me . . . But Chris, I do so appreciate your help." She kissed him on the cheek.

"The pleasure's mine," he said.

When Floyd and Birgitte were gone, Chris moved to the bar. "Hey, my number one partner," Shep said. "That a family member by chance? I was seeing a resemblance."

"Except for a younger, better looking version? Who could be in an action movie or something?"

"Kind of what I was thinking," Shep said. "They going to hook it up?"

"Probably. She needs it bad. He might benefit as well."

"That's a fine woman, for sure. You can feel the class resonating off of her." Speaking softer, "Unlike most of the other breeds that wander in here."

"I have to go to New York, unfortunately," Chris said.

"Uh-oh."

"I'm thinking if I live, I'm going to get out of this business. Right now I got two deals staring me in the face, needing someone to close them."

"You going to drive it?"

"I hate to, but I have to bring some stuff. You feel like taking a ride?"

"No . . . But any more information, on whether you're going to . . . make it?"

"I ran what you said by a medical person. She stopped short of saying whoever suggested that is an idiot."

"You work out today?"

"AT&T Park and back. Someone else did test my tongue and feet. Quite unscientific, but according to them my organs are a-o-k at the moment."

"Is that feng-shui?"

"No, I think feng-shui is the furniture-alignment harmony thing . . . I was watching *House Hunters* the other night and this couple finds the perfect house, except then the wife pulls out a compass and says it was built in the wrong direction."

"But some kind of Chinese medicine, no? I wouldn't discount that shit, it's been around a little longer than your medical person who says we're idiots."

Chris's phone rang. He answered it and said,
"Yeah . . . don't worry about it . . . how about tomorrow
night? . . . I'll cook something . . . okay see you then."

"My brother," Chris said. "He sends his apologies
that he can't make it back here today to finish up the
brunch."

"A man of good taste," Shep said. "Right?"

"Most definitely," Chris said.

41 - Pathological One

Monday morning Chris was outside doing a calf-stretch against the front of his building, about to go for his run, when a black Ford with extra antennas drove up and parked across the street. Chris assumed SFPD and felt everything go ice cold, but for better or worse, Detective Cousins got out.

"Your name came up again," Cousins said, not shaking hands.

Chris said, "It did?"

"How well do you know Joyce McCann?"

"I'm pretty sure I told you, Joyce is not capable of anything like that."

"Wasn't my question."

"Well, like I said, she's a good friend. We get together on and off."

"You talk about various topics when you're banging her?"

"Uh, okay, well yeah . . . the usual stuff that comes out spur-of-the moment, I guess."

"What'd you say about Donald Shelhorne? When you were wedged into her closet Saturday."

"I don't remember saying anything about that kid."

"How about her, what'd she say about him?"

"Nothing. The only time his name came up was earlier in the day."

"Where?"

"Sebastopol."

"Fuck you doing up there?"

"I like it there. They had a festival."

"Shelhorne came up how?"

"They want to name the high school baseball dugout after him. Joyce is trying to stop that from happening. She said they're making progress."

"And you said what?"

"I told her to let it go. Even though I agree it's wrong."

Cousins took off his sunglasses and started flipping through a notebook. "This goddamn case," he said.

"Yeah?" Chris said.

"Your friend McCann, she's gotta pick not one but two pricks."

"Oh."

"I don't mean you. Necessarily. Gilbright, the one that slugged you--and this Doug piece of horseshit."

We're spending a hundred hours trying to clear the two of 'em."

"Wait a second, Doug just came in the picture recently I thought."

"No, she was doing 'em both at the same time. In theory, either of them could have whacked the kid, and neither one's got a great alibi . . . What do you think of this Doug?"

"He seemed level-headed enough, considering the circumstances I met him in."

"Yeah, well you're contrasting him with the first a-hole. Did you know the guy lives with his mother?"

"Joyce said that."

"The reason I'm here, he called in yesterday and said someone Joyce referred to as Chris was talking about Shelhorne like he knew something."

"Well I wasn't. And I don't."

"In fairness, we've already established he's a lying piece of shit. Whether he's a homicidal liar, or just a momma's-boy pathological one, that's the problem."

"I see."

"What are you doing, exercising?"

"Most mornings, yeah."

"That help the plumbing and everything?"

"I haven't thought of it that way, but it probably doesn't hurt."

"Seely, let me ask you something," Cousins said. "If someone came to you cold and asked what happened to Donald Shelhorne, what would you say?"

Chris said, "Wow . . . I'd tell them my best guess . . . is someone who despised Donny, couldn't take it anymore and might have gone off the deep end. Be hard to go too far away from that."

"That's how we've been working it to this point. Now one of my partners is floating a theory it could have been random because there was a similar attack in Lake County. You think?"

"I don't know, common sense would say it wasn't random. Other than maybe a random person who didn't like Donny."

"One other one. A kid played ball with Shelhorne down in San Diego. Mexican-American kid. Shelhorne was a pitcher, this kid was one of the catchers, until he dropped out of school. They found him six months ago in Ensenada, the victim of an execution."

"Jesus . . . So could Donny have been in the drug trade? . . . I'm not seeing it. Liquor, yeah. Cocksucker."

Cousins said, "Okay. Well I thank you for your time there, pal."

"How's your father?" Chris said.

"The fuck you have to bring that up for? Not good. I'm going over there now, since I'm down here. It

doesn't help that my lieutenant's kicking my ass every day on Shelhorne."

"I apologize."

"Nah, it ain't your fault. Soon as I can take early retirement, I'm out of this racket."

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Chris watched Detective Cousins drive off. The last thing he felt like doing now was running, but he decided he better go through with it, in case Cousins circled back to check on him.

He ran up and down the Divisadero hills from Lombard to Broadway three times, a hard workout but a quicker than normal one. There was no sign of Cousins. From Broadway, Chris had the expansive view of the bay and Marin and points north, all fresh air and freedom and possibilities, a higher-up version of the view, he was thinking, that Alcatraz inmates had years ago when the place was operating.

He went home, had a couple shots of that vodka that he'd brought out for Birgitte, and went on the Food Network website looking for recipes. He was mad at himself that he'd invited Floyd for dinner. After all, it was set up fine yesterday, only Floyd had to throw a monkey wrench in there at the end. But what could you do now?

One food show Chris liked was the perky little woman with the Italian name who showed downward cleavage as she cooked, but her recipes were a little too perfect. There was the heavier set woman out in the Hamptons with a nice delivery and practical style, but he was thinking baby back ribs tonight and he settled on a recipe from one of the southern cooking shows where the atmosphere was more fun-loving and casual.

He picked up three racks of ribs to be on the safe side, thinking you normally got shortchanged when you ordered them in restaurants. He had a big wedding soup he liked to make, so he started that also, a thick, kitchen-sink concoction heavy with cumin, that didn't go with the ribs but would keep him busy all afternoon and distract him a tiny bit from Cousins closing in.

Could he have actually blurted out something about Donny in the heat of the moment in that closet? *Fuck.*

Floyd showed up on time at six and said the place was cozy, the way he remembered it.

"What you mean," Chris said, "is you wouldn't want to live here."

"I like having a house," Floyd said. "On the other hand, you step out the door and everything's happening. I got zip."

"Birgitte get squared away?" Chris said.

Floyd said, "Indeed. An extremely refined woman. She said you were responsible for liberating her."

"I was picturing her cheerfully writing letters home to Denmark, while my tennis partner was doing other things . . . You gonna visit her again, or is that it?"

"Visit her again."

"I know what you mean. Allison's a sweet girl, but I can see how she'd lay a lot on you."

"They're coming, by the way."

"That was my fear. I bought extra."

Floyd said, "So what else is cooking? So to speak."

"I'm supposed to go the New York, this week. Other than that, it's been pretty uneventful . . . Hey, you can stay here if you want."

"Yeah? . . . Jeez, I might take you up on that actually."

The doorbell rang and Allison and Monica stormed in, asking what smelled good and announcing they were hungry. Chris said, "You have to show some restraint, I've got it timed."

Monica brought a bottle of wine, and she poured everyone a glass and said, "Ever since Floyd's, I was hoping we could have a reunion. This is great."

Allison raised her glass and said, "Mon I agree. I thought we were just getting started there. Then the vacation got cut short. Unresolved, is how it felt."

Chris said, "Well Floyd was just saying the same thing."

"What part was that?" Floyd said.

The doorbell rang again. It took Chris a moment to react. "Henry too?" he said, his voice thin, praying it might be.

"Nope," Monica said. "He doesn't even know where you live."

Chris said in that case excuse him and went downstairs fearing the worst. It was Kim.

She said, "Why didn't you tell me?" Her makeup was smeared and her eyes were red.

Chris didn't say anything, pretty sure he knew.

She threw her arms around him, burrowing her face into his neck. "You're a complete asshole, you know that?"

"What?"

"Chris, I want to be there for you . . . except you backed off, and I had to find out through the fucking rear door."

He said, "Let's go in your car, and not scare the neighbors."

"It's way over on Scott," she said. "You can't park around here at all."

"That's fine, by the time we're there you'll see you over-reacted."

When they got to the car Chris said, "You know what, forget that. Another block and a half, we can get a drink."

"I guess that's not the worst suggestion," Kim said.

They sat at the bar at Weatherby's, and Chris introduced Kim to Shep. "Pleased to meet you," Shep said. "This guy's my favorite customer."

Kim said, "Does he have any competition?"

"Not that much," Shep said.

When Shep brought their second round Chris said, "Kim thinks something bad's going to happen to me."

Shep stared at Chris, and Chris nodded.

"That medical person I was telling you about?" Chris said. "She said something to her. Very unethical, not to mention none of her business."

"Not to mention maybe wrong," Shep said.

Kim said, "So you've known the whole time Shep? Or what?"

"Here's the thing," Chris said. "I'm driving cross-country. Shep can't make it, but why don't you come?"

"Chris, why do you change the subject?"

"How about because it needs to be changed."

Shep said, "Here, try these mini pork buns, why don't you? They're on the house."

Outside on Chestnut Street Chris said, "My brother's visiting from the southwest. Would you want to say hi?"

"That would be fine."

"Just one caveat . . . We got your friend Bethany, we got Shep, and now we've got you as essentially the only humans aware of this . . . rumor. That's it. Okay?"

"Not even your own brother?"

"No, but you'll see, Floyd's a nice kid."

When they walked in, Allison and Monica and Floyd were playing Scrabble at the kitchen table. There were plates and soup bowls and a couple of wine bottles in the living room, and hard rock music was blasting.

"Jesus, someone's going to complain," Chris said.

"Or they might not," Monica said. "Hey, I recognize you from Allison's gig. You're cute."

"She is," Allison said. "This is Floyd. Keep your hands off him."

"That's a bad joke," Monica said. "And rude. She didn't mean it that way."

Floyd stood up and said hello to Kim. Chris said, "I hate to bring up high school, but do you remember Leslie Stemphill, who was over at our house a lot for a while there? Kim's her sister."

"No," Floyd said.

Kim said, "Well it certainly is a blessing that you can spend some quality time together. Where are you staying while you're in the Bay Area?"

"Actually," Floyd said, "Chrissy is going out of town. I thought I might hole up here for a while."

Allison said, "Yeah? Thanks a lot."

Chris said, "It would be that devastating?"

"Well if that's how both you jerks see it," Allison said, "you can start on that extended stay right now. Monica, let's go." Monica looked at Floyd and shrugged, and thirty seconds later they were gone.

"There any of those ribs left at all?" Chris said. "I'm ravenous."

"Not sure," Floyd said. "Try the oven. They ate like cannibals."

Kim said, "That was some scene there."

"Jeez, a little cold soup, nothing else, just bones," Chris said. "Nah, that was no big deal."

"Seemed like a break-up to me," Kim said.

"You're perfectly welcome to crash here tonight," Chris said to Floyd. "That what you were thinking?"

"Thanks, but I may have a situation that'll work." He went in the bedroom and made a call. "Yeah, we're cool," he said. "Listen, I appreciate the hospitality and gourmet meal, and it was nice to meet you Kim."

Chris handed Floyd an extra set of keys and walked him out, this time embracing him on the sidewalk, because you never knew.

"Where do you think he's going to go?" Kim said.

"Why? You like him now too?"

"No, I'm just curious."

"You're starting to blush," Chris said. "But my brother can have that effect on people. Pretty sure he's visiting a married woman tonight."

"Gosh, really? Has he ever been married? Or anything?"

"I don't think so, though I can't rule it out entirely. We have long stretches with no contact."

"And you're not honest with each other on top of it," she said.

"The New York travel thing," he said, "Wednesday morning, I'm shooting for."

Kim said, "Chris, I don't think so."

"Why? If I die, or something, en route, then you just fly back."

"Now why would you joke around like that?"

"Probably what it is, I got enough worries day to day. There's no point looking too far ahead. Would you want to stay over?"

"Gee . . . does that mean you're past the issue with my sister?"

"Rear view mirror," Chris said.

42 - With Graffiti

Chris slept the best he had in a while. He tip-toed out of the apartment and picked up French pastries, and Kim had cleaned up the kitchen from head to toe and was waiting for him with fresh coffee when got back.

"You got time?" he said.

"I do," she said. "I don't start work until two. But I'm going to leave soon, so you can get organized."

"That's not complicated. One thing I did want to do is see my friend Ray. In case I really don't make it back."

"Chris, now you're being morbid. It's simply not funny."

"Be interesting to be a fly on the wall in this place next couple weeks, though," Chris said.

"Why, what do you think will happen?"

"Not sure, but my guess is female population will be involved. And there could be some confrontation as well."

"Do you think so?"

"Why don't you stop by and find out? Text me the developments."

"Very funny . . . Chris, you're strong enough to do all that driving?"

"No sign of decay yet. Piece of cake, is the way I see it."

"Well last night was really nice. Thank you."

"It was. What you're saying though . . . if it doesn't work out as well in a few weeks when I get back, or specifically *I* don't work out as well, at least there was last night."

"That is the furthest thing from what I was saying," Kim said, and her eyes got teary and she looked away.

"Come here," Chris said. "I'm sorry I'm jumpy."

"You had bad dreams, Chris. I patted you down a few times. That's part of why I'm concerned."

"Shit. Was I saying anything?"

"I couldn't make out much. But you were struggling."

"Jeez, I thought I slept great. In any case . . . see you soon?"

"Please leave your phone on," she said.

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Chris spent a few hours getting set, had the oil changed and swung by Ray's at dinner time. The security guard phoned Ray and told Chris to go on up, the first time that happened, since Ray always came

down. The place had five stories, and you entered the apartments from outside like a motel. There was a tasteful courtyard in the center with white rocks and a metal sculpture, though there were a couple spots on the sculpture that had been hit with graffiti and painted over.

"Seely, you ain't catching me at my best moment," Ray said. He was in his pajamas and slippers and hadn't shaved in a while.

"You okay?" Chris said.

"Running a fever is all. The shit fucks with you."

"Your treatment you mean?"

"That, the meds, the nine yards. I'll handle it. Sit down if you want."

Chris sat on a folding chair. "Your place is neater than mine. You've got the minimalist touch going on."

"I ain't striving for any particular flavor, to be honest."

"Today's your day off though, right? You going in tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you worrying about me, which you better stop doing . . . I don't miss any of 'em. That's worse."

"Ray I'm going out of town for a little while."

"How long then?"

"Few weeks. Call me if you need something, okay?"

"Fine, but how you gonna deal with it long distance?"

"I don't know . . . The cops were talking to me yesterday, it's weighing on me."

"You didn't do nothing, right? So what did they want?"

"I might have done something . . . and then I might have blurted out something about it, which someone heard and reported."

"Well I'll be damn . . . Seely, you continuing with the surprises. Someone hearing and reporting what, exactly?"

"Cop didn't say. He also implied they were looking at the guy who reported it, that they established he's a pathological liar."

"What else they ask you?"

"Ran a couple scenarios by me, wanted to know how plausible I thought they were."

"They got an original reason to be liking you? Before they claim you yelling out?"

"It would be a stretch. And if they're going that direction, two guys are on the map ahead of me."

"What you telling me, in your pussy ass way . . . they don't got jack shit. They shut out. You the only one not seeing it."

"I am?"

"How long has it been, since you might have did this deed?"

"About two months. This guy talking to me, he's playing it straight. I'm worried he's slicker than that."

"C'mon, man, after two months he ain't. Only reason they're talking to you, and plenty other people, they praying someone volunteer something. It SFPD?"

"Nah, suburbs actually."

"White suburbs?"

"Yeah."

"In that case they even more ice cold."

"So when I'm away, if someone rings my bell and I'm not there, that mean anything?"

"Only that you're going about your business. Which you supposed to be ."

"Well, I appreciate it . . . I talked to Birgitte, she thinks her husband disappeared on her."

"Good."

Chris got up. "All right then. Can I do anything for you? The store, whatever?"

"No . . . You doing something for me already, showing your ugly face here. I don't mind admitting that."

Chris reached over and squeezed Ray's shoulder. "You take care," he said.

43 - Any Episode

He couldn't see stopping for the night in Winnemucca again, so he pushed it all the way to West Wendover. It was the last town going east in Nevada, and they made sure to build it right against the Utah border so the Salt Lake City gambling crowd didn't have to drive one extra foot. He walked around a little after dinner, and there wasn't much life to the place when you got a block or two away from the casinos.

In the morning, he looked at his road atlas and sized up his day. It was a straight-shot hundred forty-seven miles to Salt Lake and then another seven hours to Cheyenne, Wyoming. From there, if he kept to his business, it was three days to the George Washington Bridge.

He was a half hour into the drive, the Great Salt Lake on his left, when Ray got in his head. Specifically the part about the white-suburb cops maybe not being that great at solving homicides. Twisting it the other way, New York City cops would be pretty damn good at it. You picked any episode of Law and Order, not the Baltimore ones but the original ones set in Manhattan,

and these guys were street-smart and relentless and usually got their man.

Something else he hadn't thought of: After 9-11 there might be cameras all over the city now too.

Chris got off at the next exit and had a second breakfast at a truck stop called The Boss Griddle and thought it through. This was what, Thursday? The percentages said Thad should be around. He wouldn't have to leave for New York for a week, unless he was combining it with another trade show beforehand, which didn't seem likely based on that phone conversation they'd had.

Salt Lake City to Pocatello was a couple hours up the Interstate the wrong way, but Chris decided it wouldn't kill him to at least take a chance. He opened the trunk and wrapped the gun in a rag and casually put it in the glove compartment. He looped north at the 80-15 interchange, and it was ten after two when he got off at the East Center Street exit in Pocatello.

He found Yellowstone again and turned into Broadway Fit, and there was Thad's black Highlander in the same spot in back. You could see the car once you were in the parking lot, but people driving by on Yellowstone couldn't see it because the building blocked it out, something Chris wished he'd deduced the last time. But here he was, and it was on, if he could work it.

He took his time cruising the residential side streets that were adjacent to Yellowstone Avenue, trying to figure out an inconspicuous escape route that wouldn't feature too many stop lights. He settled on making the quick right onto Pine, another right on Pershing, a left on Maple, and a left on Randolph which took you past Alameda Park and to the service road for I-15. He drove it twice, timed it the second time, and he was on the freeway traveling south in just under six minutes.

It was around four now, and when he'd scouted Thad before, both times he left his gym at 4:45 and drove to the Bannock Swim and Racquet Club. There was a hardware store across Yellowstone from Broadway Fit, and Chris parked there and called Kim.

"You busy?" he said.

"Sort of, I'm at work," she said. "But that doesn't matter. Chris, I'm missing you."

"Well I can turn around and pick you up."

"I should have come with you. I mean it. How has your drive been?"

"Kind of refreshing so far. In my next life I may decide to be a long distance trucker. Except I think they eat bad, ultimately."

"Bethany was here last night."

"Yeah, well, what can you do."

"You're right, that was improper of her."

"The thing you're talking about, she's stretching way out of proportion. I were you, I wouldn't believe anything she says from here on out."

"I'm not going to . . . How soon do you think you'll be back?"

"I may be able to speed things up a bit, depending. The New York part isn't that important, it turns out, but I'm thinking I should say hi to my sister in Boston."

"I didn't even know you had a sister. My God, of course you should."

"Well I'll let you go," he said.

"Chris, what you were saying just then, about Bethany exaggerating your situation . . ."

"That's what I was trying to tell you the other night. Except there was too darn much chaos."

"Well you made my day by calling," she said.

"Mine too."

Chris opened his passenger window all the way, and he took the Czechpoint out of the glove compartment. At 4:40 he drove into the space to the left of the Highlander and kept the engine running. He had a *Reno Gazette* sports page that he'd been carrying around, and he spread it open against the steering wheel.

A couple minutes went by and then he heard a beep, and it was Thad coming around the back of the gym, opening his car door from twenty feet away. Chris scanned the parking lot. If there was any sign of life, obviously, he'd wasted the trip, but he didn't see anybody and he let Thad get in and close the door. Then he reached across the passenger seat as far as he could and shot him in the face.

Right away he was worried that he might not have finished him off with just the one shot, especially since it had to go through Thad's side window, which could have deflected or altered something. But that was all he could risk, and he pulled medium-speed out of the Broadway Fit parking lot and picked up his escape route, careful to stay with the flow of traffic, and was soon back on I-15.

This time he'd started hyperventilating, right from the moment Thad beeped open his door, and that didn't stop until he had downed a couple of cheeseburgers and an order of animal fries at an In-n-Out in Salt Lake City, and then he felt a lot better, the blood sugar back under control.

It was after eight and it didn't seem necessary to go any further tonight. There were kids at In-n-Out wearing University of Utah hats and t-shirts, so Chris assumed the campus was close by, and maybe he'd have a look at it in the morning. He found a motel, pricier

than you would have thought out here, but it had a nice outdoor jacuzzi, and he put his head back and let the jets massage the soles of his feet the way Allison had done it that night.

44 - In Battendorf

He'd brought his running stuff, and in the morning he found the college track and logged three miles, feeling the altitude the whole time. Before he checked out of the motel he flipped on the TV, which he had purposely left off last night. There was no newscast on, but a local channel doing an interview show had a ticker tape at the bottom with headlines, and Chris found his:

Pocatello Man Shot, Remains Critical

Chris was afraid of this, the fucker hanging on and maybe being able to say something. The good thing though, if he was *remaining* critical, that implied he *started off* critical, so how talkative could he have been with a bullet in the head?

Either way, there was no point sitting around, and after an hour and twenty minutes he crossed into Evanston, Wyoming, and he understood why they called it The Big Sky Country, the deep blue sky with wisps of white clouds, hovering like a giant dome that extended down to all corners of the earth.

By lunchtime he wasn't dwelling on Thad as much and was trying to piece together when the last time was he'd seen his sister Bonnie. There was the time they'd met up in Vermont, when Bonnie and her then-husband Wayne were renting a summer place and Chris was driving to Nova Scotia. Bert was probably three or four then. That was the August after their mom died, six years ago now. That was it?

He stopped for the night in Lexington, Nebraska, and before he went to bed he called Bonnie. "You woke me up," she said. "There's a time change, remember?"

"I'm in the middle of the country," he said. "I thought there'd be less of one."

"Chrissy, it really is nice to hear from you. But now I'm worried something's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong. How's Bert?"

"He's good, he just turned nine. What are you doing there?"

"I thought I'd say hello, in person. It's been way too long."

"When?"

It was Friday night. "I'm thinking Monday," he said. "You still in the same place?"

Bonnie said, "No, we moved. We're in Cambridge, off Mass Ave." She gave him the address.

"You winging it on your own? . . . Or someone else stepped in?"

"No, just me and Bert and the cat," she said.

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On Saturday afternoon Chris found a library in Battendorf, Iowa, and checked on Thad. The *Idaho State Journal* had a story from the morning.

Pocatello Man Shot Thursday Removed From Life Support, Owned Area Fitness Clubs

April 14, 2017 -- Pocatello fitness club owner Thad Simmons , who was shot Thursday in a Yellowstone Avenue attack, was removed from life support last night and has died, authorities said.

Simmons, 47, had left his office at the Broadway Fit health club at approximately 5 pm and had gotten into his car when he was shot at close range in the facility's parking lot, police said.

Simmons was taken to Pontneuf medical center where he was placed on life support. A decision to remove him was made last night before midnight, according to a hospital spokesperson.

Police have released no further details about the killing. Simmons had been a Pocatello resident since

2003. From 2005-2011 he was an adjunct professor in the business school at Idaho State.

Simmons opened Broadway Fit in 2006 and added a smaller gym on Clark Street in 2009 and another in Chubbuck in 2014. Plans are reportedly underway for expansion to Twin Falls and Boise.

Chris was thinking it was good they didn't tell you the details of who exactly made the call on pulling the plug. That would have been hard to take.

Hopefully the police might connect Thad ballistically to the pickup truck guy and stay busy figuring out who would have had something against both of them. The main thing, he didn't make it, thank God.

Outside the library he called Floyd. "Everything quiet on Broderick Street?"

"I'm enjoying your pad," Floyd said.

"Anyone drop by at all?"

"Yeah, well, a few people. You don't mind, right?"

"No, that's fine, I mean anyone we don't know."

"Nah."

"How about Birgitte, the AWOL husband thing?"

"I didn't ask her, but she hasn't seemed that concerned about it."

"Well you're a stabilizing influence then . . . I'm going to see Bonnie."

"Then put in a word for me too," Floyd said. "I've been bad, I haven't seen her in a year-and-a-half."

"Will do," Chris said.

He figured what the heck and called Bethany. "How's the squash?" he said. "Have you been using the tactic I suggested, elevating the ball more?"

"I wasn't sure I'd be hearing from you," she said.

"Well I guess you did me a favor. The cards on the table, and what have you . . . Kim seem okay?"

"She seems good. Chris, I have to run."

"What for?"

"I have to finish packing and get to the airport. I've got next week off. I'm going to Dallas."

"Oh yeah?"

"A girlfriend invited me down. She just bought a new house there, actually in Plano. You wouldn't believe what you get for your money."

"Have a safe flight," he said.

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That night he phoned Kim from Elkhart, Indiana. She said, "I'm sitting here watching TV on a Saturday night, so needless to say I'm very glad you called."

"What's on?" he said.

"I'm missing you in that . . . special way . . . also."

"Well I'm going to wrap it up in a couple of days, and then try to shoot back home fast. We can sample that place on Columbus again, this time I won't have dinner first."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, last night my friend Dana from work? She wanted to go out. She teaches spin classes."

"Unh-huh."

"We were sort of at a loss, so I suggested your place, on Chestnut."

"Weatherby's. How was it?"

"We ran into your brother."

"Oh yeah?"

"We just pretty much said hi. He was with a woman."

Chris was thinking, hmm, but didn't want to start asking who. It was a multiple choice question. Even Joyce could have worked her way into the equation, since there was a chance she'd stop down, freaked out by another visit from Cousins, and afraid to use the phone.

"What a small world," he said.

Kim said, "Chris, I was thinking . . . When you get back, you could always stay at my place for a while. If you didn't want to rush Floyd out of yours."

"Gee, that's very accommodating of you. You could put up with me?"

"I'd like to try."

"Well you've definitely got my attention in Indiana," he said.

45 - Big Sundaes

He put in one more big day, which brought him to West Stockbridge in the Berkshire Mountains, and Monday afternoon he made it to Bonnie's.

After the formalities Chris said, "Have I aged much since that time in Vermont?"

"To be honest," Bonnie said, "I don't have a clear image of what you looked like then."

Chris said, "This wasn't the worst drive, actually. What I always forget, until I get out there, is how much of the country is farms . . . What about work and stuff?"

"I'm on the computer. Grant writing, some management consulting, the occasional freelance project. It's good, because I can work around Bert."

"That is good, though whenever I hear someone say 'management consulting' I have no idea what they're talking about, but that's my problem."

"Before you get comfortable I have to pick up Bert. You want to come?"

"Do you think he'll have any idea who I am?"

"He didn't this morning, but I filled him in."

"Ah."

Bonnie had the middle floor in a squared-off three family house that Chris remembered they called a triple-decker in Boston. It felt like a working class neighborhood, but there were some fancy cars parked on the street, though Bonnie's was a beat-up Corolla.

"What do you pay for your place?" he said.

"Eighteen-hundred a month," she said. "Why?"

"I don't know, you could do a lot better in Phoenix. Floyd's neighborhood, you get a whole house for twelve. You can park in your driveway, and you don't need an ice scraper for the windshield."

"I don't think I'm Phoenix material. Bert's not either."

"You don't know that. I'll talk to him and feel him out."

"Chris, don't be confusing him, okay?"

"You know what? At his age, you can turn everything upside down and he's fine."

"Well his dad moved to Florida. So that part's not fine."

Chris said, "No. That wouldn't be."

They waited outside in a lineup with the other parents, everyone idling, Chris thinking turn off the damn engines and relax. It was clearly a private school, but he hoped Bonnie wouldn't get into the curriculum

and whether it was a charter, Waldorf, alternative or whatever.

Bert approached the car. He was a smiling kid with curly hair that came down in his eyes. He was shorter than most of the others and had on a backpack that looked way too big.

Chris got out of the car with Bonnie, and without saying anything Bert came up to him and hugged him around the waist, and for a moment Chris felt his throat tighten. "Hey man," he said. "You're not supposed to know me."

"You're my uncle," Bert said. "Are you staying over at our house tonight?"

"I'd like to. If you can handle me being on the couch."

Bert said, "Hey, I'll sleep on the couch. You go in my room."

Chris said, "No, I'm not kicking you out of your room. But can you show it to me? See what we got going on in there?"

"Yeah!" Bert said.

Bonnie said since it was a special occasion why not go for ice cream, and they went to a place in Harvard Square that was full of college kids putting away big sundaes. Bert dug into his for the first few bites and

then started to struggle, and Chris finished it off for him.

"That's good, you'll never be a fat guy," Chris said.

"I'm small though," Bert said. "I'm a shrimp."

Chris said, "Maybe now, but I was noticing something. You got big feet."

"He does," Bonnie said.

Chris said, "I'm telling you, you're going to be tall."

"Well my dad's pretty tall," Bert said. Chris was picturing Wayne, and yeah, he was around six at least.

"There was a kid in my school," Chris said. "Peter Figg. He towered over everyone until about sixth grade. In eighth grade when we graduated, he was the shortest one in the class."

"Wow," Bert said.

"Another guy, Andy Hokapp, little back-up point guard on the freshmen team in high school? His junior year, he was dunking the ball. He grew like a foot. He had real big feet when he was young, just like you."

"Man!" Bert said.

"Just don't dunk on me though," Chris said.

"When you come out to San Francisco."

Bonnie stared at him. Bert slid over and put his head on Chris's shoulder, and there didn't seem to be any rush to go anywhere.

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Bonnie told Bert to go in his room and take care of his homework, and she and Chris sat at the dining room table drinking red wine. Chris said quietly, "So what's the story with Wayne?"

"He met someone, she's from down there, and he moved in with her. About two years now. He's in a step-dad situation."

"Ah, man."

"Not sure if I ever told you, but Wayne was married once before me. He has a couple of teenage kids of his own."

"Christ."

"It's a mess. The sad thing is, he has a good heart. I see a lot of that in Bert . . . How about you Chrissy?"

"Well I don't want to jinx myself, but I feel like I've got something picking up steam in the right direction."

"Someone you could actually settle down with?"

"Some circumstances that need to pan out, but yeah."

"I'm happy for you. And what about Floyd?"

"Nah, that'll never happen."

Bert came into the dining room. "That was a little quick," Bonnie said. "You sure?"

"Pretty sure," Bert said. "Can't I play some hockey with Uncle Chris?"

Chris said, "Bert, I have to draw the line at hockey."

"He has a table-top game," Bonnie said. "He's pretty into it."

The hockey set was in the center of Bert's room, on a low table with two dedicated chairs. One team was the Boston Bruins and the other was the Chicago Blackhawks. Bert had given every player a name right off the NHL rosters, and he announced the action as they played. He kept getting the puck to his center forward, who would ram it into the net before Chris could find the handle for his goalie.

"Two things this proves," Chris said, after he lost 10-1. "First, mechanical games are much better than electronic ones. Second, if you don't grow enough to dunk, you can always make it as a play-by-play man. You're amazing."

"Can we go again?" Bert said.

"We can. In fact we can keep going until your mom drags me out of here."

Bert called into the other room, "Mom, me and Uncle Chris are busy. Please don't bother us."

"And even if she drags me out of here," Chris said, "I might sneak back in."

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They had breakfast together, and on the way to school Chris told Bert he was leaving today and Bert started crying.

"You know what?" Chris said. "You're the best nine-year old I've ever met in my life. It's not even close."

"Are you coming back?" Bert said.

"Either that, or what I'm hoping, you can come out and see me. Soon."

"Yeah! Mom, can we?"

"We'll talk about it," Bonnie said. "Right now you have to say goodbye, or you'll be late."

"Bye, Uncle Chris," Bert said, and he ran over to a friend who was being dropped off, and Chris was relieved to see them joking around as they disappeared into the school.

"It's a defense mechanism," Bonnie said. "That's how he says good-bye to his dad . . . Chrissy, you okay?"

Chris didn't say anything.

Bonnie said, "Well this visit, it's been good for all of us. Clearly."

After a minute, Chris said, "Okay I'm going to lay this out there. One of those 'life's too short' ones . . . Can you and Bert move to San Francisco?"

"Chris, you have to be real. How would we undertake something of that magnitude?"

"You got what, maybe a month-and-a-half left of school? Then you pack two suitcases, you get on the fucking plane, and I meet you at the other end. That's how you do it."

"Well you are certainly animated. I didn't see this coming."

"Neither did I. But sometimes, you just have to *do* shit."

"Okay, don't talk about it any further. I won't ignore what you've said, and we have to leave it at that right now."

"You and Bert can have my apartment. I've got a place to stay."

"Chrissy, what the hell did I just tell you?"

"I'm just saying."

46 - Family Swim

Chris decided in case this turned out to be his last cross-country trip he'd try a southern route home that he'd never been on. He took 87 South through the Appalachians to Knoxville, Tennessee, and then it would be 40 West all the way to Bakersfield.

The second night, in Midwest City, Oklahoma, he phoned Kim. "Just checking in," he said.

"Oh, hey," Kim said.

"Hey?"

"Chris I'm sorry, you've caught me at a bad moment."

"Yeah?"

"It was just a rough day at work . . . And a couple other things you don't want to hear about."

"Well I wrapped everything up, and I'm a few days away."

"Oh. So when do you think you'll be back, exactly?"

"According to Google, it should take me 23 hours and 38 minutes. That's in current traffic."

"So does that mean about Sunday?"

"I was thinking more Friday night. I'm looking forward to getting home."

"Okay. For me, the weekend would be better."

"That's fine . . . I can slow down, take in some sights along the way."

"Chris, everything I'm saying, it's coming out wrong. My frame of mind is not where it should be, plus my time of the month is close. I'm sorry."

"Don't be silly. I've got my place, I just have to give Floyd a little heads-up."

The next day at a gas station near Amarillo he called Bonnie. "How's the little man?" he said.

"He's fine," Bonnie said.

"But what?"

"I talked to him about coming out and visiting. We might."

"Wow, that's great news. But for how long?"

"I thought a week would be about right. Then maybe go see Floyd too."

"Jesus Christ, a week? Just stay."

"No Chrissy, that's not going to work."

"You know what? At least stay for the summer. Develop a little routine, get a bead on the city. There's day camps up the wazoo that Bert will love. On the weekends I'll take him bodysurfing at Stinson Beach."

"He's not that great a swimmer."

"God damn it . . . Now why is that?"

"He's just never taken to it very well."

"Okay, forget the camps. We'll get him lessons every day, and at night I'll take him to the Family Swim and help him."

"I feel like you're overpowering me here."

"That's because you need to be overpowered . . . I love you though."

"Love you too," Bonnie said.

One observation, as he'd rolled through Arkansas, Oklahoma and now north Texas: The portions were bigger in the restaurants than up off Highway 80, and the food was better.

He got into Flagstaff that night in time to go for a run, and fell asleep watching a Diamondbacks game on TV. The phone woke him up, and he answered without checking who it was.

"You fucking bastard," Bethany said.

Chris muted the sound on the TV, where a late-night weight-loss infomercial had replaced the baseball game. He said, "Why am I thinking your Dallas trip didn't pan out that great?"

"I'd just like to know," Bethany said, "what kind of low-life gets his rocks off meddling in other people's business." It sounded like she'd been drinking.

"I was there anyway," he said. "So I thought I'd try to help you out. Apparently, it backfired."

"My own husband, he's afraid to see me. How unbelievable is that . . . You look in the mirror Chris, what do you see staring back at you?"

"Kyle screw around with other people too, or just with you?"

"Fuck you."

"When you get a chance, ask him if he's been back to the Holiday Inn Express. And if it worked out any better."

She hung up. It was 1:10, Chris thinking a little late to call Kim, but maybe not that bad. Kim answered after four rings. "Jesus, Chris," she said.

"Something I didn't ask you," he said. "Your frame of mind situation. That have anything to do with Bethany?"

"What a crazy question, what are you talking about?"

"She laid something on me just now that was definitely out there . . . No?"

"I haven't spoken to her. I think she's on vacation."

"All right then, sorry to bother you."

"It's okay," she said.

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Friday he stopped for lunch at a Coco's in Barstow, and he sat at the counter and watched the short-order chefs work. He remembered a family trip to the Grand Canyon once where they stopped at a drive-in in Barstow and everyone got slushes. He remembered it because something went wrong with the slush machine and they all came out funny, and his dad would bring it up over the years and embellish the story. Chris was never real close to his dad, but he could picture him on those road trips, getting out of the car whistling, his shirt stuck to his back, and telling everyone to order whatever they wanted, that the price didn't matter.

Before he got back on the freeway he called Floyd. He said, "Hope I'm not throwing you off, but I'm making good time. I'll be there tonight. That okay?"

Floyd said, "Yeah, it'll be all yours. I got somewhere to go."

"No need to get out of there on my account. You been enjoying the neighborhood?"

"Really nice . . . In case I haven't told you, I appreciate everything."

"Well it's my pleasure to see you have a good time . . . How's Allison?"

"Pretty good, I think," Floyd said.

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The apartment looked spic 'n span, and Chris guessed Floyd had some help. There was a big bowl of fruit on the kitchen table.

It wasn't even ten, the night was still young, and he took a shower to get freshened up for Weatherby's, but he started to fall asleep putting on his socks and got under the fresh sheets and slept for eleven hours.

47 - Luccia Now

Chris woke up Saturday thinking this would be a good day to go back to Sebastopol, see if he could develop a game plan, and maybe catch Joyce on the way. He called her and she said it wasn't the best time, but she could meet him for an hour in town.

There was an outdoor place on the Petaluma River that had Philly Cheese Steak sandwiches and home-made potato chips. You sat on picnic tables with red and white tablecloths and watched the occasional boat sail past. "Did you know I came by?" Joyce said.

"Floyd doesn't volunteer much information," Chris said. "But I figured you might."

"That detective again," she said. "Should I be worried about anything? . . . And Chris, going back to my impulse at the very beginning . . . should *you* be worried about anything?"

"No, and no."

"Well that certainly slams the door on any discussion. But fine . . . You went where, now?"

"See my sister. I'm trying to think, did you ever meet her?"

"No."

"She may be coming out, with my nephew, the greatest little guy . . . You get together with Floyd? Since you were there anyway?"

"What, Chris? I have to tell you my life story now?"

"What happened with Doug by the way?"

"Just what you saw . . . I'm going out with Dave Luccia now."

"From school? The guy who taught math?"

"He still does. I've finally found some stability. A good guy right under my nose."

"Well I'm happy for you. And he shouldn't even be a suspect. Or did he know Donny?"

"Chris, shut up."

Joyce had to go, and Chris could feel the drive catching up with him, the sun and a couple of beers on top of it now. He was going to have to forget about Sebastopol today, and he went home and took a nap.

After dinner he drove over to Birgitte's, no idea if she'd be around or what he might find.

"Chris, welcome back," she said. "Won't you come in?"

"Thanks, but that's okay," he said. "Is anyone here?"

"No. Why?"

"Well last time you were pretty scared, about that guy they found. And Steve wasn't around . . . He come back at all?"

"Steve has moved to Israel," Birgitte said.

"Holy shit."

"He sent an e-mail. That was how I found out my husband left me."

"Okay, let's back it up for a second. Did the police come here?"

"They have not."

"I see . . . So at this point, you don't think Steve killed anyone. But you still think the people who killed the Damirko guy are after Steve."

"That might be his concern, yes. Frankly, I'm not worried about Steve anymore."

"Oh."

"I'm not, Chris. I have the house, I have an efficient bank account, and I feel a certain strength in turning the page. You've been a big help there."

"Floyd's helped out as well?"

"Well you embarrass me a bit, but yes . . . he's helped out beautifully."

"He stay here last night? Just curious, because I had to elbow him out of my apartment."

"No, I haven't seen Floyd in a few days. He needed to cancel Thursday evening. We're supposed to have lunch tomorrow, though."

"Ah."

"Oh, and I've seen Ray. I visited him Monday during his dialysis treatment."

"Now that is really nice of you . . . How is he?"

"I felt his spirits were low. But he hides it."

"You're right," Chris said. "Behind all the sarcasm, he's as scared as any of us."

"He is," Birgitte said, and she kissed him good night.

+++

"Well that's more like it," Shep said when he spotted Chris. "Now we got a Saturday night around here."

Chris said, "Shep, something dawned on me crystal-clear out on the open road. I come in here, it's all about me. It's never once about you. I'm sorry for that."

"That's how I like it, partner." Shep looked around and came closer. "Mission accomplished? Or what?"

"Main one, yeah. Everything else is kind of jumbled up though."

"Well that happens."

"The first thing, nothing concrete, but that girl Kim?"

"The perky little one, who thinks something bad's going to happen to you."

"Yeah. The momentum was picking up, looking pretty sweet there through Indiana. By the time I got to Tennessee, just a hunch, I think she might have been fucking my brother."

"Hmm."

"But I won't put you on the spot. In case you possibly observed anything."

"Thanks," Shep said. He brought him a refill.

"Well, what can you do?" Chris said.

Shep said, "You know it seems like way back there now, that first day you came in from the doctor? Saying you were going to tie up loose ends?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't you think, maybe you've . . . accomplished enough?"

"I see what you're saying, sit back and enjoy life . . . Well I got one more eating at me, but the guy's lucky because I'm going to have to pace myself."

"Because you're slowing down physically?"

"No, I'm burned out."

"For a second, you had me worried," Shep said.

48 - Drop Thingy

On Sunday Chris took a long walk, up Lyon to Pacific, along Fillmore to Sacramento, over Nob Hill to Powell, and down to 5th and Market, where they turned the Cable Car around. He watched the tourists waiting to get on, looking excited, and he called Kim. It went to voicemail, and he didn't leave a message.

Across the street was the old Emporium department store, that they'd butchered by turning into a mall. Luckily they'd preserved the original dome, and there was a seating area underneath it. Chris found a weekly news magazine and settled in and read it cover to cover. Two items stood out: that otters' private parts are shrinking, and the 'steal of the week' house in Santa Fe, New Mexico, was four hundred grand.

It was around three and he thought what could it hurt, and phoned Allison. There was no answer so he called Monica. "Hey Chris!" she said. "We're at Marine World."

Chris said, "Nice. Who's we?"

"Al and I. We just went on a drop thingy that was amazing. Have you ever been here?"

"No. I used to like it when it was in Santa Clara, when they emphasized the fish more."

"Well what's up?"

"I'm downtown, I'm starting to get hungry. Would you want to meet at that Indian place? Or somewhere?"

"The one you took us to? Oh yeah, we'll be there. Better make it eight though. We have a lot to do here still."

Chris walked down Market to the Embarcadero. It was the same route as a film clip he'd seen on 60 Minutes, where a camera on the front of a streetcar captured the scene in 1906, a few days before the earthquake. Amazingly, they narrowed down the date by the stage of construction of one of the buildings along the way.

There was cheering coming from AT&T Park, and Chris wandered over there and walked in, the guys at the turnstiles not bothering him because it was late, and he got a hot dog and a garlic fries and found a seat in the sun down the third base line.

It was the eighth inning, the Giants up 8-2 on Colorado, everyone in a good mood. He asked the guy next to him what happened, and the guy said Cain had given them six good innings. Cain had once been a star but then needed arm surgery, and had been trying to hang on ever since.

No particular reason, but Chris thought of Barry Zito. Zito was a former star too, who didn't pitch well after the Giants signed him to a big contract. He got ridiculed on the sports stations and Chris had seen him a couple times at bars on Union Street, and one time some wise-ass spit on him as he was leaving. But he'd hung in there, and pulled out a clutch playoff game and won the fans back.

He tried Kim again, nothing. He called Floyd. "Yeah hi," Floyd said. He was breaking up.

"What do we got," Chris said.

"Not much, man. I'm on my way home."

"Oh . . . Thought you might be sticking around a little longer."

"You have to move on. You know how it is."

"Birgitte left hanging today for lunch then?"

"No, I took care of that . . . Listen, I better get off, I think I have a cop behind me."

"Don't be a stranger," Chris said.

+++

Monica and Allison weren't at the Indian place at eight, and Chris gave it a few minutes and ordered. He was just about finished when they showed up.

"I don't feel too good," Monica said, sitting down.

"I told you, that one roller coaster, we were idiots to go twice," Allison said.

"The one you see from the freeway?" Chris said.
"That brings you straight up to a point, and lets you fly back the way you came?"

"A different one," Allison said. "You didn't wait for us?"

"No. And I talked to Floyd a little while ago."

Allison said, "Yeah, well, your girlfriend, the little bitch."

"Slut," Monica said. "But you should have seen it. He comes over to Berkeley to pick up his stuff . . ."

"Limping in like a little dog," Allison said.

"And Al starts slapping him. She wouldn't stop. Henry had to restrain her."

Allison said, "I get how these domestic violence things happen, I really do. You start seeing red. If you have a gun handy you might very well blow the person away."

"The heat of the moment," Chris said.

Allison said, "The thing is, you think you know someone. In the end, you're not even in the vicinity."

Chris said, "I don't know . . . So okay, they banged each other a couple times. Unfortunate, I admit, but I guess that can happen."

Monica said, "It can, but you forgot the moving-to-Arizona-together part."

"Oh," he said.

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Chris was in a deep sleep Monday morning until the phone woke him up. It was a high energy voice. "Mr. Seely, this is Erica from Dr. Steiner's office. What would be a preferred time for an appointment this week?"

"I'm sorry, an appointment for what?"

"It just says 'consult and labs'. Is tomorrow good for you?"

"Actually, is Billy there? Dr. Steiner?"

"I'll see if he's available. One moment please."

Steiner came on. "Well Hallelujah," he said.

"We've got you on the phone. That's a start."

"Bethany still on vacation?"

"Bethany has indicated she's moving," Steiner said. "I'm sorry to see her go."

Chris said, "I can see how you would be. She was a friendly face when people walked in."

"Always. So we'll see you this week then."

"No . . . Billy what are the odds they screwed up on me?"

"Not good Chris."

"Have you seen it happen though?"

"Yeah. I've seen it happen. I can count them on one hand."

"You know what though? You never did get back to me with that example patient, who you guys cured. One hand's not bad, actually."

"So God damn it, we'll run everything again. For your peace of mind."

"Nah. I'm too busy."

"Busy? You're not even working."

"Sure I am, I'm teaching my class in the fall, at the College of Marin. And I've got tennis starting up again. I'm booking a series of lessons today, in Golden Gate Park."

"It's your life," Steiner said, and he hung up.

49 – Until

Tuesday afternoon at Weatherby's, Ray said, "You dragging me in here that first time, I went along for the ride. Now I look forward to it. Which pisses me off."

Chris said, "We're the oldest guys in the place, I'll give you that."

"So you tended to your business, then?"

"Yeah. My sister and my nephew are in the picture now. One way or the other, I'm getting them out here . . . Hard to believe it's almost May, summer's around the corner."

"Well I wouldn't mind meeting them."

"Really?"

"I said I wouldn't mind, why you need to ask me two times?"

"I heard Birgitte stopped by last week."

"She did again yesterday. She reads to me."

"Oh yeah?"

"She be reading away, and I got no clue what's going on in the book. But she bring a certain style to the occasion."

"I know what you mean. You feel like you're in good hands."

"That's never the worst thing," Ray said.

"No," Chris said. "It's not."

The End

The Chris Seely Series:

Who Needs Justice (Book 1)

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RexBoltAuthor@gmail.com

www.TedGrossStories.com

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